

STANDPOINT.

The Malady Lingers on

by Jessica Duchen

May 2010



Double act: Robert Schumann with his wife, Clara, one of the leading pianists of the day, who acted as his gatekeeper (c.1850)

What's the matter with Schumann? A quarter of the way through what should be Schumann Year, I've scarcely heard a note of the man's music. It's only because I choose to that rarely does a week go by when I don't enjoy a good wallow in a work such as the *Dichterliebe*, the Piano Quintet or *Kreisleriana*. But the Chopin bicentenary steamroller is thundering along, clearing away everything in its path. Poor Schumann, born the same year, is barely getting a look-in.

The problem is that Schumann is not straightforward. To explore the issues underlying why he is neglected in this supposedly crucial year, we can allow the fun part to lead us into the jungle. First, an enjoyable DVD, *The Schumann Experience*: a drama in which Sir Roger Norrington, preparing to conduct the Second Symphony, dreams that he is Meister Raro, a figure from E. T. A. Hoffmann, trying to reconcile Schumann's contrasting imaginary alter-egos Florestan and Eusebius — both wonderfully acted by Simon Callow. Another DVD, *Twin Spirits*, comes from Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, based on Schumann and his wife Clara's letters and diaries: it's a real tearjerker. And a German movie, *Geliebte Clara*, starring Martina Gedeck (of *The Lives of Others* fame), has been praised by those I know who've seen it, but so far seems to have eluded UK distribution.

Why are there so many dramatic adaptations? First, a mass of source material exists in Schumann's own words: he wrote prolifically, edited a magazine, cultivated an erudite style and nearly became an author instead of a composer. Next, his romance with Clara Wieck, whom he married after fierce opposition from her father, has enchanted generations of music lovers. So has his championship of

the young Johannes Brahms, who himself fell madly in love with Clara. Last but not least, Schumann was nuts.

Steering well clear of the "madness and genius" chestnut, the most fascinating thing is that while all the biographies of Schumann, studies of his music, critical essays, academic papers, novels and stage presentations could probably fill a mansion, few seem to agree on exactly what was wrong with him.

I recently invested in a fascinating book, *Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician* by John Worthen (Yale, 2007), which propounds that Schumann's mental malady was caused entirely by tertiary syphilis. All other possibilities are swept aside, and the author scarcely mentions the word "Brahms". Meanwhile, other studies have posited that Schumann was bipolar, instead of, or as well as, syphilitic. There's even a theory that he was bisexual and in love with Brahms (it was only five months after meeting Brahms that Schumann attempted suicide). Above all, we are still arguing about exactly what effect Schumann's malady had on his music.

Schumann was a far more progressive composer than many of us are conditioned to imagine. We usually hear — in a drastic oversimplification — that in approximately the second half of the 19th century, some composers championed "pure music", while others sought extra-musical associations, personal "programmes" (stories) leading to experimentation with structure and content; ultimately a stylistic rift occurred in which Brahms is seen as representative of one side and Liszt of the other. Schumann precedes this — sort of. Yet in one way, it was his madness, if madness it was, that changed the course of musical history.

There was at first much common ground between Schumann and Liszt. They were on good terms with one another while Brahms was still a toddler. They both counted Beethoven as a prime influence. Both produced orchestral pieces that were symphonic yet composed in one long span, following an extra-musical programme. Both were inspired by literature: it's all but impossible to explore Schumann without reference to authors such as Goethe, Heine, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul.

So one might have expected Schumann — given a longer life, perhaps — to be part of the experimental, referential, exploratory, Lisztian side. Yet his mental illness and the appalling social stigma attached to that condition have skewed the perception of his work, mainly thanks to the attitude of his wife. Yes, that supposed romantic heroine, his beloved Clara.

This is particularly relevant to his late works. For years, it was thought, principally by Clara and her violinist friend Joseph Joachim, that Schumann's deteriorating mental health caused a parallel deterioration in his music (in some circles it still is). But what if they were wrong? True, the late works can sound rather odd — but supposing they demonstrate not mental weakness, but a new creative direction?

Take the much-maligned Violin Concerto, which Clara and Joachim suppressed and which consequently lay buried in a Berlin library until 1933. Could it be that the wandering solo line in the slow movement is in fact perfectly sane? It's a sort of stream of consciousness that plays around the imagined theme rather than through it, lending the piece an ethereal and elusive beauty. And what if the late piano pieces *Gesänge der Frühe* are not sketchy fragments but new musical thinking with ideas refined down to the bone?

Clara remained the gatekeeper of her husband's work until her death in 1896, 40 years after his. Having been aware of his unstable behaviour from the beginning — it was a prime cause of her father's objections to their marriage — it's possible that she was terrified of any diversion from the conventional, pure and sane in Schumann's work, lest it prove that his mind was wandering in dangerous, deranged directions. She always encouraged him away from experimental or obscure writing towards a more traditional, commercial and publicly effective approach.

This may also be one reason Brahms veered towards his own highly structured, supposedly "pure" approach: experimentation, "obscurity" and unconventionality, to Clara, may have been associated with madness, and perhaps to him, too, thanks to his formative friendship with Clara.

Eric Frederick Jensen's study in the *Musical Times* in 1998, "Buried Alive", suggested that Schumann was well enough to come home from Ethenich, but that Clara, for whatever reason, chose to leave him there. His death may have been the result of a hunger strike in protest over his appalling treatment.

The arguments go on. Schumann's bicentenary should be offering a chance for a serious reassessment of all the evidence. I hope there's still time for it to do so.