

Quartet in E flat, Op. 47

Robert Schumann 1810-1856

By the age of twenty, Schumann was so obsessed by his passion for the piano that he gave up his study of law in Heidelberg in order to devote his life to music. He returned to Leipzig to resume study with his former piano teacher, Friedrich Wieck, who vowed to the musician's worried mother that he would "turn [Robert] into one of the greatest loving pianist within three years." As proof of his powers, Weick pointed to the startling musical development of his eleven-year-old daughter, Clara.

Schumann was getting a late start, however, and, to make up for lost time, began taking composition lessons with the director of the Leipzig Opera and practicing seven hours a day. Then tragedy! Years later, Schumann would write, "...a weakness in my right hand, which became a progressively worse, forced me to give up practicing and abandon my plans to become a pianist."

No one has ever determined the exact cause of the injury that crippled Schumann's hand, but it has often been attributed to a "mechanical device" which he had invented himself for the purpose of strengthening the muscles necessary to develop a technique in the shortest possible time.

What was left for this young musician to do? Like all virtuosos of the time, Schumann was composing music to enlarge his repertoire. He would make composition the true vocation of his life. From 1830-1839, he devoted his time to writing jewel-like piano miniatures, many of which he assembled into suites with such fanciful names as *Papillon*, *Carnaval*, and *Kreisleriana*.

It was not until his marriage in 1840 to Wieck's daughter Clara that Schumann began branching out into other areas, always concentrating on a particular field until he had exhausted his potential, then moving on to something else. First came an outpouring of songs in which he never really abandoned the keyboard. In these works the piano becomes more partner than accompanist and the instrument, more often than not, provides the songs with poetic postscripts of striking beauty. At the urging of Clara that he expand his work into larger forms, Robert Schumann made a foray into orchestral music that occupied him throughout 1841. Even here, Schumann had trouble extricating himself from the piano, for his orchestral works seemingly could have been piano transcriptions.

We know he composed at the keyboard, but many masters of the orchestra have done that, too. In a letter to a friend, Schumann once wrote, “I often feel like crushing the piano forte to the floor – it restricts my thought too much.”

The year 1842 became Schumann’s year of chamber music. First came three string quartets, the only ones he ever wrote. Then, as if he could no longer bear the absence from his beloved instrument, in rapid succession came the *Piano Quintet*, the *Piano Quartet*, a *Piano Trio* (Op. 88) and, after the first of the year, his *Andante and Variations for Two Pianos, Two Cellos, and Horn*.

The Piano Quartet would not receive a public performance until 1844, nor was it published until 1845. In the meantime, Clara was making concert tours, sometimes alone, and at other times reluctantly accompanied by her composer husband. Tagging along on these trips was not an ideal situation for Robert, but when Clara made plans to leave in January 1844 for a four-month tour of Russia and recitals at various ports of call on the way, he relented. It meant curtailing his work and remaining in her shadow. It also meant taking a leave of absence from his newly-founded Leipzig Conservatory, and relinquishing obligations as editor of the musical journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

Clara Schumann, at the height of her powers, was feted wherever she went. The Schumann’s spent four weeks in Moscow and four weeks in St. Petersburg, where Clara played for Tsar Nicholas I and the Tsartsa. During this time Robert was often ill and withdrawn. He brightened up, however, upon receiving attention from two brothers, the Counts Wielhorsky, noble amateurs, for whom he arranged a performance of his *Piano Quartet*. Count Mathieu, an accomplished cellist, was so enthusiastic that Schumann decided to dedicate the work to him.

The first public performance of the Quartet took place at The Gewandhaus in Leipzig on December 8, 1844, with Clara Schumann at the piano: Ferdinand David, violin; Niles W. Gade, viola; and, according to Melvin Berger, Count Mathieu Wielhorsky as cellist. (Other references omit the name of the cellist.) One can only wonder if Wielhorsky made a trip from St. Petersburg to Leipzig just for the occasion. If he did, it was a remarkable tribute to the composer.

Schumann’s piano background is so evident in his chamber music that the English pianist Fannie Davies, in her day a great interpreter of Schumann, was moved to write, “It seems often as if the composer had confined himself to the

range of the pianist.” Schumann’s tendency to dwell in the lower ranges of the strings sacrifices some brilliance in order to attain an intimate spirituality. While the piano seems to dominate with its frequent running passages, nevertheless, the parts are equally distributed among all instruments.

The principal theme of the first movement makes a thoughtful appearance in the slow introduction (*Sostoenuto assì*) before the piano picks it up smartly in the faster *Allegro* and then passes it on to the cello. There is a secondary theme, too, which makes great use of strong accents and short ascending scale passages. A powerful climax marks the junction of the development and recapitulation.

The g minor *Scherzo* does not frolic with the same abandon we find in other scherzo movements. There are two trios: the first lyrical, the second in chordal style. Some of the charm of this movement is derived from the piquant staccato phrase (borrowed from the scherzo proper) that peeps through the thick texture and serves as a link between sections.

The *Andante* is the work’s crowning moment. After two measures of introduction, Schumann bestows on the cello one of his most ardently romantic melodies, one for which any cellist can forever be in his debt. Soon the violin and piano have their turns to sing it, but no other instrument attains the warmth and loving character that the cello can give it. At the end of the movement, the composer requires a low B-flat as a pedal tone from the cello. In order to reach it, the cellist must tune down his C string a whole tone.

A flood of pent-up joy breaks forth in the *Finale*. Its first theme has been foreshadowed at the end of the previous movement. The cello is again favored with a memorable melody; another lyrical theme becomes a dialogue between piano and viola. Momentum builds throughout, carrying all to a decisive conclusion.

By Margery Derdeyn