

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 2 June 2024
3.00pm

I, Clara Clara Schumann – A Life in Music

Lucy Parham piano
Dame Harriet Walter narrator

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	Romance in F sharp Op. 28 No. 2 (1839)
Clara Schumann (1819-1896)	Polonaise in E flat Op. 1 No. 1 (1829)
Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)	Nocturne in F sharp Op. 15 No. 2 (1830-2)
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	Geheimes Flüstern from <i>Lieder von Robert und Clara Schumann</i> S569 (1874) based on Clara Schumann
Robert Schumann	So rasch wie möglich from <i>Piano Sonata No. 2 in G minor</i> Op. 22 (1833-8)
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)	Song without Words in A 'Spring Song' Op. 62 No. 6 (1842)
Clara Schumann	Romance in E flat minor Op. 11 No. 1 (1838-9)
Robert Schumann	Erster Verlust from <i>Album für die Jugend</i> Op. 68 (1848)
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)	Intermezzo in A minor Op. 118 No. 1 (by 1893)
Robert Schumann	Intermezzo from <i>Faschingschwank aus Wien</i> Op. 26 (1839-40) Kind im Einschlummern from <i>Kinderszenen</i> Op. 15 (1838) Arabeske in C Op. 18 (1838-9)
Johannes Brahms	Ballade in G minor Op. 118 No. 3 (by 1893)
Franz Liszt	Liebeslied (Widmung) S566 (?1846-60) based on Robert Schumann



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The story of the intricate and complex relationship between Brahms, Clara and Robert Schumann has fascinated music lovers for years. As three of the 19th Century's most prolific musicians, they hold an unparalleled position in music history, and we owe much of what we know about them to the extensive letters and diaries they kept.

Clara Wieck (born 1819) was a child prodigy pianist who was groomed for stardom by her father, a piano teacher. Hailed as the 'next Mozart' for her extraordinary pianistic talent, she delighted audiences throughout Europe from a very young age. In Vienna, such was her fame that she even had a cake named after her.

When Clara was 11 years old and the 20 year old Robert Schumann came for lessons to the Wieck house in Leipzig, the last thing Clara's father wanted was for this young man (whom he saw as an extremely bad influence) to fall in love with his daughter. Inevitably, a romance developed between the two young people, leaving Wieck to do whatever he could to keep them apart. He succeeded to the extent that music often became their only possible means of communication. An extraordinarily accomplished composer herself, Clara came up with a five-note motif that was unique to their music and which Robert embedded in much of his piano music. It was his way of telling Clara he loved her when they were forcibly kept apart. Ultimately, Friedrich Wieck's intervention failed to prevent them from marrying, and in 1840 Clara Wieck became Clara Schumann. She was 21 and Robert was 30.

Their marriage diary, which she kept jointly with Robert, along with the letters she wrote over the years to her friends, provides much of the material for *I, Clara*. There is no doubt that she and Robert enjoyed great happiness in their early years together, but by the time the young Brahms burst upon the musical scene in Hamburg, Schumann was already showing unmistakable signs of mental illness. In 1854, after Schumann was admitted at his own request to a mental asylum at Eendenich, near Bonn, Clara was forbidden by the doctors from seeing him. Brahms, whose love and admiration for Clara was unwavering, temporarily moved into the Schumann household to help with her seven children and the finances. Clara had to continue with her numerous concert tours, as they had always been the main source of income for the family. Her correspondence with Brahms is extensive. Sadly, toward the end of their lives they destroyed many of their letters to one another, but his surviving letters leave no doubt of the extent and depth of his feelings for her. Much of what happened between Clara Schumann and Brahms will remain forever unknown – most especially whether it involved a physical relationship. Clara Schumann was an extraordinary woman by any standards. Prodigiously talented, she was the first female concert pianist, an outstanding composer, and a standard-bearer for Robert Schumann's music. Although we will never know the exact nature of her relationship with Brahms, there is no doubt that she was his true love.

She was the first concert pianist to play from memory – thus shaping the format of the solo recital as we know it today. Her compositional output includes a piano concerto, a piano trio, numerous songs and works for solo piano. During her lifetime she gave over 1,500 performances and her compositions were much more widely known than her husband's. Her legacy is

immense. A muse to two giants of the Romantic school, and a musical heroine in her own right, she tells her story in her own words in *I, Clara*.

The second of **Robert Schumann's** three *Romances* Op. 28 is especially poignant in this context, since Clara's grandson played it to her on her deathbed: it was the last piece of music she heard. The two melodic voices, carried by the thumbs of both hands, form a duet. For me, they inescapably represent the voices of Robert and Clara.

The *Polonaise in E flat* Op. 1 No. 1 was **Clara Wieck's** first published composition and is reputed to have impressed the legendary violinist Paganini. Although simple, it demonstrates an originality that belies Clara's tender age – merely nine years old. It was four years later that Clara first heard **Chopin** perform in Paris. His *Nocturne in F sharp* Op. 15 contains a turbulent central section which is framed by some of his most exquisite and intimate piano writing. *Geheimes Flüstern* ('Secret whisperings') combines the compositional talents of two of the pianistic giants of the 19th Century concert platform: this exquisite song, written by Clara in 1853, was faithfully and lovingly transcribed for solo piano by **Liszt**.

Robert Schumann's *Sonata No. 2* in G minor Op. 22 was written with Clara in mind and the highly passionate first movement, which opens with a statement of their shared theme as a 'cry from the heart', suggests Robert's unbearable yearning for her.

Mendelssohn makes a cameo appearance in the programme with one of his much-loved *Songs without Words*, the 'Spring Song'. Clara Schumann's *Romance in E flat minor* Op. 11 No. 1 was composed in 1839. Dark and introspective in mood, it demonstrates a new level of maturity in her compositions. *Erster Verlust* ('First loss') Op. 68 No. 11 was written by Schumann for his eldest daughter, Marie and the mood then changes dramatically with **Brahms's** *Intermezzo in A minor* Op. 118 No. 1.

Schumann's *Intermezzo* from Op. 26 is again turbulent in its undertones, though its melodic line soars over them. By contrast, the utter simplicity of *Kind im Einschlummern* ('Child falling asleep') makes it possibly the most sublime short piece that Schumann wrote for the piano. The final bars contain the 'private' five-note falling theme that Robert and Clara used when they communicated with each other and which pervades many of their compositions. Clara Schumann often played Robert's *Arabeske* Op. 18 as an encore in her recitals. Written to earn Schumann some much-needed money, it was specifically intended to be both popular and playable. The coda also features Robert and Clara's five-note theme, which adds a poignancy to the closing bars.

As she grew older, Clara's hands became crippled with arthritis and Brahms wrote his tender and introspective late piano pieces with her constantly in his mind. With its underlying energy, the *Ballade in G minor* Op. 118 No. 3 proves an exception in the set of *Klavierstücke* Op. 118. Schumann's song 'Widmung' ('Dedication') comes from the song cycle *Myrthen*, or *Myrtles*. The words perfectly describe his devotion to her and the mood is one of unflinching optimism. Liszt's florid transcription is faithful to the text and although he embellishes much of the surrounding accompaniment, Clara remains at its heart.

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