



# Clara, Clarified

By Brian Lauritzen

It's impossible to properly talk about the music of Robert Schumann without recognizing the incalculable contributions Clara Wieck (later Schumann) made to Robert's output, psyche and creative voice. At a time when women were discouraged (and even hindered) from composing, Clara composed. At a time when female instrumental soloists were rare, and their success even more so, Clara thrived. At a time when many male artists viewed women as little more than muses to use and discard once "inspiration" left, Clara was a confidante, coach and even a mentor.

It is Clara who deserves credit for the fact that Robert wrote any symphonies at all: she helped him discover his voice writing for orchestra, saying, "it would be best if he composed for orchestra; his imagination cannot find sufficient scope on the piano. ... His compositions are all orchestral in feeling. ... My highest wish is that he should compose for orchestra—that is his field! May I succeed in bringing him to it!"

Clara also deserves credit for the fact that Robert's Piano Concerto exists and she deserves at least partial credit for the existence of the *Fantasia in C Major, Op. 17*, which closes Jeremy Denk's program this month. Robert Schumann composed the *Fantasia* before he married Clara Wieck but after Wieck's father (Robert's teacher) had forbidden Wieck from having a relationship with Schumann.

Understandably, Schumann couldn't abide living in close proximity to the woman he loved but couldn't be with, so he left town and moved to Vienna.

While separated, he would send letters (often times also enclosing music he had written) to Clara expressing his love in words and music. The first movement of the *Fantasia*, Schumann said, "may well be the most passionate I have ever composed—a deep lament for you."

Clara likely would have understood what Robert was saying with his music even if he hadn't included the verbal explanation.

At the end of the opening movement, Schumann quotes a phrase from the Beethoven song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte (To the distant beloved)*. The text of the quote portion is as follows: "Accept then these songs, beloved, which I sang for you alone."

That Schumann would quote Beethoven makes even more sense when considering the inspiration for the rest of the *Fantasia*. Schumann was helping to raise money for a statue of Beethoven to be erected in the elder composer's hometown of Bonn, Germany. Schumann wanted his publisher to make 100 special edition copies of his *Fantasia* and donate the proceeds to the fundraising campaign. Schumann's efforts helped, but it wasn't until Franz Liszt came along and made a sizable donation (the largest single gift) that the statue was finally built. Schumann dedicated his *Fantasia*, therefore, not to Clara Wieck nor to Beethoven, but to Franz Liszt, who played the work privately for Schumann and used it in his teaching, but refused to perform it publicly. Clara didn't perform the *Fantasia* publicly either until more than a decade after Robert Schumann's death.

25 years before that Beethoven statue was unveiled in Bonn, the 50-year-old composer was coming off the biggest thing he had ever written for the piano and getting ready to compose the biggest thing he would ever write for orchestra. The Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109, comes just after the monumental *Hammerklavier* Sonata and a couple of years before the Ninth Symphony. It's much smaller in scale, less dramatic, but incredibly intimate and personal. He described it as "a small new piece," and dedicated it to Maximiliane Brentano, the daughter of Beethoven's long-standing friend Antonie Brentano. The sonata is in three movements, with the first and second movements connected by the pianist holding down the damper pedal as the last chord of the first movement elides into the first chord of the second movement.

Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives* is a series of 20 very brief portraits of some of the composer's friends. Unlike Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, Prokofiev doesn't tell us who is conjured in each vision, only that, "In every fugitive vision I see worlds, full of the changing play of rainbow hues."

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