Detailed notes for my lecture, “Contemplation, Heroism, and Gender in Clara Schumann’s Piano Trio in G Minor, Op. 17, third movement (1846)”

Delivered as a guest lecture at UC Davis in 2019 and 2020 for Pierpaolo Polzonetti’s course Music 24B, *Introduction to the History of Music*.

Note: At the beginning of the class, I disclosed my multiple sclerosis. I talked a bit about my activist goals for the fuller inclusion of disabled guest lecturers in the college classroom. Through this pre-lecture framing, my presentation functioned as a form of pedagogical disability activism, even though the content of the lecture does not focus on disability.

*Introduction: Background on Clara Schumann’s career and personal life*

Virtuosity; concert pianism; marriage to Robert Schumann

*Part 1: Composing in a Male-Dominated World of Sexism*

Let’s think about Clara Schumann’s composing career. Social attitudes toward women were a factor that limited her output as a composer. Female composers faced many devastating forms of oppression and discrimination. Women were often viewed as incapable of artistic creation.

Schumann was conflicted about being a composer. She wrote in an 1839 diary entry, “I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose—there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?” She also sometimes expressed insecurity about her pieces. She was worried that her music was too feminine and insignificant. In an 1847 diary entry, she referred to her Op. 17 Trio as “effeminate and sentimental.”
Many of her pieces are short, in smaller forms. This might be because it was considered inappropriate for women to compose larger pieces. It might be seen as too masculine and arrogant for a woman to write a symphony. Such pieces were considered men's work.

The upshot of this is that Schumann focused mainly on smaller pieces. Much of her output could be performed in domestic settings such as the parlor. She wrote many short piano pieces and songs. Here’s a book of her piano music with a picture of her on the front (*Clara Schumann: Piano Music*, ed. Nancy Reich, Dover, 2000). I’ll pass it around so that you can all take a look at it. It’s a small, slim book, almost dainty. That’s how it’s been compiled and marketed. Let’s contrast that with this huge tome of Mozart’s piano sonatas (*W.A. Mozart: Sonatas and Fantasies for the Piano*, ed. Nathan Broder, Theodor Presser Company, 1960). Think about the role of gender in how these works are packaged and marketed.

**Part 2: Form and Affect in Schumann: Piano Trio in G Minor, Op. 17, third movement**

The score is available on IMSLP in the public domain at this link: https://imslp.org/wiki/Piano_Trio_in_G_minor,_Op.17_(Schumann,_Clara)

This trio is a work of chamber music, which refers to music written for a small group of instruments. Some chamber music works involve dialogue among the instruments. In fact, in 1829 the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe described chamber music as “intelligent people conversing with one another.” Let's find some examples of dialogue in this piece. Notice how the cello states the melody in measure 53. Then the violin responds in measure 68.
But this piece isn't only about dialogue. It's also about being alone with your own feelings and thoughts. During the Romantic period, people often thought of music as a solitary experience. For Romantic composers, music was often based on daydreaming and contemplation. (Show Josef Danhauser’s 1840 painting “Liszt at the Piano”.) This picture portrays many people gathered around the piano, all lost in their own private thoughts. Franz Liszt is playing the piano here and everyone is in their own little world, losing themselves in the music. Liszt is gazing at Beethoven; there’s a mood of contemplation, even worship. But there’s also an emphasis on masculinity. Beethoven looks very macho here! Notice his thick neck and broad shoulders.

Let’s think about how this contemplative painting relates to Schumann’s Op. 17. The third movement of Op. 17 seems to express a sense of solitary contemplation. What are some musical features that contribute to this mood?

Does this mood seem more stereotypically feminine or masculine? Its songlike quality might be considered feminine based on cultural codes. But it also seems to focus on individuality, being alone with your thoughts. Those ideas might be associated with masculine artists. So Schumann seems to be claiming the right, as a woman, to partake in these ideas about individualism. (Encourage students to share opinions about the gender roles expressed in this section.)

The opening section seems to draw on styles that many male composers used: it’s almost like a Chopin Nocturne. For example, listen to the flowing broken chords in measures 9-16. This figuration creates a sense of drifting along on your thoughts, floating as if you're daydreaming. Everything feels calm and tranquil. So, as we’ve seen, it starts out in a peaceful calm G major, very stable for the first few measures. (See Ex. 1) When does the key become less stable? Look at the E minor chords in measure 4, followed by the D-sharps pointing to E harmonic minor. But then it moves
back to G major by the end of the phrase.

Example 1: Clara Schumann, Piano Trio in G Minor, Op. 17, third movement, mm. 1-10
So the music is slipping between major and minor in a bittersweet way. Does E minor ever come back again later in the movement? (Invite students to examine this piece with this question in mind; help students discover that E Minor returns in measure 25.) So this first phrase is hinting at what’s going to come later. That often happens in 19th-century music, where the beginning of the piece offers a preview of things to come.

Let's think more about the form of the piece. Where does the first section seem to end? Measure 16. How can we tell that it's the end of a section? (Invite answers before sharing my own thoughts.) One answer could be the long note in the bass part of the piano. Then a new section begins in m. 17. How can we tell that it's a new section? (Again, invite answers and then offer some of my own). The new melody. Also the arpeggiated chords in the piano, the ones with the wavy lines next to them. Schumann seems to be using texture to differentiate sections.

Next section - measure 25. How is this different? Different key - relative minor. The overall feel is more aggressive and energetic. The dotted rhythms contribute to this sense of increased energy. Also the dynamics - now it's forte instead of piano. Notice the faster tempo, “piu animato,” more animated. You might not expect this for a minor key. You'd expect a minor key to be slower and less energetic. So there's a contrast between the key and the mood here. Does this section seem more stereotypically masculine or feminine? Does the heroic style always have to be masculine? (Encourage students to discuss this topic) (See Example 2 on the following page)
Now let’s think about the various moods expressed in this entire movement, taken as a whole. We’ve heard the nocturne-like inwardness of the A theme. Now we’re hearing heroic defiance in the middle section. These changing moods might be heard as demonstrating two different sides of Romanticism. The A section represents an aesthetic of contemplation. But there’s another side of Romanticism: the heroic self, the idea of revolution and rebellion. That’s what seems to be happening in the B section.

Where does the A section return? (Encourage student-led answers rather than giving them the answer. The goal is to discover together that the A section returns in m. 53. How is it different from the opening section? Larger pizzicato chords for the violin. More expansive arpeggios for the piano - broken chords spread out over many octaves. Also, now the cello has the melody in measure 53. Then the violin states the second part of the melody in measure 68.
Listen to the progressive elaboration/ornamentation as the piece goes on. The arpeggios cover a larger registral span. The cello has more double-stopped chords. This is a way of creating momentum in a piece, by developing the material in a way that creates a sense of forward motion. Let me know if that’s how you hear it, or does it seem static because it’s repeating an earlier section? (Invite students to think about this topic)

Concluding thoughts

Think back on what we’ve discovered about the form and content of this movement. If you didn’t know who had composed it, would you be able to guess that a woman had written it? Why or why not? (Discuss whether gender “comes through” in the style of a piece, and what it would mean to make those kinds of judgments about a musical work.)

Suggested Readings

General context about solitude, individuality, and heroism in 19th-Century European musical culture


Attitudes toward gender and musical creativity in Clara Schumann’s time


**Analyzing Clara Schumann’s Music and Career**

