

CD Review

Clara & Robert Schumann: Piano Concertos

Beatrice Rana, piano
Chamber Orchestra of Europe
Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor
Warner Classics, 5419729625, 2023
(1 CD: 57 minutes) £12.75

‘Clara Schumann and Florence Price get their due at Carnegie Hall: Two works by these composers have been marginalized in classical music, but they were never forgotten, as their histories show’.¹ This *New York Times* headline captures the spirit of rediscovery that has propelled recent engagement with Clara Schumann’s music.² The concert in question featured Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 7, with soloist Beatrice Rana, and Price’s Symphony No. 3 in C minor, performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra. Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin describes the programming of these pieces alongside music by Maurice Ravel as a display of ‘varying artistic perspectives’. ‘A work of art is a viewpoint’, Nézet-Séguin continued. ‘And if you have only one part of society that always gets their viewpoint heard, we constantly hear one viewpoint’.³

Recordings of Clara’s music released at the 2019 bicentennial juncture give voice to an array of ‘artistic perspectives’. These include Mo-Ah Kim’s *Clara Wieck Schumann: The Art of Preluding* (CD Baby, 2353004X, 2019), striking for its emphasis on improvisation; *Clara Schumann: Complete Songs* by Miriam Alexandra, Peter Gijbertsen, and Jozef De Beenhouwer (Musikproduktion Dabringhaus und Grimm, MDG9032114, 2019); *Clara Schumann: Piano Works* by Cristina Mantese and Daniel Levy (Edelweiss Emission, EDEM 3396, 2019), intermixed with a selection of songs; and Isata Kanneh-Mason’s *Clara Schumann: Romance – The Piano Music of Clara Schumann* (Decca, 4850020, 2019).⁴ Whether through reinstating a

¹ Sarah Fritz and A. Kori Hill, ‘Clara Schumann and Florence Price Get Their Due at Carnegie Hall’, *New York Times*, 27 October 2022, 1. Given that the music of both Schumanns is addressed here, and with a view to humanizing their creative endeavour, in this review I refer to Clara and Robert Schumann using their first names.

² See Joe Davies and Nicole Grimes, ‘Introduction’, in special issue: ‘Clara Schumann: Changing Identities and Legacies’, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 21/1 (2024): 3–12.

³ Quoted in Fritz and Hill, ‘Clara Schumann and Florence Price’, 1.

⁴ On these recordings, see the reviews by Joao Martins and Cheryl Tan, in *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 21/1 (2024): 149–54, and 155–60.

'lost art', as Kim writes of preluding,⁵ or interweaving song and instrumental music, this corpus offers imaginative ways of programming and listening to Clara's music – in short, providing a sonic archive through which to recentre her creativity as pianist and composer.

What distinguishes Rana's *Clara and Robert Schumann: Piano Concertos* (available as a CD and in digital format) is its pairing of Clara's Op. 7, 1833–35, with Robert's Concerto in the same key, Op. 54, 1845.⁶ This stages a powerful intervention in the discourse on 'separateness' versus 'integration' – that is, of whether to isolate music by women or to place it in dialogue with that of their contemporaries.⁷ As Stephen Rodgers advocates, 'we elevate Clara Schumann, we celebrate her artistry, when we focus on what makes her music distinctively her own, rather than more or less "Schumannian" (by which I mean more or less like the music of her husband)'.⁸ Rana's approach both celebrates Clara's artistry and inverts this well-worn way of thinking. The emphasis shifts from how her music is 'more or less like [that] of her husband', to hearing how *his* concerto bears the imprint of hers, completed ten years earlier.

Clara's Op. 7 stands out for its kaleidoscopic pianism.⁹ The first movement combines a fantasy-like unfolding of material with moments of introspection – writing that turns inward from the full-bodied, declamatory textures of the opening to the richly ornamented primary theme. Equally striking is the substitution of a formal cadenza with what Alexander Stefaniak and I hear as a 'moment of time-stopping reverie – an unmetred *Eingang* [transition]' that suspends the movement on a spread dominant chord.¹⁰ The Romanze emerges from this as a piano solo, with the orchestra remaining silent throughout, before entering into a poignant dialogue with solo cello in the closing portion of the movement. In the finale, the march-like theme of the first movement is transformed into a polonaise and interspersed with chamber-like textures that recall the inward-looking passages of the preceding movements.

⁵ See Mo-Ah Kim, 'Towards a Revival of Lost Art: Clara Wieck Schumann's Preluding and Selected 20th-Century Pianist-Composers' Approaches to Preluding' (DMA dissertation, University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music, 2019).

⁶ Further on their programming choices, see the conversation between Beatrice Rana and Yannick Nézet-Séguin at www.warnerclassics.com/release/schumann-rana.

⁷ On this discourse, see Stephen Rodgers, *The Songs of Clara Schumann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023): 16–23; Joe Davies, 'Clara Schumann in the Musicological Imagination', in *Clara Schumann Studies*, ed. Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 1–12, at 8; Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft, 'Introduction: "Half of Humanity Has Something to Say, Also"', in *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Secular and Sacred Music to 1900*, ed. Parsons and Ravenscroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 1–8; and Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg, 'Introduction', in *Women and the Nineteenth-Century Lied*, ed. Kenny and Wollenberg (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015): 1–10, at 6.

⁸ Stephen Rodgers, 'Softened, Smudged, Erased: Punctuation and Continuity in Clara Schumann's Lieder', in *Clara Schumann Studies*, 57–74, at 73.

⁹ See Joe Davies, 'Clara Schumann and the Nineteenth-Century Piano Concerto', in *Clara Schumann Studies*, 97–118; and Alexander Stefaniak, *Becoming Clara Schumann: Performance Strategies and Aesthetics in the Culture of the Musical Canon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021): 174–92.

¹⁰ Joe Davies and Alexander Stefaniak, 'Women, Pianos, and Virtuosity in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Women Composers*, ed. Matthew Head and Susan Wollenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming): 205–26, at 214.

These contrasts are brought to life on this disc through subtle interaction between soloist and orchestra – at times capturing the spirit of dialogue that is germane to the genre, while in other moments spotlighting pianistic display. The first entry of the piano is arresting. Rana leans into the upward rush of octave unisons, their dotted rhythmic profile derived from the orchestral opening, and conjures the sense of fantasy pervasive throughout. Yet there is also intimacy to the performance, particularly in the Romanze, with points of tension and release carefully choreographed above the hypnotic left-hand accompaniment. This softer, more subdued mode of delivery accentuates the associations with the genre of the nocturne, a connection that Schumann herself made through the title ‘notturmo’ on her concert programmes.¹¹ Rana blurs these boundaries between public and private genres to poetic effect.¹²

Listening at these boundaries invites us to rehear Clara’s influence on Robert’s Op. 54. In Rana’s words: ‘When you understand the timeline you realise she was the *first* to have the idea, and only *later* would Robert do the same in his concerto and then even *later*, Brahms, with his second Piano Concerto [Op. 83]’ (liner notes, 4). Rana’s rendering of these concertos highlights their shared vocabulary, implicit dialogues rather than direct lines of influence, and the ways in which Clara’s approach may be heard as informing Robert’s.

An obvious kinship between the Schumanns’ Concertos is their shared key of A minor, but there are synergies also at the level of formal and thematic construction.¹³ Robert’s Op. 54 began life as a one-movement Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra, penned in 1841, which he later revised as the opening Allegro affettuoso and added two subsequent movements: Intermezzo, Andantino grazioso and Allegro vivace. Fantasy is a central feature it shares with Clara’s Op. 7, suggested in her work through the evasion of first-movement concerto form, its flexible approach to sonata form (omitting a development section and proceeding to a recapitulation), and collage of contrasting styles and pianistic figurations.¹⁴ In the first movement of Robert’s Op. 54, qualities of fantasy are prominent in the excursion through A-flat major, a world far removed from the opening, between the exposition and development. And what of the opening four bars where the pianist plunges forth with thickly gripped chords that cascade through the registers? In Rana’s interpretations, this opening sounds akin to a mirror image – at once close and distant – of the octave unisons that surge upwards in the initial piano entry in Clara’s Op. 7. Further echoes of Clara’s approach can be heard here in

¹¹ See Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, rev. 2001): 228.

¹² Rana’s approach complements Isata Kanneh-Mason’s *Romance: The Piano Music of Clara Schumann* (Decca, 2019), where her Op. 7-ii is contextualized vis-à-vis her corpus of *Romanzen* – from the 3 Romances for solo piano, Op. 11 (1839), to the 3 Romances for Violin and Piano, Op. 22 (1853). For wider reference, see Katharina Uhde and R. Larry Todd, ‘Contextualizing Clara Schumann’s *Romanzen*’, in *Clara Schumann Studies*, 165–86.

¹³ See Julian Horton, *Robert Schumann: Piano Concerto*, New Cambridge Music Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Alexander Stefaniak, *Schumann’s Virtuosity: Criticism, Composition, and Performance in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016): 174–93; and Reich, *Clara Schumann*, 227–8.

¹⁴ On its formal structure, see Benedict Taylor, ‘Clara Wieck’s A Minor Piano Concerto: Formal Innovation and the Problem of Parametric Disconnect in Early Romantic Music’, *Music Theory and Analysis (MTA)* 8/2 (2021): 215–43.

the dotted march-like profile of the orchestral tutti, its sense of rhythmic drive radiating across both first movements.

Yet amid the physicality of Robert's Op. 54 are moments that turn inward, poignantly captured by Rana's playing. Where the Romanze in Clara's Op. 7 foregrounds piano and cello, so the second movement of his begins similarly with piano solo, enveloped by sustained sonorities in the strings. The ear is drawn also to tonal details – with F major perhaps heard in a submediant relationship to the A-flat major tonality of Clara's Op. 7-ii. But resonances are most apparent in the central section devoted to piano and cellos. Its yearning nature, with the cello line rising and falling in the ethereal texture of the piano accompaniment, looks back to the dialogue in the final section of Clara's Romanze – there, too, the cello soars into the upper registers, while the echoing of the theme in the inner voice of the piano resembles a voice 'aus der Ferne'; its sonic traces are at once audible and concealed amid the textural surroundings.¹⁵

The worlds of virtuosity and intimacy meet most overtly in the final track on the disc: Franz Liszt's transcription of Robert's 'Widmung', Op. 25 No. 1. Rana writes: 'To me, its text [by Friedrich Rückert] encapsulates Robert and Clara's relationship, telling of a love so incredible that it brings out in each of them "ein bess'res Ich" – a better self' (liner notes, 7). This song, part of the *Myrthen* cycle that Robert presented to Clara on the eve of their wedding, provides a wider context for the dialogues traced here – a reminder that the Schumanns' personal and creative lives were intricately entwined. Liszt's transcription of 'Widmung' merges the textual portrayal of rapture, pain, peace and repose with swirling figurations and étude-like writing. It serves here as a mediator between the contrasting pianistic worlds encountered throughout the disc.¹⁶ We hear multiple layers – from Rana's interpretation of Liszt, to Liszt's reading of Robert's original song – each feeding back into how we think of the afterlives of the Schumanns' music and creative relationship.

Beyond its expansive soundscapes, Rana's *Clara and Robert Schumann: Piano Concertos* puts pressure on the received relationship between these pieces and approaches to the Schumanns more generally. It allows us to reimagine the history of the nineteenth-century piano concerto with Clara's artistic vision at the centre, rather than on the peripheries. Just as Rana hears in her Op. 7 a 'willingness to make a statement' with 'assurance and determination', so the same applies to this new disc (liner notes, 6). It is thus a welcome addition not only to recordings of Clara Schumann's music, inviting bold ways of listening and programming, but also to the critical study of her creative endeavour.

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¹⁵ Davies, 'Clara Schumann and the Nineteenth-Century Piano Concerto', 111–12.

¹⁶ See Deirdre Toh, 'Werktreue Ideology in Clara Schumann's and Franz Liszt's Piano Transcriptions', *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland* 18 (2023): 23–48.