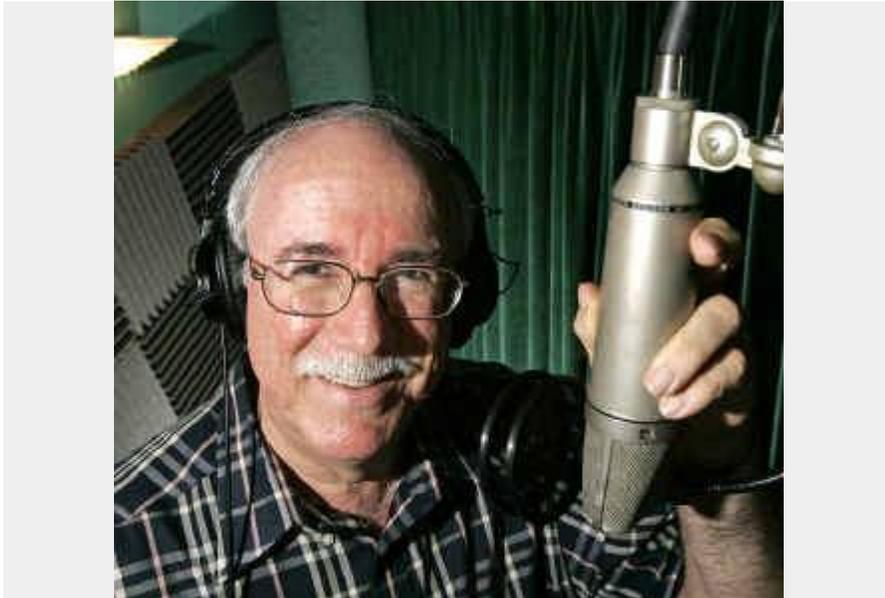


Bringing Schumann's world to life

KU professor takes to the airwaves for biography of 19th-century composer.

By PAUL HORSLEY

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FRED BLOCHER | The Kansas City Star

John Tibbetts' 13-part series on Robert Schumann will play on 100 to 150 U.S. stations.

John Tibbetts has been an author, professor, film historian, visual artist, and radio and TV commentator.

But nothing the 59-year-old University of Kansas film professor has done in his long career matches the vastness of "The World of Robert Schumann," a 13-part radio series that is a pioneering approach to biography itself.

The fruit of 20 years of Tibbetts' life, the series weaves musical excerpts into interviews with scholars, musicians and artists, then spices it up with dramatizations of critical moments in the 19th-century composer's life — all stitched together with Tibbetts' resonant, all-knowing radio voice.

It first aired on Lawrence's Kansas Public Radio in 2003. In October it is headed for international syndication, a project of WFMT Radio Network of Chicago, funded by a \$50,000 grant from Park University.

"I was just astounded by it," said WFMT senior vice president Steve Robinson of the series.

Robinson said he was skeptical when he first heard of the series from Park University pianist and Van Cliburn Competition gold medalist Stanislav Ioudenitch.

"We're often told about 'extraordinary' radio series," Robinson said with a laugh.

But then he received a copy of the 15-CD set and started listening.

"I was completely bowled over by the extraordinary amount of depth, the research," Robinson said, "but more than anything by the very rich production values. The whole thing took me off guard. I don't think he even realized what he had achieved."

Tibbetts was 16 when his parents gave him Robert Haven Schaufler's biography of Schumann, a composer to whom he was immediately drawn.

"If you need idolatry, Schumann is not your guy," Tibbetts said. "It's his feet of clay that makes him so interesting."

Schumann lived a middle-class existence with his wife, Clara, but in later years descended into madness. Schaufler's biography started Tibbetts on a journey that he wouldn't finish until the death of his twin brother, James, in 2003. The loss affected him powerfully, he said, and in honor of his brother he decided to put together the material he had amassed over two decades.

"This series has been a sort of diary of my life," said Tibbetts, a Leavenworth native who grew up in Paola, Kan.

"A lot of it was just me carrying a tape recorder and following these people around," Tibbetts said of the project's beginning. At first it was magnetic tape and scissors; now, of course, it's all digital.

Anyplace was fair game for an interview. In the middle of a field at Bard College in upstate New York. In a corridor of the San Francisco airport. At the New York Library of the Performing Arts. Backstage at the Tonhalle concert hall in Düsseldorf, Germany.

Wherever there was someone with an interesting thing to say about Schumann, Tibbetts was there with his microphone.

Sometimes venues worked against him. An interview with pianist Joerg Demus was ruined because of ambient noise at a Plaza-area restaurant. ("The sounds of silverware are like little concussions on tape," Tibbetts said.) The waterfall in the lobby of Kansas City's Downtown Marriott "sounded like a monsoon."

But over the years he interviewed nearly everyone who had ever written about Schumann, thought deeply about him or specialized in performing his music.

Big names like baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, historian Jacques Barzun, artist Maurice Sendak, flutist Eugenia Zukerman, conductors Christoph Eschenbach and David Zinman, pianists Andras Schiff and Garrick Ohlsson.

Some of his subjects are now dead, like composer Virgil Thomson or announcer Martin Bookspan. And the series has outlived one of those hired to “play the parts” of Robert and Clara Schumann, local actress Elizabeth Robbins, who died of cancer in July. (Robbins’ husband, Mark, is the voice of Robert.)

Tibbetts’ goal, he said, was to create a picture in which the voices of contemporary musicians and historians become a part of the biography of the long-dead Schumann — not just what they say but how they say it.

“It heightens the color for the listener,” he said. “Who are these people who are playing and singing this music? Their voices become a part of the mix.”

So you hear historian Eric Sams’ dry British lilt, or conductor Wolfgang Sawallisch’s Teutonic staccato, or scholar Leon Plantinga’s stream-of-consciousness ramble.

“The voice becomes a kind of music,” Tibbetts said. “I’d rather hear the dude’s voice than read a transcript of what he said.”

The addition of music completes the picture, said Royal Scanlon, who owns the recording studio in Overland Park where Tibbetts and engineer Larry Johnson are putting final touches on the series.

“When you’re able to hear the music as it is being talked about, that’s something you cannot get from a book.”

To charges that the series’ dramatized segments take liberties, Tibbetts said he thinks the role of history is to embody both facts and mythology around the facts.

Of course, historical accuracy must always follow the myth, he said, which is why he tried in the Schumann series to balance the more intuitive comments by musicians and artists with those of the more hard-nosed scholars.

Robinson said that in the United States alone he expects 100 to 150 stations to broadcast “The World of Robert Schumann.” Worldwide cumulative audience will be “certainly at least a million,” he said. “And I’m certainly being very conservative in my estimate.”

For Tibbetts, the series fulfills a lifelong dream of finding the truth about a historical subject through a variety of modern approaches.

“Life is complicated,” he said. “Truth is difficult. Five people see a robbery and tell five different stories. How do you get to the truth? History’s not for sissies.”

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