

THE MAN AT THE PIANO IS NOT HERE

(A concert play)

by

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About Clara Schumann

George Bernard Shaw called Clara Wieck Schumann “the finest classical pianist in Europe, male or female”. Trained by her father, Frederick Wieck, a strict disciplinarian, Clara’s musical gifts were exceptional. When she fell in love with the composer, Robert Schumann, their proposed marriage enraged Wieck. His conflict with the couple lasted three years. When Clara reached the age of eighteen, the couple took the issue to court and won. Her life then took a dramatic turn. Promoting Robert Schumann’s career over her own, she often arranged and edited his music, and bore him eight children. In 1854 Robert Schumann was committed to a mental asylum in Endenich, Germany, where he died in 1856. Clara returned to the concert world with determination and sustained musical success. The play is written as an homage to her courage, strength and musical accomplishments.

A Note

“The Man At The Piano Is Not Here” is a concert play. Although it is rare to find a person who can both act and play concert piano well, if such a person can be found, all the more power to her. The play also works as a dramatic monologue supported by recorded music used as a spring board for memory, mood and contrast. Musical notations are listed in the manuscript. The performer is free to consider other musical choices from the Schumann’s repertoire.

Ned Bobkoff

(1856. Clara Schumann's sanctuary, her music room. Late afternoon. On the piano, bathed in sunlight, a photograph of Clara and Robert Schumann, a wilted vase of flowers, and scattered pages of music. The piano has not been played lately. Clara has been reading the diary that she and her husband shared, filled with the secrets of their life together. She places a flower between the pages of the diary and closes it. MUSIC: R. Schumann, "Kinderszenen, Op.15" (Scenes from Childhood).

Clara

Why don't you write to me, Robert? Your poor *Clarachen* aches for you. Is this some kind of punishment? Are you so weak that you cannot write to your wife? For two and half years they have not let me see you. Two and a half years! I fear the worst has happened. All I have are these reports from Dr. Richardz. He says you are comfortable. Well taken care of. I am your wife. I have every right to see you. It was a mistake. My poor darling, what have I done? I will never forgive myself for sending you there.

(to a child off stage)

Felix Schumann! What are you doing downstairs? Go back upstairs, darling. Its time to take a nap. Now, now, there's no need to cry. Big people talk to themselves all the time. Mama will come up in a little while. That's a good boy. He looks like you, Robert. Always concerned. Our eighth child, Emil, died. I couldn't bring myself to tell you that. How am I going to feed seven children? Johannes *has* offered to help with expenses, but I will not let him do it. He has done enough for us. We all miss you so very, very much.

(MUSIC: R. Schumann, Symphonic Etudes, Op 13, Posthumous #12)

I remember the night you rose from our bed. Eyes wide open, terrified. You kept hearing hideous passages of wild clanging notes. You told me that demons were after you. You tried to shake the notes loose. Tossing your head violently from side to side. Grabbing your head. Shouting that the notes were being played endlessly in space. But only you could hear them. How could this happen to us?

(reliving the memory)

Shhh, darling. Hush. Come downstairs. I will play music to soothe you. Shhh...

Clara

You begged me to leave. Go, you said, before I hurt you. Robert Schumann, my protector, my saint, hurt me? I had never heard you speak in that tone of voice before. I will not leave you! Not for all the world.

You must leave, Clara, before I do something terrible. I am not worthy of your love. I have nothing more to give you.

Worthy of my love? Nothing more to give me? Suddenly you were gone. Running out into the storm. No boots, no hat, no raincoat. A man possessed. How does one cope with the invisible? How, how?

Children, please, don't cry. Papa will be back, I promise. This sickness of your father is only a passing phase. Marie dear, please take the children upstairs. Oh, where did he go - where?

Three fisherman brought you home. You had jumped from a bridge into the Rhine, arms outstretched, singing. My poor singing butterfly...

(MUSIC: R. Schumann, Papillion". A bright memory.)

I was twelve when I first played your composition: *Papillion* - the Butterflies. You said you wrote it for me. You said that my playing of *Papillion* was masterly. So I played it again and again. Each time with a little more understanding. A little more technical flair. I was charmed, flirtious, inspired. You looked at me with adoring eyes.

(a girl again)

Robert Schumann, my father says you are his most gifted student. Why should you fall in love with me? Oh, Robert, don't go away. I promise I will grow up. Otherwise, I will lose you forever...

If it wasn't for Johannes. Johannes Brahms is totally dedicated to you, Robert. When he comes back from the asylum, he always tells me that you are *improving*. He does this to spare me the pain. Unless I can see you with my own eyes...

Clara

Dr. Richardz says I cannot see you. He says it is not right or proper for a woman to see her husband in such a state. Right and proper? If Johannes can see you, why can't I? I don't know what to think anymore. Any story is true. Or false.

(a soft smile)

Johannes walks around the house continuously surrounded by cigar smoke. Humming snatches of songs. Quoting lyrical poetry. He is so dependent on me to edit his music. Cheer him up, reassure him. Like you, in many ways. Artists can be so fragile. If you could see him surrounded by a perpetual cloud of cigar smoke, you would laugh. The smoke fills up the house. And it stinks to high heaven. But it doesn't faze him at all. The children follow him around like he's a locomotive. Choo-choo, they shout in unison, choo-choo! I constantly have to remind him to put the ashes out.

The rumors and lies that have been spread about Johannes and me are just that: lies, jealous rumors. Johannes Brahms is the dearest of souls. A devoted friend. For you *and* for me. My darling, without you, the household is not the same. Father does appear, on the door step – occasionally. Smiling, hat in hand, doling out money parsimoniously. For the children he says. If it wasn't for father, I would never have become the concert pianist I am today. He taught everything I know. Everything. But he never forgave me for having fallen in love with you. He wears his resentment like an albatross. Sometimes I think he's glad you are gone. That some how he can find a way to reassert his authority.

(MUSIC: R. Schumann, "Sonata for Piano No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Op.11")

How well I remember how you followed me on the tour to Berlin. Riding all day and night just to hear me play. You stood at the back of the hall pacing. Agitated. I felt your presence intensely. As if you were on the front row. Instantly I changed the music program that father had planned for me. I stood up and announced with fear and pride that I was introducing a new composer, a brilliant composer: Robert Schumann! Darling, I never played better. Electricity passed between us every moment that I played. Father came backstage furious...

How dare you go against my wishes! Robert is nothing but a moonstruck concocter of charades, an irresponsible drifter! Marry him, Clara, and I will disown you. Do you hear? Disown you!

Clara

I loved playing your compositions. I was challenged, charmed, free, on my own. What woman ever had such music written for her? From the beginning, I sensed your special genius. The wild songs of the soul, the sudden flights of fantasy, the deep ashen melancholia. It was all you. I am the music, Robert, you - the composer...

Father was a tyrant. He opened my mail and read all your letters. I had no secrets left! Nothing I could call my own. He made me swear to tear your letters up. I did - one by one - in front of him. Ashamed, humiliated, *terrified* by his rage. I was only 15. He wanted me to devote myself entirely to music. Forget Robert Schumann, he said. Make a career for yourself. That is your destiny...

I want you to be the finest pianist in Europe! Marry Robert Schumann and you'll have nothing but babies. Is that what you want? A lap full of babies? Go ahead, fritter your life away! I will disown you, Clara...

I was frightened, lonely. I promised to devote myself entirely to music. But all I could think about was you. I felt like I was carried away by a force beyond my control. When I played your music, I suffered. My God how *I* suffered! Love had never struck anyone as hard as it struck me. It has been two and half years since you went to the asylum, and still I hear your voice. As if it were yesterday...

(MUSIC: R. Schumann, Kreisleriana, Op. 16, III. *Sehr aufgerget*)

When you kissed me the first time, I nearly swooned. I had led you through the dark passages of father's house into the courtyard and the moonlight and the smell of fresh flowers. We stood together in the shadows of the trees. Breathless. You took my face into your hands: "You are my only love, Clara. Hush, there is nothing to be afraid of ". Then you kissed me. It was like the world had opened up.

(reliving a memory)

Robert, I forgive you for giving Ernestine that ring. And dedicating a song to her, I do, I do. But how could you do such a thing? Oh Robert, Father says I should never give my heart away to someone like you. That you are an impostor, a charlatan. Robert, kiss me again...

Clara

Today, darling, I looked at our diary. All the secret words we wrote to each other. The love notes, the twinkling responses. And the time I came home from a tour and you had filled the house with flowers. Inside and out. I couldn't believe my eyes. What a wonderful declaration of love! And the little marks you made in the diary on the days we made love. Here: I ran across a passage that *you* wrote...

When I compose, Clara, my fingers are like flowers. Spirits fly. You are the source of all my music. My soul. My song. My life. ...

(closes diary, warms her hands, shivers)

How well I remember your dry spell in Vienna. You froze and couldn't compose a thing. Composing is out of the question, you said. You wanted to talk to Beethoven. I told you that the master had been dead for years. But still you insisted on talking to him. Outside a carnival filled the streets: masks, painted faces, calliope music. A storm broke out. It started to rain. A down pour. Lightning, thunder, people running about, alarmed. With wet, shiny faces, wide open umbrellas, and still you insisted on talking to Beethoven.

Darling, you will catch a death of a cold. Let us go later, to the cemetery where Beethoven is buried, after the storm...

Suddenly you bolted out of the room, into the street. Your coat flying behind you. Later you told me that when you came to Beethoven's grave, the sun broke loose from the clouds. And that the butterfly emblem on Beethoven's headstone *flared*. A sign, you said, of immortality. You had found a pen an admirer had left on Beethoven's grave. And when you came home, you sat down at the piano and immediately started to compose the B Flat Spring Symphony. Finishing it in record time. This pen. This old heavy pen. This memory of things past...

When I was on tour, pregnant, you wrote to me. You told me that you had a wonderful idea. Would I join you at eleven in the morning on the first day of June? *You* would play an adagio from Chopin. And *I* would do the same. Distances would disappear. If a string snapped, you said, that string would be you. Sometimes I hear you are singing to yourself in the asylum, like a nightingale. And I know that the string has snapped. I am your wife! Who are they to say I can not see you?

Clara

Robert Schumann and I were married in a little church in Shonefelt, near Leipzig. On the 20th of September, 1840. It was a lovely day. The most momentous day in my life. Father did not attend. I have not been the same since...

(MUSIC: R. Schumann, "Symphonic Etudes. Op. 13, No 7)

EXITS

Scene Two

(A few months later. Fresh flowers on the piano.)

Clara

(wading through bills)

Johannes? Johannes, are you there? Look at these bills, a ton of them! I'd like to shred them to pieces! I'll never be able to catch up!

Every month over the last few years - and I don't how I do it - I've managed to make ends meet. Not once during Robert's incarceration did I ever touch our savings. Not once! But everything is so expensive. Shoes for the children are sky high. And they eat like monsters.

(listens)

I know that you offered to pay the bills, Johannes. That's very kind of you, but I will not let you pay them. And how many times must I tell you to put away those cigars. I found a half dozen of those foul things on the kitchen table this morning. Yes, I know, you have important things on your mind, but do you want to burn the house down? Yes?! That man can be impossible. Robert called him an eagle, the true inheritor of romantic music. A genius in his own right...

(lays out money carefully to match the bills)

The world has no idea what artists go through. We supposedly perform by magic. Bolts of lightning, gifts from the gods! *Pouf!* Hard work goes into the practice of my art. No matter how I feel, I perform. I owe it to myself and to the public. Why should anyone care about how *I* feel? Such self indulgence is beyond my patience. Once, when I was on tour, a fashionable lady asked me to play for a party at her home. When I arrived, she told me that there were keys on the piano missing.

Clara
(mocking)

Its sounds like a grand piano, dear. There's no reason to complain. I'd give it a try if I were you. I'm sure you will get around it.

Why God has filled the world with the insensitive and the falsely superior is beyond me. Well I must get out of this frame of mind. I have work to do. A concert to prepare. Now that Robert's gone...

(warming her hands)

I intend to get back to work as soon as possible and play the music of my husband, and my friends: Brahms, Mendelsohn, Chopin. All fine and wonderful musicians and composers...

Did I tell you about the time that Chopin visited me? He came to thank me for my efforts on his behalf introducing his music in Germany. Father had a fit when Chopin arrived. He demanded that Chopin leave for not greeting him first! He has finally, now that Robert is gone, loosened up his pockets. A little bit at a time. For his grandchildren, he says. I told him that throwing Chopin out of the house is one thing. Taking it out on his grandchildren is another. Having lived with guilt all my life, I know exactly how to use it when I have to...

(listens)

Johannes, now what are you complaining about? Of course I will edit your music! Can you tell the children a story while I finish paying the bills? You know how much they love to hear your stories. And you tell them so well, dear. Johannes and I plan to go on a hike together. Rest and relaxation will do me a world of good. I plan to get him to stop smoking. If such a thing is possible. Well I must prepare for the concert. It feels like years since I last played...

(rubs her shoulder)

Bursitis. I don't wish it on anyone. The weather doesn't help. Rain, always rain. Perhaps I will lean over the piano like Beethoven. Listening. To ease the pain. I remember telling Robert, before we were married, that I could be happy just being with him. I did not need horses and carriages and diamonds. I wanted a life surrounded by beauty. Free of care. Oh I was young. Very young. Robert was in no condition to offer me a life free of care. He was constantly at odds with his employees. Never understood how to hold down a conducting job. Although he was quite capable of conducting when he put his mind to it. Johannes, why don't you say something? I'm tired of talking to the four walls...

(*Music: R. Schumann, "Kreisleriana, Op 16. IV: Sehr langsam"*)

Clara
(listens)

Johannes plays Robert's music beautifully. When Robert discovered him playing in a tavern – in the worst of circumstances – he brought him home. Johannes was full of excitement about meeting us. We all became friends and allies and our conversations together were a blessing. Like Robert said: Brahms is an eagle. The true inheritor of romantic music.

When they finally let me into the asylum to see my husband, I insisted on seeing him alone. Despite Dr. Richardz's warning that he would not recognize me. I wore his favorite dress. This one. Robert was nothing but skin and bones. I had no time for my own grief. I lay down next to him. Hardly daring to breathe. He gave me an unbearably gentle look. Tenderness was written on my dear husband's face. The disease could not take that away from him. He tried to put his arms around me. But he had lost control of his limbs. I lifted him. Held him in my arms. Not all the treasures of the world could equal that embrace. I don't think he knew who I was...

Ludvig, what are you doing down stairs? How many times must I tell you to put your night shirt on? Quick, go upstairs. Tell Uncle Johannes to dress you in your night shirt and put you to bed. No peek-a-boo. Johannes, would you please put Ludvig to bed? I must edit your music before I start rehearsing my program for the concert...

When I was twenty-one, I believed my husband would live with me forever. That he would protect me. I did not count on Robert's illness. Just before he passed, I had this dream. It is as real to me today as it was then. I was walking besides a deep pool. I looked down at the ring that Robert gave me. The one I thought he had meant to give to Ernestine. I tossed the ring into the pool and watched it sink. It floated down to the bottom and disappeared into the sand. My heart went with it...

My dear friends, you have been a great comfort to me. It has been four months since Robert left us. I had no idea you were still interested in my playing. I appreciate your concern: the letters, the flowers, the good wishes. My husband would be delighted to know that you came to listen to me play *my* music. Let me start with a work I composed years ago. A Toccata...

(MUSIC: Clara Schumann, "Soirees musicales Op. 6")

THE END