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Special points of interest:

Clara Schumann

Jennifer Higdon

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## Clara Schumann: A Composer's Wife as Composer

*Eugene Gates*

In an age when musical talent in a female was seldom developed beyond the level of an accomplishment--a means of enhancing her matrimonial prospects--Clara Schumann, née Wieck, received an enviable musical education, and enjoyed a brilliant performing career that kept her before the public for more than half a century. Best remembered today as one of the foremost pianists of the nineteenth century, and as the devoted wife and musical helpmate of Robert Schumann, Clara Schumann was also highly respected during her lifetime as a composer<sup>1</sup>--a fact rarely mentioned in music history textbooks. This article examines her life and works, and the forces that impeded her progress as a musical creator.

The details of Clara Wieck's early years are preserved in a diary which Friedrich Wieck, her father-teacher-manager, began for her when she was seven years old. Until Clara reached her nineteenth year, he either wrote or supervised almost every entry--an indication of the extent to which he controlled all facets of her life. The first entry reads:

I was born at Leipzig, Sept. 13th 1819, . . . and received the name Clara Josephine. . . . My father kept a musical lending-library and carried on a small business in pianofortes. Since both he and my mother were much occupied in teaching, and besides that my mother practised from one to two hours a day, I was chiefly left to the care of the maid . . . . She was not very fluent of speech, and it may well have been owing to this that I did not begin to pronounce even single words until I was between four and five, and up to that time understood

as little as I spoke. But I had always been accustomed to hear a great deal of piano playing and my ear became more sensitive to musical sounds than to those of speech.<sup>2</sup>

Clara inherited her prodigious musical gifts from both parents. Friedrich Wieck (1785-1873), though largely self-educated in music (he held a degree in theology), was a shrewd businessman and a remarkable teacher of piano and singing. Obsessed with a burning ambition to acquire musical distinction, he was also an opportunist who exploited the talents of his immediate family to enhance his reputation as a teacher.<sup>3</sup>

Clara's mother, Marianne Tromlitz Wieck (1797-1872), was an uncommonly talented singer and pianist. She had studied with Wieck in her childhood and, in compliance with his wish, again become his pupil after their marriage. Marianne appeared frequently as soprano soloist in the Leipzig Gewandhaus Subscription Concerts during the 1816-17 season, and performed piano concertos by Ries, Dussek, and Field on the same platform in 1821, 1822 and 1823.<sup>4</sup>

Marianne's public appearances were extremely important to Wieck; his prestige as a music educator increased with every concert she gave. But having never aspired to a performing career, it was not without protest that she assumed the role of a concert artist for the advancement of her husband's fame.<sup>5</sup> Her growing resentment eventually led to rebellion. On May 12, 1824, with Clara and infant son Viktor in tow, she fled to her parents' home in Plauen, and arranged for a legal separation.<sup>6</sup> She was granted a divorce the following year. Because the court ruled that Clara must be restored to the custody of her father on her fifth birthday, the child had little direct contact with her mother during most of her formative years.<sup>7</sup>

Even before Clara's birth, Wieck had

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resolved that if she were to be a girl, he would mould her into a performing artist of the highest rank. Female concert pianists were then still rare, and he knew that an important one would attract considerable attention. Her success would make him famous as the leading piano teacher in all of Europe. In keeping with his plan for his daughter's life, he named her Clara, meaning "illustrious."<sup>8</sup>

Clara's formal musical education began a few days after her fifth birthday.<sup>9</sup> Wieck's goal was to produce a virtuoso pianist who would also be a well-rounded musician, and he believed that "the whole education, from earliest youth, must have reference to this end."<sup>10</sup> In keeping with this philosophy, he supervised Clara's every waking moment. Her academic studies were squeezed into the few hours not taken up by music lessons, piano practice, and the long daily walks that her father prescribed for every member of his household. She attended a local primary school for six months in 1825, and was then sent to the Noack Institute, a larger school, for the better part of a year. Her general education was limited to the time spent at these two schools, and her hours of attendance were shortened to accommodate her music studies. She was taught only those subjects that her father deemed necessary for her future career: reading, writing, and, with tutors, a smattering of French and English--the languages she would need for her concert tours.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to her modest academic background, Clara's musical education was extraordinary by any standard. By the age of seven, she was spending at least three hours a day at the piano--one hour for a lesson with her father, and two hours for practice.<sup>12</sup> Formal training in theory and composition began when she was barely ten. Her instructors for these subjects were Christian Theodore Weinlig, Cantor of St. Thomas Church, and Heinrich Dorn, director of the Leipzig Opera. Other Leipzig teachers taught her violin and score reading. Wieck later sent her to Dresden to study advanced composition and orchestration with Carl Reissiger, and voice with Johann Aloys Miksch. She also worked with the finest instructors in the cities where she toured; while concertizing in Berlin in 1837, for instance, she had counterpoint lessons with Siegfried Dehn.<sup>13</sup>

On November 8, 1830, the eleven year-old Clara Wieck made her official professional debut in a solo recital at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Her programme included bravura works by Kalkbrenner, Herz, and Czerny, and two of her own compositions--*Variations on an Original Theme* for piano, and a song, sung by assisting artist Henriette Grabau. The critics had nothing but praise for her work. In the *Leipziger Zeitung*, for example, we read: "The excellent and remarkable performance of the young pianist, both in playing and in her compositions, aroused universal admiration and won her the greatest applause."<sup>14</sup>

Encouraged by this success, the ambitious Wieck wasted little time in taking Clara on tour. By 1835, she was renowned throughout Europe as a child prodigy. As was the custom in the 1830s, at least one of her own compositions appeared on nearly all of her programmes.<sup>15</sup> When Ludwig Spohr heard her perform some of her works in 1831, he wrote:

"Her compositions, like the young artist herself, are among the most remarkable newcomers in the world of art."<sup>16</sup> Spohr was not the only composer to praise Clara's creative talent; Felix Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt, and Robert Schumann--the man who would later become her husband--were also early admirers of her music.

Robert Schumann was eighteen years old and Clara was nine when they first met at the home of mutual friends in Leipzig in 1828. Enchanted by her playing, Schumann soon arranged to study piano with her father. In 1830, he took up residence in the Wieck household as a boarder-pupil, and soon became close friends with Clara. Even after he moved into his own quarters, he continued to visit her daily. When Clara was on tour, the two friends corresponded regularly.

Not long after meeting Clara, Schumann had mused in his diary, "It's amazing that there are no female composers. . . . Women could perhaps be regarded as the frozen, firm embodiment of music."<sup>17</sup> It was Clara who changed his mind about the absence of female composers. Her first published compositions, *Quatre Polonaises*, written in 1830, were brought out in February of 1831 as her op. 1. The young composer saved a copy especially for "Herr Schumann, who lives with us since Michaelmas, and studies music."<sup>18</sup> While the polonaises seldom rise above the level of exceptionally well-crafted salon music, they are highly sophisticated works, for an eleven-year-old.

As the publication of these pieces suggests, Wieck's plans for Clara's future were not confined exclusively to performance, but extended to the realm of composition as well. He was justifiably proud of his daughter's productive talent, and hoped that she might one day emerge as an important creative figure--a representative of the "new Romantic" school. He alluded to this in a letter to his friend Music Director Riem of Bremen: "I shall have much to say to you when we meet about the new Romantic school in which Chopin, Pixis, Liszt in Paris and several of Robert Schumann's disciples here write (and perhaps Clara promises to write)."<sup>19</sup>

Evidence of Clara's maturing creative powers is already apparent in her *Caprices en forme de Valse*, op. 2, issued in 1832. In the summer of 1833, she composed several other piano pieces and began an orchestral overture.<sup>20</sup> One of her new works, *Romance variée*, op. 3, which she dedicated to Schumann, was published that same summer. Knowing that Robert was already working on a set of piano pieces based on the theme from this composition (brought out a few months later as his *Impromptus on a Romance by Clara Wieck*, op. 5), she wrote:

Sorry as I am to have dedicated the following trifle to you, and much as I wished not to see the variations printed, yet the evil has come to pass now, and cannot be altered. Your able re-casting of this little musical thought will make good my mistakes, and so I beg for this, for I can hardly wait to make its better acquaintance.<sup>21</sup>

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As the above passage suggests, Robert and Clara delighted in sharing musical ideas, and sometimes quoted one another in their works.<sup>22</sup> Several years later, in one of his letters to Clara, Robert wrote: "You complete me as a composer, as I do you. Every thought of yours comes from my soul, just as I have to thank you for all my music."<sup>23</sup>

The most ambitious composition of Clara's youth is her Concerto in A minor, a three-movement work for piano and orchestra which she began in January of 1833. Robert helped her by orchestrating the third movement,<sup>24</sup> but, based on the surviving evidence, it seems likely that Clara orchestrated the first two movements herself. Assisted by the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra, under the direction of Felix Mendelssohn, Clara played the premiere performance of her concerto on November 9, 1835. Although the work received only a lukewarm reception at its premiere, Clara achieved considerable success with it on her concert tours during the next few years.<sup>25</sup> It was subsequently published as her op. 7.

Critical opinions of the A minor concerto were decidedly mixed. C. F. Becker, a regular contributor to the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, offhandedly dismissed the piece, asserting that there could be no question of a real critique "since we are dealing here with the work of a lady."<sup>26</sup> The most favourable review came from the critic of the *Komet*, who noted that the concerto was "written throughout in a grand style," and praised it not only for "the interchange of the softest and most tuneful melodies with the fieriest and most fantastic passages," but for "the poetic unity which governed the whole."<sup>27</sup>

Bearing in mind that the concerto is the work of a fifteen-year-old who had previously composed only miniatures, it is an extraordinary achievement. In its attempted thematic unity, it foreshadows Robert's largely monothematic piano concerto in the same key, completed in 1845.

November of 1835 marked a milestone in Clara's life, not because of the premiere of her concerto, but because it was then that she and Robert confessed their love for one another. When Wieck became aware of the seriousness of their relationship, he flew into a blind rage. Clara was forbidden to see or even communicate with her lover again. Wieck even threatened to shoot Robert on sight if he attempted to contact her.<sup>28</sup>

Wieck's opposition to Clara's involvement with Schumann cannot be attributed entirely to parental concern. He regarded Clara not only as his daughter, but as his passport to fame. Since he kept all her earnings, she was also his greatest source of income. If he allowed her love affair with Schumann to continue, Wieck knew that he stood to lose a great deal, and he resolved to go to any length to prevent that from happening.

Eighteen long months passed before Clara and Robert dared to contact each other again. Hoping that Wieck might now be more receptive to the idea of their relationship, the unhappy couple agreed that Robert should approach him on Clara's eighteenth birthday, with a formal request for her hand in marriage.<sup>29</sup> But nothing had changed. Wieck brusquely informed Robert that Clara had been groomed to become an artist, not a *Hausfrau*, and that he found the idea of "Clara with the perambulator" too ridiculous to contemplate.<sup>30</sup>

Thus began a three-year battle between Wieck and the two lovers. In his determined efforts to prevent their marriage, Wieck's behaviour became increasingly irrational and vindictive. He even attempted to sabotage his daughter's career. Robert and Clara eventually had no alternative but to take their case to court. The legal proceedings dragged on for months, but on August 1, 1840, the court ruled that they were free to marry without Wieck's consent.<sup>31</sup>

Despite her emotional turmoil, Clara toured extensively during this entire period, first with her father and later alone. Audiences in Berlin, Vienna, Paris and other cities thronged to her concerts; she created a sensation wherever she appeared. In keeping with concert practices of the day, she continued to produce new works for her programmes, and publishers competed for the honour of printing them.<sup>32</sup> Several of Clara's piano compositions date from this period: opp. 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11. Opp. 8, 9 and 10 are typical of the glittering display pieces that all virtuosi of the 1830s were expected to compose for their own recitals, while the *Soirées musicales*, op. 6, and the *Three Romances*, op. 11, are character pieces in the tradition of the new Romantic school.

Clara Wieck and Robert Schumann were married on September 12, 1840. They settled first in Leipzig, moving to Dresden in 1844 and finally to Düsseldorf in 1850. "We enjoy a happiness such as I never knew before," wrote Clara in February 1841. And she continued, "Father has always laughed at so-called domestic bliss. How I pity those who do not know it! They are only half alive!"<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, marriage posed serious obstacles to Clara's performing career and to her work as a composer. The Schumanns had two grand pianos, but since Robert needed absolute quiet while composing, both instruments could not be played at the same time. Many passages in Clara's diary bemoan "the evils of thin walls,"<sup>34</sup> and her entry of June 3, 1841, complains: "My piano playing is falling behind. This always happens when Robert is composing. There is not even one little hour in the whole day for myself! If only I don't fall too far behind. . . . I can't do anything with my composing—I would sometimes like to strike my dumb head!"<sup>35</sup> Although it saddened Robert that "far too often she has to buy my songs at the price of invisibility and silence,"<sup>36</sup> he always took it as a matter of course that Clara would make this sacrifice, and accepted it unashamedly.

In addition, much of Clara's time was taken up with running the house, and maternal responsibilities were not long in coming. During the fourteen years she and her husband were together, she bore eight children: Marie (b 1841), Elise (b 1843), Julie (b 1845), Emil (b 1846, d 1847), Ludwig (b 1848), Ferdinand (b 1849), Eugenie (b 1851) and Felix (b 1854). But despite the demands of marriage and motherhood, and the physical strain of multiple pregnancies, she continued to perform. She played at least 139 public concerts between 1840 and 1854, some as far afield as Copenhagen (1842) and Russia (1844).<sup>37</sup> When time permitted, she also composed.

It is certain that Clara derived much satisfaction from creative work, for she once wrote, "There is nothing greater

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than the joy of composing something, and then listening to it."<sup>38</sup> But although her works were well received by concert audiences and praised by other composers and performers, she had little confidence in her creative powers. Numerous passages in her diaries and letters attest to the fact that she had internalized the negative attitudes of contemporary society towards women's creativity. Her diary entry of November 28, 1839, less than a year before her marriage, is a case in point:

I once believed that I had creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not wish to compose-- there never was one able to do it. Am I intended to be the one? It would be arrogant to believe that. That was something with which my father tempted me in former days. But I soon gave up believing this. May Robert always create; that must always make me happy.<sup>39</sup>

On another occasion, she wrote: "Women always betray themselves in their compositions, and this is true of myself as well as of others."<sup>40</sup>

Robert did not share Clara's reservations about her creative ability. He admired her music, and constantly encouraged her to produce new works. In December 1840, Clara planned a special Christmas surprise for him. She noted in their marriage diary:

Whenever Robert went out of the house, I spent my time in attempts to compose a song (something he had always wanted), and finally I succeeded in completing *three*, which I will present to him at Christmas. If they are really of little value, merely a *very weak attempt*, I am counting on Robert's forbearance and [hope] that he will understand that it was done with the best will in the world in order to fulfill this wish of his--just as I fulfill all his wishes.<sup>41</sup>

Robert was delighted with the songs. "They are full of her old youthful ardor," he wrote, "yet [they] show her to be maturer as a musician."<sup>42</sup>

Inspired by Clara's Christmas gift, Schumann proposed that they collaborate on a volume of lieder. During the second week of January 1841, he wrote in their marriage diary:

I am full of this idea of publishing a book of songs together with Clara. During the week to Monday 11th I finished nine songs from the *Liebesfrühling of Rückert*, and I think I have recaptured my own particular style. It is now Clara's turn to set some of them. Do so Klärchen!<sup>43</sup>

Because her experience as a vocal composer was still very limited, Clara found her share of the work difficult. She confided her despair to the diary: "I have several times sat down to the poems of Rückert that Robert has given me to set,

but have been able to do nothing with them--I have not the gift of composition."<sup>44</sup> Eventually, however, she succeeded in producing four songs in time for Schumann's thirty-first birthday, June 8: *Warum willst du and're fragen, Er ist gekommen in Sturm und Regen, Liebst du um Schönheit*, and *Die gute Nacht die ich dir sage*. Robert selected the first three for their joint collection.<sup>45</sup>

The Schumanns' joint lieder collection was published by Breitkopf & Härtel in 1841. Its title page reads: "*Zwölf Gedichte aus F. Rückert's Liebesfrühling von Robert und Clara Schumann*, op. 37/12"--his op. 37, her op. 12. The first copy arrived just in time for Clara's birthday. The authorship of the individual songs was not specified in the printed score. To Robert's and Clara's great amusement, the critics were unable to determine which of the two had composed the various pieces in the set.<sup>46</sup>

Spurred on by her husband's joy in her creative achievements, Clara continued to compose songs. In the summer of 1842, she set Geibel's *Liebeszauber* and Heine's *Sie liebten sich beiden* for Robert's birthday. Five more songs made their appearance during the following summer: *Lorelei* (Heine), *Ich hab' in deinem Auge* (Rückert), *O weh, des Scheidens, das er tat* (Rückert), *Der Mond kommt still gegangen* (Geibel), and *Die stille Lotosblume* (Geibel).<sup>47</sup> Commenting on these works, Schumann noted in their marriage diary:

Clara has written a number of small pieces that show a musical and tender invention that she has never attained before. But to have children and a husband who is always living in the realms of imagination do not go together with composition. She cannot work at it regularly and I am often disturbed to think how many profound ideas are lost because she cannot work them out. But Clara herself knows that her main occupation is as a mother and I believe she is happy in the circumstances and would not want them changed.<sup>48</sup>

The compromises that Clara was compelled to make because of her husband's increasing mental instability also impeded her progress as a composer. Intense creative activity almost always led to periods of severe depression, during which Robert was unable to work. He experienced one such episode in February of 1843, and recorded in their marriage diary that Clara, then pregnant with her second child, was nursing him back to health with "tender care."<sup>49</sup> In April of the following year, he suffered a serious nervous breakdown. Neither rest nor medical attention seemed to improve his condition. Hoping that a complete change of environment might bring him relief, the Schumanns moved to Dresden in the early part of December.<sup>50</sup>

But the episodes of depression persisted. Because of Robert's recurring health problems, Clara was forced to take on an increasing number of responsibilities. A woman of

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great inner strength, she supported her husband emotionally, artistically and often financially during the five years they lived in Dresden. She also supervised the household, taught piano lessons, carried on with her performing career, bore four more children, and composed her most ambitious works.<sup>51</sup>

Not long after they settled in Dresden, the Schumanns began to work through Cherubini's treatise on counterpoint and fugue together. This daily practice in counterpoint bore fruit in Clara's six fugues for piano, three of which were published as her op. 16. Six other piano pieces probably date from around this time as well: the *Scherzo*, op. 14, *Quatre Pièces fugitives*, op. 15, and an *Impromptu*.

The greatest proof of Clara's industry during the Dresden years is her four-movement Trio in G minor for piano, violin and cello, op. 17. Composed between May and September, 1846, it is generally regarded as her finest work. Clara's remarks about her trio further demonstrate the extent to which she was influenced by societal attitudes toward women composers. After rehearsing the work for the first time on October 2, she confided to her diary: "There are some pretty passages in the trio, and I think it is fairly successful as far as form goes, of course it is only a woman's work, which is always lacking in force, and here and there in invention."<sup>52</sup> And in September of the following year, she wrote: "I received the printed copy of my trio today; but I did not care for it particularly, after Robert's (D minor), it sounded effeminate and sentimental."<sup>53</sup> Of course it is neither.

With the exception of an incomplete concerto movement in F minor and three choruses for a-cappella choir--birthday gifts for her husband in 1847 and 1848--Clara composed nothing else until 1853. During the intervening years, her energy was consumed by family responsibilities, occasional concert engagements, an ever-growing class of piano students, preparing the piano scores of Robert's orchestral and choral works for publication, and assisting him with rehearsals of choirs he conducted in Dresden and Düsseldorf.<sup>54</sup>

The Schumanns moved to Düsseldorf in 1850, but it was not until 1853 that they found a house in which the rooms were so situated that Clara could practise without disturbing her husband. For the first time since her marriage, she finally had a studio of her own. On January 9, 1853, she wrote:

Today I began to work again, at last. When I am able to work regularly like this, I feel really in my element; quite a different feeling seems to come over me, I am much freer and lighter, and everything seems to me more bright and cheerful. Music is, after all, a good piece of my life, and when it is wanting I feel as if I had lost all physical and mental elasticity.<sup>55</sup>

During the summer months of 1853, Clara resumed her composing. Her diary entry of May 29 reads: "Today I . . . began . . . for the first time in years, to compose again; that is, I want to write variations on a theme of Robert's out of *Bunte Blätter*, for his birthday: but I find it very difficult--the break has been too long."<sup>56</sup> But on June 3, she added, "The work is

done. It seems to me that it is not a failure."<sup>57</sup> Inscribed with the dedication, "For my dear husband, for June 8, 1853, a weak attempt once more on the part of his Clara of old," the *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann* were subsequently published as her op. 20.

Between June 10 and 22, Clara also set six poems from Hermann Rollet's *Jucunde*. Noting their completion in her diary, she wrote: "There is nothing which surpasses the joy of creation, if only because through it one wins hours of self-forgetfulness, when one lives in a world of sound."<sup>58</sup> These songs later appeared in print as her op. 23. On June 29, she completed three romances for piano (op. 21), and in July she produced a setting of Goethe's *Veilchen* (unpublished), followed by three romances for violin and piano (op. 22).<sup>59</sup>

The months beginning in September, 1853, proved fateful. On September 30, to her great dismay, Clara discovered that she was pregnant again. She lamented to her diary, "My last good years are passing, my strength too. I am more discouraged than I can say."<sup>60</sup> Five months later, Robert's final mental collapse began. Following an unsuccessful attempt to drown himself in the Rhine, he was taken to a private asylum at Endenrich, near Bonn.<sup>61</sup> Because his doctors feared that reminders of the past might heighten his anxiety and agitation, Clara was forbidden to visit him.<sup>62</sup> Two-and-a-half years would elapse before she was permitted to see her husband again.

Grief-stricken though Clara was, her return to the concert stage could not be delayed for long. She had a large family to support and the additional financial burden of Robert's medical expenses. In October 1854, four months after the birth of her last child, she began an arduous round of concert tours. Whenever possible, she made short visits back to Düsseldorf to see her children.<sup>63</sup>

On July 25, 1856, a few days after returning from a three-month tour of England, Clara received a telegram from Robert's doctor advising her that if she wanted to see her husband alive, she must "come with all haste."<sup>64</sup> She saw him for the first time in over two years on July 27. Two days later, Schumann died. Clara could only feel relief that his suffering had finally ended. On July 31, the day of his funeral, she wrote in her diary: "With his departure, all my happiness is over. A new life is beginning for me."<sup>65</sup> Composition did not play a significant role in that new life. Clara produced only two pieces after Robert's death: a cadenza for Beethoven's C minor Piano Concerto, and a little march (unpublished), written in 1879 as a gift for the golden wedding anniversary of some friends of long standing.<sup>66</sup>

Schumann's death signalled the beginning of forty-one years of widowhood for Clara. Left to provide for seven young children, it was imperative that she resume her concert career at the earliest possible moment. Thus, on October 28, 1856, after depositing the children with various relatives, family friends, and in boarding schools, she set out on her first tour of the season.<sup>67</sup> For many years, her life followed an identical pattern: she performed widely throughout Europe and England from September to May, while the summer months were

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devoted to her family and to preparing repertoire for her next season's concerts.<sup>68</sup>

If Clara had doubts about her composing, she had none about performing. She seems to have associated her feminine identity exclusively with performance. Although she was motivated by the need to support her children, touring represented far more to Clara than merely a means of earning a living; it fulfilled her as an artist and provided a solace for her grief. She explained to her friend Johannes Brahms:

I feel myself called upon to reproduce beautiful works, Robert's above all, so long as I have the strength, and even if it were not absolutely necessary I should still go on tour, though not in the exhausting fashion in which I am compelled to at present. The practice of my art is a great part of me . . . , it is the air in which I breathe.<sup>69</sup>

Health problems forced Clara to slow down somewhat after 1873, but she continued to tour until 1888, tirelessly promoting Robert's music wherever she performed. In 1887, she became principal teacher of piano at the Frankfurt Conservatory, where she played her last public performance in March, 1891.<sup>70</sup> In addition to her performing and teaching activities, she prepared a complete edition of Robert's compositions, and an edition of his early letters, transcribed thirty of his songs for piano solo, and made piano arrangements of several studies from his op. 56 and op. 58. Because of increasing deafness, she relinquished her post at the Conservatory in 1892, but continued to teach privately in Frankfurt until her death in 1896.

Clara Schumann's small creative output and the sporadic nature of her composing career may be attributed to the fact that she had absorbed the negative attitudes of nineteenth-century society toward female creativity, and to the many obstacles posed by her marriage. Her father had provided her with a musical education that must have been the envy of many of her fellow composers. But, in devising his plan for her life, Wieck had failed to consider the societal forces that encourage women to submerge themselves in selfless love, a love that leaves little room for the driving ego and singlemindedness of purpose necessary for sustained, high-level creativity.<sup>71</sup> In the early part of her career, she composed to please her father, and because all virtuosi of the time were expected to do so. In the years after her marriage, when it became no longer essential for pianists to include original works on their programmes, her husband's delight in her creative achievements provided her with a reason to continue. After his death, she devoted herself to the promotion of his music and the support of her family, leaving her own creative gifts to languish.

After decades of unjust neglect, all of Clara Schumann's known surviving music has recently become available on commercial recordings, and several of her works (most notably the Piano Trio and some of the lieder) are beginning to find their way into the standard concert repertoire. What J. A. Fuller

Maitland said of Clara Schumann more than a century ago still holds true today. He wrote: "The tiny list of her compositions contains things of such deep feeling, such real power, and such high attainment, that in strict justice no account of German music . . . could be complete without a reference to them."<sup>72</sup>

### Notes

1. For a complete catalogue of Clara Schumann's works, see Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and Woman* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 297-306.
2. Quoted in Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life, Based on Materials Found in Diaries and Letters*, abridged and trans. from the 4th German ed. by Grace E. Hadow, 2 vols. (London and Leipzig: Macmillan and Breitung & Härtel, 1913), 1:1.
3. Peter Ostwald, *Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985), 44.
4. Florence May, *The Girlhood of Clara Schumann: Clara Wieck and Her Time* (London: Edward Arnold, 1912), 13-14.
5. John N. Burk, *Clara Schumann: A Romantic Biography* (New York: Random House, 1940), 14-15.
6. Litzmann, 1:2.
7. *Ibid.*, 1:34-37.
8. Burk, p. 13.
9. Litzmann, 1:3.
10. Friedrich Wieck, *Piano and Song*, trans. Mary P. Nichols (Boston: Lockwood, Brooks, 1875; reprint ed., New York: Da Capo, 1982), 143.
11. Reich, 44.
12. Litzmann, 1:5.
13. Reich, 44-45, 73.
14. Quoted in Litzmann, 1:21-22.
15. Reich, 226.
16. Quoted in Litzmann, 1:33.
17. Quoted in Ostwald, 87.
18. Quoted in Litzmann, 1:23.
19. Quoted in May, 87.
20. Litzmann, 1:52.
21. Clara to Robert, 1 August 1833, quoted in *ibid.*, 1:58.
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23. Robert to Clara, 10 July 1839, quoted in Litzmann, 1:244.
24. Reich, 239-40.
25. May, 156.
26. Quoted in Pamela Susskind, *Introduction to Clara Wieck Schumann, Selected Piano Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1979), vii.
27. Quoted in Litzmann, 1:76-77.
28. Burk, 109-12.

29. Reich, 75-76.  
 30. Alan Walker, "Schumann and His Background," in *Robert Schumann: The Man and His Music*, 17.  
 31. Reich, 102.  
 32. *Ibid.*, 74.  
 33. Quoted in Litzmann, 1:318  
 34. *Ibid.*, 1:313.  
 35. Quoted in Reich, 110.  
 36. Quoted in Chissell, 75.  
 37. Reich, 155.  
 38. Clara's diary entry of 2 October 1846, quoted in Litzmann, 1:410.  
 39. Quoted in Reich, 229.  
 40. Clara's diary entry of 15 March 1846, quoted in Litzmann, 1:429.  
 41. Quoted in Reich, 230. The three songs were as follows: *Am Strande* (Burns), *Ich stand in dunklen Träumen* (Heine), and *Es fiel ein Reif in der Frühlingsnacht* (Heine). The first of the Heine songs was later published as no. 1 of her *Sechs Lieder*, op. 13.  
 42. Robert's entry of 20-27 December 1840, "The [Marriage] Diary of Robert and Clara Schumann," ed. Eugenie Schumann, trans. G. D. H. Pidock, *Music and Letters* 15 (October 1934): 291.  
 43. Robert's entry of 3-10 January 1841, *ibid.*  
 44. Clara's entry of 10-16 January 1841, *ibid.*  
 45. Litzmann, 1:319-20.  
 46. Reich, 249.  
 47. Litzmann, 1:320. Three songs from this latter group were subsequently published in her *Sechs Lieder*, op. 13: *Ich hab' in deinem Auge*, *Der Mond kommt still gegangen*, and *Die stille Lotosblume*.  
 48. Quoted in Reich, 228.  
 49. *Ibid.*, 115-16.  
 50. Walker, 25.  
 51. Reich, 123.  
 52. Quoted in Litzmann, 1:410.  
 53. Quoted in *ibid.*  
 54. *Ibid.*, 1:444-45.  
 55. Quoted in *ibid.*, 2:36.  
 56. Quoted in *ibid.*  
 57. Quoted in *ibid.*  
 58. Quoted in *ibid.*, 2:37.  
 59. *Ibid.*, 2:37.  
 60. Quoted in Reich, 140.  
 61. Litzmann, 2:55-60.  
 62. Reich, 144.  
 63. *Ibid.*, 148.  
 64. Walker, 38-39.  
 65. Quoted in Litzmann, 2:140.  
 66. Reich, 304.  
 67. Chissell, 141.  
 68. Reich, 180.  
 69. Clara to Johannes Brahms, 15 October 1868, quoted in Litzmann, 2:260. Historians have long speculated that Clara's relationship with Brahms may have been more than

platonic. However, based on the surviving evidence and what we know about Clara's psychological makeup, this seems unlikely. For an in-depth discussion of this point, see Reich, 187-207. See also Harold C. Schonberg, "Keeper of the Flame: Johannes Brahms," in his *The Lives of the Great Composers* (London: Futura, 1986), 255-56.

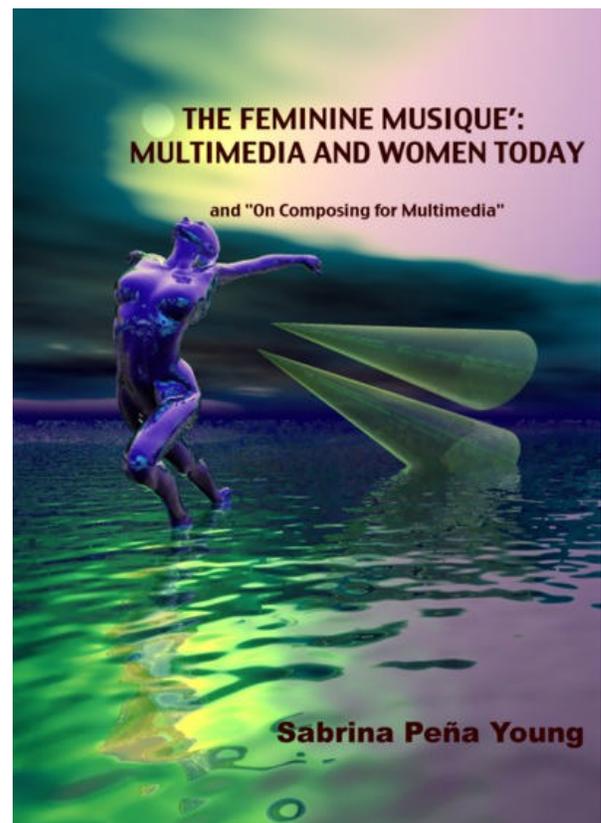
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### About the author

A faculty member of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, Eugene Gates holds an Ed.D. in aesthetics of music from the University of Toronto. His articles on women composers and other musical subjects have appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, *Canadian Music Educator*, *Journal of the American Liszt Society*, *Music Educators Journal*, *Tempo*, *VivaVoce*, *Czech Music*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, and this journal.



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## Vernacular and Classical: An Appalachian Marriage in the Work of Jennifer Higdon

Christina L. Reitz

Bluegrass music, and its predecessors mountain and hillbilly music, remains a living tradition of Appalachian culture. In the past several decades, this genre has mixed with other musical styles in its continued evolution; yet, rarely has this rich folk style been explored in a western art context. While bluegrass musicians and “classical” composers have both been male-dominated, Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962) has merged this vernacular style with the concerto genre to great critical success in one of her newest works, *Concerto 4-3*. Since the 2008 premiere, this piece has garnered numerous performances and for those still struggling to define American music, this work represents a musical “melting pot” that simultaneously projects the unique compositional voice of Higdon.

Higdon’s exposure to bluegrass stems from her family’s relocation to eastern Tennessee during her adolescence. The primary catalyst of the move was not only to be closer to relations but also to reap the benefits of rural surroundings. Indeed, the peaceful environment of the region has provided Higdon with a lasting compositional inspiration. She states, “I often think a lot of the mountains in all my pieces,”<sup>[1]</sup> and although this imagery is rarely communicated in her music, *Concerto 4-3* without question purposefully incorporates the musical style so often associated with this geographical area.

As with many of her compositions, this piece was written for specific performers: Time for Three, a string trio comprised of Zachary De Pue and Nicolas Kendall on violins and Ranaan Meyer on double bass. In addition to the musical characteristics of bluegrass, the instrumentation of this group lends itself particularly well to the hillbilly string bands that figure prominently in Appalachian culture.

The term “hillbilly” stems initially from the turn of the 20th century and often is still used disparagingly to refer to rural White Southerners with limited education and economic means. In music, the word appeared in 1925 when a band was coined “The Hill Billies” by a producer at Okeh Records.<sup>[2]</sup> Hillbilly music is not a synonym but a predecessor of bluegrass; it is largely based on the folk traditions of Appalachia that in turn are inherited from the Scots-Irish immigrants who settled the region. The “invention” of bluegrass is commonly attributed to Bill Monroe, and while he certainly was an important figure in the genre, the style is more accurately a mixture of a variety of influences that no single person created.

Alan Lomax, noted folklorist, described bluegrass music as “folk music in overdrive. . . the State Department should note that for virtuosity, fire and speed our best Bluegrass bands can match any Slavic folk orchestra.”<sup>[3]</sup> While such bravura showmanship has always been highly attractive to listeners, the composer’s draw to the music is found in its ability to communicate. Speaking to her audience through music remains a primary factor in her compositional philosophy; Higdon states, “Music is communication. Otherwise, I don’t see the point.”<sup>[4]</sup>

In mixing the vernacular elements into the musical fabric of her concerto, Higdon included specific hallmarks of bluegrass

such as syncopations, open strings, and slides. The solo instrumentation, however, provides the most evident link to the genre and its historical antecedents.

The banjo, predictably, is the very embodiment of the public’s view of mountain music and indeed, the instrument is indispensable in a bluegrass ensemble. The stereotype of this remarkably diverse instrument survives as part and parcel of the modern day “hillbilly” image. Despite the great strides virtuoso banjo players have made in breaking these typecasts, it remains commonplace to see references to the film *Deliverance* in the merchandise available in mountain regions to tourists that reads “Paddle faster, I hear banjos.” One hundred years later, this negative association with the banjo continues to thrive.

As it is well known, the banjo was introduced to the southern United States by West African slaves. Perhaps lesser known is that the instrument may also function percussively if the top is struck like a drum. The alternation between the string strumming and the tapping was the likely performance practice in its original African context,<sup>[5]</sup> thus it is capable of providing both string and percussive effects. While this instrument is not included in Higdon’s work, the solo bass functions in precisely this manner through changes of style between slaps, pizzicato, and arco that mirrors the banjo’s possibilities. In a bluegrass ensemble, the bass is not a required instrument but when included, its primary role is rhythmic. The banjo, on the other hand, provides melody in addition to rhythm and these dual responsibilities are delegated to the solo bass in Higdon’s *Concerto*.

Scoring for violin, or fiddle, offers a direct link to the traditional mountain music that reflects the Scots-Irish settlers of the region. The primary differences between western and folk music performance practices of this instrument are the latter’s use of longer bow strokes, sliding notes and double stops, all of which are prominent in Higdon’s solo writing. In addition, the use of two violins unites this score to both bluegrass and old-time music, both of which may incorporate two fiddles. In bluegrass, the term “twin fiddling” denotes tight and closely arranged harmonies,<sup>[6]</sup> but Higdon interprets this concept differently; her “twin fiddling” is realized through a dialogue between the solo violins in which each instrument asserts its importance.

Playing open strings on the violin is one of the features of bluegrass and Higdon typically utilizes this element in both accompanimental and melodic passages for the solo violins. Curiously, open fifths sounds are a compositional trait of this composer’s orchestral music; in fact, this interval appears so frequently that one could conjecture her childhood in eastern Tennessee had a lasting influence on her mature style. In the *Concerto*, the open fifth intervals occur at a spritely tempo that is distinct from the sustained, warm sound typically present in Higdon’s earlier works.

Finally, the ornamental slides that frequent bluegrass

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appear not only in the soli of *Concerto 4-3* but also in the orchestral strings to a lesser degree. This, combined with the aforementioned bluegrass hallmarks, is present immediately from the opening movement to transport the audience to the Appalachia region.

Like many of Higdon's concerti, the title of this work is not poetic. The name derives from internet language that refers to Time for Three (4-3); the dedication is "for The Guys-Zach, Nick, & Ranaan." Prosaic titles do appear in the three individual movements (*The Shallows*, *Little River* and *Roaring Smokies*, respectively). Higdon allots a marginal amount of freedom in the performance of the concerto; the improvised cadenzas are optional and the first movement may be omitted altogether. (This is reminiscent of her earlier composition *City Scape* in which the three movements may be programmed individually).

The solo writing in *Concerto 4-3*, as with many of Higdon's works, was conceived for three specific musicians; in fact, the parts are notated in the score not with the traditional solo violin one, two and string bass, but for Zach, Nick and Ranaan. In addition, personal commentary is supplied to the performers, for example "Zach's unique scrub sound"<sup>[7]</sup> and "Ranaan, try this with both the slaps and regularly-plucked pizz notes on the E and see which sounds better to you."<sup>[8]</sup> While such notes are quite rare throughout any era of compositional notation, it is this precise quality that contributes to Higdon's individuality because each work captures a specific musician's style and preference. Simultaneously, compositional traits prominent in earlier orchestral works remain consistent, and provide her personal signature to the piece. In the first movement, these include the use of *basso ostinato* passages, the use of fourths and fifth intervals, progressions of major and minor chords, reorchestrating earlier passages and unification within the movement through melodic and rhythmic motives.

*The Shallows* contains the most audible bluegrass references, and the possibility of omitting this first movement in performance would, in this author's opinion, greatly hinder the work. Throughout the three movements, the music progresses from a strong vernacular idiom in *The Shallows* to a western art style in the finale. As such, the first and second movements, which contain the most numerous bluegrass elements, are explored below.

The first movement developed from the varying string techniques utilized by Time for Three. According to Higdon, the trio is "able to shift quickly between these (extended) techniques and a straight bluegrass style without hesitation. Their ability to do this so smoothly reminded me of the parts of the mountain rivers that move in shallow areas, where small rocks and pebbles make for a rapid ride that moves a rafter quickly from one side of the river to the other."<sup>[9]</sup> In the vernacular tradition notation was unnecessary, since many of the mountain string bands had little need or use for musical literacy, and while the ensemble Time for Three is comprised of Curtis-trained musicians, Higdon leaves various aspects to the performers with only outlines in the score. In fact, during the compositional process, Higdon

recorded the trio's playing, and assigned each style a number in the score. When the players complained about the difficulties of the music, although based on their own style, Higdon responded, "It's a concerto—dude!"<sup>[10]</sup>

The bluegrass elements are immediately apparent from the opening measures of *The Shallows*. While not especially fast, the rhythmic density provides the energy mentioned in Lomax's article. Rhythmic tension in bluegrass is supplied by the bass and guitar accenting beats one and three, while the mandolin and other instruments stress the even numbered beats.<sup>[11]</sup> This style is imitated by Higdon with violin one accenting beats one and three (Figure 1)<sup>[12]</sup> and the second violin's stressing beats two and four (Figure 2).<sup>[13]</sup> Subsequently, the bass opens by slapping the E string against the fingerboard, imitating the aforementioned banjo percussive style.

Upon the ensemble's entrance, Higdon's unique orchestral style becomes apparent. A two bar *basso ostinato* passage appears in the lower strings comprised primarily of melodic fifth intervals. In addition, the major chords scored for the violas and second violins remain an essential aspect of her compositional style. These chords are extended, varied and re-emerge later in the brass where such sonorities typically appear in Higdon's symphonic works.

Above the orchestra, the soli continue with the bluegrass style of pitch sliding (also present on beat four of Figure 2), open fifths and slap stringing that merges the vernacular idiom with the western art tradition present in the ensemble. For the remainder of the movement, the western style is restricted primarily to the orchestra with only a few exceptions of pitch sliding and twin fiddling dialogue in the tutti strings, while the soloists continue the bluegrass style.

The optional cadenza between movements one and two, improvised by the soloists, continues the exploration of bluegrass elements not only in the use of open violin strings but also in the alternating virtuosic soli that betray a jazz influence. It is precisely this bravura element that lends credence to calling bluegrass the "jazz of country music." In western art music, such technical showpieces are of course prominent in the concerto genre, which makes such works the ideal vehicle for integrating the bluegrass idiom.

The melodic content of the cadenzas recalls the Scots-Irish ballads. Hillbilly music borrowed frequently from the melodies of the English, Irish and Scottish folk tradition with texts that remark on longing for family or a home far away but proved unique by merging these airs with African-American rhythms.<sup>[14]</sup> True to this style, the cadenza contains a tinge of melancholy infused with much rhythmic excitement.

As expected of a traditional three-movement concerto, the second movement, *Little River*, is slow and lyrical. According to Higdon's program notes, the second movement "reflects the beauty of Little River as it flows through Townsend and Wal-land, Tennessee. At times there is real serenity and a majestic look to the water, with no movement obvious on the surface—it resembles pure glass. I was sitting on the back porch of Little River Barbecue during a gentle rain when I thought of the design and 'sound' of this movement."<sup>[15]</sup> This tranquil atmosphere is evident in the beginning measures with the soloists' legato

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strokes, half notes, and *mezzo piano* dynamic. The ambience is maintained with two soaring melodic oboe soli that reappear several times throughout the movement. Although the content of these lines is varied substantially at each entrance, the unusual timbre may be viewed as ritornello-like. Higdon often reorchestrates passages to produce a new sound; it is thus extremely deliberate when she features the same timbre in recurring passages. Once the remainder of the ensemble enters the brass and strings sound chords that are a major second apart. While one may be tempted to consider this a reference to the harmonies of traditional bluegrass, this is another Higdon trait that is prevalent in earlier orchestral works.

As mentioned previously, the opening movement is most characteristic of bluegrass; indeed, nearly all works in this vernacular genre contain a rapid tempo which makes the slow movement quite outside the standard practice of this traditional music. And yet, subtle features occur in *Little River* through the use of syncopations and alternating melodic passages in both the solo and the tutti sections. Because of the tempo, however, these elements may not be instantly recognized as a bluegrass influence.

Higdon commented to David Patrick Stearns of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Nothing occurs on the beat. If it does, there's nothing more square or hideous."<sup>[16]</sup> The rhythmic connection to bluegrass is therefore present and, again, it is this aspect that resulted in the vernacular genre, acquiring the nicknames of "white blues" or "country jazz."

Attempting to place definitive style traits to "American" music can be a notable challenge due to the melting pot of cultures. Higdon herself has said she is unclear about what elements comprise an "American" composition. She said, "I know that I'm American...female and lesbian. But I don't actually know of any composers who think of themselves as anything but a composer."<sup>[17]</sup> While this is likely accurate, even an amateur listener would be able to describe this music as American. As Lomax explained, those, who traveled to the Appalachians in search of aged ballads, found instead "folk music in overdrive." In a similar manner, those who may be looking for a relaxing orchestral piece would find a most unexpected result from *Concerto 4-3*.

### Notes

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2. Bill C. Malone and Ronnie Pugh: 'Hillbilly music,' *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
3. Ronald Cohen, ed., *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 200.
4. Jennifer Higdon, e-mail message to author, June 4, 2006.
5. Richard D. Smith, *Bluegrass: an informal guide*, (Chicago: a cappella books, 1995), 176.
6. *Ibid.*, 10.
7. Jennifer Higdon, *Concerto 4-3* (Philadelphia: Lawdon Press, 2007).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Jennifer Higdon, program notes for *Concerto 4-3*, January 25, 2009.
10. David Patrick Stearns, "A 'what's this' kind of concert," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 6, 2008, H01.
11. Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 7-8.
12. Jennifer Higdon, *Concerto 4-3* (Philadelphia: Lawdon Press, 2007). Used with permission of the publisher.

Figure 1. Concerto 4-3: 1. "The Shallows," mm. 1-2, violin one accenting beats one and three.

13. *Ibid.* Used with permission of the publisher.

Figure 2. Concerto 4-3: 1. "The Shallows," m. 5, violin 2 accenting beats two and four.

14. Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 66-67.
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17. Jennifer Higdon, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2006.

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Christina Reitz holds an M.M. in Piano Pedagogy (University of Florida) and Ph.D. in musicology (University of Florida) with external cognates in piano performance and women's studies. She teaches music history at the Western Carolina University. Her current research interests are female composers with specific focus on the works of Jennifer Higdon.

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