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Brahms and his Clara Themes

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.... in some indescribable way, she kept recurring like a motive in music...
(CHESTERTON)



In the April *Musical Times* I suggested that Brahms had paid the same homage to Clara Schumann as to Agathe Siebold, namely in music. Agathe appeared in the sextet op.36 as A G A D H E. Schumann once wrote the letters TH as the notes DH;¹ and Brahms may well have liked and followed that precedent.

So with Clara. Of her various musical forms, ex. 1a has been discerned by Dr Fiske as the leading figure in Schumann's dances op.6; ex.1b is Clara's



"Voice from the Distance" in Dr Temperley's reading of the *Novellette* op.21 no.8; and so on.² I have suggested that ex.1c not only means but speaks her name;³ ex.2a shows how.



Its D minor form (d) is the motto-theme of what Schumann said would be called his "Clara" symphony, the first version of op.120.

If anyone can hear these ideas and guess their meaning, Brahms could. He would have enjoyed opportunity as well as motive. He knew the pet names for Clara, and doubtless the pet themes too. If so, he might well have written her notes at the time he was writing her letters (c1854-6), as declarations of love. I shall try to show that he used ex.2 to mean Clara; (b) in the B major Trio op.8, and (c) in the C minor Piano Quartet op.60. Both works were conceived in those years. Brahms said of op.60, point-blank, "imagine a man about to shoot himself" and also "picture a man in blue and yellow".⁴ That colourful allusion may now seem cryptic. But taken literally its meaning would then be plain. Goethe's Werther, the archetypal Romantic hero, wore blue and yellow, and shot himself for love of a married woman, whose husband he honoured and admired. So op.60 will presumably express Brahms's hopeless love for Clara Schumann, before her widowhood.

The first sentence of that autobiographical work is doubly expressive of Clara (ex.3c). Furthermore, there is direct evidence that this melodic form actually embodied her, for Brahms as for Schumann. Those great musical minds thought alike, because of affinity as well as influence. Notes were their means

¹ *Sammelbände der Schumann-Gesellschaft*, ii (1966), 34

² MT Aug 1964, pp. 574-8; Oct 1964, p. 744]

³ MT May 1966, pp. 393-6; *The Songs of Robert Schumann* (1969) pp. 24-6; PRMA, xcvi (1969-70), 112-4

⁴ several sources; see the foreword (by Wilhelm Altmann) to the Eulenburg score

of exchange of ideas, and made ideal gifts. On Clara's birthday in 1854, music was Brahms's present to her. It often made her present to him. In December he wrote "I often see you as it were bodily, for example at the trill passage in the Andante

Ex. 3


a) Schumann Op.61/III



b) Beethoven Op.133/647-9



c) Brahms Op.60/3-7



of the C major symphony, in the concluding passages, the pedal point in the great fugue, when all at once you appear to me as St Cecilia⁵ (whence also Schumann's pet name for her, Cilia - music's matron saint and his own). The words used by Brahms are cloudy with emotion; but they may be clarified by ex.3.

That close correspondence would fit in with the intimate letters, between the lines of which Shavians will hear the very tones addressed to Candida by her young artist. In that artificial comedy, the husband was allegedly mad and temporarily absent; in the real-life tragedy, he was truly and permanently both. But the moral is the same. The artist's lonely uphill road finally leads elsewhere, surpassing (or just bypassing) the love of women. Meanwhile there was a true and touching tenderness. The literary theme of the triangle became the musical themes of the 1854 trio.⁶

Take first its obvious allusions (confirmed by, for example, Max Kalbeck,⁷ who was well placed to know) to Schubert (*Am Meer*, no.12 of *Schwanengesang*) and Beethoven (*An die ferne Geliebte*) in the Adagio and finale respectively. The latter speaks plainly enough; the recurrent melody of "Nimm sie hin denn, diese Lieder" is synonymous with its usage in Schumann's Fantasy op.17. In both works, as in Beethoven's song-cycle, the music is offered as humble homage to an unattainable beauty. So presumably the other quotation will also mean its words. The Heine poem of *Am Meer* is about bitter tears, tragic parting, hopeless love. Modern critics may attribute its dubious taste to irony entering the soul. But Brahms (like Schubert) would have taken its contorted expression at face value. It was set in Hamburg, the home seaport to which Heine returned in *Die Heimkehr*. And when in November 1854 Brahms returned to his own home in Hamburg, Clara Schumann was with him.

They seem to have been together there earlier that year. But even if the encounter took place only in the artistic imagination, it was surely very vivid. Brahms showers his song-quotation with pizzicato notes from violin and cello; and staccato was always his way of depicting drops of rain, tears, or dew in his song accompaniments. We hear the Schubertian cadences and the expressive staccato again in *Sapphische Ode*, also about darkness, tears and kisses; and perhaps drawn from the same memory, though riper and sweeter by many years.

Elsewhere in op.8 Brahms seems to be writing more of his reminiscences. In 1854 Clara was practising and performing the fourth Beethoven piano concerto, which resounds from the trio's finale (ex.4).

Ex. 4

a) Brahms Op.8/IV



b) Beethoven Op.58/II



⁵ Litzmann, *Clara Schumann*, 1907, II 344

⁶ Only the 1889 version is published by Eulenburg; again Dr Altmann's foreword gives useful background.

⁷ *Brahms* (1912), i, 152, 155 8

Further, if ex.26 does indeed mean Clara, then she is apparently the theme of the whole work sometimes too apparently (e.g. ex.5, from the first movement),

Ex. 5

(Violin)

(Piano)

as Brahms may later have realized. From such features, Kalbeck⁸ was able to identify the “pervading basic idea which binds the different components of the trio into one unity” (ex.6);

Ex. 6

a very modern-sounding concept. Perhaps Brahms's op.8 was the first monothematic chamber work, as Schumann's op.120 was the first such symphony? If so, Clara has an even more assured place in musical history, for she provided the motive power of both.

We may then wonder whether Brahms might have had any special reason for choosing the B minor--major form for his own self-expressive purpose; and indeed he might. The trio was in effect complete by June 1854⁹ (though it may well have been revised later; it does not seem to have been advertised until December, and the actual publication date is far from clear). Brahms's own story in that year is well known. He had just met the Schumanns, who had instantly and warmly adopted him and espoused his cause. When Robert Schumann went mad, the 20-year-old Brahms nobly sacrificed himself and his art to do what he could for Clara and the children. Of course he soon fell in love with her. She was still a young and attractive woman; she was a supreme musician; and she was in the direst distress.

The story of Schumann's opera *Genoveva* is less well known. Its hero Siegfried marches off to the wars, leaving his wife to the all too tender care of his steward Golo, who (being only human, as he explains) has already broken the tenth commandment and is soon aiming at the seventh. Brahms would have good reason to be thinking of that opera in 1854, and not only because its overture was due to appear on the autumn concert-programmes. It contains one of the last, and not the least apt or moving, of Schumann's own B minor Clara-themes - at Siegfried's words to Golo “take care of my wife” (ex.7).

Ex. 7

Mein - es weib - es nimm dich an

The keys of B minor and major are especially associated with Golo throughout.¹⁰ Among his less endearing traits is a trick of repeating himself - in moments of stress. His address to Siegfried (beginning “You my second father, to whom I owe everything”, exactly as Brahms might have spoken of Schumann) includes two repeated asides, to which he later adds a third. I have set all this out in ex.8 (my translation), which contains everything Golo says about his new domestic duties. With this we can compare ex.9, the pensive and oddly recitative-like subject announced by the solo piano in octaves in the first movement of the trio.

Ex. 8

Why do you turn to me? You've ap - point - ed me, How I wish that you had found
As guard-i - an for your la - dy I'm on - ly hu - man! Left to guard this 'an - gel Someone far more worthy!

⁸ op cit, i, 153

⁹ Brahms-Joachim *Briefwechsel* (1908), i, 42

¹⁰ see Novello vocal score, pp.21, 27-29, 49-52, 64-5

Ex. 9



Soon afterwards the dastardly Golo dares to steal a kiss from the swooning Genoveva, stupefied by her lord's departure. At this moment they and the audience are very properly reminded of the absent Siegfried, by the motif of ex.10a, already heard in the overture in various keys (ex.10b). With this we can again compare Brahms, again from the first movement. Ex.11a is heard from the piano, while ex.11b comes from a violin counter-theme later developed as a new subject.

Ex. 10



Ex. 11



The same movement also introduces a gratuitous fugato which suggests both a tribute to Clara's Bach repertory and also a reference to Schumann's *Manfred* overture, the Romantic guilt-complex personified. Similarly the Adagio is followed by an Allegro apparently unmotivated except for repeated allusions to the rising intervals and syncopations that characterize Golo's craving for Genoveva.¹¹ Many of the themes and quotations so far discussed, and no doubt others, are immediately recognizable as meaningful and deliberate allusions in the Schumann style. Together they give the music that unmistakable undertone of autobiographical fantasy which Max Kalbeck was among the first to discern and describe.¹² All those I have mentioned, without exception, were omitted by Brahms from his second version, which is clearly presented as absolute music-telling no tales, betraying no secrets. The first version is all but forgotten; and this too seems likely to have been a conscious aim. One permissible inference is that the revision was made for personal as well as musical reasons. If so, it is interesting to note what Brahms thought it safe to retain. There was no real risk that any Clara-theme he used would be identified as such a fortiori, since no one at that time had even noticed any of Schumann's. In any event, it would be easily explicable in purely musical terms. So he was free actually to strengthen the latent thematic content by adding more of such themes in the second version (see for example violin at bars 116-19 and piano at bars 121-5 on p.8 of the Eulenburg score).

Similarly he would have no misgivings about any other themes which are on the face of it featureless enough to occur in any music without any question of extra-musical reference. But perhaps some such expressions are after all significant. For example, when Golo waxes outrageous and kisses Genoveva we hear ex. 12. In the first version of the trio we

Ex. 12



¹¹ cf vocal score p. 28 bars 5-7, 30-2, and p. 50 at the final "mine then for ever" etc

¹² op cit, I, 152

hear that same phrase, beginning on the same note, in six different rhythms, in several different passages throughout the work. And again Brahms feels free to add these notes to his second version (violin, p.9 bar 40; *cf* also p.14, bars 206-11), again showing that they are thematically important without showing why.

So perhaps the change of mind involved no change of heart. Brahms loved Clara Schumann all his life, in 1889 as in 1854, and then no less devotedly than Shaw's young poet loved Candida. Both poet and musician could with justice have pronounced her sentences: "When I am thirty, she will be forty-five. When I am sixty, she will be seventy-five". But each could also have offered the same truthful and touching rejoinder: "In a hundred years, we shall both be the same age".