

“Robert & Clara Schumann Complete Piano Trios”-- The Beaux Arts Trio (1972)

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Essay by Robert Greenberg (guest post)*



Robert and Clara Schumann: Complete Piano Trios

The Beaux Arts Trio was founded in 1955 by the pianist Menahem Pressler, the violinist David Giulet, and the cellist Bernard Greenhouse. The trio played its first concert at Tanglewood on July 13, 1955 and their final concert in Lucerne, Switzerland, on September 6, 2008, completing an unprecedented 53-year run as the premiere, gold-standard piano trio.

Over the years, various violinists and cellists came and went, though the founding pianist--the extraordinary Menahem Pressler--remained the rock and anchor of the group from its inception to its end. Of the founding members, Pressler is the only one still with us at the time of this writing (September 2019); he will celebrate his 96th birthday on December 16 (Beethoven's birthday as well), 2019. He was still performing as recently as 2016, making him--at the time--the eldest living performing pianist. (For our information, in January 2014, at the age of 90, he made his *debut* with the Berlin Philharmonic under the baton of Simon Rattle. Better late than never!)

The Robert and Clara Schumann piano trios on this album were recorded at La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, in August 1971. The personnel in the trio at the time of the recording was, arguably, the greatest permutation of the Beaux Arts: Menahem Pressler, piano; Isadore Cohen, violin; and Bernard Greenhouse, cello.

Until the late 18th century, a keyboard trio (a musical composition for a keyboard instrument, a violin, and a cello; what was known at the time as an “accompanied sonata”) was a technically undemanding work intended for amateur performers. The keyboard--either a harpsichord or a pianoforte--carried the musical weight in these works, and the violin and cello, which shadowed, respectively, the pianist treble and bass lines, were considered the “accompanimental parts.”

While it is usually impossible to assign a specific date and credit a specific composer with the “invention” of a musical genre, when it comes to the Piano Trio we have no such difficulty: between 1786 and 1788, Wolfgang Mozart completed his five mature Piano Trios, the trios that defacto invented the genre as we understand it today. What set these works apart from what preceded them were the following. One: the string parts were made independent equals to the piano part. Two: the technical demands of all the parts were raised an order of magnitude (give or take!). Three: the lengths and expressive breadth of Mozart’s piano trios rivalled that of his string quartets and symphonies.

Beethoven’s Piano Trios picked up where Mozart’s left off. His three Piano Trios Op. 1 of 1795 are full-blown concert works written for professional caliber musicians. (Beethoven’s Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 1, No. 3 pushed the expressive envelope so far that Joseph Haydn was said to have been “perturbed” by it!)

By Robert Schumann’s own admission, the four *great* piano trios that influenced his own were Beethoven’s Piano Trio in D Major, Op. 70, No. 1 of 1809 (“Ghost”) and his Piano Trio in B-flat major, Op. 97 of 1811 (“Archduke”); Schubert’s Trio No. 2 in E-flat major, D. 929 of 1827; and Mendelssohn’s Piano Trio in D Minor, Op. 49 of 1839.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) worshipped his friend and colleague Felix Mendelssohn and referred to him as being “the next Mozart.” Schumann called Mendelssohn’s Trio in D minor “the most masterly trio of the present era,” and as such, it’s no surprise that Schumann likewise set his first Piano Trio--Op. 63 of 1847--in the key of D minor.

Schumann’s Piano Trio in D minor is by far the best known of his three piano trios (four if we count the “Fantasiestücke” Op. 88 for piano trio, composed in 1842). Typical of Schumann, the piece was composed in a manic white heat, two weeks from start to finish during the summer of 1847. It is a big, passionate, four-movement work, boiling over with Schumann’s fervent Romantic expressive palette (and that’s “Romantic” with a capital “R”). The piano plays virtually *all* the time, creating all sorts of potential balance problems with the strings, not a single one of which is apparent in the Beaux Arts performance/recording. This is not a function of good recording engineering; rather, it is a function of the trio’s sensitivity to the overall dramatic line of the work and to each other (as well as pianist Menahem Pressler’s alchemical ability to speak clearly without overpowering his bandmates).

Schumann’s Piano Trios in F major, Op. 80 (also of 1847) and G minor, Op. 110 (of 1851) are infrequently performed and are thus much less well known, a travesty for which this writer has no explanation. While Schumann completed his Trio in F major just a few months after the D minor, they are as different as cumquats and flank steak. The outer movements, set in F major, are engaging and transparent, Schubert-like in their lyricism, while the inner movements--cast in the distant keys of D-flat major and B-flat minor are relatively quiet and brooding in character. Schumann’s Trio No. 3 in G minor of 1851 is an admittedly enigmatic work, as its four movements explore such a wide range of moods and key areas that, on first listen, they seem to have little to do with each other. But the Beaux Arts performance is compelling, and by the time

the piece ends--brilliant and dancing, in G major--we are *sold* on this wonderful, if idiosyncratic, piece.

No such aura of enigma surrounds Clara Schumann's Piano Trio of 1846; it is a superbly crafted work, lyric, structurally sound and harmonically adventurous.

Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896) was one of the great pianists--and piano prodigies--of the 19th century. She was single-mindedly trained from the age of five by her "tennis-father," "tiger-helicopter-papa," piano-pedant dad, Friedrich Wieck.

Wieck "designed" Clara's education and, almost from the beginning, that education included instruction in music composition, for which Clara demonstrated a real ability.

There can be no doubt that Clara enjoyed composing. For example, after completing her Piano Trio in G minor she wrote in her diary: "There is no greater pleasure than having composed something and then to hear it."

Unfortunately, the flip side of Clara's pleasure in composing was a tremendous ambivalence towards the music she composed. For example, in another diary entry she wrote that her Piano Trio was: "Woman's work, which always lacks force and, occasionally, invention."

On November 25, 1839, the 20-year-old Clara wrote in her diary: "I once believed I had creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not wish to compose--there was never one able to do it. Am I intended to be the only one? It would be arrogant to believe that."

Why did this spectacularly gifted and successful musician so routinely demean herself as a composer?

Part of it was an over-developed sense of self-criticism: as one of the world's greatest living pianists, the 20-year-old Clara knew that her skills as a composer were not yet equal to her skills as a pianist. She was also, at the time she wrote the previous diary entry, engaged to be married to Robert Schumann, someone who she correctly understood to be a composer of genius. It's also likely that her negative attitude towards her own music was a way to *discourage* criticism from others.

But mostly, Clara's ambivalence towards composing was a product of her time and place: the societal belief that women, lacking the imagination, craft and artistic vision of men, were not cut out to be composers.

For example, in reviewing Clara's Piano Trio in G minor, the critic for the prestigious "Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung" wrote: "Women rarely attempt the more 'mature' [compositional genres] because such works assume a certain abstract strength that is overwhelmingly given to men."

Even praise from her beloved friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, had a backhanded edge to it. On March 13, 1860, Joachim wrote Clara a letter in which he praised her Piano Trio, and added:

“I recollect a fugato in the fourth movement and remember that Mendelssohn laughed at me because I could not believe that a woman could have composed something so technically sound and serious!”

Robert Schumann understood Clara’s potential as a composer. Nevertheless, he was also aware that she was the mother of the family’s ever-growing brood and the Schumann family homemaker. So he convinced himself that she was happy with her lot.

On February 17, 1843, Robert wrote in his diary:

Clara has [recently] written a number of pieces that show a musical invention that she has never attained before. But to have children and a husband do not go together with composing. Clara knows that her main occupation is as a mother and I believe she is happy with the circumstances and would not want them changed.

In this, Robert Schumann was almost certainly wrong.

Clara composed her Piano Trio between May and September of 1846. It was her first chamber composition; aside from an early piano concerto (written when she was 14 years old), all her compositions to the time of the Piano Trio were for solo piano or voice and piano.

However: Clara had been studying and performing the chamber works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven since she was a child. She was no chamber music newbie: she was well prepared to compose her Piano Trio. And make no mistake: it is a slick, professional grade composition.

Typical of Clara, she described the piece as being “effeminate and sentimental.”

This writer is clueless as to what—specifically--she was talking about. Because, in fact, it is a dynamic and beautifully crafted work that *painfully* gives us an inkling of what Clara might have done had she the time and encouragement to be a professional composer. But her life and times militated against it, and we are the poorer for it.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.