The Songs of Clara Schumann

Focusing on Clara Schumann’s central contributions to the genre of the Lied (or German art song), this is the first book-length critical study of her songs. Although relatively few in number, they were published and reviewed favorably in the press during her lifetime, and they continue to be programmed regularly in recitals by professional and amateur performers alike. Highlighting the powerful and distinctive features of the songs, this book treats them as a prism, casting light not just on them but also through them to explore questions that foster a deeper understanding of the work of female composers. The author argues for the importance of taking Clara Schumann’s music on its own terms, the intimate relationship between text and musical form, and the vital role of musical analysis in recuperating the contributions of previously understudied composers.

Stephen Rodgers is Edmund A. Cykler Chair in Music and Professor of Music Theory and Musicianship at the University of Oregon. His book The Songs of Fanny Hensel was published in 2021. Rodgers recently launched a website called Art Song Augmented, devoted to songs by underrepresented composers, and he hosts a podcast about poetry and song called Resounding Verse.
The aim of Music in Context is to illuminate specific musical works, repertoires, or practices in historical, critical, socio-economic, or other contexts; or to illuminate particular cultural and critical contexts in which music operates through the study of specific musical works, repertoires, or practices. A specific musical focus is essential, while avoiding the decontextualization of traditional aesthetics and music analysis. The series title invites engagement with both its main terms; the aim is to challenge notions of what contexts are appropriate or necessary in studies of music, and to extend the conceptual framework of musicology into other disciplines or into new theoretical directions.

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STEPHEN RODGERS

University of Oregon
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Acknowledgments

This book would not exist had I not been fortunate enough to attend a conference in Oxford called “Clara Schumann (née Wieck) and her World.” That was in June of 2019, many months before the COVID-19 pandemic would turn the world on its head and make travel of this sort impossible. It seems like a lifetime ago now, but the memory of the event has stayed with me and has been a guiding force as I have worked toward the completion of this book. I gave my first ever conference presentation on Clara Schumann at that conference, on musical and poetic closure in one of her songs. Parts of that presentation made their way into a chapter that was later published in Clara Schumann Studies, a volume of essays edited by the brilliant Joe Davies, who, along with Susan Wollenberg and Laura Tunbridge, helped to organize the conference; some of the material also appears in this book.

More than getting the chance to present at the conference, however, it was getting the chance to hear other presentations that inspired me to continue studying Clara Schumann’s music – presentations by Natasha Loges, Susan Youens, Harald Krebs, Benedict Taylor, Nicole Grimes, and Christopher Parton, not to mention a thrilling performance of Schumann’s songs by soprano Aisling Kenny and pianists Cecily Lock and Cheryl Tan. On the plane ride home, I barely slept, so intoxicated was I with what I heard and experienced over the course of those three days. I opened up the two volumes of Clara Schumann’s songs, published by Breitkopf & Härtel, and reread every page, returning to songs I was familiar with but didn’t know inside and out, savoring every bar. By the time I arrived back in Oregon I was convinced that if we already had books on the songs of Schubert, Wolf, Brahms, and Robert Schumann, why couldn’t we have one on the songs of Clara Schumann?

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the many scholars who have written about Clara Schumann’s life and music, and not just those who shared their ideas at the Oxford conference. Thank you especially to Julie Pedneault-Deslauriers, whose ever-sensitive analyses of Schumann’s music have served as a model for my own; I’m grateful that Julie invited me to participate in a daylong symposium on Clara Schumann at the University...
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