

CD REVIEW

Clara Schumann: Complete Songs

Miriam Alexandra *sop*, Peter Gijsbertsen *ten*, Jozef De Beenhouwer *pf*
Musikproduktion Dabringhaus und Grimm MDG9032114, 2019 (1 CD:
71 minutes). €16.65

Clara Schumann Piano Works

Cristina Mantese *sop*, Daniel Levy *pf*
Edelweiss Emission EDEM 3396, 2019 (1 CD: 71 minutes). €16.00

The tradition of celebrating composers at significant anniversaries has grown ubiquitous in the western musical world, having taken a strong foothold particularly since the twentieth century. In 2019, scholars and performers on both sides of the Atlantic convened in commemoration of the bicentenary of Clara Schumann. In England, *Clara Schumann (née Wieck) and her World* was held at the University of Oxford.¹ In North America, *Performing Clara Schumann: Keyboard Legacies and Feminine Identities in the Long Romantic Tradition* took place at Cornell University.² That same year, two compact discs also were released by Musikproduktion Dabringhaus und Grimm (MDG) and Edelweiss Emission. The former, *Clara Schumann: Complete Songs*, encompasses her twenty-nine currently known *Lieder* while the latter, *Clara Schumann Piano Works*, surveys a sample of her piano music.

The aforementioned conferences reflect trends in contemporary scholarship which, in the critical evaluation of her life and works, aim to forge dialogues between the performative and scholarly realms. In a similar manner, these two CDs offer further insight into her musical world and creative output. The following oft-quoted entry from her marriage diary reveals the unjust and inaccurate nature of Clara's self-effacing attitude towards her own compositions and, in fact, her own compositional abilities: 'I tried to compose something for Robert, and lo and behold, it worked! I was blissful at having really completed a first and second sonata movement, which did not fail to produce an effect – namely, they took my dear husband quite by surprise'.³ These CDs by MDG and Edelweiss

¹ 'Clara Schumann (née Wieck) and her World', *Clara Schumann (née Wieck) and her World*, accessed 15 September 2021, <https://claraschumannbicentenary.com/>.

² 'Conference-Festival: Performing Clara Schumann', Department of Music Cornell Arts & Sciences, 11 November 2019, <https://music.cornell.edu/news/conference-festival-performing-clara-schumann>.

³ Beatrix Borchard, *Robert Schumann und Clara Wieck: Bedingungen künstler* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1985), 232, cited in Jeffrey Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 49.

Emission not only further Clara Schumann's musical presence in the twenty-first century, but also bring the compositional facet of her artistic personality to the fore in ways she would have hardly imagined herself.

Upon first encounter with these CDs, the listener is met with striking distinctions in recording acoustics. The first CD, *Clara Schumann: Complete Songs*, was recorded in the 'natural' state of 'specially chosen concert halls'; the clean, clear, crisp, and balanced tones characterizing Miriam Alexandra's, Peter Gijsbertsen's, and Jozef De Beenhouwer's recordings are a true reflection of the sonic qualities propagated by a concert hall setting. One might question, though, this inherent concept of naturalness not merely in relation to the nineteenth century, but also in a modern-day context, given that these spaces are ultimately technologically engineered and highly specialized. By contrast, Levy and Mantese's CD was recorded in chapels – the Rosslyn Hill Chapel in Hampstead, London, and the *Chiesa della Misericordia* in Ascona, Switzerland – whose stone walls, high ceilings and vast, empty spaces incite quite the contrary effect: significant amounts of reverberation and an obfuscation of acoustic clarity. While the former situates the listener firmly within the familiar, serious realms of modern-day concert experiences, the latter offers a listening experience more intimate and natural in its transportation of the listener – if only virtually – into what has now become a largely unconventional setting for a professional performance.

Clara Schumann: Complete Songs is neatly organized in five sections. The first three are comprised of her Opp. 12, 13, and 23, published in Leipzig by Breitkopf and Härtel in 1841, 1844 and 1856 respectively.⁴ The remaining songs on this CD were unpublished during her lifetime: the fourth section is a collection of songs composed in her youth before her marriage to Robert Schumann, and the fifth and final section is devoted to those composed in the years after her marriage. Robert Schumann had played a pivotal role in encouraging Clara not only to compose many of these songs, but also to publish them. In their performances of her Opp. 12, 13, and 23, Alexandra, Gijsbertsen, and De Beenhouwer present each of these multi-partite collections as a coherent, organic whole, in the order as published. Natasha Loges has highlighted the anachronistic nature of this performing practice; far from being 'intrinsic' to the genre, this approach to performing her *Lieder* is instead one which has been 'constructed or deconstructed over time by the combined efforts of multiple actors – performers, listeners, publishers and critics'.⁵ The equivocality of Clara's designation of her *Lieder* for *Singstimme* – a 'singing voice' – leaves much open to interpretation; in this 70-minute array of her songs, Alexandra and Gijsbertsen alternate between the timbres, colours, and registers offered by the soprano and tenor voices. This re-creation of the dual-gender [ed] approach characteristic of Clara's time reflects, if not embraces, aspects of historical performing traditions.⁶ The three *Lieder* from her Op. 12 are sung by

⁴ The three *Lieder* from Clara Schumann's Op. 12 were set to poems by Friedrich Rückert and published in a joint collection of 12 songs with Robert Schumann. Dedicated to the Danish Queen Caroline Amalie, Clara's *Sechs Lieder* Op. 13 is comprised of songs composed to poetry by Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Rückert and Emanuel Geibel. Set to poems from Hermann Rollett's *Jucunde*, the *Sechs Lieder* op. 23 aus "*Jucunde*" (Six songs from *Jucunde*) were completed in June 1853, but only published in January 1856.

⁵ Natasha Loges, 'Detours on a Winter's Journey: Schubert's *Winterreise* in Nineteenth-Century Concerts', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 75/1 (2021): 2.

⁶ Loges, 'Detours on a Winter's Journey', 15.

Alexandra,⁷ her Op. 13 by Gijsbertsen, Op. 23 by Alexandra, and the four *Lieder* from her youth, by Gijsbertsen. The final section, which simply bears the title 'Clara Schumann', features eleven songs which are divided between Alexandra and Gijsbertsen, neither having more than two successive tracks (see [Table 1](#)).

The successive ordering of 'Mein Stern' [27] and its English version 'O Thou, My Star' [28] brings the effects of this alternation between the soprano and the tenor to the fore. Both songs were composed in 1846; despite having been published in London in 1848, the latter only received its first recording with Gijsbertsen's performance on this CD. In this juxtaposition, De Beenhouwer's sensitivity as a pianist is highlighted as he attunes to the vocal demands of each range. In 'Mein Stern', where Alexandra's voice resounds at the top of the texture, greater prominence is afforded to the mid-register through the voicing of the hands. In 'O Thou, My Star', the tenor range is supported by prominent bass lines; despite the close proximity of the piano part to the vocal melody otherwise embedded within the texture, Gijsbertsen's voice not only retains its audibility and clarity, but is also never obscured. In the case of the latter, De Beenhouwer occasionally accords greater prominence to the counter melodies in the right hand, allowing the piano to duet with the tenor voice. By contrast, he is cautious not to contest texturally with the soprano register in 'Mein Stern' where, instead, he brings out the interrelationships between the piano and voice through the voicing of concurrent inner lines.

Such displays of textural awareness permeate the entire set of songs; this, alongside De Beenhouwer's ability to generate harmonic tension and exhibit an array of touch and tone in accordance with the poetic demands of the text, attests to his sensitivity as a collaborative pianist and his ability to enhance the affective capacity of the performance. While his contrasts in mood and tone are remarkable, one occasionally wishes for the musical textures to be imbued with greater dynamic gradation and shading. At times, Clara Schumann's intricately carved chromaticism in the inner parts of the texture and the contrary motion generated against the melodic line are also deserving of a far more stated presence. Above all, De Beenhouwer exhibits not only his mastery of the instrument, but also his ability to communicate musical affects through it. Particularly noteworthy is his delightful, glistening touch in the higher registers of the piano – such as in 'Walzer' ('Waltz') [16] and 'Das Veilchen' ('The violet') [30] – and his adept handling of the virtuosic pianistic textures in 'Er ist gekommen in Sturm und Regen' ('He came in storm and rain') [1], 'An einem lichten Morgen' ('On a clear morning') [11], 'O Lust, o Lust' ('The joy, the joy') [15], and 'Am Strande' ('On the shore') [20].

On initial glance, chronology appears to be the decisive factor influencing the choice of programming in the final section of the album. Through the organization of its contents, however, the listener also derives immense joy from the ingenuity of the tonal relations achieved by this section. In [Table 1](#), I show the rising tonal relations of tracks 20–30, which is momentarily disrupted by E minor in 'Oh weh des Scheidens, das er tat' ('O pain of parting which he caused') [26]; even so, tonal

⁷ The three *Lieder* from Clara's Op. 12 were published in Leipzig by Breitkopf and Härtel as part of a song cycle, 'Zwölf Lieder aus F. Rückert's Liebesfrühling für Gesang und Pianoforte von Robert und Clara Schumann' (Twelve songs for Voice and Piano, on F. Rückert's *Spring of Love* by Robert and Clara Schumann). To this joint publication – known as Robert Schumann's Op. 37 – Clara contributed 'Er ist gekommen in Sturm und Regen' (Op. 37/2), 'Liebst du um Schönheit' (Op. 37/4), and 'Warum willst du and're fragen' (Op. 37/11). In and of themselves, these *Lieder* constitute her own Op. 12.

Table 1 Tonal relations and voice parts in Part 5, 'Clara Schumann' (tracks 20–30), in *Clara Schumann: Complete Songs*.

Track	Key	Voice
[20] 'Am Strande' 'On the shore'	E♭ minor → E♭ major	Soprano
[21] 'Ihr Bildnis' 'Her picture'	E♭ major	Tenor
[22] 'Volkslied' 'Folksong'	F minor	Tenor
[23] 'Die gute Nacht, die ich dir sage' 'The good night which I bid you'	F major	Soprano
[24] 'Sie liebten sich beide' 'They loved each other'	G minor	Tenor
*Previously heard in [5]. Here, greater liberties are taken by both tenor and piano, by means of caesurae and a break before the second strophe		
[25] 'Lorelei' 'Loreley'	G minor	Tenor
[26] 'Oh weh des Scheidens, das er tat' 'O pain of parting which he caused'	E minor (relative of G major)	Soprano
[27] 'Mein Stern' 'My star'	E♭ major	Soprano
[28] 'O Thou, My Star'	E♭ major	Tenor
[29] 'Beim Abschied' 'On departing'	F major	Soprano
[30] 'Das Veilchen' 'The violet'	F major	Soprano

interrelations are evident. E minor is closely connected to the tonal centre of G: the relative to the major pole of its preceding G minor. E-flat major – which began this section in *Am Strande* ('On the shore') [20] – is then reinstated in 'Mein Stern' ('My star') [27].

In addition to its delightful organization, the musicality and sensitivity underlying both Alexandra and Gijsbertsen's performances – complemented by the collaborative efforts of De Beenhouwer – offer the listener a deeply rewarding experience. Both Alexandra and Gijsbertsen's performances exhibit a wide range of tonal colours and an assured clarity; to my pianist's ear, had Alexandra employed a darker tonal colour befitting of the A minor tonality in 'Auf einem grünen Hügel' ('On a green hill') [13], the musical effect could have been further enhanced in two ways. Within the context of the *Lied*, this darker tone is better suited to the narrative in which the character fails to attain a resolution in both tonality and text: 'Wer niemals Leid, recht grosses Leid erfahren / wird nie recht glücklich sein' ('he who has never suffered great pain / will never truly be happy'). Beyond its individual context, greater contrast would have been generated between 'Auf einem grünen Hügel' [13], the warmth of D♭ major exuded by the preceding 'Geheimes Flüstern hier und dort' ('Secret whisperings, here and there') [12], and the exuberance of the following D major of 'Das ist ein Tag, der klingen mag' ('This is a day of sound rejoicing') [14]. Alexandra's renditions of despair, desolation, passion, and principally those of pathos, however, are particularly moving.

Alexandra and Gijsbertsen's performances enact the legacy of a twentieth-century ideological shift, whose new performance rhetoric focused on textual clarity and a 'cleaner', more 'accurate' attack on the notes. By contrast, Mantese's interpretations of Clara's *Lieder* in *Clara Schumann's Piano Works* are abound with portamento, a technique that has suffered 'iconoclastic' admonishment for its antithetical relation to these new sonic ideals.⁸ Swells in long notes and flexibility towards the score, both of which manifest in a vast dynamic range, further define Mantese's performances; though largely foreign to the present-day ear and aesthetic, these stylistic and interpretive features are a hallmark of her performing style, aligned with her self-proclaimed idiosyncratic approach of 'us[ing] ancient singing as the key to every interpretive reading'.

While De Beenhouwer exhibits a noticeable use of tempo rubato in *Clara Schumann: Complete Songs*, these are often confined to the preludes, interludes, and postludes – moments in which the piano plays independently of the voice. Where tempi fluctuations are indicated by Clara Schumann herself, a premeditated consistency is reflected in the synchronous realization by both pianist and singer, as in climactic moments wherein either Alexandra or Gijsbertsen take a moment to 'place' a (typically high) note. Comparatively, Levy and Mantese's unreserved employment of tempo rubato and asynchrony as expressive techniques in *Clara Schumann's Piano Works* reflects their adoption of an entirely different approach – one that is of stylistic pertinence.

The innate sense of creative freedom governing their approach owes much to Levy's realization of Clara Schumann's piano writing, with the liberties taken in tempo rubato, arpeggiation, and the desynchronization between hands constituting a distinctive feature of his playing. In his solo piano recordings, where he has total freedom and control over the expression of the musical material, these techniques are exhibited with yet greater prominence. In the *Lieder*, he employs these techniques to unique ends. The use of dislocation does not merely manifest itself between the hands – within the piano part in moments of textual and harmonic tension, as De Beenhouwer occasionally does – but also extends to the asynchrony between the piano and vocal parts. The occasional entrance of the bass line before the soprano lends greater support to the vocal line. Meanwhile, the sparing moments in which Levy chooses to do the contrary – that is, leaving a slight delay *after* the soprano's melody, as in the last note of the vocal melody in 'Am Strande' [20] – are highly effective in captivating and enrapturing the listener as attention is drawn and focused onto the soprano line in its fleeting moment of loneliness. Dislocation between the performers also occurs in the manner of entire chords being played asynchronously to the vocal melody despite their demarcation as otherwise being of the same beat; comparatively less adventurous is the frequent use of arpeggiation within the piano parts where there are chordal or dyadic textures. In many instances, this technique of playing the lower, harmonic notes together with the soprano line, leaving the doubled melody note of the right hand just a fraction late, circumvents potential issues of balance that could arise from the piano's proximity to, or doubling of, the soprano line.

In their approach to musical notation, Levy and Mantese embrace what many contemporary performers – such as Alexandra, Gijsbertsen, and De Beenhouwer – have otherwise rejected as 'bad old habits' in favour of a more 'sacrosanct[us]'

⁸ John Potter, 'Beggar at the Door: The Rise and Fall of Portamento in Singing', *Music and Letters*, 87/4 (2006): 548.

approach to musical notation.⁹ In tracing treatises and contemporaneous writing both preceding, but particularly from, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Neal Peres Da Costa calls for the revival and use of (unnotated) arpeggiation, desynchronization, and tempo rubato in accordance with the harmonic and melodic demands of the musical work. The development of the 'Urtext mentality' and that of recording technology over the course of the past century has led to a quest for an unprecedented faithfulness to the musical score, as much as they have done for that of technical perfection.¹⁰ As a result, these techniques have grown increasingly rare; in Levy's playing, we witness attempts at unearthing, recovering, and renewing some of these otherwise lost aspects of nineteenth-century performance practices. Underlying his overt use of specific musical techniques is the more covert subscription to an aesthetic in which expression, not perfection, is key (if one can, indeed, chase or define 'perfection' as such). One senses not an 'immense pressure to make everything correct' through the infinite possibilities made possible by modern recording and editing technologies, as attested to by the occasional technical errors made in both the *Lieder* and solo piano music. The sacrifice of technical immaculacy does not leave me in want of greater 'accuracy', for Levy's use of techniques otherwise broadly unfamiliar to one's twenty-first century ear is grounded in analytical insight; judicious in their application, his interpretation enhances and refreshes the music in (seemingly) novel ways. In his careful selection of four opuses from Clara Schumann's oeuvre for piano, Levy carves out the opportunity for showcasing his wide-ranging technical and musical palette. Large-scale structural contrast is presented within the multi-movement works: the *Drei Romanzen* ('Three Romances') Op. 11 (1838–39, published 1840), *Pièces Fugitives* ('Fugitive pieces') Op. 15 (1840, published 1844), and Piano Sonata in G minor (1841–42, unpublished during her lifetime). The final work, her Op. 20 (1853) – a set of seven variations on a theme of Robert's *Bunte Blätter* ('Coloured leaves') Op. 99 – is intrinsically diverse by nature of its form. Levy's performances of these works, which encapsulate a great variety of texture, colour, characters, and styles, are a testament to his versatility as a pianist.

With a recording that presents her *Lieder* 'for the first time in their entirety', Alexandra, Gijsbertsen, and De Beenhouwer purport to have adopted a trailblazing approach to Clara Schumann's contributions to the genre of the *Lied*. It is worth noting, however, that a complete survey of her vocal music had previously been undertaken twice: by Gabriele Fontana and Konstanze Eickhorst in 1994 (CPO),¹¹ and by Dorothea Craxton and Hedayet Djeddikar (on the fortepiano) in 2009 (Naxos).¹² The truly original contribution of this 2019 survey resides in Gijsbertsen's world premiere of the English version of 'Mein Stern': 'O Thou, My Star' [28]. Levy and Mantese's CD makes no attempt at such a comprehensive approach; though far and few between, complete recordings of Clara Schumann's piano works have already been undertaken by artists such as De Beenhouwer (2001),¹³ Susanne Grützmann (2011),¹⁴ and Junghwa Lee (2021).¹⁵ On the one hand, Levy and Mantese's commingling of the genre of the *Lied* with

⁹ Neal Peres Da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): ix.

¹⁰ Da Costa, *Off the Record*, x, 41.

¹¹ CPO 9991272.

¹² Naxos 8570747.

¹³ CPO 9997582.

¹⁴ PH07065.

¹⁵ CRC 3840.

that of her solo piano music can partly be perceived as an adoption of a nineteenth-century performance practice. Such mixing of genres reminisces the miscellany concert of Clara Schumann's time and is thereby closely aligned with their historically rooted approaches to performing, as evidenced by their liberal use of tempo rubato, arpeggiation and asynchrony, as well as the proliferation of portamenti. On the other hand, the performance of these works in their entirety – apart from the *Pièces Fugitives* Op. 15, whose fourth piece is heard in the Scherzo of her Piano Sonata and therefore omitted in the former to avoid duplication – reflects a practice atypical of the nineteenth century. That these works were ultimately recorded on separate tracks, however, offers the potential to listen to them in random order at pleasure, instead of being confined to the sole modality of listening to them sequentially in their entirety.

Earlier recordings of Clara Schumann's music have predominantly been in conjunction with works by other composers, in the same way that her music would occasionally have been performed during her lifetime. The CDs reviewed here are but two of a quickly growing collection that, alongside scholarship, reflects this burgeoning interest in, and joint effort at, championing her life and works. Beyond commemorating the bicentenary of her birth, these CDs offer the opportunity for one to become acquainted with Clara Schumann's compositional oeuvre by keeping a focus solely on her voice as a composer. What we have here is an elevation of Clara Schumann's status as composer that is commensurate with the status already accorded to many of her contemporaries with whom she worked and knew intimately. With the passage of time, she has come to be known not only as a remarkable virtuoso, woman, and wife, but now, too, as Clara Schumann the composer.

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