

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06415-6 - Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life, Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters: Volume 1

Berthold Litzmann Translated by Grace E. Hadow

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I.

### CHILDHOOD.

1819—1834.

“I was born at Leipsic, Sept. 13<sup>th</sup> 1819, in the house *Zur hohen Lilie* in the new *Neumarkt*, (to which my parents had moved at Easter 1818) and received the name of Clara Josephine. My godparents were a notary named Streubel, a friend of my father; Madame Reichel, a friend of my mother; and Frau Cantorin Tromlitz of Plauen, the mother of my mother Mariane Tromlitz. My father<sup>1)</sup> kept a musical lending-library and carried on a small business in pianofortes. Since both he and my mother were much occupied in teaching, and beside this my mother practised from one to two hours a day, I was chiefly left to the care of the maid, Johanna Strobel. She was not very fluent of speech, and it may well have been owing to this that I did not begin to pronounce even single words until I was between four and five years old, and up to that time understood as little as I spoke. But I had always been accustomed to hear a great deal of piano playing and my ear became more sensitive to musical sounds than to those of speech. I soon learned to walk, and in my third and fourth years could go out with my parents and cover miles of road.

My inaptitude for speech, and my want of concern in all that was passing round me, often caused my parents to complain that I was dull of hearing. Even up to my eighth year this

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1) Friedrich Wieck, born 1785, died 1873.

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defect was not entirely cured, although it improved as I came to speak better and to take more notice of what was going on.

At Easter 1821 my parents moved to a house in the *Salzgässchen*, and it was here that I was fated to lose my mother. She left my father on May 12 1824 and went to Plauen to arrange for a legal separation."

With this harsh dissonance begins the record of a life which in later years was to pour its full music before innumerable multitudes and to round on a close of perfect and unalloyed harmony. It was her father's hand which traced these lines on the opening pages of her diary that loving stern hand which with unbroken singleness of purpose, moulded the girl's life and thoughts, and yet with utter callousness bruised the most intimate and tender of her feelings. The few cold words in which he narrates, for his daughter's reading, the disaster of his marriage, show little care for the pain with which she was one day to see them, if indeed they were not intended to widen her sum of the estrangement.

Wieck's right to the custody of his daughter began at her fifth birthday. Accordingly for a few months she accompanied her mother, together with her little brother Viktor<sup>1</sup>), (born in the spring of 1824) on the strict understanding that she should return to Leipsic by September 13<sup>th</sup>. There is a pathetic letter in which Frau Wieck asks leave to bring her back in person: a permission which Wieck refused. At the same time he certainly allowed some freedom of intercourse between them. In 1825 Frau Wieck married a music-teacher named Bargiel and came with him for a year's residence in Leipsic. During that year Clara frequently visited her mother, carrying with her on one occasion a stiff, characteristic note which begins 'Madame, I send you the dearest thing left me in the

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1) *Translator's note:* Her brothers Alwin (born Aug. 27 1821) and Gustav (born Jan 31 1823) remained at Leipsic.

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1825.

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world', and continues with injunctions that 'she be told nothing which can arouse her suspicions', that 'she be given little pastry', that 'her conduct be better supervised than it was at Plauen', and that 'she should not be allowed to hurry when practising'.

"On September 18<sup>th</sup>," so runs the diary, "my father began to give me regular piano-lessons. Already, some months before my mother took me with her to Plauen, I had learned to play several exercises without moving the hand and had picked up a few simple dance-tunes by ear, but this was all that I could accomplish since I could neither speak myself nor understand others." Wieck cannot refrain from adding bitterly "During the few months at Plauen my mother, in this respect at all events, was not of the slightest use to me."

For her musical gift Clara was as much indebted to her mother as to her father. Mariane Tromlitz, who had been Wieck's pupil before she became his wife, was a good musician<sup>1)</sup> and a capable pianist. But it was Wieck to whom his daughter owed her musical training. He was one of the greatest teachers in Germany, cordially acknowledged as master by Schumann, von Bülow and many others: he had made up his mind before Clara's birth that if she proved to be a girl she should be a famous artist, he deliberately chose her name as a presage of future renown, and the fulfilment of the presage was the chief work to which he dedicated his life.

"On October 27<sup>th</sup> of this year my father began to teach me together with Therese Geyer and Henriette Wieck." This was an experiment by which he hoped to diminish the difficulty which she found in speaking and in understanding what was said. As a matter of fact her power of speaking improved now with extraordinary rapidity, and she also

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1) She was the granddaughter of Johann Georg Tromlitz the famous flute-maker, flute-player and composer.

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displayed a remarkable memory, especially for music, and could play by heart and remember for a long time every little piece which she had tried over once or twice. These lessons lasted till Easter 1825. During this time she played according to Logier's system<sup>1</sup>), but her father also taught her by his own method<sup>2</sup>). By this method she played without notes at first, but at the same time learnt to write them down, though she went to no school and "did not know a single letter". By degrees she learnt to play all the scales, major and minor, in quick succession, with both hands together, and also to play triads in every position and every key. At the same time her father made her play by ear a number of little pieces which he wrote for her, since the training of the ear and the study of expression in contra-distinction to mere mechanical dexterity, formed the essence of his applied theory of musical education: as he himself says:

The artist's first rule  
Is that skill is a tool;  
But your art's put to shame  
If skill is the aim.

Wieck believed that in this way the dull work of learning to read from note was made as little irksome as possible.

As a result of thoroughly practising her father's method Clara became so familiar with the key-board that when later

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1) According to Logier's system the difficulties of technique were made easier, and organic defects, such as stiffness and lack of flexibility of the fingers, were overcome by means of the "*Chiroplast*", a contrivance attached to the key-board to accustom the pupil to the best method of holding body, arms, and fingers.

2) Friedrich Wieck expressed — in pithy language which recalls the wisdom of popular proverbs — the substance and aim of his teaching, and above all the grounds and principles of his theory of music-teaching, in a pamphlet whose contents should be laid to heart by every student of music today: "*Piano and Song, a didactic and polemic work* by Friedrich Wieck" (Leipsic, Leuckart) and his thoughts on music as an art in his, "*Musical Proverbs and Aphorisms*". (Ibid. 1871.)

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1826.

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on she played from note she seldom found it necessary to watch her hands and could steadily follow the notes with her eyes. By this means in a short time she achieved a readiness in playing from note which was marvellous for her age. Also she had no difficulty in keeping time, although it was not until her eighth year, when she learned mental arithmetic at school, that she understood the correct way to count time. From the time she was six she went to school regularly, but for not more than from three to five hours a day, for her father now not only gave her an hour's lesson himself every day, but made her practise the piano daily for two hours more.

In the winter of 1825—1826 she went for the first time to the large subscription-concerts in the *Gewandhaus*. "I heard," says the diary, "a grand symphony of Beethoven's, amongst other things, which excited me greatly. Also I heard some big choral works, which interested me very much."

Her education was, so her father thought, greatly helped, during the following year (down to September 1827) by his pupil, Emilie Reichold from Chemnitz, in whom Wieck was specially interested, and who gave a concert at the *Gewandhaus* in the autumn of 1826. She made Clara read through a number of pieces, and also study some more carefully, in the course of which, as the diary reprovingly remarks, she had, "much to suffer" through the "contradictoriness" of the pupil "which I seem to have inherited". In the year 1826 Clara learned a great many duets playing mostly the bass part.

At the end of the year — after a course of preliminary exercises to make the hand capable of stretching — she first began to play octaves with both left and right hand. At six years and ten months (July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1826) she played with an accompaniment for the first time; taking the bass part of Haslinger's little *Concerto for four hands with Quartet accompaniment*.

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A few weeks later she went to the theatre for the first time, and saw Ludwig Devrient as “the poor poet” in Kotzebue’s piece of that name, and as “Elias Krumm”, “which”, says the diary, “I did not understand”; and in addition to these she saw Spohr’s *Bergegeist*, “which filled my thoughts for a long time, although I did not understand it either”.

The year 1827 brought a substantial advance. “In 1827”, remarks the diary, “my perception of music began to develop more and more quickly, and I could distinguish the keys with fair certainty simply by ear, nor was I unacquainted with the first elements of theory, I could quickly find the sub-dominant and dominant chords in every key, and could modulate at will or at command (as the chords led me) from major and minor keys through the diminished seventh, by using the leading-note of the dominant. My playing also improved, my attack was good, firm and sure, and my fingers strengthened so rapidly that I could now play difficult pieces for two hours on end with fair persistency, and my father often praised my aptitude for natural and good execution, which I always liked. “But”, the inexorable diary continues, “I very easily became obstinate over it and my desires were limitless — (so my father says!)”

The daily practising was now extended to three hours, and the hand was specially trained and strengthened by new exercises in trills.

In May she began her first study of a concerto with orchestral accompaniment, Hummel’s *Concerto in G-major* Op. 73, which she had mastered by July. At the same time the diary tells us of little attempts at composition. “My father says that most of them were correct rhythmically, and the bass was tolerable; at least I did not double the major third in the chord of the dominant and I avoided fifths and octaves which always sound so ugly to me.” She now began to notice the difference between good and bad pianos, specially liked

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1827.

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Andreas Stein's, and complained bitterly "if my father did not happen to have one now and then". But she condescended to play on any piano of from six to six and a half octaves, "which does not worry me". Square pianos however were emphatically declined, "because as a rule they have not sufficient tone". "My father assures me that I have already a powerful and good touch, with which the plumpness of my hand and the flexibility of my fingers (apart from any movement of the elbows) have not a little to do."

In direct connection with this, Friedrich Wieck incorporated with his daughter's diary — *sub specie aeterni* — his own programme of musical education, and added to this an expression of opinion, addressed to his friend Andreas Stein of Vienna, which fulfilled the threefold purpose of justifying his method, warding off the suspicion of enthusiasm, and spurring on the heroine of the book to fresh artistic efforts by a word of qualified praise which she was intended to overhear. "In my opinion" the word run "my daughter Clara will become a capable pianist: her attack and touch are already good, she has the right feeling for execution a good ear, some real musical talents, and a retentive memory. Her tone will be further developed as much as possible by the use of the best instruments, and perhaps I may add by the teaching of her father. Already she can play difficult studies artistically and with a round pure tone. But I do not wish her to kill herself (musically) by over-practise. Nearly all our virtuosi have done this — pianists in particular — they have practically no feeling or understanding left, but only a base pleasure in their own mechanical dexterity, nor, can they take any delight in hearing others play, but only in playing themselves!!" 1)

1) The fable has often been spread abroad in the musical world that Clara was kept at the piano by her father as long as her physical strength would endure. The origin of this legend goes back to Franz

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This impersonal appreciation and recognition of what had been reached so far, is followed a few days later by some characteristic remarks which must have been less pleasing to the subject of the diary: "My father specially blames me now for a certain jealousy of disposition — love of pleasure — childish sensitiveness — and a curious inclination never to enjoy the present time or present possessions. This last troubled my father the most, because it made me appear seldom contented, since a perpetual 'But' or 'If' got in the way."

If such demands as these made upon a child of eight, show an austere discipline only to be looked for in a much older person, the father's complaint, which follows a few months later, "over my entrance into the awkward age," at the same time shows a ray of humour which softens the rugged pedagogy; and the remark "that it is beginning to pass", affords proof how little rooted in this child's nature were the faults which were being blamed.

This was the point of mental and musical development which Clara had reached when on Sept. 9<sup>th</sup> 1827, four days before her eighth birthday, she played the E<sup>b</sup> major concerto

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Liszt who was one of Clara's sincerest admirers. La Mara, without mentioning his authority, states that they left her so little leisure for play and recreation, such as child-nature delights in, that she was obliged to steal the few moments in which she caressed her beloved little kittens, behind her father's back. The present quotation, drawn from the most authentic source ought at last authoritatively to put an end to such statements. Anyone who knows Wieck's writings and the brilliant results which, up to his 88<sup>th</sup> year, accompanied his activity as a teacher, knows that to over-strain a pupil so cruelly, would be to pour contempt on one of the fundamental principles of his method of teaching. He really valued study only when it was begun with perfectly fresh, or well-rested powers. Clara was never compelled to practise more than three hours a day. She had to thank this circumstance for the fact that throughout her life she was spared from the chief suffering of the modern musical world, — nerves.



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1827.

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of Mozart before a select audience at a concert rehearsal. The accompaniment consisted of two violins, two violas, a violoncello, a flute, and two horns. Let us hear her own words, sent to her mother, Frau Bargiel, at Berlin, over this, her most recent appearance in public:

The letter — the first, by the way, that Clara ever wrote in her life — is remarkable for its precocious hand-writing, a peculiarity which may well be connected with the technical development of the little hand, and for the happy childishness which runs through it in spite of all.

“Dear Mother

You have as yet read nothing from me, but now I can write a little I will send you a little letter, which will please you. I had presents on my eighth birthday from dear Bertha and from my dear Father, from dear Father I got a beautiful dress, and from Bertha I had an ashcake and a plum-cake and a lovely knitting-bag. And I played Mozart's *E*? major concerto which you used to play, with orchestral accompaniment, and Herr Mathäi, Lange, Belka and a lot of others played with me. It went very well and I never stuck at all, only my cadenza would not go easily, where I had to play a chromatic scale three times, I was not a bit frightened, but the clapping troubled me. Emilie Reichhold and M. Kupfer played too, The day before my birthday I went to Malger with Father. Please give my love to Grand-mamma, and my brothers send their love to you. Now you will write to me, won't you?

Leipsic  
Sept. 14<sup>th</sup>  
1827

Your obedient daughter  
Clara Wieck.

Dear Mother

I will come to see you soon and then I will play a great many pieces for four hands with you. And I have sung and played through ever so many operas already, such as *Oberon*, *Die Schweizerfamilie*, *Der Schlosser*, *Die Zauberflöte*, which I have seen in the theatre too. My dear Father has ordered me a beautiful piano

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1828.

from H. Stein in Vienna, because I have been industrious and can play and sing at the same time all Spohr's songs, and the concerto went without a mistake.

Good-bye

C."

In February 1828 the diary goes on to speak of a large musical evening "At Home" which Friedrich Wieck gave and at which Clara played, among other things, four polonaises of Schubert, with her father. Soon after the expected piano "of six octaves" arrived from Vienna, and at the same time she received a *Physharmonica*<sup>1)</sup> of three octaves: "on which", says the diary, "I can improvise".

She appeared more and more in public, though not chiefly in the concert-hall. Thus the diary speaks on March 31<sup>st</sup> of a gathering at Dr Carus's where she played a trio of Hummel's, Op. 96, and adds, "I made fewer mistakes than the gentlemen who accompanied me." Easter-time in particular, gave the young performer many opportunities of appearing before artists, and colleagues from other places. And while she herself, like a true child, enjoyed the Easter festivities and conscientiously reports that she has seen "the wax-works, the elk, Weisse, the juggler from Paris, the horse-breakers, and the Panorama of Gibraltar", she continues, "I have played and sung before a great many people this Easter, among other things J. Schmidt's variations Op. 56, Moscheles' rondo No. 30, and *Die Forelle* by Schubert".

It was possibly at this gathering at Carus's house that the first meeting took place with Robert Schumann, who had come to Leipsic a few days before (March 25<sup>th</sup>)<sup>2)</sup>, and as he was closely connected with the Caruses, may well have been one of the guests.

Ostensibly Robert Schumann came to Leipsic with the intention of studying jurisprudence. At the same time his

1) An instrument which had just then been revived by Anton Hackel.

2) Cf. *Jugendbriefe* p 18.