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*Kein Frauenschicksal: An Analysis of Clara Schumann's Musical Rise to Power*

While researchers and social critics tend to focus on music created during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries when discussing the politics of gender and music, much can be discovered when one looks farther back in history. For instance, Clara Schumann, despite being a *Wunderkind* (prodigy) and one of the most influential piano performers and songwriters of the Romantic era and the years after, spent her entire life living in a patriarchal society where she was passed from the possession of one man to another, always under someone else's control. Her musical talent was seen as a commodity and was used by the men in her life to promote their own fame and fortune.

Clara, born in 1819, was the first daughter of the infamous Friedrich Wieck, a popular piano teacher and salesman at the time.<sup>1</sup> Wieck was the first influential and controlling man in Clara's life, and by far the most important when it came to her piano teachings. He tutored her in music theory, composition, and performance from a very young age. Not only did he teach her how to actually perform music, but also, "...in each town [in which she performed] Clara dutifully copied into her diary Wieck's letters to friends and foes, excoriating the provincial audiences and unresponsive patrons, commenting on fees, complimentary tickets, programs, and instruments. She was learning how to manage a concert tour; this practical education formed the

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Kemple, "Women Composers, Part 1." *Library Journal* 141, no. 14 (September 1, 2016): 73.

basis of her own managerial skills later on.”<sup>2</sup> With this education, she would later be able to manage her own concerts and organize her own performances.

However, Wieck was not just a teacher and father to Clara; he was also a source of cruelty, greed, and fear. Nancy Reich writes, “Wieck firmly believed that his pedagogical genius alone was responsible for the creation of the young pianist who generated such excitement in Vienna in 1838, overlooking entirely the role of Clara’s mother, the girl’s own remarkable talents, and the series of circumstances... which went into the making of the Queen of the Piano.”<sup>3</sup> From the moment Clara began to perform, he viewed any income she received as his, and any fame that she received, he thought, was also his. He taught her, both implicitly and explicitly, that money was a great source of comfort, and sometimes even fatherly love.<sup>4</sup> Clara remained both emotionally and financially dependent on her father for many years. Much to Wieck’s dismay, however, around the age of thirteen, Clara began to act out, because of both simple teenage rebellion as well as the arrival of another extremely influential man in Clara’s life: Robert Schumann.

This famous musical power couple had met before, when Robert was eighteen and Clara was nine. Robert was a student studying piano at the time under Wieck, and he had many opportunities during this time to listen to Clara play and to get to know her as a person.<sup>5</sup> However, the two were separated for a short while when Wieck, sensing his daughter’s growing affection for the older man, took her away on a concert tour in Paris, Frankfurt, and Darmstadt.

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 28

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>4</sup> Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann; an Artist's Life, Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters* (New York, NY: Vienna House, 1972), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Lépront, *Clara Schumann: Künstlerleben Und Frauenschicksal* (München: Heyne, 1992), 43.

When they returned a year later, in 1832, Clara was now thirteen and Robert was twenty-two.<sup>6</sup> The two grew even closer than before, and five years later, when Clara was eighteen, Robert asked Wieck for her hand in marriage. Wieck was heavily opposed to the marriage, both because he viewed Robert as incompetent and air-headed and also because if Clara married Schumann, all of her earnings would legally go to her new husband.<sup>7</sup> The two lovers took Wieck to court, and the court ruled that the marriage was lawful, leading to the happy marriage of the Schumanns in 1840.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the fact that Robert loved and admired Clara, he still chose to control her finances and concert earnings. However, due to an injury in his hand, he was unable to perform in any piano concerts. This led to a revolutionary era in Clara's career. Catherine Lépront writes, "Robert had given up the thought of a concert career... From this time on, Clara was the foremost interpreter of his piano works."<sup>9</sup> Because of this, she became famous not only for composing and performing her own pieces, but also for doing the same with Robert's pieces as well while Robert shifted from performing music to conducting it. This was extremely progressive for a woman at this time, as it was not heard of for a wife to control her husband's schedule and finances. Throughout all sixteen years of their marriage, as Robert's mental and physical health declined, Clara took an increasingly stronger position of power in their musical productions. She began to organize and lead their rehearsals, set up performances, keep track of their earnings, all while playing the role of wife and mother. Nancy Reich wrote, "Clara's health and stamina carried her forward as she continued her own concert career, aided her husband

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 54.

artistically, emotionally, and financially, bore four more children during the five years they lived in Dresden, supervised a household that included three servants, and composed her best works.”

<sup>10</sup> Clara was able to both play a feminine role, bearing and raising children, organizing the house, and all other typical roles of women at the time, while also taking a masculine role in the organization and leadership of concerts and performances, as well as keeping track of the family’s finances, something that was unheard of for a woman to do at the time. Unfortunately, Robert was in no position to take control of their lives. He had been suffering from mental health issues all his life and attempted suicide in 1854. Two years later, in the summer of 1856, when Robert’s health finally failed him and he died, Clara took on her powerful role with even more vigor.

While it was typical for a widow to become slightly more independent during this time period in Europe, Clara took it to a whole new level. Nancy Reich writes, “Outsiders may have pitied her, but she soon realized that the life of an artist, even with all its trials and tensions, brought her a fulfillment that motherhood could not match.”<sup>11</sup> While she felt some guilt about not being around her children as much as a woman at the time was encouraged to do, Clara was a born performer and took to her solo musical career with an insatiable vigor. During this time she wrote some of her best pieces, led some of her most successful performances, and dazzled her audience like she never had before. However, as her life went on, her body began to betray her. She struggled to perform with arthritic fingers, and eventually had a stroke in 1896.<sup>12</sup> Even on her deathbed, however, she was obsessed with music, and “As she lay dying, she asked her

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 76.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

grandson Ferdinand to play for her. The music, from Schumann's Intermezzi, op. 4, and his F-sharp Major Romance, op. 28, was the last she heard."<sup>13</sup>

In the end, Clara Schumann died knowing she was one of the most influential musicians of the nineteenth century. She was one of the first performers to memorize her music before performing, which set a musical standard that is still upheld today. She also taught her vocal students to sing with a certain vocal tone and expression, which was a revolutionary tactic, unheard of at the time.<sup>14</sup> She did all this, and yet, she was not truly recognized for her talent until the late twentieth century. The men in her life received most of the credit and the wealth, but that wasn't really what Clara cared about. In the end, she was a performer, and this dedication to performances, while still playing the role of the mother, was something revolutionary and extremely feminist during the nineteenth century. Nancy Reich wrote, "...this girl, born in an age when musical talent in a female was generally regarded only as an asset in the marriage market, subsequently built a glorious career that spanned over sixty years, a career that influenced the concert and musical life of the nineteenth century."<sup>15</sup> It is in this way that Clara was able to break free from the influence of the men in her life, and become her own person, focusing on what she loved most in the world; performing.

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<sup>13</sup> Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann; an Artist's Life, Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters* (New York, NY: Vienna House, 1972), 64.

<sup>14</sup> Steve Kemple, "Women Composers, Part 1." *Library Journal* 141, no. 14 (September 1, 2016): 73.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 4.

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