

The *Three Oboe Romances* of Clara Schumann?

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A seemingly overlooked contradiction exists in the historical accounts regarding the Dresden years of composer Robert Schumann. Although the composer often wrote in his personal correspondence during this time of cyclic depressive bouts that made him unwilling and literally unable to create music, the period between 1845-1850 is considered Schumann's most prolific. Upon investigation, evidence implies the *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano*, as well as other chamber compositions of the Dresden period, could have been written by Clara Schumann instead of Robert. The penning of works under her husband's name could have occurred in an attempt by Clara to conceal Robert's mental illness from the public and maintain the family's established place in society.

The *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano* were written in December of 1849, allegedly as a Christmas present for Clara from Robert. The original manuscript and dedication are not available for study, as they have been lost over the years. Completed toward the end of the Dresden years, the *Three Romances* were written during a time of psychological and compositional struggle for Robert. As Slater states in chronological notes, "1848: relapse in January and depressive mood predominating for most of the year ... It is very typical of an 'endogenous' or manic-depressive depression to cause a general slowing up of mental activity. This psychic inhibition, if it is at all severe, makes creative work impossible; and this is strikingly exemplified by Schumann" (Slater, 409). The depression continued through the end of the year, as is described in Ostwald's account of December 3, 1849: "He could not compose, however - a problem that he had observed during every major depressive episode beginning in adolescence" (Ostwald, xii). Schumann's own account as notated in a letter from December 3, 1849 states, "I have been suffering all this time from a headache, which kept me from working or thinking ... I have to avoid very carefully any depressing associations of the kind" (Stork, 267). The historical accounts of Robert's mental and compositional states during the time of completion of the *Three Romances* are meek and pessimistic.

Inversely, 1849 is considered by historians to be a year of tremendous compositional output for Robert Schumann. The prolific amount of music written at this time is contradictory to the medical and personal accounts of Robert's mental state. As Sams writes, "But in 1849 he wrote more music than ever before in his life in a single year" (Sams, 150). The year also marked a discernible change in style as well as output for the composer. Textures became simpler as the scale of orchestration became smaller. As Walker describes,

... in the year 1849 he wrote more than twenty works between Op. 67 and 146, including such major compositions as the *Concertstucke* for four horns and orchestra (Op. 86) and the *Introduction and Allegro Appassionato* for piano and orchestra (Op. 92). True, these works mark a new stylistic departure; but a stylistic departure is not necessarily a 'creative decline' (Walker, 30).

A study of Robert's output reveals a sudden interest in composing character pieces in chamber setting in addition to the larger scale orchestral works common to his oeuvre. As Meerwein notes,

In 1849, one of the most productive years in the whole of his output, Robert Schumann also turned his attention to three wind instruments in chamber music settings: his *Drei Phantasiestucke* ... as well as the *Adagio and Allegro* ... both written within a week in February ... Schumann composed the *Drei Romanzen* for oboe and piano on the 7th, 11th, and 12th of December (Meerwein, iv).

Is it too much of a delusion to imagine a second hand aiding in, if not solely executing some smaller chamber compositions of this time? While it is possible to credit the style change to correspond with the alternating moods and depressive tendencies, the large output of compositions during a creative decline for the composer is harder to justify. In addition, Clara withheld a number of works attributed to Robert during the Dresden years from publication, supposedly to keep evidence of Robert's depression from the public. Instead, it

can be hypothesized that Clara was trying to conceal indications of her supplemental material to Robert's compositional output. As Ostwald notes,

Schumann himself had composed nothing since the beginning of November, when he wrote *Romances for the Violoncello*. (They were not published, though, and Clara later destroyed them in the belief - which she held also for his violin concerto - that the music associated with Schumann's madness ought never to be performed) (Ostwald, 272).

Perhaps alongside the desire to conceal Robert's illness, a hidden agenda existed to suppress from the public the more obvious works that she had penned under her husband's name.

Corresponding to the theory, although a catalogue of Clara's compositional output shows steady productivity both numerically and chronologically from Opus 1 through 17, there exists a gap after Opus 17 of 1846. (Three opus numbers are missing, and no works were published under Clara's name between 1846 and 1853). The end of the Dresden years, 1853 marked a noticeable decline in Robert's creative output, yet the number of works published under Clara's name dramatically increased. Traits which seem more conspicuous in Clara's oeuvre are present in the creation and finished product of the *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano*. For example, there exists a recurring emphasis of the number three threaded through Clara's compositions, both in title and selected genre. Also recurring in Clara's compositional output is the use of chamber genres and character pieces such as romances and fantasies. While Robert had previously been occupied with symphonic writing and compositions of larger orchestral nature, Clara's pieces consistently featured solos and works for chamber ensembles. As early as Opus 3 of 1833, Clara composed a *Romance* for piano. In addition to several compositions for three players such as her *Piano Trios*, she composed here *Three Romances for Piano*, Opus 11 in 1839. Two consecutive opus numbers, 21 and 22, consist of additional *Three Romances for Piano*, and *Three Romances for Piano and Violin*, both from 1853. Clara and Robert's joint studies in theory and counterpoint increases the difficulty in discerning between styles, yet Clara's focus on elements of the number three can be enlightening. As Reich states,

After her marriage, her composing efforts followed closely the patterns set by her husband ... Both produced music that reflected their joint studies of contrapuntal techniques and the classical masters. Clara's op. 16 consisted of three preludes and fugues, and her *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Cello*, op. 17, by far her most outstanding work, was structured in the classical tradition but is filled with romantic tenderness and lyricism (Reich, 228).

Robert's oeuvre is without any reference to the number three until the depressive state of his Dresden years. The first published pieces of this nature were the two piano trios, Opus 63 and 80 of 1847. Interestingly, Clara had recently composed her own *Piano Trio*, which was premiered on a public concert alongside quartets of Robert in 1847. Additional pieces attributed to Robert during this time which incorporate relations of threes either in title or ensemble include the *Three Patriotic Songs for Male Chorus*, Op. 62, *Three Hebrew Songs*, Op. 95, *Three Fantasy Pieces for Clarinet*, Op. 111, the three *Piano Trios*, Opp. 63, 80, and 110, and the *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano*, Op. 94. All of these pieces fall in the chronological framework concerning Robert Schumann's prolific, yet depressed Dresden period.

Distinguishing traits of the individual styles of Clara and Robert Schumann is a difficult task because of the close musical relationship in which the couple studied, composed, and performed. Clara and Robert Schumann enjoyed sharing with each other new compositional ideas and theoretical studies. Clara was a highly regarded interpreter of Robert's piano music, and her own compositions helped supplement his creative powers as well. As noted by Ostwald, "He was fascinated by a tone sequence, CFGC; Clara had suggested this melody to him ... As Schumann's 'thoughts streamed forth' he found it impossible to incorporate Clara's melody into his own music. Her CFGC melody can be heard in his *Impromptus* (Op. 5)" (Ostwald, 90). Clara enjoyed the intellectually stimulating studies, and often used learned materials to compile pieces to be given as presents for Robert. As Reich explains,

There was, too, intellectual and musical growth during this period with Clara valued. The two musicians analyzed Bach fugues together, read Shakespeare and Goethe together, and

both composed, Clara with many reservations. Her first Christmas gift to her husband was a group of three songs on texts by Robert Burns and Heinrich Heine, composed in odd moments when her husband was out of the house and she could use the piano freely (Reich, 108).

While correspondence states Robert presented the oboe pieces at Christmas to Clara, the original manuscript and dedication have been lost. Perhaps the *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano* were another attempt by Clara to please Robert through presentation of a composition as a gift.

Forces that propelled Clara to promote Robert's compositions and aid in his career were her concern for her children's future and her constant attempt to preserve the family name. Clara was enormously conscious of the family's social status, and seriously applied herself to improving her husband's reputation as composer, conductor, and critic. As Walker notes, "Throughout 1849, Schumann's desire for a regular position in the world of music increased. Clara, too, was impatient on his behalf. She longed for him to gain an official post in keeping with his growing status as a composer" (Walker, 30). Increasing attempts made by Clara to promote Robert's career seemed to correspond with Robert's impaling depression and his desire to retreat from society. As Ostwald relates, "Schumann's behavior under these stressful conditions, as well as Clara's, again demonstrates a role reversal: he became passive and meekly submissive and she performed periodically" (Ostwald, 219). Clara's determination to maintain family status may have provided the necessary ambition to pen compositions under Robert's name. Her determination to maintain a normal public appearance despite Robert's illness is evident in other aspects of the couple's endeavors. She gave recitals and concerts to Robert's oblivion both to provide financial stability and social status for the family. As Ostwald describes, "Hoping to shield Schumann from the knowledge that she was actively trying to supplement their meager income, she asked Wasielewski not to tell Schumann that she had asked him to arrange a soiree for her in Bonn" (Ostwald, 255). A protectiveness of Robert's reputation, as well as her concern for the family's social status provided stimulus for Clara to aid in preserving Robert's career.

An additional possible predicament in which Clara would be tempted to pen music under the guise of Robert's name exists in the difficulties of promoting her own music which resulted from a general lesser regard in which women composers were stereotyped in the Romantic era. Reviews of her compositions, as well as her own inherent belittlement of her talent, reveal the battle Clara Schumann had to endure due to the social scrutiny of compositions by women during the Nineteenth Century. As Clara Schumann is quoted describing her own compositions by Reich, "There is no greater joy than composing something oneself and then listening to it ... There are some nice passages in the Trio and I believe it is also fairly successful as far as form is concerned, but naturally it is women's work, which always lacks force and occasionally invention" (Reich, 228). However, critics of the time noticed the "manly" craftsmanship and intellectual worthiness of Clara's compositions. Her competent construction of music and inherent knowledge of counterpoint and form were deceptive to the current concert audience. As a critic once related, "I would rather have heard your trio (than music by Moritz Hauptmann). I recollect a fugato in the last movement and remember that Mendelssohn once had a big laugh because I would not believe that a woman could have composed something so sound and serious" (Reich, 228). Although Clara's compositions were justifiably constructed and expressively apt, her music would constantly be viewed as inferior to Robert's due to the accepted social assumptions in which women composers were regarded.

While it is impossible without further information to completely discern authorship or source of influence for the Opus 94, a common language is definitely used in contemporaneous works of Clara Schumann. In addition to the noticeably thinner texture, use of minor modes and simpler melodies, and choice of chamber setting for the character pieces; further parallels exist between the *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano* and compositions of Clara Schumann. A similar harmonic vocabulary and recurring use of triplets as accompanimental figures is evident in many piano pieces by Clara, including the *Three Romances*, Opus 21 of 1853. Similar traits also exist by means of imitation between voices, displacement of the strong beat within triplet patterns, and use of chromatic lines during transitory passages. Consider the first period of phrasing from each composition:

Oboe

Piano

a: i iv₄⁶ i V i V⁵/VII VI ii^{o6} V⁷

Romance No. 1 from Robert Schumann's *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano*, Opus 94

a: i iv₄⁶ (V) i i⁶ ii^{o6} ii^{o7}/V V (ii) V⁷

Romance No. 1 from Clara Schumann's *Three Little Pieces for Piano*

Further similarities exist later in the piece, with more chromatic inventiveness occurring in the later Opus 21.

Oboe

Piano

a: i iv₄⁶ (V) i i⁶ ii^{o6} ii^{o7}/V V (ii) V⁷

Romance No. 1 from Robert Schumann's *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano*, opus 94

a: i iv₄⁶ (V) i i⁶ ii^{o6} ii^{o7}/V V (ii) V⁷

Romance No. 1 from Clara Schumann's *Three Little Pieces for Piano*.

Although evidence hints that Clara Schumann may have aided in composing smaller pieces in an effort to save her husband's musical and societal reputation, without concrete evidence it is only possible to theorize. Robert often wrote in his personal correspondence during his Dresden years of the effects of cyclic depression which halted his creativity and made composition unappealing. However, the period between 1845-1850 is historically considered Schumann's most prolific. The *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano*, as well as other chamber compositions of the Dresden period, could have been written by Clara Schumann instead of Robert out of financial need and a desire to maintain a musical reputation. ❖

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