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Clara Schumann: A Woman of Her Time

Abstract

Clara Schumann was the wife of the composer Robert Schumann, the mother of seven children, a famous concert pianist, and a talented female composer in a time when few women were active in both the private and public spheres. This paper seeks to present a more objective view of Clara Schumann beyond the superficial labels of wife, mother, pianist, and composer. By closely examining her early married life to Robert through the marriage diaries, as well as letters between the couple and Clara's own personal diary, a more complex and often conflicted woman emerges from these pages.

Clara Schumann: A Woman of Her Time

Gina Tangorra

Clara Josephine Wieck Schumann is recorded in history as a child prodigy, a wife, a composer, a mother of eight children, a teacher, a widower, and a celebrated concert artist. Clara captured my interest because she played so many roles as a 19th-century female, certainly a difficult and restricting role in itself. An initial search into Clara's history revealed biographies with titles such as, *Clara Schumann: A Romantic Biography* and *Concerto: The Glowing Story of Clara Schumann*. In biographies such as these, Clara is presented as an idealized version of herself. Clara is seen as being a woman ahead of her time: a married, yet independent, female who composed music.¹ At the same time, Clara's relationship with her husband is highly romanticized and is distilled down to a passionate love story about two people who overcame great obstacles and found fulfillment as partners in marriage. However, the collections of letters and the joint diary between Clara and Robert Schumann reveal a more complex relationship. What is really striking about Clara is her remarks in the marriage diary about her compositions. Clara only composed music during her marriage to Robert, and because of this I will look more closely at their early years of marriage rather than the tumultuous years of their courtship and the later years of their marriage as Robert spiraled into depression. After composing three *lieds* she says, "But they are of no value, only a very feeble effort,"² that "I have no talent whatsoever for composition!"³ How can a woman who accomplished so much during her lifetime subscribe to the belief that "a woman must not wish to compose-there never was one able to do it?"⁴ In an effort to understand this contradiction, I will present a more objective view of the marriage of Clara and Robert Schumann and also explore the issue of whether the absolute truth of her history can ever be uncovered.

On September 13, 1840, Robert wrote a diary entry in what would become the joint diary between him and Clara. The diary chronicled their marriage weekly from the day after the wedding until the summer of 1844. *The Marriage Diaries of Robert & Clara Schumann* were translated into English by Peter Ostwald, a professor of psychiatry and biographer of Robert Schumann. He is the originator of the rather unique theory that Robert Schumann died of

¹ Anna Burton, "Robert Schumann and Clara Wieck: A Creative Partnership," *Music & Letters* 69, no.2 (April 1988): 216, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/855217> (accessed April 14, 2008).

²Gerd Nauhaus, ed. and Peter Ostwald, trans., *The Marriage Diaries of Robert & Clara Schumann: From Their Wedding Day through the Russia Trip* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 44.

³*Ibid.*, 52.

⁴Diary entry Clara Schumann quoted in Nancy Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 228. I used Reich's biography for any of the bibliographical information that is not sighted. She presents a more scholarly biography of Clara Schumann and includes many endnotes to show her sources.

self-imposed starvation.⁵ Ostwald has an even more controversial view of the Schumanns's relationship. He believes that there was a possible pre-marital pregnancy and miscarriage and that Robert Schumann threatened to kill himself and Clara because of her sympathy towards her father.⁶ The two authoritative biographies on Clara Schumann, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* by Nancy B. Reich and *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life* by Berthold Litzmann, discuss Robert's depression and suicidal tendencies, but do not mention either the possibility of a pre-marital pregnancy or that Robert ever physically threatened Clara. In a review of the *Marriage Diaries*, Robert Anderson asserts that Ostwald has a "rather uncertain knowledge of German" and, while the translation is generally proficient, it is as if he consulted a German dictionary and "made unerring choice of the least appropriate word offered."⁷ On the other hand, *Music & Letters* also published excerpts from the marriage diaries that were translated into English by a different translator, G. D. H. Pidcock. A comparison of these two translations reveals only minor discrepancies in word choice but not in meaning. For example, Ostwald's translation of Robert's description of the diary reads, "it shall be our good, true friend, to whom we entrust everything, to whom we open our hearts,"⁸ while *Music & Letters* reads, "In short it will be a good and faithful friend, to whom we may always come with open hearts...."⁹ Both the letters and diaries that I use as sources for this paper are translated from German into English, which calls into question how faithful the translations are to the originals. Certainly, something was lost in translation. However, the general meaning of the letters and diaries has not been lost, and they are still an invaluable source of information about the Schumanns's marriage.

Robert's first entry in the diary outlines the purpose of the joint diary. The marriage diary will be a method of communication between husband and wife in which they will write about both their musical and married life. The diary will also be used for "mediation and reconciliation" and will be their "good, true friend, to whom we entrust everything."¹⁰ There are rules which both Clara and Robert must follow: both will write entries alternating weeks and the entry for each week must be longer than a page. If either fails to fulfill

⁵The current belief that most biographers subscribe to is that Robert died from tertiary syphilis. Alan Walker, review of *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, by Nancy Reich, *Music & Letters* 67, no. 4 (Oct. 1986): 410, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/735150> (accessed April 14, 2008).

⁶Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, xi-xii.

⁷Robert Anderson, review of *The Marriage Diaries* ed. by Gerd Nauhaus and trans. by Peter Ostwald, *The Musical Times*, 135, no. 1815 (May 1994): 292, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1003172>.

⁸Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 3.

⁹Eugenie Schumann, ed. and G. D. H. Pidcock, trans., "The Diary of Robert and Clara Schumann," *Music & Letters* 15, no. 4 (Oct. 1934): 287, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/727881> (accessed April 14, 2008). See also "The Diary of Robert and Clara Schumann: Concluded," *Music & Letters* 16, no. 1 (Jan. 1935) 40-49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/727861> (accessed April 14, 2008). Both are useful in highlighting important events and recordings in the diaries.

¹⁰Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 3.

these stipulations there will be some sort of punishment. Robert also lays down the maxim for their marriage on which “all happiness in life depends: *Industry, Thrift, and Loyalty.*”¹¹ Robert tells Clara that “the most beautiful and heartfelt content” of the diary will be: “your beautiful hopes and mine, which heaven might bless; your and my worries, which married life brings with it; in short, all the joys and sorrows of marital life should be written down here as a true history, which should give us pleasure even in old age.”¹² Robert’s description of the diary as a “true history” suggests that he acknowledged the presence of another, unknown reader. The diary is meant to be a chronicle of their marriage, and perhaps even a model for others to follow. While all this is speculation, Robert’s use of the words “true history” ironically does call into question the truthfulness of the diary. If Robert knew, or hoped, that others would eventually read the diary, then what he recorded in the diary would be tempered accordingly. Robert’s tendency to include the words “greetings to your reader”¹³ also suggests that he was aware that others would read his entry besides Clara.

However, even while viewing the diaries in a skeptical light, the diaries actually do give insight into the lives of Clara and Robert, their friends and family, and even the “joys and sorrows of marital life.”¹⁴ Clara and Robert write observations about current politics, aspects of their daily life, and above all, commentary on the world of music. With the inclusion of all these aspects, the diary presents a fairly well-rounded history of their marriage. Their marriage is not perfect, and certainly not always full of “abundant happiness.”¹⁵ Even in the early weeks of their marriage, Robert and Clara’s struggle with jealousy and anxiety is evident in the diary. Clara remarks about other women and the attention Robert gives them. In the second week of their marriage a distressed Clara writes, “I have a dangerous female competitor in *Rieffel* by whom, rather than me, Robert prefers hearing his compositions played, as I was able to conclude from his remarks.”¹⁶ This is particularly painful for Clara who is a devout supporter of Robert’s work and is supposed to be his muse. Although in a subtler manner, Robert also expresses jealousy of Clara and the attention she receives. He casually remarks in the entry of week five that Clara “sat between Mendelssohn and Count Reuss and carried on a lot; one nice word from Mendelssohn makes her glow for hours” and “In the evening I met Verhulst... Clara could barely conceal her pleasure over the news”.¹⁷

Clara also expresses her anxieties in the diary. She repeatedly worries that she is not pleasing her husband with her domestic skills and that her lack of education displeases him. In one diary entry Clara expresses a reoccurring

¹¹Ibid., 4.

¹²Ibid., 4.

¹³Ibid., 43.

¹⁴Ibid., 4.

¹⁵Ibid., 5.

¹⁶Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 9.

¹⁷Ibid., 21.

concern: “Throughout the entire noon [meal] I always endure a thousand anxieties [asking myself] whether the guests like the taste and [hoping] I don’t bring dishonor to my husband.”¹⁸ She also reflects, “I sometimes really feel my ignorance in the humanities, my lack of exposure to literature, quite oppressively!” Clara also expresses concern as a musician that she will “fall into total oblivion”¹⁹ since she is no longer touring. Both Clara and Robert, however, were plagued with bouts of melancholy. Robert says in one entry that “right now nothing wants to go right for me, which often fills me with depression.”²⁰ Clara says woefully in another entry, “Yesterday and today were sad for me- I was and still am most depressed!”²¹ In still another she writes, “my anxiety increases from day to day. I am depressed, and various worries torment me.”²² In this way, the marriage diaries do not support biographer John N. Burk’s claim that after the wedding “Robert and Clara blissfully entered the serene haven of married life.”²³ Burk’s biography, along with Bertita Harding’s, rely on the biography of Clara written by literary scholar Berthold Litzmann. Litzmann was asked by Marie Schumann, the daughter of Clara and Robert, to write Clara’s biography. In this biography, Litzmann left out a great deal of the letters and diaries that were contradictory to the view of Robert and Clara that their family wished to present. Litzmann’s carefully constructed view of Clara and her marriage to Robert thus caused his and subsequent biographies to be more one-dimensional and biased histories.

Further evidence that Clara and Robert were not always filled with “marital bliss” is the specter of Clara’s father, which hovered over them like a “shadow.”²⁴ During his courtship to Clara, Robert makes clear his animosity towards Clara’s father and forces her to choose between her father and him. *The Complete Correspondence of Clara and Robert Schumann*, volume I, is comprised of the letters during the Schumanns’s five years of courtship. The editor’s introduction to the collection describes the difficulties in compiling and translating the letters. These include the problem of deciphering the Schumanns’s handwriting, the Schumanns’s use of a now obsolete form of Saxon, and their occasional use of code, which is not translatable. The editor and translators of *The Complete Correspondence* claim to have a more accurate and more complete translation of Clara and Robert’s letters.²⁵ In one letter written in 1838, Robert tells Clara that she can not go back on her promise to become his wife. In his mind there is a clear distinction between “...Klara, the

¹⁸Ibid., 35. Brackets in original.

¹⁹Ibid., 29

²⁰Ibid., 19.

²¹Ibid., 24.

²²Ibid., 27.

²³ John N. Burk, *Clara Schumann: A Romantic Biography* (New York: Random House, 1940), 211.

²⁴Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 75.

²⁵Eva Weissweiler, ed., Hildegard Fritsch and Ronald L. Crawford, trans., *The Complete Correspondence of Clara and Robert Schumann* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994) 1: x-xiii.

musician” and “her father’s daughter” who is delaying their marriage.”²⁶

Clara later records in the marriage diary her feelings of being divided over the issue of her father. She admits that “conciliatory sentiments for my father arise within me”²⁷ and that she feels for him the “greatest pity.”²⁸ However, she believes that her father “wants to tear even the smallest, weakest sentiment for him out of my heart.”²⁹ As a result of his displeasure over Clara and Robert’s marriage, Clara’s father holds onto all her belongings and her piano. His refusal to return Clara’s piano gave her “considerable grief” and was, in Clara’s opinion, one of the “countless intrigues that this man instigates.”³⁰

Biographers of Clara, especially Nancy Reich, emphasize that Clara’s father was very controlling. John N. Burk views Clara’s decision to break with her father and marry Robert as evidence that she was “self-sufficient.”³¹ The marriage diaries actually reveal that Robert was in many ways just as controlling as Clara’s father. Robert exerted control over Clara when she practiced or performed music. In one instance, the couple spent an evening at a fellow musician’s house. Clara reports, “I was urgently requested by *Mendelssohn* and *Ole Bull* to play, which put me in a very horrible mood, since I had to refuse. Who knows whether I would have remained steadfast, had it not been for the portentous glances of my husband, who incidentally had the complete right not to let me play.”³² This entry, along with other entries in which Clara remarks that she is “not allowed to play, also not to go out,”³³ do cast Robert as the controlling, dominant half of their marriage. Robert also constantly and increasingly advises and corrects her in both her relations with other people and her musical studies. Clara writes in the second week of their marriage a typical remark concerning her playing: “Robert reprimanded me very strongly.”³⁴ In the third week, Robert discusses the argument they had over the interpretation of his work. He admonishes Clara, “But you are not in the right, Klärchen. The composer, and only he alone, knows how his compositions are to be presented.”³⁵ Later, Robert reprimands Clara for her “great admiration for Mendelssohn’s art” and for her degrading herself through her “old excessive attentiveness toward him.”³⁶ Because I am a woman and am sensitive to this issue, it is very easy to interpret Robert’s constant critique and treatment of Clara like a child as being sexist, especially since the critique is not reciprocal.

²⁶Robert Schumann to Clara Wieck, Vienna, November 13 1938, in *The Complete Correspondence*, 306.

²⁷Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 34.

²⁸Ibid., 40.

²⁹Ibid., 34.

³⁰Ibid., 33.

³¹Burk, *Clara Schumann*, 171.

³²Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 40.

³³Ibid., 27.

³⁴Ibid., 8.

³⁵Ibid., 12.

³⁶Ibid., 32.

The view that Clara was an independent woman also does not hold up in light of her deference to Robert. Clara certainly does not appear to be a separate entity from her husband when she tells Robert, "I can truly say I *only* live through you."³⁷ Clara wanted to go on tour and expressed this desire many times. She states, "it's terrible for me to be unable to put my talents to use for him, now while I have the power for that."³⁸ Clara's desire to contribute to their income was a point of contention. Robert only wanted to accept emotional support and not financial support. His financial contributions were very important to him. Before his marriage, he wrote to her father explaining how he could support them both. Robert also wrote many letters to Clara during the year 1838 in which he discussed their financial situation before their marriage.³⁹ This was a practical thing to do, but in conjunction with the entry in their joint diary, also points to Robert's pride. He records in the diary how much he's made in that year: "I've already taken in 240 thalers, outstanding in sold manuscripts 330 thalers, and yet unsold for at least 340 thalers; that really is a handsome amount to live on."⁴⁰ He boasts of how much he makes shortly after Clara asks him to be allowed to go on tour to make money. Clara did make some money giving lessons, but this is practically negligible compared to how much she could have made on tour or what Robert earned.⁴¹

The dispute the couple had over whether Clara should earn money for their family is just a small part of the deeper conflict that existed over the definition of Clara's role in the marriage. Bertita Harding author of *Concerto: The Glowing Story of Clara Schumann*, does not see a conflict between Clara's domestic life and musical career. In fact, Harding believes that Clara's marriage to Robert was an ideal situation.⁴² However, the marriage diaries actually show that there was tension evident. On one hand, Robert wanted to pigeonhole Clara in the role of devoted housewife and mother while he played the role of benevolent husband who supported and protected the family. On the other hand, he encouraged Clara to play and to compose her own work, to criticize other works and to study. He praised: "she played occasionally in a way that made me forget the woman for the master."⁴³ He certainly recognized the difficulties Clara was experiencing and appreciated her support. In one diary entry he expresses his appreciation: "I would have had to search among millions [to find] someone who gives me as much consideration, as much attention as she does. Now let me kiss you, my good wife whom I love and esteem ever

³⁷Ibid., 7.

³⁸Ibid., 16.

³⁹Robert Schumann to Clara Wieck, Vienna, October 23, 1838, in *The Complete Correspondence*, 280-281. See also Robert Schumann to Clara Wieck, Vienna, November 13, 1838, 305.

⁴⁰Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 42.

⁴¹Ibid., 32. She records that she earns 2 thalers a music lesson, and she gives lessons occasionally.

⁴²Bertita Harding *Concerto: The Glowing Store of Clara Schumann* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1961), 82-83.

⁴³Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 19.

more.”⁴⁴ His conflicting view over Clara’s role was shared by Clara. There was a clear tension between her domestic and musical sides, which is also a reflection of the 19th-century societal roles for women. Her inability to find playing time was a constant frustration, and her dissatisfaction is evident when she says, “I don’t get to play at all nowadays; partly my being unwell prevents it, partly Robert’s composing. If only it were possible to solve the evil of the thin walls; I unlearn everything and because of that might become very melancholic.”⁴⁵

One of the defining characteristics of Clara, according to many biographers, is her ability to soothe the frequently troubled Robert. John N. Burk believes that she was the perfect wife for Robert because she was a “woman of infinite strength, tenderness, sympathy.”⁴⁶ However, what Burk sees as admirable can also be seen in a negative light. Clara certainly seemed to idealize him and gave no indication that anything he did was wrong. One diary entry in particular states, “For several days Robert has been very cold toward me; although the reason is very gratifying indeed, and no one can be more sincerely interested in everything he undertakes than I, yet this coldness sometimes hurts me who would least deserve it. Forgive me for this complaint, my dear Robert.”⁴⁷ Whether or not she really felt that Robert’s coldness towards her was justifiable, in either case she is still placating him. In this way, Clara’s endless “strength, tenderness, [and] sympathy” actually seems to be her allowing Robert to dominate her.⁴⁸ Their marriage did not seem like a partnership of equals in that respect. However, anyone who reads their diary is unable to miss the romance on almost every page. Both Clara and Robert expressed their love for each other through words. Clara placed much emphasis on the importance of love and believed that love created happiness and improved the music people created. (These two things are most likely the same in her mind since her happiness was inextricably linked to music.) When she listened to an unemotional performance by her friend, Elise List, she concluded, “I believe that once she falls in love, she will also sing with more soul. It’s certain that love has much to do with it, I discovered this in myself.”⁴⁹ Clara, however, was not a “hopeless romantic.” She believed that love was a very sensible emotion and expressed caution about entering marriage for it is “no trivial matter to bind oneself to a man for one’s entire life.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, Clara could not stand the nauseating couple who “melt in bliss” and feed each other *bonbons*. With a tone of relief she remarks, “I for my part thank my God that I did not have a bridegroom like that.”⁵¹

⁴⁴Ibid., 62.

⁴⁵Ibid., 56. Clara is pregnant, which also is most likely contributing to her depressed mood.

⁴⁶Burk, *Clara Schumann*, 90.

⁴⁷Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 56.

⁴⁸Burk, *Clara Schumann*, 90.

⁴⁹Ostwald, *The Marriage Diaries*, 25.

⁵⁰Ibid., 34.

⁵¹Ibid., 37.

Clara and Robert's approach to the marriage diaries represents how they approached their relationship as a whole. Clara expended much effort in writing the journal, in keeping it current each week and even taking over from her husband when he was busy. Her tone in the journal is an attempt to please; she stops herself from rambling since she assumes Robert will disprove. Clara self-deprecatingly requests at the end of her first entry that Robert "might have patience with me and might pardon me when here and there I've said something stupid, which surely will happen frequently."⁵² Her diary entries are much longer than Robert's, and it is reasonably safe to assume she spent a significant amount of time on these entries. Robert's, on the other hand, are much shorter and are perfunctory. He is able to skip over 5 weeks of entries (thus violating the initial agreement that both signed) with the excuse that he is composing. Robert was not to be interrupted; his work was the more important out of the two. Clara states, "when a man composes a symphony one really can't expect him to concern himself with other things- thus even his wife must accept herself as set aside!"⁵³ During the four-year period the diary was kept, Robert skipped additional weeks. His last significant entry was on November 21, 1843. Clara's continued commitment to the diary corresponds with the sacrifices she made in their marriage. Evidence of equality is hard to find in their relationship since she had to give up her practice time so that she did not disturb him.⁵⁴ To be fair, Robert does acknowledge that "We must make other arrangements for ourselves later on, so that Clara can play as often as she desires."⁵⁵ Clara certainly agreed with Robert's assertion: "Well that's the way it goes in marriages of artists, and if they love each other, that's always enough."⁵⁶

However modern observers view their marriage, Clara and Robert believed that love made their marriage ideal. What is significant about their relationship is that it reveals that Clara was not, as many biographers believe, a woman ahead of her time. Berthold Litzmann, the first biographer of Clara, writes that he wishes to "shadow forth the life of this great, noble, distinguished woman, that her soul may be made manifest."⁵⁷ Although she had these qualities, she certainly did not believe so. Her marriage reflects how difficult it was for a 19th-century woman to play the role of mother and housewife and also to play the role of an artist. While I did not discover the absolute truth of her history, by presenting a more objective view of Clara Schumann, I was able to reach a reasonable approximation of the truth. She was talented, fascinating,

⁵²Ibid., 12.

⁵³Ibid., 53.

⁵⁴Ibid., 9.

⁵⁵Ibid., 42.

⁵⁶Ibid., 36.

⁵⁷Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life*, trans. by Grace E. Hadow (New York: DeCapo Press, 1979), 2:vi.

and multi-faceted, but she was also simply a woman who was shaped by the forces of her own time.