THE COMPOSER
AS CRITIC:
ROBERT SCHUMANN

IT TOOK A WILDLY FANCIFUL RHETORIC AND THREE
ALTER EGOS TO ACCOMMODATE ALL THE THINGS
SCHUMANN HAD TO SAY ABOUT MUSIC

By Henry Pleasants

As a music critic, Robert Schumann has many distinctions, but none is more extraordinary, certainly, than the fact that he is remembered primarily, by all but specialists, for his very first and his very last notices: in the one he heralded the genius of Frederic Chopin, in the other the promise of Johannes Brahms.

The auguries themselves are astonishing, based as they were on the scantiest of omens. The Chopin notice, published in the Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung of Leipzig on December 7, 1831, was concerned with nothing more than the Variations for Piano and Orchestra on "La ci darem la mano" from Don Giovanni, Opus 2, composed in 1827 when Chopin was seventeen. All that Schumann knew of Brahms when he wrote the subsequently celebrated notice titled "New Paths" for the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik twenty-two years later, in 1853, were the young composer's Opp. 1 through 5, none of which had been published at that time.

In respect to the Chopin review, the only comparable example of such precocious prescience that comes readily to mind is Eduard Hanslick's confident description of Wagner, in 1848, as "the greatest dramatic talent among all contemporary composers." Hanslick was then twenty-one, as was Schumann in 1831, but Hanslick was reviewing Tannhäuser and was already familiar with The Flying Dutchman and Rienzi. To match Schumann's feat he would have had to discern Wagner's genius in nothing more advanced than Das Liebesverbot.

But prophecy is not the principal concern of music criticism—which is just as well, since critics generally, and young critics particularly, are given to hyperbole and are remembered more frequently and more vividly for their misses than their hits. Schumann was lucky: his hits were spectacular. But among those familiar with the whole body of his critical writings, he is taxed with immoderate and, in retrospect, undue enthusiasm in