

## **Piano Concerto in a minor, Op. 7**

### **Clara Schumann**

Born: September 13, 1819 – Leipzig, Germany

Died: May 20, 1896 – Frankfurt, Germany

*Piece Length: Approximately 20 minutes.*

Among the great figures that helped shape the musical world during the Romantic era, one of the most influential would be Clara Schumann (née Wieck). She is regarded as one of the greatest pianists of that time, helping transform the format of the piano recital into what we are familiar with today. For example, she was among the first pianists to perform recitals completely from memory. Likewise, she also shifted away from the practice of performing solely virtuosic compositions on her recitals, bringing a fresh, artistic approach to the format. Her career lasted over 60 years, during which she would frequently tour Europe, championing the work of Robert Schumann (her husband), Johannes Brahms (with whom she maintained a close friendship for most of her life), Frédéric Chopin, and Felix Mendelssohn.

Clara Schumann was taught by her father, Friedrich Wieck, a renowned pianist and pedagogue. His approach to pianism had greater emphasis on tone and expressiveness over sheer finger dexterity. Her career began as a child prodigy when she made her debut in 1828 in Leipzig at the age of nine, and within three years she would begin touring Europe. On one of her first tours, she impressed the great violinist Niccolò Paganini as well as the writer Johann Goethe. During her youth, she also composed, producing a number of excellent works, including the piano concerto on tonight's concert. Composing was a part of her life that, as she wrote, "gives me great pleasure...there is nothing that surpasses the joy of creation." Sadly, after she married and as her life became busier raising a family while still concertizing, her composing activities came to a stop. In a heartbreaking statement in later life she wrote, "I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose—there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?" Thankfully, there was one more burst of creative energy in her life in 1853, the year she met Brahms. In this year, she completed sixteen original works. Outside of this extraordinarily fruitful year, however, the remaining years of her creative life were devoted to piano transcriptions of works by Robert Schumann and Brahms. She would also remain busy editing Robert Schumann's published works. For years, her compositions were forgotten and rarely performed, but beginning in the 1980s, there was an increased interest in her compositions. Today her complete works have been recorded by multiple artists and they rightfully appear on concert programs every year.

The brilliance of both her creative genius and her incredible pianistic abilities can be found in her only completed piano concerto, which she finished in 1835 when she was just 16 years old. She premiered the concerto on November 9, 1835 with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, conducted by Felix Mendelssohn. While the concerto features the standard three movement structure one would expect from concertos of the era, the composition also features formal and orchestrational innovations that reveal a composer clearly moving away from the traditional forms of the Classical era.

The first movement, marked *Allegro maestoso* (Fast and majestic), showcases a more Romantic approach to form. Typically, in a Classical era concerto one would hear an orchestral exposition that introduces the main themes, a second exposition that restates the themes as the soloist and orchestra play together, a development section that fragments the themes and moves rapidly through keys creating a sense of instability and excitement, and a recapitulation that restates the themes one last time in the original key of the work. This movement deviates from this predictable structure. Schumann seemingly blends

sonata form and a freer, fantasy structure that foreshadows the more inventive approaches to form found later in the 19th-century. The movement opens with the orchestra presenting the dramatic main theme of the movement, featuring bold dotted rhythms. It gives the impression of the start of the expected orchestral exposition, but shortly after the pianist bursts onto the scene with virtuosic octaves, breaking up the flow of the section. The orchestra takes over again, seemingly trying to introduce a contrasting lyrical theme before the soloist once again interrupts the section. This second interruption allows the soloist to take over the movement, eventually leading to an ornamented, Chopin-esque version of the first theme. After a transition section that features dazzling technical passages, a lyrical second idea is introduced. The development section follows. The majority of the development focuses on the first theme, though hints of the orchestra's lyrical theme are interspersed throughout the section. The music has constant energy created by the virtuosity of the piano writing and the restlessness of rapid key changes, leading to an orchestral tutti that would suggest the start of the recapitulation, but Schumann takes an extraordinary detour. A solo cello emerges from the orchestra, creating a transition that leads directly into the second movement without pause.

The solo cello's emergence is of great importance as it reveals another innovative element of the concerto: the instrumentation of the second movement. Titled "Romanze", the slow movement is a beautiful duet between the soloist and cellist—the rest of the orchestra does not play in this movement! The "Romanze", in ternary form (A-B-A), opens with an extended piano solo in which the main theme is reminiscent of the lyrical theme found in the first movement's orchestral exposition. The music in the piano soon becomes a little more tonally unstable, signaling the contrasting B section before the solo cello enters, playing the A theme melody against elegant piano ornamental figures. In the coda, Schumann once again uses orchestration to set up the final movement as quiet timpani rolls act as a bridge that moves the concerto directly into the finale.

The expansive finale, which is as long as the first two movements combined, is marked *Allegro non troppo* (fast, but not too fast). The movement is a large, but loose, sonata allegro form. The first theme is energetic and shares some similar contours to the first movement's main theme. The contrasting section contains two ideas. The first features bold ascending chords in the piano while the second has a gentler mood featuring elegant descending arpeggios, again first introduced by the soloist. The closing material of the exposition takes these descending arpeggios and reverses them as Schumann spreads this gesture throughout the orchestra. While the development section contains many of the expected compositional devices, including fragmentation and rapidly moving keys to create excitement for the listener, Schumann does make an unexpected move. In most development sections, the composer would avoid the original key of the movement, in this case a minor. By avoiding the original key or tonic, it makes the eventual return to the home key at the start of the recapitulation stronger. Schumann does something brilliant: she brings back the first theme in the middle of the development section, not in a minor but in A major. This brighter version of the theme can throw a listener for a bit of a loop and one might think one is listening to a rondo form. This seeming blending of two forms, a technique sometimes found in Beethoven's work, further foreshadows new approaches to musical structure that will be prominent in many compositions just a few decades later in the century. This moment also acts as a structural cue, for after the presentation of this theme, Schumann moves away from developing ideas and instead presents new virtuosic passages for the piano that are occasionally punctuated by orchestral chords. This leads to a large orchestral interlude before the piano enters with the gentle section of the second theme, wrapping up the development section. The recapitulation that follows is more standard, restating the themes one last time before a brilliant coda pushes the music to a dramatic conclusion.

When listening to this remarkable concerto, it is easy to forget this is the work of a precocious teenager. The melodic invention and fresh approach to form are remarkable for even a mature composer. Add to that the absolutely brilliant piano writing, revealing what an astounding technique Schumann had, and

we can be thankful that this concerto, and all of her catalogue, is finally getting the attention it has long deserved.