



The Schumann Show: Clara accompanies Joseph Joachim, the leading violinist and family friend

# Essential Schumann

We ask half-a-dozen of the finest musicians performing Clara's music today to champion a work by the Romantic pianist and composer

**Lucy Parham pianist**  
*Nocturne, Op. 6 No. 2 (1836)*



GETTY, SVEN ARNSTEIN

The Nocturne comes from a set called *Soirées musicales*. It's very dreamy to play; quite like playing an early Chopin Nocturne. Of course he was composing his Nocturnes at the time, and you can see how influenced Clara was by that style of writing. The same kind of qualities are required – balancing the melody over the accompaniment – but there's a slightly

stormy central section and then it ebbs away into this beautifully distant little coda. I love this piece because it was so inspirational to Robert Schumann; the opening theme, of five falling notes, is the one he then used in so many of his famous pieces – like the *Fantasia in C*, the eighth *Novelette* and *Kreisleriana*. It's a theme they used when they wrote to each other; it was like a code for them saying 'I love you'. So this piece is kind of pivotal, and it's all the more extraordinary that it was written by a teenage girl.

**Jennifer Pike violinist**  
*First Romance from the Three Romances for violin and piano, Op. 22 (1855)*



I recorded Clara Schumann's Three Romances for violin and piano a few years ago, and the first Romance is such a wonderful and daring piece. Smaller compositions are easily overlooked, despite the fact that they can be just as powerful and moving as an epic-scale work. It's interesting to see women writing during this time, as they

didn't have publishers to please because they weren't considered professional composers. This Romance also includes a lovely quote from Robert Schumann's Violin Sonata – it's very poignant to see the way they shared material, quoting from each other. She has an individual style, and it's so personal in the way she reflects on her relationship with Robert. There's an equally wonderful partnership between the violin and piano. Clara writes beautifully for the violin, exploiting the natural sonorities of the instrument. It's deceptively difficult, as all great music is. It sounds simple to the listener, but there's an awful lot going on underneath.

**Sholto Kynoch pianist**  
*Die gute Nacht (1841)*

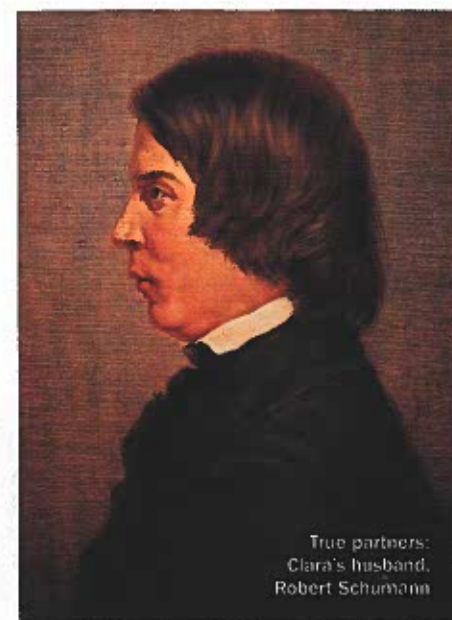


The song *Die gute Nacht* sets a poem by Friedrich Rückert – it's one of those perfect songs where the simplicity of it is what gives it its power. Clara Schumann captures the poem by Friedrich Rückert in an understated way. It starts off almost like a chorale, which gives it a feeling of longing or 'Sehnsucht', but also a sense that it's at rest with itself. That gives the song real depth and profundity. So it's a love song of sorts, but in a more settled state. Clara is incredibly skilled with words. She captures the essence of the poem's deeper meaning, carrying every little word stress perfectly, connecting all of the phrases. Her music starts with an incredible stillness, but as the angel appears, it gently moves and colours the poem. Some of Clara's work was slightly diminished by Robert's editing, but there is no interference at all here – this is pure Clara Schumann.

**Reiko Fujisawa pianist**  
*Scherzo, Op. 10 (1838)*



Clara Schumann's *Scherzo* Op. 10 has always stood out to me because she wrote it when she was just 18. It's so full of energy and lightness, looking ahead to her bright future. Her later life became incredibly tough, but when she wrote this piece she was thought of as a superstar pianist. It must have been a happy time, and you can hear that in the music. I've played almost



True partners: Clara's husband, Robert Schumann

## Clara's melodic lines are expressive, well-crafted and memorable

all of her piano music and it all conveys her warmth so well. This *Scherzo* in particular has such tender expression and a real delicacy. Clara brought this piece to Paris to perform herself, and it was an extremely successful recital. She wrote to Robert saying how well it had been received and that she had plans to play the piece in the future. It was here that she met Chopin and Liszt, who said she was remarkable. Her pieces are really difficult to play, and yet her technique was reportedly so good that she played them perfectly.

**Helen Grime composer**  
*Three Romances, Op. 22 (1855)*



These are such beautiful pieces. There's such clarity in the melodic writing, but it's also subtle. Clara's harmonic language is very refined as well. The melodic lines are expressive, well-crafted and memorable. The way she develops the melody throughout each of the movements, as well as varying the combined textures of

the two instruments, really stand out for me. You get this beautiful overarching form from the three pieces. I've been studying her songs too, as I've been writing a response to her *Sie liebten sich beide* for the Chelsea Festival in New York, and again the lines are very beautiful. The songs are quite fresh too; she's not just following convention and writing polite little pieces. It's more than that. The music of the Romances is very idiomatic. She has an obvious natural melodic gift, and she had an incredible technique. She spent a lot of time learning counterpoint with her father, and she and Robert spent a lot of time together studying Bach. So she has this brilliant craft, and that really comes through, especially in larger works like the Piano Trio. I bet she would have written a remarkable symphony or violin concerto.

**Alessandro Fisher tenor**  
*Der Wanderer in der Sägemühle (1831)*



The song *The Wanderer in the Sawmill* is a vignette, and I love it for that reason. Even something as simple as a snapshot of a person wandering through a sawmill creates this powerful, harrowing piece. Clara makes us think about our fates and choices and our ultimate final destination, in a piece that at first glance is incredibly simple. There are touches of Schubert's *Erlkönig* because the song has multiple voices. A ghostly voice calls out to the wanderer and it's the voice of a tree that's being sawn up. The tree berates him, saying you might be enjoying your life now but the planks I'm being turned into will be for your coffin. The whole piece is quite terrifying and there's a feeling of malice too. The text is by Justinus Kerner, and Clara's word painting is incredible. At one point the saw is cutting deep wounds into this tree, and Clara almost recreates the whining sound of the saw as it slices through. One bar in particular shows her effortless genius at painting these pictures. There's a really simple phrase where the wanderer looks at the saw as if in a dream. The piano underlay is wispy and ethereal. In just seven semiquavers she creates this dream-like, fleeting moment. It's a wonderful example of pianist and singer being in perfect symbiosis.