

Robert Schumann, Clara Schumann, and Johannes Brahms – three names that had an indelible impact on the musical world of nineteenth-century Germany – are often discussed together in relation to an alleged love triangle centered on Clara. Though Johannes Brahms held cordial relationships with both Robert and Clara Schumann, their idyllic friendship as mentors and mentee would last only a few short months. Just five months after Robert Schumann (who was also a renowned music critic) first championed Brahms as a bright new talent who was "fated to give expression to the times in the highest and most ideal manner" in an 1853 article entitled, *Neue Bahnen (New Paths)*, he attempted suicide by jumping into the Rhine. Thereafter, Robert Schumann's final two years were spent in a mental sanatorium, largely cut off from his wife Clara, though Brahms did visit him intermittently. Clara – then pregnant with Robert's seventh child and preoccupied with a busy schedule as a concert pianist – had to quickly turn around and take charge of her family and professional life, though it is no secret that Brahms was a close confidante during this tumultuous period in her life. It is also widely known that both Robert and Johannes admired Clara, for the "C-B-A-G#-A" (Clara) theme appears in compositions by them both, though the extent of Clara's and Brahms's relationship remains shrouded in mystery to this day. Both survived Robert by a few decades, but perhaps it is interesting to note that Clara never remarried, and Brahms never married. Although they each occupied a separate realm of the musical world, together their work on chamber music and recital culture completed the genre's transformation from the amateur salon-culture it grew out of into the public-facing concert practice it had become.

Robert

Robert Schumann's compositions range from expansive symphonic works to the most intimate chamber pieces, and it is in the latter genre that his creativity shines through the brightest. A trademark of Schumann's compositional style is his motivic treatment, with a small motif forming the seed for an entire movement, sometimes with near manic intensity. Some have linked this compositional technique to his own battles with mental illness, especially his visions of angels and demons and possible tinnitus resulting in a constant concert "A" ringing in his ears. While such connections are tenuous at best, what is apparent is Schumann's economic use of musical motifs and a propensity for the texture of a limited ensemble.



Robert Schumann: Wikimedia Commons

In the same vein as his solo piano work: *Kinderszenen (Childhood Scenes)* – 1838, and his trio for clarinet, viola, and piano: *Märchenerzählungen (Fairytale Narrations)* – 1853, lies his piece for solo viola and piano, **Märchenbilder (Fairytale Pictures), Op. 113**, composed in 1851. The four movement work paints four very different narrative pictures, though the jury is still out on whether they form a continuous narrative arc or instead four separate fairytales. Going from the lyrically dramatic first movement to the regal march of the second to the tense *moto perpetuo* of the third, the fourth movement being presented today is a welcome break. Marked: *Langsam, mit*

melancolischem Ausdruck (Slowly, with melancholy expression), this movement verges on the realm of the lullaby, but still maintains the tension and drama from the previous movements with Schumann's glorious harmonies underlying the simple and unadorned viola line. As you listen, think about which fairytale this picture seems to be describing to you.

Though his *Piano Quintet in E-flat Major* has earned itself a spot as a concert staple, his **Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 47**, remains a slightly more obscure work. Perhaps this is because piano quintets tend to be played more often than piano quartets (it is usually a simple matter to add a piano to a string quartet), but the fact remains that this is a wonderful work wherein Schumann explores all the colors of the instruments and ensembles with his characteristically economical motivic treatment. The first movement, *Sostenuto assai – Allegro ma non troppo*, begins with a dark introduction driven by the strings. As the piano comes in with full force at the *Allegro*, it springboards us into a much brighter land woven together by arpeggiated downward scales. Despite its turn towards a happier effect, darkness forever lingers along the edges, as it must have in Schumann's later years, plagued by visions. This movement is followed by a short *Scherzo: Molto Vivace*, where the cello and piano begin. The upper strings enter in imitative counterpoint, creating a *moto perpetuo* which holds until the first trio, in which the piano and viola break out into a lyrical interlude. The return to the *scherzo* is signaled by the return of the motor and the piano takes center stage in the second trio. The third movement, *Andante cantabile*, is an exercise in extravagant lyricism, marked especially by a prominent cello solo. The violin soon enters in a high register above the cello, transporting us to a happier place and simpler time. Schumann excels at writing to each instrument's strengths, and even the viola is given a chance to shine in its most lyrical register. The *Finale: Vivace*, is a nod to the fugues of yore, beginning with the viola. Here, Schumann explores the thickest textures, sometimes reaching an almost orchestral sound with just four instruments. Despite the thickness of the sound, each instrument is engaged in clear dialogue with the others, and Schumann has set a very delicate balance to which the performers must be extremely sensitive in order to give this movement shape. Despite the density of this movement, it is all tied together by an insistence on the opening motif of melodic leaps.

Clara

Clara Schumann (née Wieck) lived a very musically active life, from her early years as the daughter of the Wieck piano makers, to her concert career as a solo pianist second only to Franz Liszt, to her marriage and relationship with Brahms – music was everywhere in Clara's life. Although she achieved great success as a performer, her career as a composer was largely overshadowed by that of her husband's, and arguably her music is equally, if not moreso, delightful to perform.

The **Three Romances for Violin and Piano, Op. 22**, were composed in 1853 for the virtuoso violinist, Joseph Joachim. Clara and Joseph performed this work together many times, taking it on tour and even performing it for King George V of



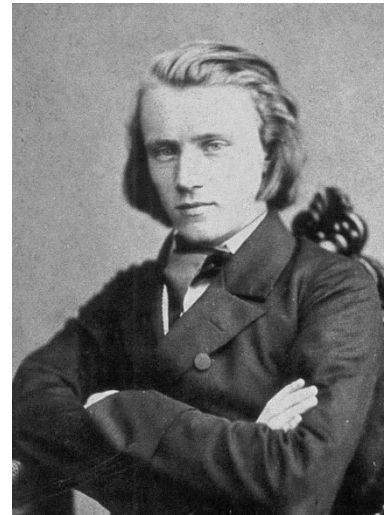
Clara Schumann, née Wieck:
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Hanover. The work is composed of three one-movement pieces, showing off the full expressive capabilities of both the violin and the piano. Today, only the first romance will be presented, as a short prelude to the larger works on the program. *Romance No. 1 in D-flat Major* is an intimate conversation between the violin and piano. It features a rhapsodic violin part set over a very active piano part that nonetheless blends seamlessly into the conversation; we can almost picture Clara and Joseph performing the work, each trying to outdo the other in displays of musicality and virtuosity. This is no simple violin solo with piano accompaniment, for it is truly hard to tell who the star of the show is. A delight for the ears, this piece allows us to appreciate Clara as a composer in her own right, rather than simply a gifted performer.

Johannes

For Johannes Brahms, chamber music was yet another medium in which to explore the application of orchestral techniques and textures. Known for his perfectionist tendencies, it was not until 1876 that he published and premiered his first symphony, just one year after the publication of his **Piano Quartet No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 60**, more than two decades after Schumann's death. For Brahms, to write a symphony was to follow in the footsteps of giants before him, particularly Ludwig van Beethoven. However, he had considerably less qualms about writing in other genres, particularly for chamber ensembles.

Brahms's *Piano Quartet in C Minor* is a work of considerable scale and highly influenced by the form of Schumann's quartet. The movements follow nearly the same pattern (putting the *scherzo* second rather than after a slow movement), and the opening cello solo of the third movement is a clear nod to Schumann. Beginning *Allegro non troppo*, the first movement is characterized by dense textures interspersed with sparser duets and trios. The orchestral nature of Brahms's writing comes alive when all four instruments take on completely different contrapuntal roles, something which more rarely occurs in Schumann's chamber works, where the four-voice texture is often reduced with two or more instruments playing together. Like Schumann's piano quartet, the second movement is a fast *Scherzo*. Here is a moment for the pianist to show off their virtuosity – Brahms as a pianist himself certainly had a penchant for writing piano parts which take advantage of the full range and techniques of the instrument. By reducing the texture and writing mostly in duets for the strings, Brahms allows the piano to cut through with its ostinato. The third movement, *Andante*, in a subtle homage to Robert Schumann, begins with a rhapsodic cello solo, followed in turn by the violin, and then the viola. The *Finale: Allegro comodo* is a fitting showpiece with which to end this concert, giving each instrument a platform to shine. The piano and violin start the party, and the delayed viola and cello entrance – once it finally happens – brings everyone to their feet. Abounding with musical quotations (Beethoven and Mendelssohn both make an appearance), Brahms's third piano quartet is his answer to the musical giants who came before him, setting the stage for his own compositions to stand on their own two (or eight) feet.



Johannes Brahms:
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