

2008

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Recommended Citation

Cabral, Jean (2008). Clara Schumann: A One-Woman Musical Dynamo. *Undergraduate Review*, 4, 211-218.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol4/iss1/38

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Clara Schumann: A One-Woman Musical Dynamo

JEAN CABRAL

This project was an opportunity to learn about the life and works of Clara Schumann (1819-1896), probably the most important female musician and composer of the 19th century. The difficulties this great composer faced throughout her life give insight to her courage and audacity. She continued to write music against the wishes of her husband and society's view of a woman's role and took on the responsibility of providing for her family after her husband's mental breakdown. Clara's story is rich with turmoil, passion, and creativity—one worth telling.

Through my research and study of her music, I wrote and performed a one-woman play which was highlighted by performances of her beloved songs. In character, I told the story of Clara, dressed in appropriate attire reflecting this time in history, and performed songs she wrote as well as music written by her composer-husband.

This one-woman musical play was a unique way to bring a historical figure to life. All too often I have attended presentations that consist of lectures, PowerPoint shows, or standard recital performances. By engaging an audience in this lively and entertaining format they will learn much about music style and history as well as gain keen insight into the status and plight of women at the time. This musical performance-play was performed on campus for school children and could be performed as well in other locations.

The majority of research, writing, learning of music, and costume design was done during the summer. This work would not have been possible without the funding provided through the Shea Scholar Program. I had many resources at my disposal: practice rooms in the music department, Maxwell Library and other libraries as well as the internet, recordings, a qualified accompanist Jim Hay, my vocal professor Martina Ferrante, and, of course, my mentor Dr. Deborah Nemko. With Dr. Nemko's assistance, who herself did her doctoral research on Clara and Robert Schumann, I was able to focus on approachable music and prepare a script that is both educational and entertaining.

The nature of this project truly immersed me in the life of Clara Schumann and gave me a much deeper appreciation of this important figure in music history—one I wish to share with others.

LIGHTS UP ON FORESTAGE. STAGE LEFT: A dress form and a small table are on the stage. On the dress form is a black costume from the 1800s. On the table is a Styrofoam form with a gray wig, a mirror, and a diary. CENTER STAGE RIGHT: A grand piano and piano bench are set up for a performance. Clara enters STAGE RIGHT and travels across stage to the dress form and table. She proceeds to get dressed. As Clara is dressing, the accompanist enters STAGE RIGHT, sits at the piano, and goes through finger exercises. Clara finishes dressing and puts on wig, picks up the diaries, and assumes her character. She moves to CENTER STAGE in front of the piano and places the diaries on the piano.

Clara: Guten Morgen. Ich heisse Clara Schumann.¹ Oh, I am so sorry; I forgot that some of you may not speak German. This is good; I have an opportunity to practice my English with you today. My father made sure that I studied French and English as a child to prepare me for trips to France and England.² There was a time when I had hoped to travel to America, but alas, this was never to be.³

So...welcome to Germany. I am so happy to see all your young faces. You know, I was just about your age when Father started arranging my concerts. First I started to play for company at home above my Father's "shop." Father had a very busy piano factory business, what we call a *Piano-Fabrik*. He had a music lending library, rented, sold, tuned, repaired pianos, and taught lessons. Father would say "he stood behind every piano he sold."⁴ Friends and visiting musicians often gathered there. He made sure I had an opportunity to perform—and of course, to meet the right people. Father also arranged concerts in homes of his acquaintances...and then, my first real public appearance—the *Gewandhaus*! (I was nine years old) I did not have a major part in the concert, but oh, the doors that opened for Father and me after I played.⁵

1. "Name," *Collins German Concise Dictionary* (New York: GarperCollins Publishers, 2007), p. 671.

2. Bowers, James and Judith Tick. *Women Making Music; The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 255.

3. Reich, Nancy B., *Clara Schumann The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca, NY: H. Holt and Company, 1945), p. 269.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

We met so many people—and one very special man that changed my life—my Robert. Our first encounter was at a mutual friend's home, another concert my Father arranged. I was so young and impressionable and he was so handsome and so mature, nineteen years old. (I think maybe he may have been a little jealous of my playing.) Robert had heard of my Father's reputation as a teacher and sought him out. Robert's family had expected him to become a lawyer, but his love of music changed those plans. Ah, the power of music. His family was so reluctant but his mother

finally wrote a letter to Father begging him to take Robert on as a student. Father was hesitant because rumors do spread and it had been said that this young man fell "in love with every pretty woman he saw"⁶ and was irresponsible with money, (Clara puts her hand close to her mouth and whispers to the audience)...and even drank and smoked.

It was such a joy to have Robert move into our home as a student and boarder. Father had a regimented schedule for my

training. Working side by side with Robert made my training all the more enjoyable. The year that Robert lived with us was such a glorious time. He would spend time with my brothers and me in the evenings playing games and telling ghost stories.⁷ It was like having a special soul mate—someone that I could confide in and with whom I could truly express myself.

My concert tours often took me away from home, and each time I went away it was harder and harder to be apart from Robert. I was falling in love! Oh, what a feeling! The pleasure, thrill, excitement, joy, adventure, delight, bliss, and rapture all made me feel as if I could burst from happiness. It was almost as if I was being caught up in the twirling and swirling of a waltz. You know, the dance that some who are old fashioned think is so scandalous just because the man holds up his partner's dress so it will not trail or be stepped upon and partners are wrapped together tightly as possible in an embrace when they glide around the dance floor.⁸ (Clara demonstrates lifts her skirt and demonstrates the waltz) In fact, I wrote music for a song that describes that incredible feeling—"Walzer." The poet who wrote the lyrics expressed much

6. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

7. Nemko, Deborah. *Clara Schumann as Inovator and Collaborator: The Piano Trio in G Minor, Op. 17* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Company, 1997), p. 18.

8. "History Repeats Itself," pythia.uoregon.edu/~llynch/Tango-L/2001/msg01071.html-8k.

of how I felt then and it was such a delight to compose music that captured that moment in time. I have a little challenge for you when you listen to this song. Let us see how often you hear the word “love.” Hmmmm, too easy. I think maybe I should sing this in German and you must listen for the German word for love: *liebe*. No cheating now, the program may not have all the repetitions included so you must really listen.

Clara and accompanist: (Clara assumes appropriate singing posture and “Walzer” is performed.)

Horch! Welch' ein süßes harmonisches Klingen:
Flüstren erhebt sich zum jubelnden Laut.
Las mich dich, reizendes Mädchen, umschlingen,
wie ein Geliebter die liebende Braut.
wie ein Geliebter die liebende Braut.

Komm! Las mit den wogenden Tönen uns schweben,
die uns wie Stimmen der Liebe umwehn;
die uns wie Stimmen der Liebe umwehn;
So uns der seligsten Täuschung ergeben,
glücklich es wahren, was nie kann geschehn.
glücklich es wahren, was nie kann geschehn.

Auge in Aug emit glühenden Wangen,
bebende Seufzer verlangender Lust!
Ach! Wenn die Stunden der Freude vergangen,
füllet nur trauernde Sehnsucht die Brust,

nimmer erblüht, was einmal verglüht,
nie wird die resige Jugend uns neu,
o drum, eh' das Feuer der Herzen verglüht,
Liebe um Liebe, noch lächelt der Mai.
o drum, ehe das Feuer der Herzen verglüht,
Liebe um Liebe, noch lächelt der Mai.

Horch! Welch ein süßes harmonisches Klingen,
Flüstern erhebt sich zum jubelnden Laut.
Las mich dich, reizendes Mädchen, umschlingen,
wie ein Geliebter die liebende Braut.
wie ein Geliebter die liebende Braut.⁹

Clara: How did you do? How many heard the word ten times? How many heard the word fourteen times? Well, I will say that both are correct. You see the noun “Liebe” appears ten times and the adjective “liebende” four times. Just as in English: love and loving. Wunderbar! (Said slowly.) Oh, sorry, wonderful! (Said equally deliberately slowly.)

9. Schumann, Clara, *Samtliche Lieder für Singstimme und Klavier* (Germany: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1992), pp. 10–15.

Oh the trials and tribulations of love. Robert and I had such an incredibly strong bond—music—and our letters. There were so many times that I was away on tours. Father booked as many concerts as he could and these appearances took me to so many places: cities throughout Germany—Hamburg, Berlin, Dresden—and Paris. Letters bridged the distance between us and I grew to depend on those precious words from Robert.

Let me read an excerpt from one of my favorites. (Clara pulls a letter from her diary and reads):

Dear good Clara,

I am going to ask you to do me a favour. As there is no electric current between us to remind us of one another, I have had a sympathetic idea, namely that to-morrow, exactly at eleven o'clock, I shall play the Adagio from Chopin's Variations, and shall think intensely, exclusively, of you. Now my petition is that you will do the same, so that we may meet and communicate in spirit...If there were a full moon, it might have been a mirror reflecting our letters.

With all my heart, I remain

ROBERT SCHUMANN.¹⁰

Much happened while I was away. When I returned from one of my trips my dear Robert had done something terrible to his hand. He attempted to have one of his fingers strengthened with a strange contraption. He felt that his weak finger hampered his ability at the piano and this procedure would enable him to perform better. He had such high hopes, but the contraption failed and he no longer could play as he had before.¹¹ This man could not perform the beautiful music he composed as he wanted and I was determined make his music known...I would be his instrument, interpret his creations, and introduce them to the world. I felt closer than ever to my beloved.

And, of course, I did hear rumors of Robert's attention toward other women. (Clara places a hand on her hip) Well, two can play at that game. I certainly had many an opportunity to meet eligible bachelors on tour. Amazing how Robert became interested in me once again upon hearing of my adventures.

It did not take long for Father to recognize how Robert and I felt about each other. He was not pleased! Although Father opposed our relationship, he still allowed me to perform Robert's works at concert. Father realized that Robert had an incredible talent.

10. Herbert, May, *Early Letters of Robert Schumann* (St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1970), p. 204.

11. Hanning, Barbara Russano, *Concise History of Western Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 430.

The bond I once had with my Father was disintegrating and this man who had managed all my performance affairs cut me off. My first experience on my own was in Paris. Not only did I have to memorize and practice my music, I also had to attend to a long list of details that included (Clara counts these off on her fingers): renting a hall and instruments, having the piano tuned, hiring supporting musicians, finding wealthy and influential patrons, printing tickets, giving complimentary tickets to the right people, arranging heating and lighting, advertising in newspapers and getting posters made, having appropriate concert attire. It was so overwhelming, but I did it! My concert was a success and I discovered an inner strength that I never realized I had!¹²

Robert and I made plans to marry, but Father would not have it and the law was on his side—I could not marry without his permission until I turned 21. He warned me that if I married I would destroy my career as composer and performer. Robert and I had to file a lawsuit to set aside the need for Father's consent.¹³

After many years of conflict with my Father, Robert and I won the court settlement and we were married—one day before my twenty-first birthday. My dream of being Robert's wife became a reality. And oh, such a wedding gift I received from my husband—he composed a cycle of songs, eight in all, that mirrored a woman's experiences throughout life starting “when she meets the man she will marry and ending with his death, leaving her only with memories.”¹⁴ One song I would like to share with you is “Thou Ring Upon My Finger.” The lyrics have such a sweet meaning to me for the ring that Robert gave me (Clara lovingly gazes at the ring on her hand) changed my life.

I think it is time for another challenge. I want you to listen for something referred to as Rondo—the melody heard at the beginning of the song comes around again.¹⁵ This will be quite easy for you since I am singing in English this time. In “Thou Ring Upon My Finger” I would like you to determine how often you hear a repeating melody.

Clara and accompanist: (Clara assumes appropriate singing posture, this time gently holding her hands so her wedding ring is clearly visible, and sings “Thou Ring Upon My Finger”)

Thou ring upon my finger,
My beautiful ring of gold,
My lips on thee fervently linger,
And close the dear treasure to my heart I hold.

My childhood's dream had vanish'd,
A joyous dream serene and bright;
Alone I seem'd as if banish'd
To desolate regions of night.

Thou ring upon my finger,
Hast giv'n to glad thoughts a birth,
Forbiddest clouds to linger,
Transformest to rapture my life on earth,

And I'll live for him and near him,
Will always his remain,
To serve him, to bless and to cheer him,
His glance of approval to gain, his approval gain.

Thou ring upon my finger,
My beautiful ring of gold,
My lips on thee fervently linger,
And close the dear treasure to my heart I hold!¹⁶

Clara: So let us see, how many times did you hear the opening melody? (Clara waits for a response) Very good, three times!

On the first morning as man and wife Robert presented me with a diary. On the first page he wrote:

My most beloved young wife!...The little book which I open herewith has a very particular intimate meaning; it is to record everything that affects us together in our household and married life, our wishes, our hopes shall be written down in it...In short, it shall be a good, true friend to whom we will confide everything, to whom our hearts shall be opened...”¹⁷

12. Bower, p. 269.

13. Reich, p. 79.

14. Kimball, Carol, *Song A Guide to Style & Literature* (Redmond, Washington: PST...INC, 2000), p.89.

15. Randel, Don Michael, ed., *The Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 572.

16. Schumann, Robert, *85 Songs for Voice and Piano* (New York: International Music Company), pp. 36-37.

17. Burk, John N., *Clara Schumann A Romantic Biography* (The United States of America, Random House, Inc., 1940), p.213.

We took turns writing in our marriage diary--the first of many. Each week we would pass the diary from one to the other.¹⁸ Oh, to know the thoughts of my beloved. For so long I was unable to freely express my inner emotions in my diaries. My Father began my first diary for me when I was seven, writing in my name and supervising and examining all that I wrote. He made me copy "letters he wrote to associates, friends, and enemies."¹⁹ I suppose this was his way of educating and communicating with me; I would receive information, praise, and criticism through the pages of my diary. I often felt as if he was molding my personality.²⁰

Our first year of marriage was bliss. I was with the man I loved. We spent much time with our music. Robert had become editor of *neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (in English it is New Journal of Music), a journal he founded that contained reviews and essays²¹, and we would spend time with our heads together studying scores and discussing compositions. And oh how Robert spent time composing his work.

Of course I had been trained in composition and wrote music of my own. I never felt as comfortable with my work as Robert did with his. You see, during my lifetime people believed that women were not as capable of composing music as men. Many women have had to write under pseudonyms to be published, using either their father's, husband's, or a friend's name. If a composition is written by a man, it has a better chance of getting published.²² Robert offered to look over my work, and although I truly appreciated his comments I felt that what I had written was strong enough to stand on its own.

It was not easy for two artists to be in the same household. I knew I could not disturb Robert when he wrote which meant I could not spend time at the piano. Pretty soon the novelty of our new

life started to wear and my desire to return to performance won out. Robert did travel with me at first, but as our family grew he would stay at home when I toured. I felt so strongly about my art that I continued to play even "in advanced stages of pregnancy."²³ This was not customary in my day and women did not discuss pregnancy or appear publicly. It was referred to as "physical sufferings" or "health problems."²⁴ Since Robert and I had eight children—(Clara counts them off on her fingers) Marie, Elise, Julie, Emil (who died as an infant), Ludwig, Ferdinand, Eugenie, Felix—

I often appeared in public although I had (Clara makes a set of quotations in the air) "health problems." Robert did well to care for the children, but as our family grew they were sent to stay with relatives or attend boarding schools.²⁵

Although we loved each other fiercely our life was not destined to be one of happiness. Robert was "troubled by depression and melancholy," he lost the one position in which he earned a

salary as a municipal music director in Düsseldorf, "he suffered hallucinations and tried to commit suicide."²⁶ Robert committed himself to an asylum and I was not allowed to see him for two years. My song, "Sie liebten sich beide," expresses the anguish I felt at that time. I would like to share this with you.

Clara and accompanist: (Clara assumes proper singing posture and performs "Sie liebten sich beide")

Sie liebten sich beide, doch keiner
wolt' es dem andern gestehn.
Sie sahen sich an so feindlich,
und wolten vor Liebe vergehn.

Sie trennten sich endlich und sah'n sich
nur noch zuweilen im Traun.
Sie waren längst gestorben
und wusten es selber kaum.²⁷



18. Ibid., p. 213.

19. Reich, p. 18.

20. Ibid., p. 18.

21. Hanning, p. 430.

22. Citron, Marcia J., *Gender and the Musical Canon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.96.

23. Bower, p. 263.

24. Ibid., p. 263.

25. Reich, pp. 133-158.

26. Hanning, p. 430.

27. Schumann, pp. 20-21.

Clara: It was now time for me to support my family and I did so by committing to an intense concert schedule and teaching. Dear friends and my own students helped me through my darkest hours. And finally, after two years, I was allowed to see my Robert. He was not eating and so weak he could not speak. “For weeks he had had nothing but wine...I gave it to him—and he took it with the happiest expression and in haste, licking the wine from my fingers (Clara touches her fingertips to her lips and pauses)—ah, he knew that it was I.”²⁸ Two days later my love died. (Clara pauses again).

My loss fueled my desire to uphold my professional reputation. It was now my sole responsibility to support my household and children. Although friends suggested that I play for benefits, I declined. When I did have to borrow, the debt was paid expediently.²⁹

It was a rather daunting task but one that suited me perfectly. Music was my passion and I was fortunate to live in the era of Romanticism. This time in history has given artists the ability to truly express intense emotions—describing their inner most thoughts or perhaps the wonders of the world around them. It has been a time of experimentation—going beyond the boundaries set by the past. I composed a piece of music that I had given to Robert as a birthday gift³⁰ entitled “Lorelei.” It is an example of another interest of Romantic composers—music based “on legends, folk songs, and fanciful tales of romance.”³¹ Let me tell you the story of the “Lorelei.”

Clara and accompanist: (Clara assumes proper singing posture and performs “Lorelei.”)

I do not know what this means,
This haunting nameless pain;
A tale of the bygone ages
Keeps brooding throughout my brain;

The faint air cools in the glooming,
And peaceful flows the Rhine,
The summits that thirst are drinking
The sunset’s flooding wine;

The loveliest maid is sitting
High-throned in yon blue air,
Her golden jewels are shining,
She combs her golden hair;

She combs with a comb that is golden,
And sings a strange refrain
That lingering melody
How it casts a magic spell:

The doomed in his drifting sailboat,
Is tranced by the sad sweet song
He sees not the threat’ning breakers,
He sees only her all alone:

The merciless currents devour him!—
So perish sailor and boat:
And this, with her mournful singing,
Is the Lorelei’s work.
And this, with her mournful singing,
Is the Lorelei’s gruesome work.³²

Clara: Perhaps some of you may someday choose to express yourselves as we of the Romantic era have—be it through music, literature, or perhaps art. Your faces are those of the future... cherish the time you have. It has been so many years that I have been without my Robert. And yes, I have outlived some of my own children. But one thing lives on and is always there for me—my music. Ah yes, a life lived musically is one lived in the past, present and future.

28. Reich, p. 128.

29. Ibid., p. 162.

30. Ibid., p. 319

31. Faber, Nancy and Randall, *Piano Literature Book 3* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: The FJH Music Company Inc., 1999), p. 5.

32. “An Ancient Legend of the Rhine,” <http://www.readbookonline.net/read/830/10740/>.

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