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Robert Schumann: A Study of the Link Between Manic Depressive Illness and Creativity

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Robert Schumann: A Study of the Link Between Manic Depressive Illness and Creativity

A THESIS

The Honors Program

College of St. Benedict/ St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"

and the Degree Bachelor of Arts

In the Department of Music

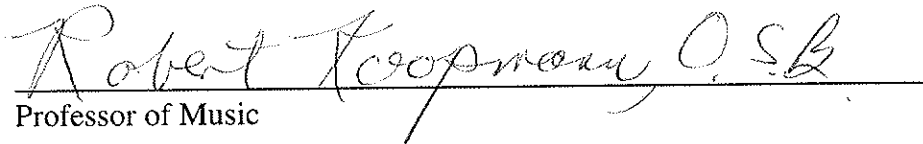
by

Kerri Vickers

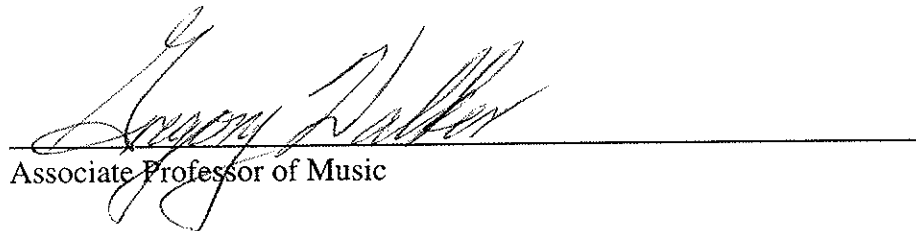
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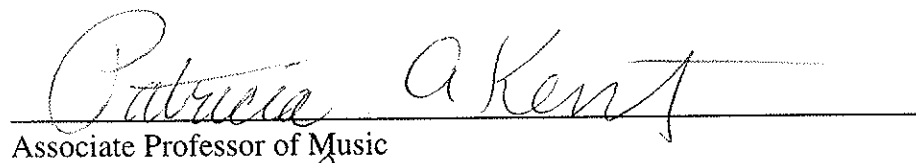
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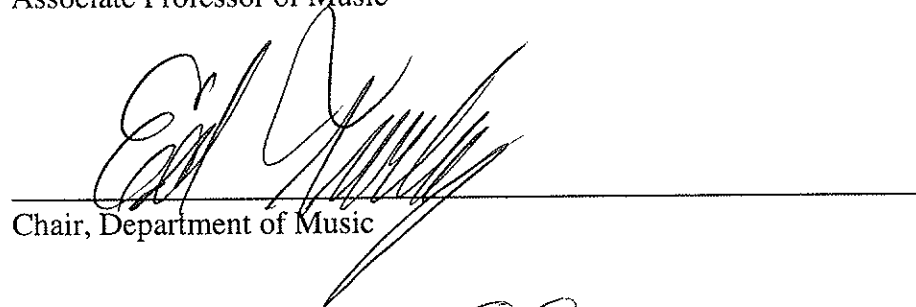
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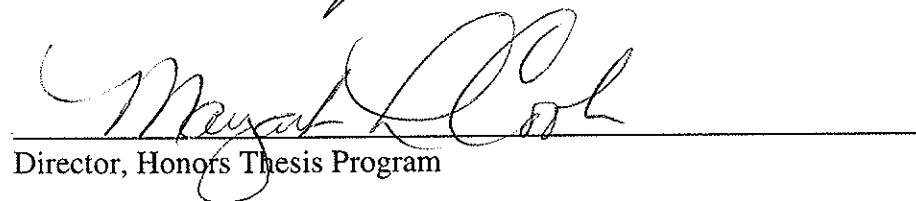
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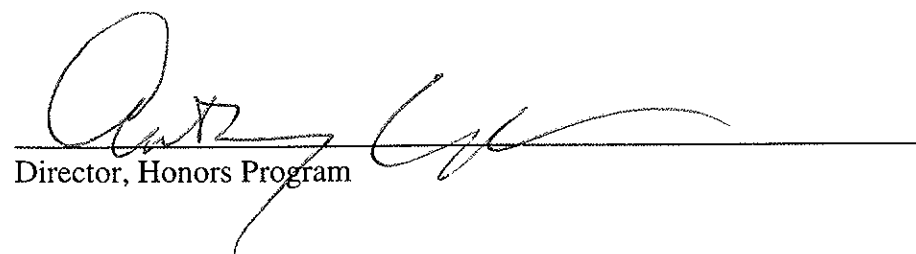
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Director, Honors Program

Robert Schumann lived during a time of emotional expressiveness in art and music. He also lived a life of suffering. By studying his life and work, I intend to find whether or not his pain influenced his compositions. Also, I hope to find a better understanding of the *Zeitgeist* (spirit of times) of the 19th Century. Was the freedom for expression the reason listeners of Romantic music at times experience more emotional reactions to the music, or are mental problems more prevalent during this time, which lead to compositions including more pain and suffering? The search for a connection between mental illness and creativity is continuing today. Much of the research I came upon said that madness is over-romanticized and that there is no connection. However, by studying the creative process while reading the works of authors such as Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Dr. Anthony Storr, also a psychiatrist, and Albert Rothenberg, I found that it becomes easier to understand why the connection has been made between certain types of mental illness and creativity.

The Age of Schumann was shaded by Romanticism. Characteristics of the Romantic Period are the increased interest in nature and in the supernatural, emphasis of emotion in art, more freedom in expression of intense feelings such as passion and suffering, and finally, the focus on spirituality. Important literary works of the time include Goethe's Faust, and the lyrical poetry of John Keats, Lord Byron and Percy B. Shelley. In addition, artistic creations such as the paintings by Kasper David Friedrich and etchings by Francisco Goya incorporating fantasy, witchcraft and demons were prominent at this time (Stolba 452). This focus on the supernatural

was significant because it affected all forms of art in the 19th Century. The movement to include the subjects of demonic images and witchcraft is an example of the new freedom from limitations that artists experienced during Romanticism.

Knowledge of this 19th Century movement in the arts is needed to understand the heightened emotion in Romantic music compositions. After C.P.E. Bach, in the time of rococo and galante style Pre-Classical music, had influenced the shift to *enfindsamer stil* (German term for style with expression) and the use of more freedom of emotion in composing, the expressiveness of Romanticism began to be established. Pre-Classical composers used sudden dynamic changes, ornaments (such as trills to show instability) and chromaticism to show changes in emotion. These techniques led to the development of the “storm and stress” or *Sturm und Drang*. *Sturm und Drang* was an intensification of *enfindsamer stil*, with even more sudden and surprising changes in dynamics and “stormy” excitement added to music, again using increased chromaticism. It was a time of diminishing the influence that the French classicism and the enlightenment had on the structure of Europe. This movement in music developed partially from the German use of heightened emotion in literature during this period. Goethe referred to this time as “an ‘epoch of forced talent’ because so many gifted young men exhausted themselves struggling to display their ‘genius’” (Ostwald 12).

During the Romantic period, the emotional intensity of *sturm und drang* was taken to another level. The origin of this emotional intensity must be examined in order to understand the music of the nineteenth century. Consequently, the Romantic period is a very fitting time to attempt to discover a link between creative accomplishments and mental illness. By looking at composers of this time period, it becomes evident that there are several important musicians who

suffered from mental illness. Ludwig van Beethoven, described by his contemporaries as violent tempered and a heavy drinker, was also considered to have been contemplative of suicide. Berlioz also was suicidal and “afflicted by black depressions” (James 1). Donizetti died in an insane asylum and was diagnosed with neurosyphilis. Liszt and Rachmaninoff both suffered with deep depressive episodes throughout their lives. Pedophilia, necromancy (belief and practice of black magic), and a dysthymic disorder (long term mild depression) are examples of the mental problems Bruckner fought during his life; not to mention a nervous breakdown that led to his hospitalization. Mahler and Tchaikovsky were both considered manic-depressives, the latter thought to have committed suicide. Brahms drank heavily and Schoenberg was considered paranoid and moody. Literary works of the nineteenth century have suggested that there exists a “divinity in madness,” due to the number of amazing compositions created by these and other suffering artists. The word divinity is used to express the special and almost superhuman talent that these artists possessed. Do these extreme feelings that arise in the music come from the turmoil the composers are experiencing? Also, what exactly does the term ‘madness’ mean? What types of illnesses are considered causes of madness?

To attempt to answer these questions, I would like to take a further look into the nineteenth century, especially at the focus on freedom of thought and emotion. George Becker, author of The Mad Genius Controversy: A Study in the Sociology of Defiance, has used the idea of the mad genius to “provide recognition of special status and the freedom from conventional restraints that attended it” (Jamison 4). He says:

The aura of “mania” endowed the genius with mystical and inexplicable quality that served to differentiate him from the typical man, the bourgeois, the philistine, and, quite importantly, the “mere” man of talent; it established him as the modern heir of the ancient Greek poet and seer and, like his classical

counterpart, enabled him to claim some of the powers and privileges granted to the “divinely possessed” and “inspired.” (73)

Madness could then be viewed as positive, because of the significance it has been awarded in the creative process. When, psychologically, the artist is experiencing extreme amounts of passion or is taken over by frustration and pain, then possibly these feelings fit into the Romantic idea of madness. How far into psychopathology the notion of madness exists is something that should be discussed, however. This theory of “divine madness” may be oversimplified. Scholars of this time period are looking to find a connection between true mental illness, not just excessively passionate feelings, and creative production. The type of madness I am researching is also that of diagnosably mentally ill people. More specifically, I will be investigating the psychiatric illness of manic depression. It is important to consider the problem of romanticizing the idea of madness and to think instead of the suffering of psychopathological artists and composers.

The Use of Opposites in Creative Process

The depicted pain included in the compositions of this time was thought to increase the affect of the music on the listener. Besides the previously mentioned uses of chromaticism and ornamentation in music to bring about this reaction, Romantic art was effective also because of the inclusion of opposites. For example, pain followed by happiness; the suffering after a great loss of a loved one and the resulting joy after finding her again are opposite emotions used together to stir the feelings of the audience. “Another feature of Romantic music is the presence of a blend of opposites - contradictory factors woven into the musical fabric so skillfully that they appear as intriguing dualities rather than harsh contrasts of clashes of principle” (Stolba 455).

The use of opposites is not only significant because of the reactions it causes in the listeners of Romantic music, but also because it is a principal element of the creative process in general.

One of the main authors I will be referring to in this discussion of creativity is Dr. Albert Rothenberg. His book Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes introduced me to the janusian process of creativity. Janus, the Roman god of doorways and beginnings, is who this process is named after. He is said to have two, four or even six heads - all of them facing in opposite directions. The janusian process includes the human mind transcending the antithetical essence of opposites; thus enabling opposites to instead work together. Although the use of the janusian process is not often apparent in the final stages of an artistic production, a paradoxical feeling can be found when studying the finished work of art. The most important question to be raised now is whether a form of mental illness or madness is needed to give the creator the ability to transcend logic, or, rather, if it inhibits the process. Dr. Rothenberg would say that this creative process is one that occurs in the mind of a healthy individual.

Unlike psychotic episodes, in which bizarre thinking develops because of the person's inability to tolerate extreme anxiety . . . the creative process requires an ability to tolerate high levels of anxiety and a relative lack of defensiveness in order to proceed. In sum, although creative people may be psychotic at various times in their lives . . . they cannot be psychotic *at the time they are engaged in a creative process*, or it will not be successful . . . janusian processes are healthy ones.

Contrary to the romanticized view of a divine madness which inspires creativity, it is my intention, by discussing other theories of the creative process, to show that it is not necessary that all creative processes occur in the minds of healthy individuals. The second book I will refer to was written by Dr. Anthony Storr, who is a psychiatrist and author of Music and the Mind, (which will be discussed later) among other books. Storr's The Dynamics of Creation, discusses

further the use of opposites in creating. The first example of the use of conflicting ideas is his dichotomy of male vs. female. Storr suggests that creative women are more likely than average women to understand and be aware of their masculine side, as are creative men more likely to understand and be aware of their feminine side. There are more examples throughout history of artistic men displaying their female side and scoring higher on tests measuring femininity. However, creative women, who have not received the attention and study as have their male counterparts, also display contradictory masculine behaviors. Psychologists state that the more creative a person is, the more capable he/she is of being open to emotions and attempting to understand the feelings that may characteristically belong to someone of the opposite sex.

A further example of contrasting ideas within the mind of a creator is the tendency to be obsessional and desiring symmetry while still having the ability to express freedom and inhibition (270). The need to maintain control of emotion is typical of the creator, even though she is noted as having intense emotion. For this very reason, creators use their inventions to express the emotion they otherwise do not allow themselves to display. In other words, they act conversely to how they feel. So, in order to express themselves, they must understand their inner world enough to create it outside themselves.

Theories of Creativity

All of the theories just mentioned should be looked at with a skeptical eye. Although the previous attributes given to creative people fit the descriptions of those by psychologists and others studying the creative mind, it is important not to assume that only creative people experience intense emotions or that all creative men display their femininity. Most importantly,

the one common factor of the aforementioned attributes assigned to creative people is that they possess a superior understanding of their inner selves. The significance of this claim, which serves as the basic foundation of my argument, is that this intensified understanding of oneself leads to creativity. I intend to show that people suffering from mental illness have a stronger ability and more reason to discover this “inner world” which allows them to use internal thoughts to bring a creation into the external world. People dealing with psychopathology, artistic or not, have a need to discover the source of their pain. Even those without treatment spend more of their lives trying to understand their difficulties than those who do not suffer from mental illness. Whether or not they try to, the mentally ill, through this process, discover more about the workings of their mind and emotion.

Before I continue with the discussion of ability of mentally ill to understand themselves and, therefore, create, I will discuss the opinions of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer concerning creativity and why people create. Nietzsche, a 19th Century German philosopher, was a lover of art; he especially enjoyed music, and even composed. He agreed that life is full of opposites.

Pleasure is inconceivable without pain; light without darkness; love without hate; good without evil . . . in life, heaven and hell march hand in hand . . . This is why the greatest art always includes tragedy; why it must embrace tragedy as well as triumph; why the denial of suffering is the negation of life itself.

Nietzsche was a believer in living through the adversities of life by immersing oneself in art. He seemed to think that the only reason to live was just that: to live through art (Storr 154).

Abandoning his belief in Christianity at the age of 22, Nietzsche desired to find something to give his life meaning. He replaced his focus on religious ideas with those of aesthetic ideas. In “The Birth of Tragedy,” Nietzsche discusses the difference between Dionysus and Apollo.

Apollo is the deity of light that presides over the world of dreams giving them structure and order. Dionysus is the god of celebration and liberation. "He especially manifests himself in music" (Storr 156). This dichotomy of mythological gods fills the empty space in his life left behind after his declaration that God is dead. Nietzsche experienced insanity at the end of his life due to his brain softening at the final stages of syphilis. Interestingly, he was still able to extemporize at the piano even when his control over his thoughts was gone. The use of creativity to make the world a more tolerable and even somewhat enjoyable place was the reason Nietzsche supported arts and creative thought. In sum, after abandoning religion, Nietzsche believed the sole purpose of life was art.

Another philosopher important to the study of creativity is Arthur Schopenhauer. His pessimistic view of the world included his idea that life is a constant struggle. However, Schopenhauer saw the benefits of creativity differently than Nietzsche. According to Schopenhauer, the beauty of art is that it provides an escape from the daily miseries of the world. Rather than experiencing every pain in life through art, as Nietzsche would do, he would step aside from his world and enter into the world of the creative so as to deliver himself from affliction. Although he used art in a different way than Nietzsche, it was still an important means of survival for Schopenhauer; an existence of something besides affliction.

Another possible theory on why people create is that it makes order out of disordered thought. Plato, in "Timeaus and Critias," states that "music is a heaven-sent ally in reducing to order and harmony any disharmony in the revolutions within us" (65). How does music, or even art in general affect the order of one's thoughts? As I have stated previously, the creator is one who has a clearer understanding of her "inner world." Storr suggests that she is also one who is

affected by external stimuli to a greater extent. He states that music and other forms of creativity aid in organizing this external stimuli and help to use it in a productive way. This suggested use of the mind for creating order is a perfect way to continue my discussion on the link between mental illness and creativity.

Creativity and Madness

In the previous discussions of different views of creativity, ideas such as Nietzsche's theory that music is a way to live through misery, Schopenhauer's theory that it is an escape, and Dr. Storr's and Dr. Rothenberg's suggestions that creativity finds a way to deal with the opposites that exist, all touched on the idea that creativity is used to make order out of disordered thought. This next section will discuss in more detail the process of developing this order. Research suggests that the minds of people considered mentally ill, because of schizophrenia or affective disorders, have a different functioning of the left and right hemispheres than do normal subjects. This has been demonstrated with auditory input. In experiments with dichotic listening, the left hemisphere of the normal subjects perceived language better than the right hemisphere. In contrast, the right hemisphere more clearly perceived music. (Goodwin and Jamison 509). Storr suggests:

Since specialization of hemispheric function has developed partly to facilitate the efficient processing of incoming auditory information, whether this be speech or music, it is not surprising that some mentally ill people are hypersensitive to such information and may feel threatened by it. Modern theories of information processing postulate that, in the normal person, incoming information is rapidly scanned so that stimuli which are unwanted, inappropriate, or irrelevant are excluded from consciousness. (103)

It is unfortunate that mentally ill people possess minds unable to screen input such as do those

with normal functioning brains. This inability to exclude excess information causes the mentally ill to be more affected by the outside world. It is not so unfortunate, however, that this exposure to excess stimuli can lead to creative productivity. The mentally ill are linked to the creative because both may suffer from struggles to deal with input and are threatened with disordered thought. The way to reduce this kind of suffering is through creation of a new order out of the chaos of excess stimuli and disordered thought.

A further relationship between processes of creative and mentally ill people is suggested by Storr in his book, Dynamics of Creation. He talks of the characteristics of those he calls schizoid, depressed and manically depressed, in order to show how these characteristics affect their lives and cause them to create. His discussion of depressives is more important to my research so I will mention schizoid only as a comparison. First of all, a schizoid is a person who is withdrawn and considers herself to be more important than those around her. In contrast, someone suffering from manic-depressive illness relies on people and requires their approval in order to feel good about himself. He, the manic-depressive, turns his aggression inward and would rather kill himself than injure those he believes do not love him and are not satisfying his needs. Depressed and manically depressed people suffer from low self-esteem and are constantly seeking approval. This need for approval is the focus of their lives and motivates them to create. If they are successful, their self esteem will rise. However, even after success, manic-depressives are left with melancholy because the satisfaction that results from accomplishments is short lived. This satisfaction, therefore, needs to be rediscovered. So, the depressed artist must continue to create. The work of art that is produced from this period of creativity becomes more important than thoughts of themselves - they need to create; they need success.

Another characteristic of depressed people is an ignorance of their inner aggression. Their continued efforts to please and impress those around them leaves them with little time to balance their sympathetic and aggressive emotions. Creating is a way to deal with these feelings. It helps lift some of the repressed and ignored frustration and aggression. It also is a means of reparation, especially for the manic-depressive.

Manic depressives also use creativity as a defense system. They use creation as a reversal and a denial of depression. It is a contrast to the inhibition and inactivity of depression. Ideas of omnipotence and self-aggrandizement can be the result of production of art for the manic depressive; possibly because the work created during depressed episodes is not necessarily inferior to that created at times of more sobriety. This ability to create in the face of adversity gives the person a feeling of grandeur. (Storr 115).

Nietzsche considered illness a challenge which strengthened a person and the only way for one to discover his true potential. The ability to create in the face of adversity, which was just mentioned, is also thought, by Heine, a 19th Century artist, to be an important means of strengthening a person. His last stanza of his work entitled, "*Schöpfungslieder*" contains the words:

Disease was the most basic ground
Of my creative urge and stress:
Creating, I could convalesce,
Creating, I again grew sound. (Storr 159)

He put these words of Nietzsche's into the mouth of God in this work. Nietzsche thought that some types of philosophical thought originated from illness and became a way to attempt to understand and interpret the body that has been misunderstood.

Storr does mention that, at times, one can be too mentally ill to create. For instance a

person suffering from manic depression can be too restless or confused about the lines between reality and fantasy. The next step in my process of understanding the link between illness and creativity will, therefore, include a look into the personal life of a mentally ill artist to see just how much his illness aided or restricted his creative output.

Robert Schumann and Manic Depression

I chose to study Robert Schumann because of my love for his music, but more importantly, because his music displays to me very clearly the expressiveness of Romanticism. His use of Romantic techniques, such as the use of program music, probing, expressive harmonies and lyricism are examples of this. Also, while searching for information about a person's thoughts and emotions, it is important to have a significant amount of literature written by and about that person to get a better understanding of his or her life. Both Robert and his wife Clara kept daily journals and a joint marriage journal. He was very strict about documenting his everyday life. While researching Schumann's family history, I discovered a great deal of mental illness. These findings gave me even more reason to use Schumann as my subject of research because mental illness has been found to be hereditary in some cases. The Schumann family is no exception.

Robert's father, August, was said to have had a nervous breakdown from which he never entirely recovered. He was a successful publisher and lover of romantic literature. Adele Juda, author of *Hochstenbegabung*, which is a study of the pathology of creative subjects, claimed August was normal, even though he showed signs of giddiness and melancholy at times. Other authors have claimed that Robert's illness followed in the steps of his father's, and that his father

did indeed suffer some kind of mental illness. Robert's sister, Emilie, became ill as a teenager and killed herself at age 29 (Slater and Meyer 70). She was described as having occasional traces of "quiet madness" - meaning that she experienced depression and possibly "catatonic schizophrenia" (Ostwald 21). Johanne Christine Schnabel, Robert's mother suffered from "a chronic depressive disorder" (14). Robert wrote in 1829, "Oh mother, again you can't tear yourself away from the grandfather chair. You have been sitting there for two everlasting hours, saying not a word, singing a dead old song" (James 2). Robert and Clara Schumann's son Ludwig died in a mental institution, at age 51, after being hospitalized for many years due to a mental illness which was regarded as incurable. Another of their sons was a morphine addict.

The exact diagnosis of Schumann's illness has been argued for many years. Because of the family's history of schizophrenia and Robert's display of symptoms similar to those of someone suffering from syphilis, among other illnesses, naming his illness manic-depression is still debated by some doctors and researchers (Diagnostic explanations of manic depression and cyclothymia will be discussed later). Although I agree that some of his behavior could be traced back to schizophrenia or syphilis, the information I found to support the diagnosis of manic depression outweighed any other possibilities. The main support for this diagnosis, or one of cyclothymia, is his continued bouts of depression followed by periods of hypomania during the majority of his adult years. One reason why a diagnosis of schizophrenia may be incorrect is the probability that if Schumann lived with schizophrenia, his creativity would have suffered. As Slater and Meyer state in their article entitled, "Contribution to the pathography of musicians: I. Robert Schumann," he had "hardly a single complete year when he was fully healthy; and yet he was always able to recover his productivity when his health improved again after a spell of

illness” (83). Schumann suffered a variety of different illnesses throughout his lifetime. The final years of his life, during the early 1850's, he was described as having a kind of dementia, which was different from the illness of the rest of his adult life. Earlier he was considered to be cyclothymic, which can be explained as cycles of depression and mania, because he always recovered from the illness and it did not progress until after 1859, which is when he shifted into the aforementioned dementia. If his condition had progressively deteriorated throughout his life, Schumann could have been considered a schizophrenic; this, however, was not the case. Other information leading to the final diagnosis of manic depressive illness included his insomnia, oppression by fears, hypochondriacal behavior, and the bodily malaise he experienced. Two doctors who have differing thoughts about the true identification of his illness are Mobius and Gruhe. Mobius, being a supporter of a diagnosis of a succession of schizophrenic illnesses, was in opposition of Gruhe's suggestion that cyclothymic illness controlled most of Schumann's youth and that his final illness was that of organic paresis of the brain. The disagreement concerning his diagnosis is still unresolved. More support of schizophrenia had appeared at the time of the publishing of Slater and Meyer's article (1959). More recently, I have found more support of the diagnosis of cyclothymia and manic depressive illness.

Mood disorders are a “class of disorders marked by emotional disturbances of varied kinds that may spill over to disrupt physical, perceptual, social, and thought processes” (Weiten 251). The two basic kinds of these disorders are unipolar and bipolar. People suffering from unipolar disorders experience extremes of emotion in the form of depression. Their mood stays at one end of the continuum. Those suffering from a bipolar disorders, on the other hand, switch back and forth from extreme depression to elation. In bipolar disorder, also known as manic

depression, the manic stage is just as difficult to live through as the depression. During manic periods, a person has an inflated self esteem, decreased need for sleep, is more talkative, has racing thoughts, is easily distracted, and experiences desire to have excessive involvement in pleasurable things which may lead to destruction - such as unrestrained buying and sexual activity and quickened and more finely tuned senses. Although this manic stage may seem to have some positive aspects, people suffering with the disorder experience irritability, uneasiness and possible hostility during this elated period (Atkinson, et al 637). The period of depression is filled with gloominess, hopelessness, slowness of thought processes, negative self-image, difficulty in sleeping, and social withdrawal (Weiten 522).

Several disorders are encompassed by the illness entitled manic-depressive or bipolar illness. The least severe of these is cyclothymia. Mood changes are common in cyclothymia, yet they are not as debilitating as those in more severe manic depression. Other characteristics of the illness are alternating sleep patterns - hyposomnia and then decreased need for sleep; self-esteem changes - aggrandizing feelings of self worth followed by lack of self confidence; mental apathy alternated with sharpness and creativity; uneven productivity; angry and irritable temperament; frequent changes in life plans; use of drugs, such as alcohol, to self treat or excite; and alternating phases of inhibition and need for companionship. Similar behaviors and temperaments are the result of manic depressive illness; only in true manic depressive illness, the symptoms are more severe.

Schumann's Manic Depression: In His Own Words

The first documented madness that Schumann experienced was when he was eighteen

years old:

My heart pounds sickeningly and I turn pale . . . often I feel as if I were dead . . . I seem to be losing my mind. I did have a mind but I thought I had lost it. I had actually gone mad. (Ostwald - Doctors 6)

A further example of his feelings of melancholy is a quote taken from Nieks's book, "Robert Schumann: A Supplementary and Corrective Biography"

I was little more than a statue, neither cold nor warm; by dint of forced work life returned gradually. But I am still so timid and fearful that I cannot sleep alone . . . Do you believe that I have not the courage to travel alone . . . for fear something might befall me? Violent rushes of blood, unspeakable fear, breathlessness, momentary unconsciousness, alternate quickly. (142)

Had these descriptions of sadness and melancholy been all that Schumann had experienced, it would not be necessary to diagnose him with anything but unipolar disorder, or depression.

However, because of the switch he makes from this depression to stages of elation, it becomes clear that he suffered from manic depression. As mentioned previously, during an elated stage, the manic depressive can experience feelings of higher self-esteem and self-worth which can lead to higher expectations of his abilities. During 1839, considered to be his year of song, Schumann writes to Clara:

I can't tell you how easy it's become for me to write songs and how happy this makes me. I do it mostly while standing or walking around, not at the piano. This is an entirely different sort of music, which doesn't first have to be borne through the fingers - much more immediate and melodic. (Litzmann v.1 407)

Although this may not sound like words from a man experiencing mania and elation, compared to the loneliness and pain of his depressions, this happiness and ability to write so easily is a complete contrast. It seems as though Schumann's composing offered him a means of avoiding the melancholy of life at times. For example, when composing "Genova," his opera, he claims to

feel very joyful and this joy lasted even after its completion.

Another example of a parallel behavior of Schumann's to that of a manic depressive, is his use of the two characters Florestan and Eusebius. He developed Florestan, the first of these two names that he wrote under, after a bout of severe melancholy. He thought that his sanity was threatened again, as it had been when he was eighteen. The result of this fear was the creation of Florestan. He is named after the hero of Beethoven's opera "Fidelio." Florestan is a social creature symbolizing the outgoing, assertive, elated side of Schumann (Ostwald 77). The next creation was that of Eusebius, which is the name of a Christian saint representing martyrdom, and suffering which is thought to represent the suicidal and masochistic side of Schumann (Ostwald 79). These two characters were used as leaders in his "*Davidsbündler*" and he wrote articles in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Journal for Music), which he edited, under these names. The personality of Florestan is the polar opposite of the personality of Eusebius; representing Schumann's two extremes.

Schumann's Manic Depression: In His Music

As the attached chart of Schumann's output displays, his productivity followed his mentality in a specific pattern. His years of depression left very little compositions, while his years of hypomania were ones of productivity and success. By studying certain musical examples I intend to show in closer detail this connection between his mentality and productivity. However, before I get into specific examples, I would like to look at the second chart attached, that of Jamison's "Mood, Cognitive, and Behavioral Changes Reported During Intense Creative Episodes" to discover what happens to a creator during this period and how it is related to the

changes that occur during a manic stage. As the chart says on the very bottom, only the need for sleep decreased. All other mood, cognitive and behavioral changes were increased. For example, heightened enthusiasm, self-confidence, rapid thinking, restlessness, irritability and anxiety are all results of a manic depressive's period of mania. This connection between the behaviors of a creator and a manic depressive person aids in understanding why Schumann wrote the most and arguably the most successfully during bouts of mania.

One of Schumann's most amazing accomplishments was the composition of his "Spring Symphony." The entire process took him only ten days while he was in a state of elation during a hypomanic period in 1841. In contrast, some of his compositions leave the listener with a feeling of the depression he experienced. For example, his song cycle, "*Frauenliebe und Leben*" begins and ends on the same gentle melody, leaving the listeners with a memory of the joy of the first song of love while ending with the pain of death. This song cycle ends in a song of pain and remorse even though the poetry he was composing for had a different ending. He chose to end with the theme of pain rather than find resolution. Chamisso, the author of the text Schumann used, wrote nine poems. Schumann chose, however, to include only the words that reflected his own personal experience- that of the first eight. Why did Schumann compose more successfully during manic stages?

During stages of mania, even though heightened irritability may be the result, a manic depressive is able to experience emotion at a higher level than normal. Jamison, in her book "Touched with Fire" describes the effects of hypomania:

Hypomania and mania often generate ideas and associations, propel contact with life and other people, induce frenzied energies and enthusiasms, and cast an ecstatic, rather cosmic hue over life. Melancholy, on the other hand, tends to force

a slower pace, cools the ardor, and puts into perspective the thoughts, observations and feelings generated during more enthusiastic moments. (118)

Schumann's inability to compose at times because of the debilitating effects of depression, and his feelings of grandeur and excess emotion that aided in his composing make him a great example in the study of the link between manic depressive illness and creativity. In addition to the behavioral changes that occur during the different stages of cyclothymia and manic depression, Schumann's ability to understand the pain of being mentally ill increased his ability to create beautiful music and literature. Jamison says :

An artist certainly need not go through all extremes of all moods and all experience, but it is undeniable that familiarity with sadness and the pain of melancholy- as well as with the ecstatic, often violent energies of the manic states- can add a singular truth and power to artistic expression. To the extent that the artist survives, describes, and then transforms psychological pain into an experience with more universal meaning, his or her own journey becomes one that others can, thus better protected, take. (120-121)

This claim of Jamison's brings me back to the earlier discussion of theories of creativity.

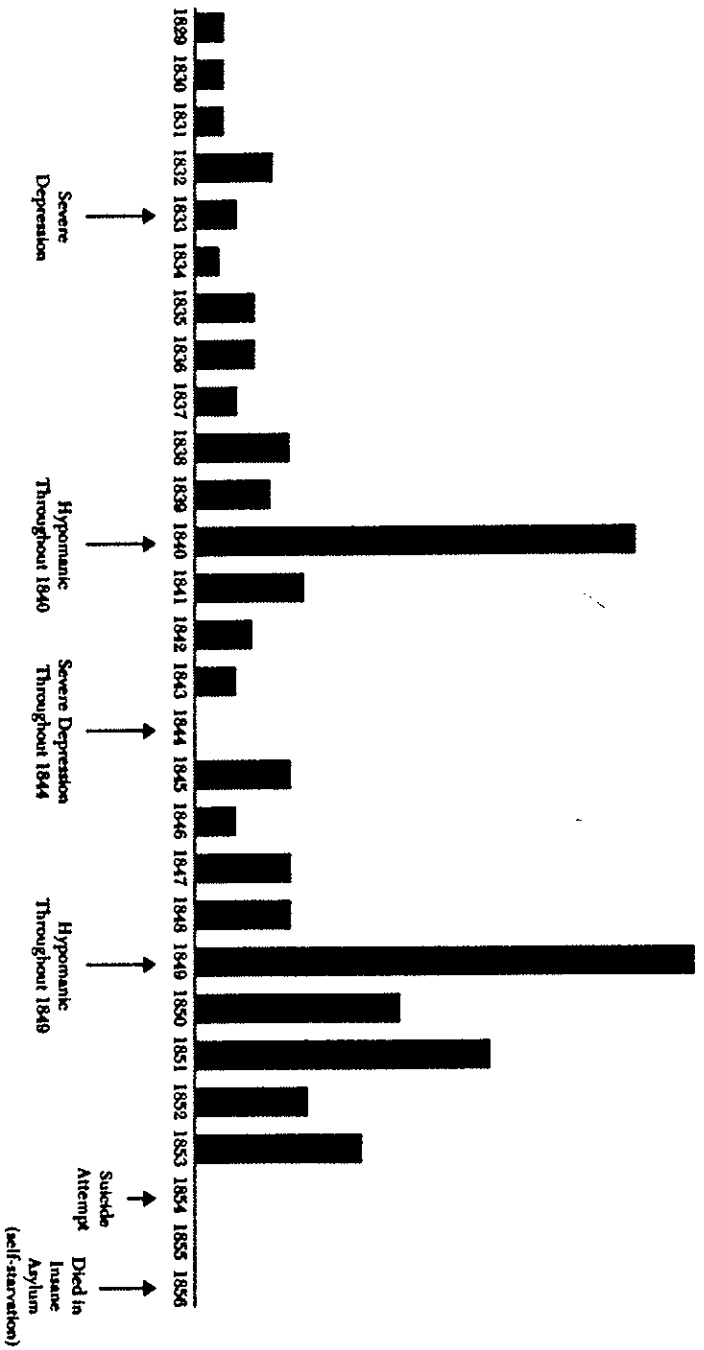
Schumann is an artist of the kind she explains in the last quote. He transforms his pain into art for us. I believe that his ability, and other artists' abilities, to create in this way is because of his understanding of his inner self. The pain and "violent energies" Schumann experienced throughout his life can be heard in his music. Peter Ostwald wrote Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius which contains, throughout the entire book, documentation of Schumann's struggles to understand his melancholy and madness. He writes in his daily journal about the joy of one day and the suffering of the next, all the while searching for a way understand it.

In looking at other of the theories of creativity, I have noticed that the two polar extremes of his personality that Schumann experiences and uses to create is like the janusian process

previously discussed. His thoughts and emotions are focused in several different directions, yet he is able to transcend the opposites and bring these thoughts and emotions together in his musical creation. Also, I think Schumann lives through the painful experiences of life by creating, as Nietzsche would suggest. Although there are times in Schumann's life where music seems an escape from affliction, and therefore, similar to Schopenhauer's theory, he found music, after struggles with studying law, literature and theology, as a place to relieve his pain. I would guess that his composing kept him alive.

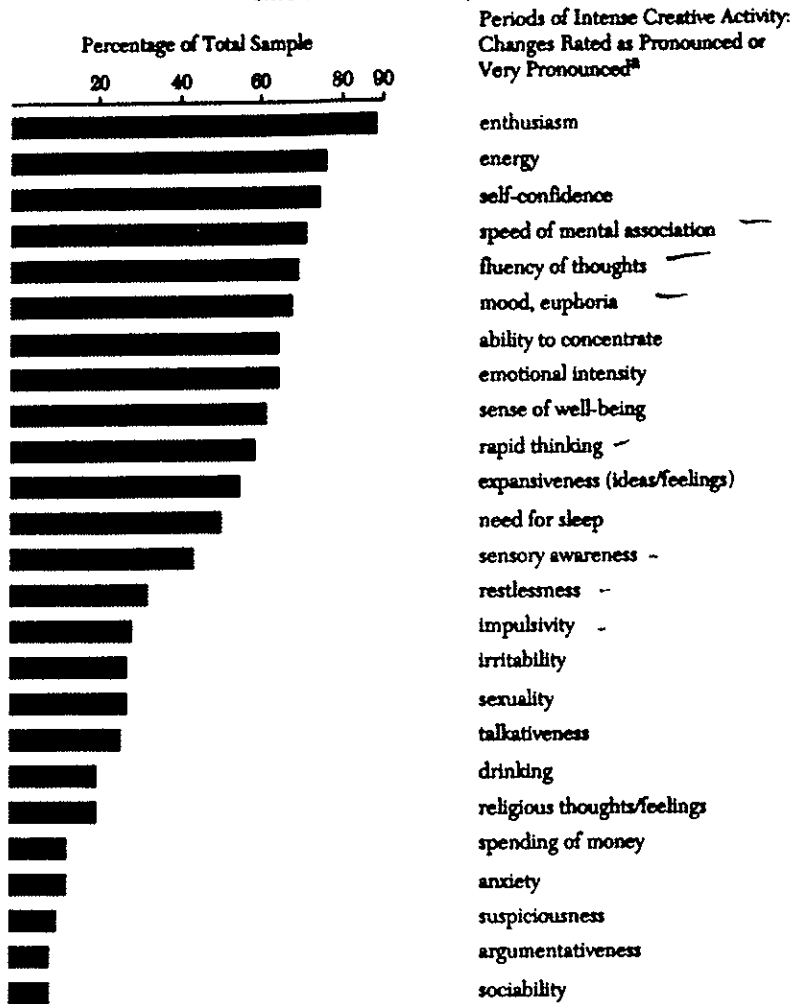
In conclusion, to answer the question concerning the existence of divinity in madness, my answer would have to be no. The divinity of the creation comes, rather, from the creators' ability to see into their own selves and understand their emotions clearer than the mentally healthy. If madness is what gives the creator a reason to discover this inner self, then it is beneficial. Madness, however, is not the only necessity. Talent and ability are also crucial. For instance, just because a person is mad, she will not necessarily become a great creator. Conversely, if a person is creative, she is not necessarily suffering from mental problems. The importance of the connection between mental illness and creativity lies in the creator's ability to understand themselves and to take the opposite ideas and emotions within themselves to the next level; that of art.

Figure 4-7.
Robert Schumann's Work: Number of Compositions by Year



SOURCE: Adapted from E. Slater and A. Meyer. Contributions to a pathography of the musicians: Robert Schumann, *Confinia Psychiatrica*, 2(1959):65-94. Reprinted by permission of Karger, Basel, Switzerland.

Figure 3-2.
Mood, Cognitive, and Behavioral Changes Reported During Intense Creative Episodes



*Need for sleep decreased; all the others increased.

SOURCE: From K. R. Jamison, Mood disorders and patterns of creativity in British writers and artists, *Psychiatry* 52 (1989): 125-134.

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