

Clara Schumann: The troubled career of the pianist

Clara Schumann resumed her piano career even as her husband Robert lay dying in an asylum. Devoted wife or damaged prodigy? Jessica Duchen investigates

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Robert Schumann, who died 150 years ago this year, would not have written much of his music without his wife, Clara. Muse to Brahms and Schumann, and mother of seven, she is revered as a musician and woman of historical significance. But does this image mask a darker truth about her personality?

Born in 1819, Clara was the daughter of Friedrich Wieck, an ambitious piano teacher who groomed her to be a child prodigy. Schumann, one of Wieck's pupils, lodged in their house and first met Clara when she was a small girl. Later, her father, trying to protect his daughter from this thoroughly unsuitable young man, kept them apart until they took him to court and won the right to marry in 1840. Until then, Schumann filled his works with ciphers and sent them as coded love letters.

Thirteen years of domestic life followed: they settled in Düsseldorf and began to raise their family. But Schumann's dissolute lifestyle in his youth had landed him with syphilis; he was probably also schizophrenic, manic depressive or both; and five months after Johannes Brahms blazed into their house, Schumann tried to drown himself in the Rhine. He died two years later in a mental asylum.

That, though, is not the full story. It appears that Clara - who did not see her husband again until he was on his deathbed - could have brought him home when his condition improved, but chose not to. The writer Bettina von Arnim visited him in Enderich and found him in good health, but in the care of doctors who verged on the sadistic. Effectively imprisoned, Schumann lost the will to live; his death was the result of self-starvation.

The cellist Steven Isserlis, a passionate Schumannophile, feels that Clara did her husband substantial harm, not only during his lifetime. "Schumann composed several Romances for cello and piano - Brahms and their violinist friend Joseph Joachim loved them and used to argue over which was their favourite," he recounts. "But after Schumann died, Clara decided the Romances weren't good enough and destroyed them."

He also points to an incident in 1854, when Clara was upstaged by the soprano Jenny Lind in a shared concert. She wrote: "The whole of last winter, with all its torments, did not exact such a sacrifice as this evening when I was forced to

humiliate myself from a sense of duty." "That had been the winter in which Schumann attempted suicide," Isserlis exclaims. "She was only interested in her career."

But after Schumann's breakdown, Clara had to support her children; presumably she had no choice but to resume performing? "Lots of people offered her assistance," Isserlis points out, "but the only person she allowed to help her was Paul Mendelssohn."

"If you look at Clara's upbringing," he adds, "you can see why her personality developed as it did." One day, Clara's 10-year-old brother was playing to their father. He kept breaking down; Wieck became furious, and knocked him over. Clara smiled, walked past him and played the piece perfectly. "She was reared to think her *raison d'être* was to be a concert pianist, so she would have been deeply frustrated during the years when her playing was restricted," says Isserlis.

The accompanist Graham Johnson takes a different view. "One has to see Clara in context," he explains. "She was a typical Victorian. Her attitudes were characteristic of her day, especially the avoidance of scandal - and Schumann's mental illness would have been a dreadful scandal. Clara was endlessly devoted to music; the routine was essential to her survival. But women are generally expected to be nicer, softer, more amusing - none of which she was. If she'd been a man, her behaviour would not have been seen as at all remarkable."

Johnson has written a play with music, *Mother Clara*. It centres on Clara's tempestuous relationship with her daughter, Eugenie, who moved to London to live with her lesbian lover, but came back to visit Clara on her deathbed. "Clara as an elderly, embattled lady was much more interesting than Clara as a simpering bride," Johnson says. "And there was the fact that she had allowed one of her sons to die in someone else's arms while she was giving a concert."

Eugenie had escaped relatively lightly, for the Schumanns comprised a tragic catalogue. There was Julie, with whom Brahms fell in love, but who died of tuberculosis in her twenties; Felix, the youngest, dead of tuberculosis in his teens; Ferdinand, whose morphine addiction killed him; Marie, the eldest, who lived a repressed life as her mother's assistant. Emil died at 16 months. Worst of all, Ludwig was locked away in another asylum for some 30 years; his mother's visits amounted to barely a handful.

The pianist Lucy Parham, director of the festival *Schumann 2006: The Poet Speaks* at Cadogan Hall, defends her: "From a human perspective, to have gone through what she went through, to have had to fight like that with her father, must have caused a huge amount of distress. It's generally men who take a negative attitude to Clara; any woman today would recognise that life was not easy for her. She was tough; she had to be."

The pianist Piers Lane agrees: "She must have been the most extraordinary woman to have coped with the life she had, and she was a talented composer as well as a marvellous pianist. But," he adds, "if she inspired music like Schumann's C major *Fantasie* then I don't care what sort of woman she was."

It's what she meant to Schumann that counts." Lane's recital series at the Wigmore Hall includes the Fantasie, a masterpiece from the courtship period.

"Clara was a complete superwoman," says Roger Vignoles, lieder accompanist and programmer of two Schumann concerts at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. "It's interesting that in Schumann's song cycle, *Frauenliebe und Leben*, which is sometimes deemed demeaning to women, the protagonist is a very strong character. At that time, it would have been natural to Clara to hero-worship Schumann despite his faults; that doesn't stop her being strong and powerful." Did she damage Schumann? "It's possible. He was obviously sensitive, volatile and unstable; living with someone as tough and capable as Clara could have induced him to withdraw into himself even more."

Isserlis is now working on a Schumann concert script. "I'm amazed people are so pro-Clara," he says. "Of course one has sympathy for her: she had an awful father and a difficult marriage. But one reason Schumann wanted to go to Endenich was that he was afraid he'd harm her, which is maybe some indication of how he felt about her. She was a profoundly damaged person. She triumphed in the end. She got what she wanted. But at what cost to other people?"

Graham Johnson's song recital series, 16 and 17 March, and Piers Lane's *Metamorphoses*, 14 March, at Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020-7935 2141); *Album Leaves*, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1 (0870 401 8181) 20 March