The Forgotten Art of Clara Schumann:
German Society’s Influence on a Female Composer

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The world of Western art music is dominated by male composers. Works regarded as the ‘greats’ are scarcely those by females, and in most musicology, female composers are frequently overlooked. Perhaps the best known female composer of the nineteenth century is Clara Schumann, rarely commented on in modern musicology beyond the relationship with her husband, Robert Schumann. This article uses historical information, including extracts of the couple’s diary, to examine how culture and society frequently worked against Clara and her life as a musician. A picture emerges of a musician who, despite her personal beliefs to the contrary, has been found by historical and contemporary audiences to have produced a musical output of high aesthetic value. Ultimately, however, Clara’s works have been largely forgotten, despite her efforts during her lifetime, and have recently been uncovered thanks to an increasing awareness of historical female musicians. Based on this, the article explores the relationship between nineteenth-century German society’s attitudes towards women and their resulting professional lives and success in the field of music. It provides a timely intervention on the value of gender-based musicology, offers new perspectives on the life of Clara Schumann and considers that female-produced music is often overlooked in today’s research.

Keywords: musicology, society, female composers, presentation etiquette.

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Clara Schumann (1819-1896) was born in Leipzig, Germany. A successful concert pianist and composer in life, her work has gained little acknowledgement in most musicological studies. For some time after her death, Schumann’s works were only considered significant in relation to her husband’s achievements, who is regarded today as having produced outstanding piano music and songs (Hall, 2003). However, a surge in musicological gender studies in the late twentieth century led to her pieces being performed with increasing frequency and respect (Reich, 2001a). During her life, Clara was able to transcend societal barriers in terms of gender expectations, and this article will examine the effect of society on her musical activity during three periods: her early life (pre-marriage), her experiences during her marriage to Robert and her life following her husband’s death.

This article will examine extracts from the couple’s diary alongside wider socio-cultural knowledge to elucidate what obstacles Clara Schumann had to overcome during married life. The reception of her work both during and after her life will also be addressed to highlight the aesthetic value of her output, and possible reasons for her relative obscurity in modern musicology will be suggested. It is hoped that by going beyond secondary accounts from musicological texts, this analysis will bring new perspectives on how Schumann is perceived within the realm of musicology and provide greater clarity as to why her music was received as it was.

It is recognised that there is a comparative lack of academic discourse surrounding Clara Schumann, certainly when compared to that of her husband, and therefore much of the analysis will necessarily be based on informed reasoning. Melissa Grosso (Grosso, 2015) is one of few academics to have written on the life of Clara and her surrounding social circumstances, and so her work will be referenced regularly in this article to support the main argument that society played a constraining role on her activities as a musician. Joan Chissell and Nancy Reich have also written key texts on Schumann’s life, focusing more specifically on her life as a musician, and these shall also help inform the argument (Chissell, 1983; Reich, 2001a).

In early nineteenth century Germany, women often experienced monotony in their lives, being expected broadly to follow the ritual of ‘Kinder, Küche, Kirche’ (Children, Kitchen, Church). With Germany’s belief that its values were ‘superior to others of the West’ (Grosso, 2015), it is likely that the rise of feminism was greatly stifled during that period. While some men supported women and believed the inequality of rights to be wrong, a great many more ‘had come to relax in their domineering role, they became uncomfortable, if not fearful, when women showed their independence’ (Grosso, 2015). Clearly, that period was one in which a woman would find
great difficulty being successful in any walk of life, let alone the life of a musician, which involved the use of a great deal of personal initiative and public performance engagements.

At the same time, as patronage of the arts in Europe was spreading increasingly from the upper to the middle classes, women came to be involved with amateur music making, with sales of pianos rising and magazines published specifically for the ‘fair sex’ in music (Reich, 2001b, p. 147). Families had come to realise that the piano was a class symbol and that music lessons for their daughters could be an asset in climbing the social ladder, enhancing marriage possibilities. While a great number of talented amateurs emerged within households, most were forbidden by their husbands or fathers from taking music too seriously and barred from public engagement (Reich, 2001b).

Clara, however, was given a fairly atypical upbringing compared with her peers, and one that may have cleared the path for, and catalysed a personality that would be key to, her future success. She was given an exceptional musical education by her father, Friedrich Wieck, himself a talented pianist, who saw to it that she learnt both piano and composition with some of the finest teachers in Germany (Music Academy Online, 2007). She may have comprehended music more easily than language, as she could play piano pieces with greater fluency than her speech and was composing by the age of four. This was a result of Wieck attempting to create a virtuoso out of Clara, dreaming of creating a ‘wunderkind’ (wonder-child) of his own (Chissell, 1983, p. 3).

To pursue this goal, Clara was pushed to play outside of the family in order to establish connections useful for a later performance career (Grosso, 2015). She made her concert debut at the age of 11, going on to tour Germany, France and Austria afterwards (Music Academy Online, 2007). For a period when women were generally marginalised both socially and musically, Wieck’s efforts in carving a path for his daughter and imposing a strict work ethic opened up doors for her that may otherwise have remained closed.

During her engagements, Clara was to encounter her future husband, Robert Schumann. By 1836, the two had fallen in love, although Clara rejected Robert’s early proposals for marriage, perhaps due to her father’s disapproval. Wieck remained steadfast in his objections towards Robert – Schumann was still unknown outside his own circles, and Wieck may have considered him a poor prospect for a son-in-law (Hall, 2003). However, it is equally possible that he wanted to maintain a close hold over Clara due to the income she brought for him, especially after her successful period in Vienna. This may have ‘opened his eyes as never before to the wealth as well as fame now within their grasp’ (Chissell, 1983, p. 58). When she was seventeen, Wieck tried to separate the couple by sending Clara on tour to Dresden. While he had hoped this would result in a lack of contact, she and Robert managed to maintain
communication through an intermediary. During an era where women were controlled either by their father or their husbands, this showed great bravery and strength about the young Clara, a trait that likely aided her later (Grosso, 2015). Despite Wiek’s efforts, Robert and Clara eventually married in 1840 after several years of legal battles with him (Music Academy Online, 2007).

However, despite Wiek’s thoughts on Robert, it is a testament to Clara’s ability that Robert was to fall in love with her. Robert’s willingness to engage in a relationship suggests that he came to value her work and abilities as a musician, something that was hard to come by for any woman during this period. While she had a great effect on his musical life, the marriage may have had a much greater impact on the young woman’s life. From the beginning of their marriage, the two kept a joint diary, which provides a glimpse into their personal and professional lives. On the very first page, Robert writes that ‘it is to be a diary of all that concerns us in our domestic and married life… one feature… shall be criticism of our artistic efforts and performances…’ (Schumann and Pidock, 1934, pp. 287-8).

During the marriage, Clara maintained her piano performance practice. The prevailing views on correct feminine behaviours (passive and submissive) did not deter her from appearing as a performer, which she considered a ‘re-creative’ activity (Reich, 2001b, p. 149). Her programmes helped change the paradigm of concert performance from virtuosic endeavours to serious, composer-focused recitals. She was one of the first pianists of her time to play from memory and to play entire recitals with no assisting artists (Reich, 2001b). In the early days of their marriage, Robert noted that he found her ‘at the piano every day’ (Schumann and Pidock, 1934, p. 290). She often premiered Robert’s work for him, as well as preparing piano arrangements of his instrumental pieces (Reich, 2001a). This was a further endorsement of her ability from a man who would later be considered a great composer, particularly important as Schumann may have engaged such pianists as Chopin and Liszt to play his pieces during this period. Clara’s ability and efforts, however, did not stop Robert from asserting himself over her, once writing: ‘We had an argument about your interpretation of my pieces. But, Klärchen, you are not right’ (Schumann and Pidock, 1934, p. 289).

Despite her successes, it is likely that Clara’s performing career was not as extensive during the marriage as it may otherwise have been. She would often refrain from practising in order not to disturb Robert with his composing (Grosso, 2015). She also took on many of the roles expected of a musician’s wife such as copying music, accompanying groups her husband conducted and singing in performances of his work (Reich, 2001a).

The diaries also illustrate the impact the marriage had on her compositional output. Even though she considered performing a recreational activity, composition may have been a more
uncomfortable matter. Even before the marriage, she had begun to question her role as composer, writing: ‘I once believed that I had creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not wish to compose… that was something with which my father tempted me in former days. But I soon gave up believing this’ (Citron, 1993, p. 57). With this, Clara identifies women as ‘the Other’ in relation to the male creative act, perhaps signifying the beginnings of the internalisation of the tradition of creativity in the rationalised subjectivity of a man (Citron, 1993). Following their marriage, with the constant example of Robert’s work and growing reputation in front of her, Clara grew further ambivalent about her compositional ability. It would appear that Robert’s influence was greatly important to her, as her ambivalence towards composition came despite her pieces being received well in concert (Neuls-Bates, 1996).

Attitudes towards female composers seen in newspaper reviews (which she likely read even before the marriage began) must also have had an effect on her ambivalence. While her compositions were acclaimed by audiences, this was in the context of them being written by a female composer. When reviewing her trio, one critic wrote:

*Women rarely attempt the more mature forms because such works assume a certain abstract strength that is overwhelmingly given to men… Clara Schumann, however, is truly one of the few women who has mastered this strength* (Reich, 2001a, p. 218).

The situation may have been complicated by the fact that Clara was a celebrated performer and earned more money than her husband (Reich, 2001a). However, it seems that Robert was still often perceived to be the dominant figure. In September 1840, shortly after their marriage, Clara writes: ‘Robert gave me a good blowing-up for doubling one passage in octaves… he was right to reprimand me’ (Schumann and Pidock, 1934, p. 288). This entry clearly illustrates that the societal expectations of a self-subordinating married woman (Grosso, 2015) were in play from early on. Clara’s struggle for independence is seen in a diary entry in May 1841:

*This love is really the most beautiful, and every day we get to be more united in heart and soul… [However,] the more diligently my Robert pursues art, the less I accomplish therein* (Grosso, 2015).

It would seem that the nature of their domestic life began to prevent Clara from achieving all that she wanted, particularly in her compositional endeavours.

Later entries illustrate an increasing deference towards her husband and his work, as well an increasing lack of belief in her own compositional ability. Clara wrote of her *Trio in G minor* that ‘naturally, it is still women’s work, which always lacks force and occasionally invention’ and later compared it to Robert’s, saying hers ‘sounded quite effeminate and sentimental’ (Citron, 1993, p. 56). An important part of womanhood at the time lay in having children, with those
without them seen as ‘useless’ under the aforementioned ‘Kinder, Küche, Kirche’ ritual (Grosso, 2015). As such, the couple soon had their first, though this meant that Clara found herself with even less time to devote to her musical activity. In late October 1841, Robert acknowledges that ‘the Artist, it is true, must give up many an hour to the Mother’ (Schumann and Pidock, 1934, p. 298). Clara herself acknowledges that her family commitments impacted on her output, writing in 1847: ‘What will become of my work? But Robert says children are blessings, and he is right for there is no happiness without children…” (Chissell, 1983, p. 102). With this, it appears that a conflict had developed between the Artist and the Mother, a battle which motherhood may have ultimately won.

It is possible that Clara’s withdrawal in creative output may also have been caused in part by the loss of her father who pushed her so hard in her early years. While he was a devoted and strict musician himself, it may have been that Clara lacked such a drive. Indeed, she refers to composition as something her father pressed upon her in her ‘former days’ (Citron, 1993, p. 57). However, it must also have been difficult to ignore the societal pressures she experienced during her marriage. Women rarely attempted creative activity at that time (Grosso, 2015) and so it is likely that Clara felt pressured to fall in line with this. Additionally, Clara may even have felt that it was natural to defer to her husband and let her own creative work lapse in favour of his. Also, as well as strictly adhering to the duties of taking care of their children, of which they had eight, she also maintained the household.

Psychological theory may provide a further case for how society’s thinking at large may have influenced Clara Schumann. According to Halstead (1997, p. 216), while ‘males and females have equal potential for creativity’, psychoanalytic studies have suggested that there are differences in temperament and personality between the sexes in the unconscious mind. Hallstead (1997) also points out that ‘continued emphasis on women’s roles as mothers, especially true in middle-class Western society, ensures the perpetuation of psychological dependency in some women’ (p. 223).

Despite her own thoughts, it is clear that Clara Schumann’s works were more accomplished than she had recognised. After her husband was committed to an asylum in 1854, Clara maintained close contact with Johannes Brahms, in which the tenor of their discourse was one of friendship (Avins, 2003). While this relationship was close in a personal sense, it was also built on an established relationship in which the Schumanns contributed to Brahms’ development both musically and by introducing him to ‘friends and acquaintances who would figure in his life for the next four decades’ (Avins, 2003, p. 161). One can therefore appreciate that those who are regarded highly by the modern musical canon likely thought highly of Clara, in this case with Brahms at least partially owing his high level of success to the Schumanns’
contributions during his development. Moreover, Clara Schumann’s pieces today are performed with increasing frequency, and contemporary musicologists are recognising that her music is ‘skilfully crafted’ (Hall, 2003, p. 1124) and that it meets the ‘highest standards’ (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca, 2010, p. 632).

Following Robert Schumann’s death in 1856, Clara ceased composing apart from a single piece, March, in 1879 (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca, 2010). She instead spent much time on tasks related to Robert’s work, including editing published editions (Music Academy Online, 2007). Further, perhaps to maintain her family and the household, she resumed her performing career at a frequency she had not seen since before marriage.

This period saw her begin to intentionally transcend the gender boundaries imposed by society. The German music critic, Eduard Hanslick, who attended one of these later concerts, described her as ‘the greatest living pianist rather than merely the greatest female pianist, where the range of her physical strength is not limited by her sex’ (Grosso, 2015). For the time this was quite an extraordinary statement because women were hardly ever seen as the superior of men. Her devotion to her performance was clear, with Reich (2001a) writing that, in her mind, there would have been no concept of a ‘weaker sex’; she was a highly trained professional, an artist admired by men, and was ‘generally regarded as unique, almost above gender’ (pp. 160-161). Her newfound strength as an independent woman came to the fore at a party in England, where she began to perform at the piano, only to have guests continue talking around her. She stopped and waited for everyone to fall silent, before saying ‘Either you talk or I play. It cannot be both’ (Grosso, 2015).

By her seventies, feminism in Germany was on the rise, and while much of society still thought that a woman’s place was at home, many of the qualities Clara promoted became commonplace (Grosso, 2015). A sense of nationalism came to encompass German universities and the emergence of more inclusive values allowed women to access higher education. Encouraged by this, women began to promote their rights and raise awareness of the injustices they had encountered over past centuries (Grosso, 2015). It may very well be the case that Clara Schumann, with her high-profile and many successes, catalysed this change.

Following her death, Clara Schumann sank into obscurity, her works lost in the shadow of her husband. It may be that her gender played a detrimental role in the preservation of her history and music, as the canon would no doubt have reflected society and favoured men. When inevitably located next to her husband, who was a very well-known composer, her music may only ever have been seen relative to his. Even in modern musicology books not devoted to concerns around gender, Clara Schumann appears as no more than an afterthought, with
entries being dwarfed by those devoted to Robert (Hall, 2003; Burkholder, Grout and Palisca, 2010).

Feminist musicology was initially regarded with scorn; whilst music itself was associated with feminine qualities, its study was to lie on what was perceived as the ‘masculine’ (and therefore intellectually superior) plane of scientific, objective work (Cusick, 1999, p. 473). This view for some time implied that gender was marginal to a musician’s output and success (despite great evidence to the contrary), and this contradiction between attitudes and reality may well have contributed to Clara Schumann’s obscurity. It took the emergence of the branch of feminist musicology to finally give gender the weight it deserved in music research, and recognise that, far from being marginal to success, gender created a negative impact on those who faced societal barriers simply because they were female. These efforts have been hugely beneficial to discovering work by female musicians, though they are efforts that have now been shown to have been ‘strangely received and strangely stymied for nearly a generation’ (Cusick, 1999, p. 482).

It is, therefore, only by transcending this view and recognising that gender carries a larger impact on musicians than was once thought that feminist musicology has uncovered the long-forgotten music of woman composers, including Clara Schumann. This has also led to uncovering the history of other women in music such as Lili Boulanger and Amy Beach, and the conditions in which they had to work (McClary, 1994; Davies, 2003).

These recent discoveries beg the question of how many more female composers have had their works cast aside in favour of their male counterparts. The question is as selfish as it is academic as the world may be being deprived of excellent music simply because of historical sexual discrimination and outdated views surrounding traditional musicology.

Overall, this article suggests that Clara Schumann was a musician of exceptional talent, with a ‘blazingly successful career as a concert pianist that lasted over sixty years’ (Reich, 2001b, p. 167). This was longer than any other performer at the time (ibid.), which underscores the merits of Clara’s work. Her performing career was achieved alongside a sizeable compositional output, all produced within the societal constraints of nineteenth century Germany. By exploring Clara’s diary entries and accounts of critical reception, it is apparent that she not only managed the expectations of a family life alongside her performance and composition, but produced performances and compositions that were, and remain, highly regarded. Both her contemporaries and modern musicologists have given high praise towards her work. Although it is clear that society at the time may well have influenced her to believe otherwise, Clara Schumann was clearly a woman of exceptional talent, producing output of high aesthetic quality worthy of recognition.
Clara Schumann’s success is juxtaposed with the attention she has received from modern musicologists. Although it is clear that she produced excellent work, this did not translate into long-term impact. The lack of interest shown towards her until recently has only perpetuated the circle of obscurity; Clara Schumann is one of many female composers who are deserving of greater recognition.

Today, women continue to be marginalised in some areas of music, with few seen wielding the baton, or directing large record companies from the boardroom. This is perhaps a reflection of modern society’s wider gender issues. The undervalued nature of women has been illustrated in the recent controversy surrounding the lack of any female composers in a UK A Level music syllabus. This has been justified by claims suggesting that ‘female composers were not prominent in the western classical tradition’ (Khomami, 2015). In turn, this perpetuates the view in the wider culture that works produced by females were of lesser value, with commentaries that suggest a condescending view towards Clara’s work: ‘It’s a dud… in her defence, it’s an early piece… straight out of the catalogue’ (Thompson, 2015).

Yet, with her history now becoming more widely appreciated and understood, Clara’s story represents the compelling need for further academic study in both current and historical gender-based musicology. It is only by delving into the history of marginalised female composers and recognising the additional struggles they faced over their male counterparts, that we may discover, and appreciate, further talent like that of this extraordinary woman.
References


