

Clara Schumann: Piano Trio in G Minor, Op.17

Strand: Instrumental music

1. Composer background

[Accompanying PowerPoint provides illustrations]

Clara Schumann (1819-1896) was a German concert pianist and composer. Like Mozart, she was originally a child prodigy (*wunderkind*), who went on to become one of the most famous concert pianists of the nineteenth century. She was also the wife of the well-known composer and music critic, Robert Schumann, and a renowned piano teacher. Clara Schumann was born into a musical family in Leipzig in 1819. Her mother, Marianne Tromlitz, was a pianist and singer, and her father, Friedrich Wieck, was one of the most famous piano teachers of nineteenth-century Germany.

Leipzig was an important musical city, and an excellent place for a young musician to grow up. Leipzig had been one of the most important cities in the North-Eastern German state of Saxony for centuries. By the early nineteenth century, Leipzig was an important commercial and cultural centre, with a population of around 40,000. The musical tradition of the city was well established. Its reputation for church music dated back to the time that Johann Sebastian Bach had been Kantor (or Music Director) at the famous St Thomas's (Lutheran) Church. Secular music was also extremely well developed, and largely focused around the famous Gewandhaus Concert Hall. Leipzig was also an important centre for publishing, including music publishing. The first dedicated music journal, *Die Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, had been established there in 1798. Unusually for early nineteenth-century Germany, Clara's parents divorced in January 1825. Marianne Tromlitz remarried (to the musician and former friend of Wieck, Adolphe Bargiel) in August 1825 and relocated to Berlin shortly afterwards. Under then current Saxon law, Clara, as a child of the marriage, was regarded as Wieck's 'property' and required to remain in Leipzig with him and her two younger brothers. As Wieck did not remarry himself for several years, he turned his full attention to the education and training of his daughter, Clara.

Clara Schumann received an extremely thorough and privileged musical education and training, overseen by her father. Female musicians could only very rarely achieve such a comprehensive musical grounding, and it was this, to a significant degree, more than anything else that allowed her to break the bounds of what female musicians could usually achieve at the time. Clara began piano lessons shortly after her fifth birthday. By the age of seven, she was spending three hours a day at the piano: one hour for a lesson with her father and two for practice. During the 1820s, when Wieck was preparing his daughter for a career as a concert pianist, it was the custom for all performers to compose and regularly to programme their own compositions in their concerts. Thus, Wieck ensured that she received a thorough grounding in music theory and composition. She studied theory and harmony with Christian Weinlig (the Kantor of the famous St Thomas Church in Leipzig, where Bach had once worked) and composition with the composer Heinrich Dorn. During the summer of 1834 (shortly before her fifteenth birthday), her father sent her to Dresden to study orchestration with the Kapellmeister Carl Reisseger and also voice with the famous singing teacher Johann Miksch. Wieck even ensured that she also studied the violin (a relatively unusual instrument for a girl to learn in the early nineteenth century) in order to assist her string scoring. This first-hand knowledge of a bowed instrument, of course, actually did help her string writing in the Piano Trio in G Minor, Op. 17. To complete her musical education, Wieck regularly took Clara to the operas and concerts that were regularly mounted at the Gewandhaus, the famous Leipzig concert hall.

Friedrich Wieck's great efforts over his daughter's musical education and training quickly bore fruit. She made her first public appearance – in a concert which brought together a range of artists – at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 20 October 1828, at the age of nine. Despite the success of this appearance, Wieck did not allow her to perform in public again until 1830, encouraging her instead to build confidence by playing at the private *soirées* (or musical evenings) for local musicians and music publishers, which he arranged at home. 1830 was an important year for her early career, however. In March, Wieck took Clara to Dresden (another important musical city in Saxony) for a series of concerts, and in early November she gave her first solo concert at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Between September 1831 and May 1832, Wieck took Clara on a concert tour which culminated in Paris (which, along with Vienna and London, was one of the three most important musical cities in Europe). Between 1831 and her marriage in 1840, Clara made many successful concert tours, particularly including one to Vienna in 1838, where she caused such a sensation that people stormed the box offices in order to buy tickets to her concerts and the police had to be called in to restore order. She became so well known in Vienna that the Viennese cafés started serving 'Clara cakes' in her honour. Thus, by the later 1830s, her reputation as one of the finest leading international concert pianists of the day was already firmly established. She was also making headway as a composer. She had been composing since the age of ten, and, before her marriage, at least one of her own original compositions appeared on the programme of every single concert that she gave.

By the late 1830s, however, Clara's personal life had become very complicated by the bitter tug of love that she was experiencing between her father and Robert Schumann, who she had become engaged to marry, against Wieck's wishes. Robert Schumann had originally come to live in Wieck's home, as a lodger, in 1830, so that he could study the piano with him intensively. Robert Schumann – who was nine years Clara's senior – had originally come to Leipzig to study law at the University (as his family wished). However, he was not a diligent law student, and had spent most of his time in musical pursuits, including taking piano lessons with Wieck (who he initially greatly admired) and attending the musical *soirées* at the Wieck family home, where he also first met the child Clara. (He was also – as Wieck was fully aware – very fond of excessive drinking and rowdy evenings with other students.) In 1830, he managed to persuade his mother to allow him to give up his law studies and dedicate himself to music instead, by studying privately with Wieck. (Thus, it was arranged that Schumann would board with the Wieck family so that he could immerse himself intensively in his music studies.) Clara was still only a little girl, when Schumann first arrived, but – despite the nine-year age gap – they immediately became friends, and effectively studied together.

Clara and Robert Schumann first became romantically attracted to each other shortly after her sixteenth birthday, in the autumn of 1835. Wieck, however, steadfastly refused to give his consent to the match. As early nineteenth-century Saxon law required that both sets of parents had to give their consent for marriage, regardless of the age of the children, Schumann and Clara had no other option but to go to court against Wieck to obtain permission to marry. The case was finally settled in their favour in the summer of 1840, and they married on 12th September that year, one day before Clara's twenty-first birthday.

The Schumanns' marriage lasted from September 1840 until Robert's death in July 1856 (although he was hospitalised through severe mental ill health for the last two years, following a suicide attempt). They initially settled in Clara's hometown of Leipzig, although they moved to Dresden in 1844, and again to Düsseldorf in 1850. Together they had eight children: Marie (born 1841), Elise (born 1843), Julie (born 1845), Emil (who lived for only 16 months, born 1846), Ludwig (born 1848), Eugenie (born 1851) and Felix (born 1854, after Robert's hospitalisation). Although Clara's time for music was severely curtailed during her marriage – not least as Robert Schumann was often unwell (both physically and mentally) and as her frequent pregnancies curtailed her ability to tour – she did manage to keep her career going. Following Robert Schuman's hospitalisation in 1854, she spectacularly revived her career as a concert pianist in order to pay for his medical bills and to

support their large family. She remained one of the most renowned concert pianists of her day until the end of her own life, four decades later.

A musical marriage

At the time of their marriage, Clara Schumann was already one of the most celebrated concert pianists of her day. Robert Schumann, on the other hand, and although he would become a famous composer later in the nineteenth century, did not have an established international career. His compositions were not widely known and liked by only a small number of people, and he was actually much more well known as a music critic, rather than a composer. After her marriage, Clara diverted many of her musical talents into aiding and furthering Robert’s career, rather than continuing to focus on her own. Her hours for practising the piano, and for composing, were limited to times when his creative work would not be disturbed. She voiced her frustration over this in their joint diary (often referred to as their marriage journal) on 2 June 1841 thus:

My piano playing again falls completely by the wayside, as is always the case when Robert composes. Not a single little hour can be found for me the entire day! If only I don’t regress too much!

Clara Wieck-Schumann, Diary Entry (2 June 1841); cited from Gerd Nauhaus (ed.) *The Marriage Diaries of Robert and Clara Schumann*, Translated with a Preface by Peter Ostwald (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 84.

During their marriage, Clara dedicated large amounts of time to copying out parts for Robert’s compositions and making piano transcriptions of his orchestral scores. She also accompanied the various ensembles which he conducted. (This was obviously an act of wifely devotion, as pianists of her calibre did not usually accompany choirs for routine rehearsals.)

Unfortunately, Robert Schumann often expressed ambiguity about Clara’s musical career. On the one hand, he was proud of her musical gifts and approached publishers on her behalf on several occasions. On the other hand, however, he believed that her primary role after they married was as a *Hausfrau* (or housewife). Although he took great pleasure in her piano playing, especially just for him at home, he often appeared jealous of having to share her gifts as a concert pianist with the general public. It was his wish – and one that caused her great distress – that she should not perform in public, during the first year of her marriage. He wrote to her in 1839 (during the last year of their engagement) to express his view that:

The first year of our marriage you shall forget the artist, you shall live only for yourself and your house and your husband, and wait [...] just see how I will make you forget the artist – because the wife stands even higher than the artist and if I only achieve this much – that you have nothing more to do with the public – I will have achieved my deepest wish. Yet you still remain an artist. The bit of fame in the contemptible paper that your father considers the greatest happiness in the world – I despise it.

Robert Schumann, Letter to Clara Wieck (Schumann) (Early 1839); cited from Nany B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, Revised Edition (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 68.

Although her work as a pianist was somewhat circumscribed during her marriage, as a composer Clara really developed during those years. Clara published 23 works with opus numbers, but she also left a substantial amount of music unpublished at the time of her death. (Much of this has now been published posthumously.) The piano – as might be expected – is absolutely central to her output. In addition to solo piano works, she also completed a Piano Concerto, a substantial number of Lieder (or

songs), and the Piano Trio in G Minor, Op.17. Early in their marriage, Robert and Clara Schumann embarked upon a serious joint study of Baroque and Classical music together. They spent their evenings analysing scores together and studying counterpoint. The fruits of this study is evident in both of their works from 1840 onwards, and is a particular influence upon her Piano Trio in G Minor, Op. 17.

Activity

Watch this short film which was produced by the OU to mark the bicentenary of Clara Schumann’s birth in 2019 and consider the following questions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtWFgZ2pbU8>

Consider the effect of Clara Schumann’s marriage and Robert Schumann’s attitudes on her career. How might these have affected her confidence and her ability to pursue her talents as both a composer and a pianist? Might there, however, have been some positive effects too (perhaps particularly her development as a composer)?

An important point to remember is that Robert Schumann was little known at the time of their marriage. Clara Schumann’s championing of his work had a tremendous impact on raising his profile and making his music better known and understood. The marriage was tremendously beneficial for his reputation as a composer.

Students can be encouraged to place this within the wider patriarchal attitudes of the nineteenth century, when women lacked many basic rights and their lives were very constrained by the conservative social conventions of the day.

* Students should also be made aware that, although Clara Schumann certainly did have many domestic responsibilities, she did, as was common in the nineteenth century (when most middle- and upper-class people had servants) have a lot of domestic help too. The Schumanns employed a cook, a maid, a general housekeeper, and a wet-nurse for each child. (So she was not a *Hausfrau* in the conventional sense that she was personally tied down to routine domestic tasks all day everyday).

2. Genre

A Piano Trio is a genre of **chamber music** that usually consists of piano, violin, and cello. Clara Schumann’s choice of chamber music as a genre was most probably also influenced by her marriage. Throughout their marriage, Clara was often guided by Robert’s views and tastes. Nine years older than her, she looked up to him as her senior. She was particularly guided by him in the musical genres that she experimented with after their marriage. Following Schumann’s *Liederjahr* (or year of song) of 1840 – the year of their marriage, during which he concentrated almost exclusively on writing Lieder – she too turned to writing Lieder shortly after her marriage. Likewise, the influence of his own *Kammermusikjahr* (or chamber music year) of 1842, early in the marriage, is apparent in her decision also to turn to chamber music in 1846. In Clara’s particular choice of chamber music genre, however, it seems natural that she would want to write for her own instrument, so would be drawn to the Piano Trio. She was also, of course, familiar with the genre as a performer. The manuscript of the Trio – which contains many revisions – reveals how much work (and re-work) went into it.

Activity

Encourage students to listen to Clara Schumann's Piano Trio in G Minor, Op.17 in its entirety, first without a score – just listening and concentrating upon the sound of the music and the way that the three instruments interact – and then practising following the score.

Recordings of the work are readily available on music-sharing sites. Copies of the scores can also be easily accessed via IMSLP, and students can be encouraged to search for a copy.

3. Analysis

Obviously influenced by the tradition of chamber music following Beethoven (which the Schumanns spent time studying together), Clara Schuman's Piano Trio in G Minor, Op.17 is organised into four movements: Allegro, Scherzo and Trio, Andante, and Allegretto. The Piano Trio was written in Dresden between May and September 1846. This was an emotionally difficult time for the Schumanns – as, in addition to the ongoing worry of Robert's mental health – their fourth child, and first son, Emil, had been born very sickly in the February of that year. Both parents knew from the outset that he would not live very long. (He died 16 months later, in June 1847.) In addition, Clara also suffered a miscarriage in July 1846, in the middle of her work on the Piano Trio. Since the time of Beethoven, both symphonies and chamber music have been understood as cathartic genres; that is genres which composers turned to at difficult times in their lives and which allowed them to cleanse their emotions through writing. It is possible to interpret Clara Wieck-Schumann's Piano Trio – written at a time when she knew that her first-born son wouldn't survive very long and during which she also endured the loss of another child through miscarriage – in this way. That is, that it is a cathartic work which allowed her to pour out and cleanse her anguished emotions. The dark minor key of G Minor obviously reflects this.

The Schumanns' joint study of both Baroque and Classical scores together, previously mentioned, is apparent throughout the Piano Trio. The movements and their forms – obviously stemming from the tradition flowing from Beethoven – are influenced by Classical forms, whilst the whole work is influenced by counterpoint and contrapuntal techniques. During the winter of 1845 to 46 (whilst she was pregnant with Emil, and therefore unable to tour as a concert pianist), Clara and Robert turned their (joint) attention instead to a renewed study of counterpoint, focusing upon working through and closely analysing the works of Bach and Cherubini together.

Movement	Key points
Allegro	The opening Allegro movement is cast, as one might expect, in Sonata form. The lyrical first subject is first heard in the violin part, before being passed to the piano. A chordal second subject, development (which includes contrapuntal writing – showing the first evidence of her recent immersion in the study of counterpoint), and recapitulation follow.
Scherzo and Trio	The Scherzo, of the Second Movement Scherzo and Trio, is cast in the mediant key of B Flat Major. Evoking Classical chamber music works (before the older Minuet and Trio movement was replaced by the Scherzo and Trio, around the time of Beethoven), it is marked 'Tempo di Minuetto' (or at the speed of a Minuet). Its main theme uses a dotted rhythm, in the manner of a 'Scotch Snap'. (It is possible that Clara was influenced in this by the Schumanns' close friend, Felix Mendelssohn, who also used 'Scotch Snap' rhythms in his own Scottish-inspired works, such as the Scottish Symphony of 1842.) The Trio modulates to the local sub-dominant key of E Flat Major.

Andante	The Third Movement Andante presents a typical slow movement. It is cast in the parallel major key of G Major. The Andante takes ternary form, in which the more restless B section modulates to the minor mode, before returning to the tonic for the recapitulation of the A section. This movement includes some particularly technically complex writing for the piano, Clara’s own instrument.
Allegretto	The Fourth, and final, movement returns to the tonic key of G Minor. The opening theme of the Andante is subtly referenced, thereby suggesting a degree of cyclic unity (once again in the manner of the tradition springing from Beethoven). The movement, like the opening Allegro, is also cast in sonata form, although it also contains extensive contrapuntal writing, particularly in the development and coda, where the principal theme is treated as a fugal subject. Here the fugal subject is shared by the violin and cello, with the piano given an elaborate accompaniment.

Activity

Listen to the opening movement (Allegro), encouraging students to practise following the score. Take the movement apart and guide students through the form (which is a Sonata). Ask them to identify the various sections themselves, and to justify their choices as to why they have marked the different sections beginning and ending where they have.

Here are some landmarks in each movement which students can be encouraged to look out for:

- The **Exposition** occurs between bars 1 and 90.
- The **First Subject** is first heard in the violin part at the opening (bars 1-8).
- The **Transition** (or Bridge Passage) takes place between bars 30 and 45.
- The **Second Subject** is heard in the piano part (bars 45-48).
- The **Development** takes place between bars 91 and 164. An example of contrapuntal writing between the cello and the violin can be heard starting at bar 103.
- The **Recapitulation** occurs between bar 165 and the end of the movement. The First and Second Subjects are both heard in the **tonic** (G minor).

4. Related repertory

Clara Schumann was one of the leading composers of the Romantic era. She was a close friend and colleague of not only Robert Schumann, but also Felix Mendelssohn, Frédéric Chopin, and Johannes Brahms. Her music bears a close affinity to that of her colleagues.

Suggestions for further repertoire which students can be encouraged to explore:

- Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, Piano Trio in D Minor, Op. 11 (1847);
- Robert Schumann, Piano Trio in D Minor, Op. 63 (1846-7);
- Clara Wieck-Schumann, *Three Romances for the Piano*, Op. 11 (1838-9);
- Clara Wieck-Schumann, *Six Lieder*, Op. 13 (1840-43);
- Clara Wieck-Schumann, *Four Fleeting Pieces for Piano*, Op. 15 (1841-44);
- Clara Wieck-Schumann, *Three Preludes and Fugues for Piano*, Op. 16 (1845);
- Clara Wieck-Schumann, *Three Romances for Piano*, Op. 21 (1855).

5. Teaching points

[addressing gender issues]

Although Clara Schumann was one of the most well-known female composers of the nineteenth century, she was far from being the only one. Other famous nineteenth-century female composers included Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, Louise Farrenc, Josephine Lang, Pauline Viardot, Luise Adolpha Le Beau, Augusta Holmès, Cécile Chaminade, Maude Valérie White, and Amy Beach (to name just a few).

Questions for consideration or research

- How did the exceptional musical education and training which Clara Schumann received enable her to succeed as a composer? An important teaching point here is that female musicians could only very rarely access a thorough and rounded musical education, including such aspects as training in advanced harmony and counterpoint or orchestration, which would enable serious composition. Women's musical education throughout the nineteenth century tended to be concentrated on learning to play an instrument to an amateur level to help them attract a husband and to provide domestic music-making in the home. (Students could be encouraged to relate this to nineteenth-century literature, and teachers might even consider showing some clips from dramatisations of Jane Austen novels in class to illustrate how women's amateur music-making was used as an 'accomplishment' in the contemporary marriage market.)
- Encourage students to research a nineteenth-century woman composer of their choice and present a short presentation on her to the rest of the class. They could prepare some biographical information, and perhaps choose one particular work to share with the class. If sharing a work, students should ideally find a score and recording to share with their peers. (Depending on the composer that they pick, however, there might be difficulties with this, as so much less music by women than by men is available in printed or recorded form. This in itself and the underlying historical and economic reasons why could themselves lead to an interesting discussion on gender in/equalities and music history and the music industries.)

6. Curriculum links

History – the nineteenth century, women's history

English Literature – nineteenth-century literature

7. Bibliography/further reading and resources

Laura Hamer, 'Clara Schumann', a short film to mark the bicentenary of Clara Schumann's birth (in 2019), produced by The Open University: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtWFgZ2pbU8>

Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, Revised Edition (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).