

Like Minds in Variations: Clara Schumann's Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, op. 20

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Abstract

Robert and Clara Schumann are known as an eminent musician couple in the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1853, the couple developed a close professional and personal friendship with Johannes Brahms. The author has been fascinated by the lives and works of the three magnificent musicians, and performed a recital including three sets of variations by the three composers: Clara Schumann's Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, op. 20; Robert Schumann's Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24; and Brahms's Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, op. 9. All three sets were written in the period from 1853 to 1854; all reflect the beautiful relationships among the three musicians: mutual adoration of Robert and Clara Schumann, profound friendship between Clara and Brahms, Robert Schumann's enthusiastic admiration of Brahms, and Brahms's sincere respect for Robert Schumann. This article focuses on Clara's Variations op. 20, a set of seven variations written in May and June 1853, dedicated to her husband for his 43rd birthday. Discussions include the origin of the theme, Robert Schumann's *Bunte Blätter* (Colored Leaves) op. 99; the implication of "Clara's motives" in his theme; and an allusion to her earlier composition, *Romance variée* op. 3 into the final variation, which was inserted in Brahms's Variations op. 9 first and then suggested to Clara to do the same for her own variations.

Keywords: Clara Schumann, Variations, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Clara's motive

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Introduction

Clara Schumann (1819–1896) was born on September 13, 1819 as Clara Wieck. She was a child prodigy trained by her father, Friedrich Wieck (1785–1873), a well-known piano teacher. She was one of the most famous female pianists in the 19th century. She performed more than 1300 programs between 1828 (at age 9) and 1891 (at age 71).² She is especially remembered for championing the music of Robert Schumann,³ who was her father’s pupil as well. She premiered many of his works and included at least one Schumann’s work in almost every program she played after her marriage to him in 1840.⁴ She was also a composer, educator, and the adviser and editor of the works of her husband. While all those things, she also was the wife of a musician who suffered from depression and nervous disorder and finally being permanently institutionalized after attempting suicide, and she became a single mother to raise seven surviving children.

Clara Wieck first met Robert Schumann (1810–1856) when she was nine years old. In early 1830, Clara was already active as a concert pianist and composer while Robert had started his career as a composer and influential music critic. They married in 1840 and had eight children between 1841 and 1854. Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) visited Schumann’s house in Düsseldorf on September 30, 1853. Schumann discovered Brahms’s extraordinary talent and introduced the unknown 20-year-old musician to the world. The three greatest musicians of the 19th century began their profound friendship thereafter. Unfortunately, Brahms came into Schumann’s life just as the older composer was suffering a mental breakdown. Less than six months later, a catastrophe occurred; Schumann threw himself into the Rhine on February 27, 1854. He was rescued but was admitted to a mental asylum several days later and stayed there until his death on July 29, 1856.

Clara’s compositions include 23 opus numbers with chamber music, works for orchestra, songs, and many character pieces for solo piano. She wrote several sets of variations for piano in her youth. The first three were written between 1830 and 1831; however, the manuscripts for these works have been lost.⁵ The published works are *Romance variée pour le piano*, op. 3 (1831–1833) and *Variations de concert pour le pianoforte sur la “Cavatine du Pirate” de*

² Reinhard Kopiez, Andreas C. Lehmann, and Janina Klassen. “Clara Schumann’s Collection of Playbills: A Historiometric Analysis of Life-Span Development, Mobility, and Repertoire Canonization” *Poetics*, 37 (2009): 50. [http://musicweb.hmt-hannover.de/kopiez/Kopiez-Lehmann-Klassen\(2009\)CS-Programs.pdf](http://musicweb.hmt-hannover.de/kopiez/Kopiez-Lehmann-Klassen(2009)CS-Programs.pdf).

³ Li-chin Lai, “Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 20 by Clara Schumann: An Analytical and Interpretative Study” (DMA diss., Temple University, 1992), 4.

⁴ Nancy B. Reich. *The Artist and the Woman*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 257.

⁵ Lai, 15.

Bellini, op. 8 (1837). The *Souvenir de Vienne: Impromptu pour le pianoforte*, op. 9 (1838) was written in a free-variation style.

Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, op. 20

Clara Schumann started composing her Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann on May 29, 1853 as her diary entry on that day attests as below:

To-day I once more began . . . for the first time for years, to compose again; that is, I want to write variations on a theme of Robert's, out of *Bunte Blätter*, for this birthday: but I find it very difficult—The break has been too long.⁶

On June 3, 1853 she added: “The work is done. It seems to me that it is not a failure.”⁷ She dedicated the variations to her husband by writing the following inscription on the manuscript: “To my beloved husband on June 8, 1853; this renewed feeble attempt from his old Clara.”⁸ It was Schumann's 43rd birthday; this would be the last he would spend with his family. The variations are based on her husband's piano piece, *Bunte Blätter* (Colored Leaves), op. 99, no. 4. *Bunte Blätter* is a collection of 14 short piano pieces written between 1834 and 1849. Schumann assembled and published them as op. 99 in 1852. No. 4 was written in 1841, one year after he married Clara. The piece is in F-sharp minor marked “Ziemlich Langsam” (rather slow), as in Example 1:

Schumann was deeply interested in the psychological effects of harmony and the aesthetic differences between the tone-coloring of different keys.⁹ Christine Bunyan states that, as early as 1834, Schumann wrote an article titled “Charakteristik der Tonleitern und Tonarten,” in which many of the ideas expressed were heavily indebted to Christian Daniel Schubart's (1739–1791) “Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst,” published in 1806. According to Schubart, the key of F-sharp minor is “a gloomy key: it tugs at passion as a dog biting a dress. Resentment and discontent are its language.”¹⁰

⁶ Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life, Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters*, trans. Grace E. Hadow, vol. 2 (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Reich, 217.

⁹ Christine Bunyan, “Aspects of Tradition and Originality in the Chamber Music of Robert Schumann” (Ph.D. diss., Rhode University, 1978), 75.

¹⁰ Rita Steblin, trans., *A History of Key Characteristics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*. (1983). <https://www.wmich.edu/mus-theo/courses/keys.html>.

Example 1

Ziemlich langsam. Componirt 1844.

Schumann Bunte Blätter op. 99, no. 4 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

Before the *Bunte Blätter*, op. 99, no. 4, Schumann wrote only two other piano pieces in the key of F-sharp minor, both of which are associated with Clara. The Piano Sonata No. 1 in F-sharp minor, op. 11 (1833–1835) was written to communicate his love for her at a time when her father tried to end their relationship by sending Clara far away. The other F-sharp minor work, *Noveletten*, op. 21, no. 8 (1838), includes an interlude titled “Stimme aus der Ferne” (A voice from the distance) (Example 2), which—as Reich points out—resembles Clara’s “Notturmo” no. 2 from *Soirées musicales*, op. 6 (1834-36) (Example 3).¹¹

¹¹ Reich, 226.

Example 2

Stimme aus der Ferne
A voice from the distance
 Une voix dans le lointain

Schumann Noveletten, op. 21, no. 8, interlude marked “Stimme aus der Ferne,” b. 198–211 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

Example 3

Andante con moto.

sempre legato.
Ped. *dolce.*

Clara Schumann “Notturmo”, op. 6, no. 2, b. 3–8 (Friedrich Hofmeister)

Stephen J. Smith observes that “certain melodic shapes which occur again and again in Schumann’s music have some association with Clara.”¹² There are two patterns of “Clara’s motive” seen in Schumann’s op. 99, no. 4. The first is C-B-A-G (#)-A, which represents Clara’s name: C (L) A (R) A.¹³ In this work, C-sharp substitutes for C-natural, appearing in bars 1–4, 5–8

¹² Stephen J. Smith, “Eloquence, Reference, and Significance in Clara Schumann’s Opus 20 and Johannes Brahms’ Opus 9” (DMA diss., University of British Columbia, 1994), 6.

¹³ Eric Sams, “Brahms and his Clara Themes,” *The Musical Times* 112 (May 1971): 432.

and 19–20. The following are two examples of Schumann’s works with this pattern. The first is “Die Lotosblume” no. 7 from the song cycle *Myrthen*, op. 25 (1840), a piece dedicated to Clara as Schumann’s wedding gift to her. The song begins with five pitches: C-Bb-A-G#-A in the original key of F major as in Example 4:

Example 4

The image shows a musical score for the song "Die Lotosblume" by Robert Schumann. It is in 4/4 time and F major. The tempo is "Ziemlich langsam." and the dynamics are "p". The score consists of a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are "Die Lo - tos - blu - me äng - stigt". The piano accompaniment features a prominent bass line with a sequence of notes that correspond to the five pitches mentioned in the text: C-Bb-A-G#-A.

Schumann “Die Lotosblume”, op. 25, no. 7, b. 1–3 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

The first version of Schumann’s Symphony No. 4 in D minor, op. 120 was written in 1841 and given to Clara as a birthday present. Schumann called it “Clara Symphony.” The opening theme of the first movement includes five pitches: F-E-D-C#-D, as in Example 5:

Example 5

The image shows the beginning of the first movement of Schumann's Symphony No. 4 in D minor, op. 120. It is in 3/4 time and D minor. The tempo is "Ziemlich langsam." The score is for a string quartet. The dynamics are "f" and "pp". The opening theme is characterized by a sequence of notes: F-E-D-C#-D. The score includes a marking "4te Saite" for the violin part.

Schumann Symphony No. 4, op. 120, I, b. 1-3 (C. F. Peters)

The other pattern of the “Clara’s motive” is five descending notes: C#-B-A-G#-F#, as seen in b. 21-24 of op. 99, no. 4 (Example 1).¹⁴ Below are of some of Schumann’s earlier works employing this descending five-note pattern (Example 6 and Example 7):

Example 6



Schumann Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, op. 14
 (originally written in 1836), I, b. 1-2 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

Example 7



Schumann op. 14, III, b. 1-4 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

The title of the movement in Example 7, “Quasi variazioni. Andantino de Clara Wieck,” is uncertain: which of Clara’s compositions was Schumann referring to? There is only one piece written by Clara with the indication of “Andantino” before his Third Sonata: the third piece of *Caprices en forme de valse*, op. 2, a collection of nine short pieces (1831–1832). In the opening of the Caprices, op. 2, no. 3, there is a descending motion with four notes as in Example 8.

Example 8



Clara Schumann Caprices en forme de valse, op. 2, no. 3, b. 1-4 (Hofmeister)

¹⁴ Ibid.

It is questionable whether Schumann meant this piece as “Andantino de Clara Wieck” in his composition. Actually, the seventh piece of the same Clara’s Caprices, op. 2 contains a descending five-note line more likely to be what Schumann could have quoted from Example 9.

Example 9



Clara Schumann op. 2, no. 7, b. 17-18 (Hofmeister)

Schumann uses the descending five-note motif in the opening theme of his *Fantasie*, op. 17 as well (Example 10):

Example 10



Schumann *Fantasie* op. 17 (originally composed in 1836), I, b. 1-5 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

As mentioned earlier, Reich observes resemblance between a passage in the *Noveletten* op. 21, no. 8 and the opening of Clara’s *Soirées musicales* op. 6, no. 2,¹⁵ both of which include the descending five-note motive (see Examples 2 and 3). It should be noted that the Clara’s composition was written before Schumann’s. In fact, two other pieces of Clara’s op. 6 also contains the “Clara’s motive”; interestingly, the two versions of “Clara’s motive” in Schumann’s *Bunte Blätter* op. 99 no. 4 appear in the middle section of Clara’s “Tocatta”, op. 6, no. 2: C#-B-A-G#-F# in b. 49-53 and C#-B-A-G#-A in bars 85-90, and “Clara’s name motive” is found in her “Ballade”, op. 6, no. 4 in d minor as F-Eb-D-C#-D in bars 16-17.

¹⁵ Reich, 226.

Besides Clara’s motives, there are two more noteworthy counts on the *Bunte Blätter* piece, one of which is that the piece features lower neighbor tones prominently such as F#-E#-F# in the alto voice, A-G#-A in the tenor of bar 1, and C#-B#-C# in bars 9, 11 and 13 (see Example 1). As semitone dissonance is also a feature of Clara’s style,¹⁶ she will explore them abundantly along with other non-chord tones and chromatic writing in her op. 20.

The other count is the bass line of the piece. Smith observes similarity between the bass line of the first and last four bars in the *Bunte Blätter* piece and the opening of Schumann’s *Impromptus sur une Romance de Clara Wieck*, op. 5,¹⁷ which begins only with the bass as in Example 11:

Example 11



Schumann Impromptus op. 5 (originally written in 1833), b. 1-8 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

Although it is titled “Impromptus,” Schumann’s op. 5 is actually a set of variations based on double theme: the opening bass theme followed by Clara’s theme taken from her *Romance variée*, op. 3. The Impromptus op. 5 will influence significantly on Clara and Brahms’s variations.

Clara Schumann composed seven variations on the *Bunte Blätter* theme. Reich recounts that “Clara’s op. 20 set is more structured and formal than such earlier variations as opp. 3, 8, and 9, which tended to be virtuosic and rhapsodic, exploring many aspects of Robert’s F-sharp minor theme.”¹⁸ The first variation almost exactly preserves the theme in the upper voice which is decorated by the eighth-note triplet movement in the bass (Example 12):

Example 12



Clara Schumann Variations op. 20, b. 25–28, variation 1 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

¹⁶ Smith, 26.

¹⁷ Ibid, 16.

¹⁸ Reich, 233.

The triplet line includes wide leaps, for example, in bars 39–40, where the bass triplets become syncopated and cross over the theme. The original harmonic structure is retained except for bar 41 and bar 46; the former includes an A-sharp half-diminished chord and an F-sharp seventh chord instead of the original A-sharp diminished chord; further, the latter has altered harmonies with the major subdominant and Neapolitan sixth chord, giving a special color. The variation also shows Clara Schumann’s characteristics well, featuring frequent dissonances with appoggiaturas (e.g. beat 2 of bar 27), neighbor tones (e.g. beat 1 of bar 27, beat 1 of bars 34, 36 and 39), and suspensions with ties (e.g. bars 46–47).

The second variation increases rhythmic intensity by the perpetual motion in chordal 16th notes, which often appear in chromatic lines and ascending arpeggios (Example 13):

Example 13



Clara Schumann Variations op. 20, b. 49-52, var. 2 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

The texture becomes thicker and the register wider, extended to five octaves. This variation is somewhat similar to the third piece of the revised version (1850) of Schumann's Impromptus op. 5 (Example 14):

Example 14



Schumann Impromptus op. 5, III, b. 1-2 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

One major change in the structure is the insertion of a transition in bars 64–67 extending the total length from 24 bars to 27 bars. The melodic line is often syncopated as in bars 49, 53, 57, and 59. An altered harmony appears in bar 67, where the original A-sharp diminished chord is replaced with a C-sharp minor chord.

The tension created in Variation 2 is suspended in the following variation, returning to the initial theme's rhythm with occasional triplets in the parallel major key of F-sharp major (Example 15):

Example 15



Clara Schumann Variations op. 20, b. 76-79, var. 3 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

The melody remains in the soprano with some alterations, first appearing in bar 79, with a new octave bass line in the low register making the texture thicker and profounder than the original theme. The bass in the first eight bars ascends in ascending motion contrary to the melodic line. The opening totality of F-sharp major becomes its subdominant D-sharp minor in the middle section starting in bar 84. The melody in the section is modified and transposed down a minor third until bar 89, in which a new interval of ascending 6th: A#-F# gives a special climactic feeling. The melody and harmony in the last section are also modified, becoming more chromatic.

The fourth variation returns to F-sharp minor with furthering of rhythmic intensity again. The theme this time appears in the tenor voice of the left hand while the right hand displays brilliant figurations in sixteenth-note triplets, giving a feeling of forward motion (Example 16):

Example 16



Clara Schumann Variations op. 20, b. 100-103, var. 4 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

The figurations written in wide registers in the right hand shift to the low bass a few times, covering more than six octaves of the piano. These are a mixture of diatonic and chromatic scales, broken octaves and arpeggios—a pattern that, as Lai points out, bears resemblance to passages in the third variation of Schumann’s ABEGG Variations.¹⁹

Variation 5, marked “Poco animato,” changes the mood by the tempo and sudden *forte* dynamics at the beginning. The variation (written with a strong chordal statement of the main theme in the right hand over enduring sixteenth-note octaves in the left hand) reflects Clara Schumann’s brilliant skills as pianist. The second half of the variation is repeated for the first time in the set by the first ending and repeat sign.

The sixth variation calms down and returns to the opening tempo with a beautiful canon between the soprano and tenor first at the fifth and then at the octave in four-part counterpoint as in Example 17:

¹⁹ Lai, 54.

Example 17

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The music begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. The melody in the right hand is characterized by dotted rhythms and eighth-note patterns, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment. The second system continues this style, with the right hand playing a more active melodic line and the left hand featuring a complex, rhythmic figuration of thirty-second notes.

Clara Schumann Variations op. 20, b. 148-151, b. 156-159, var. 6 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

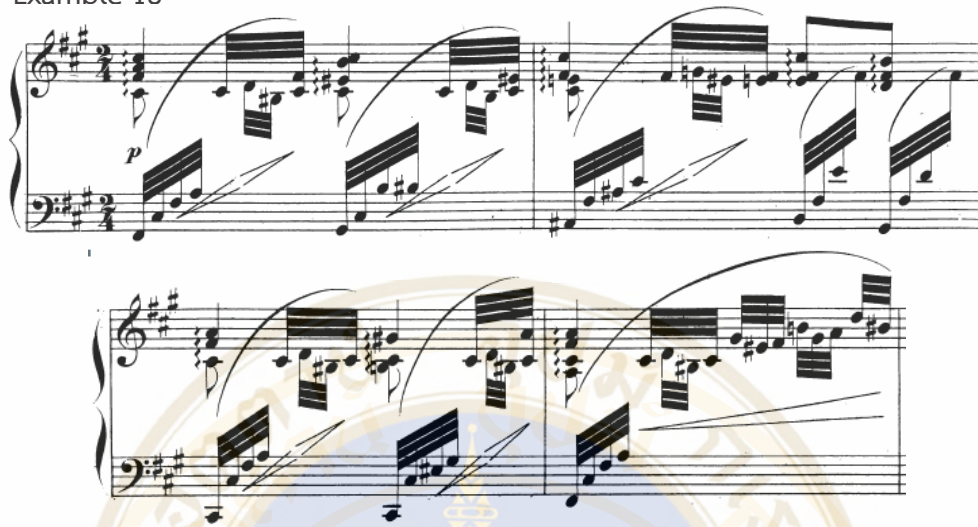
Clara had studied counterpoint with her father since the age of 10.²⁰ In 1840, the year of her marriage, she wrote one pure canonic composition: “Wenn ich Vöglein wär.” Robert Schumann wrote a vocal duet with the same text in the same year, as op. 43, no. 1, which also includes a canonic phrase. According to Reich, “after her marriage, Clara Schumann’s composing efforts followed closely the patterns set by her husband; after their counterpoint studies in early 1845, both composers produced music that reflected these efforts.”²¹ In fact, Clara’s solo piano works written in 1845 are all preludes and fugues.

The last variation has an extended structure: instead of 24 bars, there are 66. Clara may have modeled her op. 20 on her husband’s ABEGG Variations op. 1 (1830), Impromptus op. 5 (1833), and Symphonic Etudes op. 13 (originally written 1834-1835), all having an extensive finale. Variation 7 features a new rhythm of thirty-second notes as accompaniment and decorative figurations. The thirty-second-note figurations, which constantly appears until bar 199 and again from bar 226, often include upper and lower neighbor tones shared by both hands (Example 18):

²⁰ Ibid, 11.

²¹ Reich, 214.

Example 18



Clara Schumann Variations op. 20, b. 172-175, var. 7 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

These neighbor tones are sometimes articulated with groups of three notes as in beat 2 of bar 175, giving a sense of *hemiola*. The first eight bars are repeated for the first time in this work. The second half is shortened by two bars, making the total section 22 bars instead of 24 bars, followed by an extensive coda with a key change to F-sharp major.

The coda includes three subsections: transition in bars 194–201, the return of Variation 3 in bars 202–225 and a codetta marked “*calando*” in bars 226–237. The transition begins with a modified version of the opening theme starting on an A-sharp, the third degree of F-sharp major scale. Two bars later, the melody rises from a C-sharp chromatically while a pedal point in the bass prolongs the dominant harmony for five bars. Then the rhythm of thirty-second notes stops and the opening phrase of Variation 3 returns. There is one significant change here, an allusion from her earlier composition, *Romance variée*, op. 3 (1831–1833), which was Clara’s first composition dedicated to Robert Schumann (Example 19):

Example 19



Clara Schumann *Romance variée*, op. 3, b. 6-9 (Friedrich Hofmeister)

This theme is quoted by Robert Schumann in his *Impromptus sur une romance de Clara Wieck*, op. 5. He superimposes Clara’s op. 3 theme onto his own bass theme (Example 20):

Example 20



Robert Schumann Impromptus op. 5, b. 17–20 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

In Clara’s Variation op. 20, the theme of op. 3 in C major is inserted in the inner voice starting in bar 202 of the coda in F-sharp major with slight modifications (Example 21):

Example 21



Clara Schumann Variations op. 20, b. 202–205, var. 7 (Breitkopf & Härtel)

Actually, this allusion was not included when Clara completed the set in June 1853. It was Brahms who suggested to Clara when he studied Clara’s variations (when writing his own variations in the summer of 1854). Smith describes, “. . . he noticed that it was possible to combine the beautiful third variation with . . . the theme of Clara’s first musical homage to Schumann and of his first homage to her.”²² Reich also states: “For Clara, the quotation may have recalled the glowing days of her childhood; for Brahms, it was a gesture to honor both older composers.”²³

Clara Schumann added her op. 3 theme to her manuscript (beginning bar 202) before it was sent to the printer.²⁴ Her diary of September 14, 1854 notes: “Proof of my *Variations* from Härtel. Brahms has had a splendid idea, a surprise for you, my Robert. He has interwoven my old theme with yours – already I can see you smile.”²⁵

²² Smith, 30.

²³ Reich, 233.

²⁴ Ibid, 314.

²⁵ Litzmann, 81.

After the allusion of the op. 3 theme in eight bars in the section, Clara brings back the canon of Variation 6 in bars 210-213. In the codetta, a chromatic melody as a transformation of the original *Bunte Blätter* theme in bars 226-230 descends from a C-sharp to F-sharp, continued with an ascending F-sharp major arpeggio in bars 230-234. The thirty-second-note figurations heard earlier in Variation 7 come again, including the recalling groups of three notes with neighbor tones, first appeared in bar 175. The piece ends with a *pianississimo*. Smith describes the dynamic mark: “The application of *pianississimo* was also a favorite device because Clara was especially known for her superb ability to play softly and with sublime feeling.”²⁶

Conclusion

The Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, op. 20, distinguishes itself as one of Clara’s last compositions and one of her most mature works. She seemed content with its outcome. In a letter to her stepsister (Marie Wieck) on August 16, 1853, she said:

“To my great joy, all the pieces [opp. 20–23] were so well done that there was nothing that Robert wanted to change. So you see, as one gets older there are also many pleasures that only a more mature mind and feelings can bring.”²⁷

The Variations op. 20 displays her elegant style, clarity in texture and formal plan, virtuosic figurations with chromaticism, imaginative treatment of accompanying patterns, and exploration of various tonal colors with delicate harmonies with effective use of dissonances. Based on Robert Schumann’s theme and providing inspiration to Brahms, this work remarkably represents the beautiful relationship of the three composers.

According to Reich,²⁸ Brahms wrote to Breitkopf and Härtel on September 25, 1854, requesting that two variations of his op. 9 and Clara’s op. 20 be published simultaneously; they were published by this concern in November 1854. It is a little sad to note that Clara’s Variation op. 20 was dedicated to Robert Schumann but, at the time of its publication, he was already in the mental asylum in Eendenich.

²⁶ Smith, 81.

²⁷ Reich, 215.

²⁸ Reich, 233, 341.

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