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Jiaying Zhu

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Clara Schumann's Piano Sonata in G Minor:  
A Preview of Things to Come

Jiaying Zhu

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Music

Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Steven Young, Thesis Director  
Dr. Jean Kreiling, Committee Member  
Dr. Donald Running, Committee Member

The purpose of this study is to examine, analyze, and perform a recently published edition of a nearly forgotten piece, the *Piano Sonata in G minor*, by Clara Schumann. This is her first attempt at writing in this form. The piece is in a larger form and of a much longer length, which makes it unique among her works. Since it is unique and little has been written about the piece, it offers a wealth of opportunities to the researcher. The study includes a complete formal and structural analysis of the sonata, as well as a comparison of this sonata with her *Piano Trio in G minor*, op. 17. This study will place this piece within the context of the Romantic piano sonata genre of the mid-nineteenth century, and offer some possible reasons for its neglect within the literature.

Clara Schumann (1819-1896) was a well-known pianist in the nineteenth century. She was born into a musical family. Her father Friedrich Wieck was a piano teacher, and he also owned a music shop lending and selling music scores. Clara's mother Marianne Wieck was a student of Friedrich, and they married in 1816. Marianne was a pianist and soprano who performed frequently at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Friedrich and Marianne divorced in 1824 when Clara was only five years old. Clara lived with her father until she married Robert Schumann in 1840.

Until she was 19, Clara's father directed her education and career as a concert pianist, escorting her on tours in Germany, Austria, and France.<sup>1</sup> Her father kept track of her progress as a musician in her childhood diaries. The diaries also included her repertory and concerts of the 1830s.<sup>2</sup> Clara performed at the Leipzig Gewandhaus as an assisting artist at nine years old, and her first solo piano début was at the age of eleven in the same

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy B. Reich, "Schumann, Clara," Grove Music Online; available from <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/25152>; Internet.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

venue on November 8, 1830. Not only did Clara study piano, she also learned violin, music theory, orchestration, counterpoint, and composition with various teachers in Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin.

Joan Chissell, a Clara Schumann scholar, wrote that, as she approached seven, her stretch was already wide enough for her to manage octaves in both hands.<sup>3</sup> Her natural physical advantage, the strict regimen prescribed by her father, and her discipline led to her successful career as a pianist, a career that spanned over sixty years. In her younger days, she played pieces that were mostly written by the contemporary composers of her time such as Johann Peter Pixis, Henri Herz, Friedrich Kalkbrenner, and Franz Liszt.<sup>4</sup> Later in her life, especially after her marriage, she explored music by earlier composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Johann Sebastian Bach, Domenico Scarlatti, and Franz Schubert. She had also promoted Robert Schumann's works since she was twelve years old. Overall, she performed 1,299 concerts, with her last performance in Frankfurt at age 71.<sup>5</sup> All her programs have been preserved and numbered, and are stored at the Robert-Schumann-Haus at Zwickau.<sup>6</sup>

As Clara was so famous and successful as a concert pianist, it often overshadowed that she was also a composer. Most of her early compositions were virtuosic character pieces, which served the purpose of showing off piano skills and impressing audiences in her own concerts. Those pieces included *Romance variée*, op. 3 and *Souvenir de Vienne*, op. 9, which contained many fast scalar runs and arpeggios, large stretches and leaps,

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<sup>3</sup> Joan Chissell, *Clara Schumann, a Dedicated Spirit: a Study of Her Life and Work* (New York: Taplinger Pub. Co., 1983), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Reich, *Schumann, Clara*.

<sup>5</sup> Chissell, *Clara Schumann, a Dedicated Spirit*, p. xi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

contrasting articulations and extreme dynamic changes. After she married Robert, she wrote fewer character pieces and composed more Lieder.<sup>7</sup> Clara and Robert studied counterpoint and fugue daily, which improved her compositional skills. She also composed more large-scale works such as the *Piano Sonata in G Minor* and the *Piano Trio in G Minor*, op. 17.

The *Piano Sonata in G Minor* was composed in 1841-1842. As Clara mentioned in her diary: “I tried to compose something for Robert, and lo and behold, it worked! I was blissful at having really completed a first and a second sonata movement, which did not fail to produce an effect – namely, they took my dear husband quite by surprise.”<sup>8</sup> Clara presented the *Allegro* and *Scherzo* of the sonata as a Christmas gift for Robert in 1841. Robert then wrote to Clara’s mother, and expressed his pleasure at the two sonata movements modestly described as a *Sonatine*.<sup>9</sup> In January, Clara found time between concert engagements to add the *Adagio* and *Rondo*.<sup>10</sup> It seemed to be a tradition that the couple composed for each other as gifts for holidays and birthdays. Besides the sonata, she had written *Ich stand in dunklen Träumen*, op.13 no.1 and *Volkslied* as Christmas gifts for Robert in 1840, and *Lorelei* as a birthday gift in 1843. The latter two songs were published posthumously.

The sonata remained unpublished until 1991. Several facts indicated that Clara had never intended to publish the entire piece. First, she had never performed this piece in public. Second, in the fourth movement (Rondo), dynamic markings appear in the first

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<sup>7</sup> Reich, *Schumann, Clara*.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Schumann, Clara Schumann and Gerd Nauhaus, *The Marriage Diaries of Robert and Clara Schumann: From Their Wedding Day through the Russia Trip* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> Clara Schuman, *Piano Music*, Yoshiko Iwai; compact disc (Decca 8.552501, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

fifty-three measures and there are no further indications of dynamic markings. Third, neither she nor Robert made mention in their marriage diary that she had sent the piece to a publisher. However, the *Scherzo* was published in 1845 as part of the *Pièces fugitives*, op. 15, with some changes to the articulations and dynamics.

*Allegro*

As expected, the first movement is in sonata form. The exposition ends at m. 89. The development section starts in m. 90 and ends at m. 122, followed by the recapitulation from mm. 123-192. Finally, the coda gives the conclusion to the movement from mm. 193-219. The detailed formal structure shows in the charts below:

<b>First Movement: Allegro (Sonata Form)</b>				
Sections		Measures	Tonalties	
Exposition	First Theme	Mm.1-14	G minor	
	Transition	Mm.14-26		
	Second Theme	Mm.26-43 Mm.44-70	E-flat major	
	Closing area	Mm.70-89		
Development		Mm.90-122	Mm.90-94	C minor
			Mm.94-95	A-flat major
			Mm.96-97	F minor
			Mm.98-103	D-flat major
			Mm.103-106	F-sharp minor
			Mm.107-122	G minor
Recapitulation	First Theme	Mm.123-136	G minor	
	Transition	Mm.136-149		
	Second Theme	Mm.150-167 Mm.167-192	G major interrupted by A minor	
Coda		Mm.193-219	G minor	

Two themes are introduced in the exposition. The first theme (mm. 1-14) is in the key of G minor. The theme contains two contrasting ideas: (1) the homophonic theme is presented initially; (2) the polyphonic phrase that follows adds a lyrical element. The

transition (mm. 14-26) leads the piece into the second theme and moves the key to E-flat major. The second theme consists of two parts as well: mm. 26-43 and 44-70. Compared to the first theme, the second theme is more complicated in terms of extensive use of chromaticism. The first part features scalar figures, while the second part is more developmental: it contains extreme amounts of chromaticism, and the harmonies are unstable. The tempo markings *um vieles schneller* and *immer schneller* indicate a much faster speed. The second theme finally cadences on E-flat major in m. 70. The closing area starts with a mood change to *tranquillo*, and ends on the dominant chord of G minor in m. 89.

The development section features an arpeggiated triplet figure that has no connection with the themes of the exposition. Although it is a short development compared with its exposition, the development shows some interesting tonal relationships. The tonicizations in the development feature, in order, the keys of C minor, A-flat major, F minor, D-flat major, and F-sharp minor. Those keys are separated by thirds and alternate modes, so they are in doubly chromatic mediant relationship. Not only does the development section follow the doubly chromatic mediant relationship, the tonalities of the whole movement occur the same way: G minor, E-flat major, C minor, A-flat major, F minor, D-flat major, and F-sharp minor. F-sharp minor then acts as a leading tonality going back to G minor.

The recapitulation has almost the same structure as the exposition. The second theme moves to the parallel major, G major with the brief tonicization of A minor in mm. 155-156 and mm. 159-161. In the lengthy coda section, Clara indulges in some virtuosic pianism before concluding with the closing-area material.

This movement follows the traditional structure of a sonata form. However, Clara Schumann stretches the tonal scheme in some unusual ways, through a systematic use of chromatic mediant relationships, to break the shell of the old-fashioned sonata form established in the Classical Period.

### *Adagio*

The *Adagio* is the most lyrical one of all four movements. It uses the harmonic language that is frequently used in the Romantic Period, such as passing-tone diminished seventh chords and common-tone diminished seventh chords. These chords reflect the increasing use of chromatic harmonies in the Romantic Period, adding colors to a rather basic tonal melody. The song-like melody may indicate Clara's growing interest in composing Lieder. The form of the movement is shown in the chart below:

<b>Second Movement: Adagio (Ternary)</b>		
Sections	Measures	Tonality
A	Mm.1-13	E-flat major
B	Mm.13-27	B-flat major
A <sup>1</sup>	Mm.27-38	E-flat major

### *Scherzo*

In contrast to the song-like nature of the *Adagio*, the *Scherzo* is a spritely dance. The articulation used in the *Scherzo* is mostly staccato with one exception in the left hand of the B section. In contrast, the trio that follows is more legato. The harmonic language of this movement is mostly traditional. The form of the movement is shown in the chart below:



<b>Third Movement: Scherzo (Rounded Binary)</b>			
Sections		Measures	Tonalities
A		Mm.1-12	G major
B	Digression	Mm.13-28	G major (E minor at the beginning for two measures)
	A return	Mm.29-40	G major
<b>Trio (Ternary)</b>			
C		Mm.41-56	E minor
D		Mm.57-68	A minor to E minor
C <sup>1</sup>		Mm.69-84	E minor
<b>Scherzo (reprise)</b>			

### *Rondo*

This is the most virtuosic movement of the Sonata. It features perpetually moving sixteenth notes from the beginning to the end. The opening theme of the movement became the piano introduction of the song *Sie liebten sich beide*, op.13, no. 2, that Clara composed later in June 1842 with slight rhythmic variations (see examples 1 and 2 below). The tonal changes in the piece are also based on doubly chromatic mediant relationships. The chart below shows the details:

<b>Fourth Movement: Rondo</b>		
Sections	Measures	Tonalities
A	Mm.1-22	G minor
B	Mm.23-39	B-flat major
A <sup>1</sup>	Mm.40-54	G minor
C	Mm.55-111	E-flat major
A <sup>2</sup>	Mm.112-133	G minor
BC	Mm.134-200	B-flat major
A <sup>3</sup>	Mm.201-221	G minor
Coda	Mm.222-237	G minor

Example 1: Piano introduction to *Sie liebten sich beide*, mm.1-4

Example 2: The opening of *Rondo (Piano Sonata in G minor)*, mm.1-4

The *Rondo* movement uses some patterns similar to those in the first movement. The examples below show that she employs similar scalar pattern and octave doublings but they are played twice as fast in the *Rondo*. The chord progressions are the same in the penultimate measure in Examples 4 and 5 ( $V^6$  -vii<sup>07</sup>/ii-ii-V<sup>7</sup>).

Example 3: Allegro, *Piano Sonata in G Minor*, movement 1, mm. 40-43

Example 4: Allegro, *Piano Sonata in G Minor*, movement 1, mm. 163-167



Example 5: Rondo, *Piano Sonata in G Minor*, movement 4, mm. 94-98



Example 6: Rondo, *Piano Sonata in G Minor*, movement 4, mm. 179-183

In 1846, Clara used the sonata form in her chamber piece, the *Piano Trio in G minor*, op. 17. Some noticeable similarities can be found in the first movements of the Piano Sonata and Piano Trio. First, Clara used G minor as the key for both pieces. Second, the expositions, recapitulations, and codas are approximately the same length. Third, Clara uses scalar patterns in both movements frequently. Fourth, the thematic ideas used in the expositions are similar; for example, the second themes both contain two distinctive melodies while maintaining the same tonality. However, the tonal scheme in the Piano Trio is more conventional than that of the Sonata, as the second theme of the Trio moves to the relative major. The development section of the Piano Trio is forty measures longer than that of the Sonata. Here, Clara shows growth as a composer as in this development she manipulates themes from the exposition. This did not occur in the development section of the first movement of the piano sonata.

First Movement of the Sonata				First movement of the Piano Trio			
Sections		Measures	Tonalities	Sections		Measures	Tonalities
Exposition	First Theme	Mm. 1-14	G minor	Exposition	First theme	Mm. 1-22	G minor
	Transition	Mm. 14-26			Transition	Mm. 22-45	
	Second Theme	Mm. 26-43	E-flat major		Second theme	Mm. 45-60	B-flat major
		Mm. 44-70				Mm. 60-73	
Closing area	Mm. 70-89		Closing area	Mm. 73-92			
Development		Mm. 90-122		Development		Mm. 92-164	
Recap	First Theme	Mm.123-138	G minor	Recap	First theme	Mm. 165-181	G minor
	Transition	Mm.138-149			Transition	Mm. 181b-210	
	Second Theme	Mm.150-167	G major		Second theme	Mm. 210-249	G major
Mm.167-192							
Coda		Mm.193-219	G minor	Coda		Mm. 250-288	G minor

The Piano Sonata in G minor appears to be a collection of compositional ideas for her some of later pieces. As already noted, she reused the theme of the Rondo in *Sie liebten sich beide* which she composed several months after the Sonata; three years later, she published the *Scherzo* as part of *Pièces fugitives*. Finally, she incorporated the same two-part structure of the second theme from the Sonata within the Piano Trio, composed four years later.

In conclusion, the Sonata seems to have been a practice model for Clara, or may be a musical conversation between her and Robert. The Sonata experiments with tonal schemes and extensive chromaticism. However, it still contains compositional

inadequacies, such as the development section in the first movement that has almost no connection to the exposition in terms of motives; the development section is short compared to the structure of the entire movement. The sonata can be viewed as a transitional work that leads to more well-developed compositions.

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