Clara Schumann: Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 17 Movement 1

# Clara Schumann 1878.jpgContext

Schumann (13th September 1819 – 20 May 1896) was a German musician, teacher and composer, considered one of the most distinguished pianists of the Romantic era, earning her the nickname ‘Queen of the Piano’. A child prodigy, she became famous for the development of the solo piano recital and was also well known for her ability to perform from memory (not common at the time). Although she is sometimes overshadowed by Robert Schumann (her husband), perhaps more of a prolific composer, she was more successful as a solo artist.

Her most successful work, Piano Trio in G minor (opus 17) was written in 1846 for piano, violin and cello and is comprised of four movements. She also wrote many lieder, German songs for piano and solo.

Mendelssohn greatly influenced and supported Schumann, conducting one of her first compositions for its debut. As he was a well-regarded composer of the time, this spoke volumes. She was also helped by Josef Joachim, a professional violinist who was able to perform and advise her on her violin parts. In addition, she and her husband encouraged and mentored Johannes Brahms, following his impressive performances to them.

**Style**

A piano trio is a group of piano and two instruments, usually a violin and a cello. This is one of the most important forms of chamber music (music for a small group of soloists).

Developed by Mozart and Haydn from an accompanied keyboard sonata, this became a style of its own during the classical period. Schubert and Beethoven transformed it even further from the original two or three movement form to four movements, as opposed to the piano concerto which are commonly in three. These compositions were developed in parallel to symphonies (another big orchestral work of the time) and are generally set in sonata form.

## Features of Romantic Music

* Increased dynamic range (ppp to fff)
* Break away from periodic phrasing to an endless melody
* More sudden key changes to more remote keys
* Gradual increase in dissonance
* Expansion of sonata form

**cont. Style – Development of the Piano**

## Development of the Piano

* Increased range
* Addition of sustain pedal
* Went from a wooden frame to a metal (cast iron) frame
* Addition of the soundboard
* Felt hammers were used instead of leather or cotton hammers

Because of the last three points, the piano was able to play louder than before.

## Examples of Typical Romanticism

Schumann primarily writes is a style common to the period:

* She uses the most popular combination for a piano trio
* Romantic composers preferred subject groups rather than a single idea
* Schumann uses the popular progression Ic-V7-I (a legacy of Classical music)
* The majority of chords are in root position or first inversion (as was normal)
* There are very quick successive passing modulations which are more tonally and harmonically adventurous than classical traditions.
* Development contains quicker changes to more remote keys than classical
* A variety of typical piano textures, including chords with the LH playing in octaves.
* The diminished 7th was a popular chord to use.
* 4/3 suspensions were very common in this period.
* Unlike classical tradition, Schumann doesn’t stay in the tonic key throughout the recap.
* It was common for codetta material to be used to lead into the coda.
* It was typical for a key interval in a motif (e.g. perfect 5th 1a) to be developed.
* The melody has a lyrical quality, like many melodies in romantic music.

## Deviations from Convention

Whilst Schumann is idiomatic, she doesn’t always follow romantic traditions:

* Unlike some examples of the time, she gives equal roles to all the instruments.
* Her instrumental writing is more similar to classical pieces sometimes.
* Less virtuosic, more suited to playing at home together than in concert.
* She doesn’t use many string techniques.
* You would expect no change of key throughout a subject group (especially in the classical period) but in the 2nd subject group, Schumann modulates.
* The violin part is rarely written to play in the 3rd octave of its range, unlike the time.
* Similarly she doesn’t push the boundaries of the range of the piano.
* During the codetta, there is a very typical chromatic sequence over a dominant pedal.
* It was more common for classical composers to repeat the exposition.

**Instrumentation**

* Most of violin range exploited (mainly 2 octaves), although she uses third octave of violin writing sparingly.
* Piano part is also not wide ranging – predominantly uses the middle 4 octaves.
* Double stopping is used for loud passages and chords (e.g. 1c), but also in contrasting simple and often quiet passages, to fill out the texture.
* The higher lyrical cello range is exploited and the resonant low range.
* Whilst this is very little, Schumann does use some octave doubling of parts, for instance in the coda where the strings parts play for a while entirely in octaves.
* Very little of the piano part is always moving around the chords.
* Piano writing is varied in the development with on-beat LH and off-beat RH.
* Limited use of the sustain pedal.

**cont. Instrumentation**

**Sonority**

* Schumann demonstrates great sensitivity to balance as her parts are well orchestrated, such as the moving piano material to avoid masking the strings.

**Structure & Tonality**

Schumann uses sonata form, including a repeat of the exposition. The tonic key is a minor key so Schumann can exploit its expressive quality. She uses the typical contrasts of keys associated with sonata form.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Exposition (repeated)** | **Development** | **Recapitulation** |
| **1st subject group:**   * G minor   **Bridge:**   * The purpose is to get from G min to Bb maj, so it is more chromatic.   **2nd subject group:**   * Bb major * Brief modulations to:   + Eb major   + D major   + Bb major   + G minor   + Eb major   **Codetta:**   * Modulations end up going back through Bb major in order to return to the tonic. | Modulations through many different keys (e.g. F minor).  Towards the end of the development, there is further development of ideas that are heard at the beginning of the development. | **1st subject group (identical):**   * G minor   **Bridge:**   * Ideas are different because it needs to get to G major.   **2nd subject group:**   * G major * Brief modulations B major (among others) * Material developed from codetta   **Coda:**   * The start is developed from the end of the codetta. * Ends in G minor. |

**Texture**

* There is regular imitation between the layers throughout.
* The movement starts with a homophonic texture
* This becomes polyphonically animated homophony, as although there is only one main tune, the accompanying have their own moving parts rather than just playing chords
* 1c and 2a have chordal textures.
* The development has a more polyphonic texture, with imitation between the string parts.
* At some parts of the development the texture is thinner.

**Melody**

* Not strict periodic phrasing although some sections/phrases are quite balanced.
* Frequent appoggiaturas.
* Chromatic melody line in places.
* 1a is the antecedent of the phrases, in which the perfect 5th leap is balanced out with more stepwise movement.

**cont. Melody**

* 1b is the consequent phrase, which consists of rising sequences and an octave leap.
* 1d has a falling sequence.
* 1c and 1d are shorter than 1a and 1b.
* The dotted rhythm in 1c is important melodically.
* 2a has an appoggiatura feature in the melody line.
* Melodic diminished 7th in string parts at 2b.
* The first 2a and 2b are in a descending sequence with their repeats.
* The development is mainly based on 1a, inc. the perfect 5th from 1a becoming a dim 5th.
* Development contains arpeggiated movement, including with diminished 7ths.

**Harmony**

* Tonal, predominantly diatonic (2a is chromatic) and functional
* Most of the key changes are conventionally prepared (V-I)
* Secondary dominants and perfect cadences are used during modulations to confirm keys.
* 7/6 and 4/3 suspensions are used.
* Schumann uses dominant pedals to prepare for key changes, including for the return to G minor at the end of the development.
* Some chromatic movement in the bass line.
* 1a ends with an imperfect cadence to allow the melody to continue
* A French augmented sixth substitutes chord 5 for this cadence the 2nd time
* Whilst it didn’t play during the first 1a, the cello does accompany it the 2nd time
* 1b ends with a perfect cadence.
* 2nd subject group modulates through 5 or 6 different keys, including tertiary modulations
* Codetta begins with a descending sequence of parallel sixths.
* Codetta has dominant minor 9th chord followed by RH parallel thirds in the piano part. These are developed later in the coda.
* The development starts with some octave doubling between the violin and cello and parallel chromatic triads played by the piano.
* It also includes a slightly distorted circle of fifths with a free sequence in the melody.
* Repeated feature of a diminished 7th followed by a resolve during the coda.
* Tonic pedal is played by piano and then cello to prepare for the end of the movement.
* The piece ends with a perfect cadence, which is a regular cadence point throughout.

**Dynamics**

* Sforzandos build up tension.
* Wide range of dynamics (ff-pp)
* Some sudden contrasts (fp).
* Crescs and dims to fit melodic lines.

**Tempo**

* Allegro moderato: crochet = 152
* Schumann occasionally uses a rit.

**Rhythm & Metre**

* In common time, but sometimes feels 2/2.
* 1a features tied rhythm of minim to quaver
* 1c is homorhythmic and has dotted rhythm feature
* 1c and 1d have anacrusis features.
* 2a is syncopated
* Pulsing quaver rhythm in 2b