

Robert Schumann

Piano Concerto in A minor, Opus 54

ROBERT SCHUMANN was born in Zwickau, Saxony, on June 8, 1810, and died at Endenich, near Bonn, on July 29, 1856. In mid-May of 1841 he composed a “concert fantasy” in A minor for piano and orchestra. Four years later, beginning in late May 1845, he reworked the fantasy into the first movement of his piano concerto, completing the second movement on July 16 and the finale on July 31 that same year. Clara Schumann was soloist for the first performance of the concerto on December 4, 1845, in Dresden, with Ferdinand Hiller conducting.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANO, the score of Schumann’s piano concerto calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Clara Schumann, *née* Wieck, was a celebrated keyboard artist from her youth, and she was renowned through her long life (1819-96) for her musical intelligence, taste, sensibility, warm communicativeness, and truly uncommon ear for pianistic euphony. She was a gifted and skilled composer, and Brahms, who was profoundly attached to her when he was in his early twenties and she in her middle thirties—and indeed all his life, though eventually at a less dangerous temperature—never ceased to value her musical judgment.

Robert and Clara’s marriage, though in most ways extraordinarily happy, was difficult, what with his psychic fragility and her demanding and conflicting roles as an artist, an artist’s wife, and a mother who bore eight children in fourteen years. They met when Clara was nine and Robert—then an unwilling and easily distracted, moody, piano-playing law student at the University of Leipzig—came to her father, the celebrated piano pedagogue Friedrich Wieck, for lessons. It was in 1840, after various familial, legal, psychological, and financial obstacles, that they married. Most of Schumann’s greatest piano works come from the difficult time preceding their marriage. 1840 became his great year of song.

Clara Schumann was ambitious for her thirty-year-old husband and urged him to conquer the world of orchestral music as well. He had actually ventured into that territory a few times, making starts on four piano concertos and writing a rather jejune symphony in G minor, but he had not yet met with success. He now went ahead and produced a superb Concert Fantasy with Orchestra for Clara, as well as writing two symphonies: the first version of the D minor (now known almost exclusively in its revised form of 1851 and listed as No. 4) and the *Spring* (listed as No. 1). He could interest neither publishers nor orchestras in the one-movement Concert Fantasy, and so he expanded it into a full-length three-movement concerto. In doing so he revised the original Fantasy, making choices, as almost always he was apt to do whenever he had second thoughts, in the direction of safety and conventionality. (One can only guess whether the revisions reflect Schumann’s own musical convictions or responses to the urgings of the more conservative Clara.) The full-dress, three-movement concerto was introduced by Clara in Dresden in December 1845.*

In 1839, Robert had written to Clara: “Concerning concertos, I’ve already said to you they are hybrids of symphony, concerto, and big sonata. I see that I can’t write a concerto for virtuosi and have to think of something else.” He did. Now, in June 1845, while the metamorphosis of the Concert Fantasy was in progress, Clara Schumann noted in her diary how delighted she was at last to be getting “a big bravura piece” out of Robert (she meant one with orchestra), and to us, even if it is not dazzling by Liszt-Tchaikovsky-Rachmaninoff standards, the Schumann concerto is a satisfying occasion for pianistic display, while of course being also very much more than that. (On the other hand, compared to the concertos by Thalberg, Pixis, and Herz that Clara had played as a young prodigy, Schumann’s concerto, considered strictly as bravura stuff, is tame by comparison.)

Schumann’s “something else” was noticed. Most of the chroniclers of the first public performances, along with noticing how effective an advocate Clara was for the concerto, were also attuned to the idea that something new—and very pleasing—was happening in this work. Many of them noted as well that the concerto needs an exceptionally attentive and sensitive conductor. F.W.M., who reviewed the first performance in Leipzig on New Year’s Day 1846 for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, wrote that the many interchanges between solo and orchestra made the first movement harder to grasp at first hearing than the other two. One thing that strikes us about this first movement—but perhaps only in a very good performance—is how mercurial it is, how frequent, rapid, and sometimes radical its mood-swings are. Or, to put it another way, how Schumannesque it is.

Clara Schumann noted in her diary the delicacy of the way the piano and orchestra are interwoven, and among the pianist's tasks is sometimes to be an accompanist—the lyric clarinet solo in the first movement is the most prominent example. And to be a good accompanist means to be a superlative musician: intuitive, alert, ever listening. The pianist gets a grand, wonderfully sonorous cadenza at the end of the first movement, but above all the Schumann concerto is a work of conversation both intimate and playful—whether in the almost whimsically varied first movement, the confidences exchanged in the brief middle movement, or in the splendidly energized finale.

Michael Steinberg