



Robert & Clara Schumann: Piano Trios Op. 17, 88, 110

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[Fanfare](#) (Jerry Dubins - 2013.07.01)

This is now the third occasion on which I've been privileged to review a new release by the outstanding Swiss Piano Trio. The ensemble's Mendelssohn trios received an urgent recommendation from me in 34:6, and its account of Tchaikovsky's Trio, if not quite as enthusiastically received by me in 36:3, still earned my nod of approval. Expectations for this Schumann disc thus ran high, and, I'm happy to report, they were not disappointed.

Clara Schumann (1819–1896) was a devoted wife, loving mother, accomplished pianist, and, no doubt, a composer of some talent. But I've always felt that her eminence in the latter capacity has been exaggerated both by virtue of her being spouse to one of the most famous of romantic composers and for being somewhat of that 19th-century novelty, a female composer. It has thus come about that when someone is asked to name three or four women composers, Clara Schumann invariably tops the list. Yet, if one 19th-century composer of the female gender deserves equal billing with her male counterparts, it's not Clara Schumann or Fanny Mendelssohn; it's Louise Farrenc (1804–1875), a composer who wrote symphonies and chamber works on a scale and of a quality comparable to many of her male contemporaries.

The Piano Trio in G Minor, dated 1846, is Clara's only large-scale chamber work; in fact, it's her only chamber work of any scale, period. Most of her catalog consists of songs and pieces for solo piano, though, as a teenager, and later, with the help of her husband to be, she did try her hand at a Piano Concerto. The trio was long held to be Clara's crowning compositional achievement; some even credited it with being the inspiration for Robert's first numbered Trio in D Minor, op. 63, written the following year. Thus, I was rather surprised to find fewer recordings of Clara's opus listed than I would have expected; and of those currently in the catalog, more than one logically pairs it with Fanny Mendelssohn's Trio in D Minor, written in the same year, 1846.

Whether pairing Clara's trio with Robert's third and final Trio in G Minor, composed in 1851, is a logical choice or not, I can't say, although it seems to me that juxtaposing Robert's D Minor, the one supposedly inspired by Clara's effort, would have made more sense. However, in addition to Robert's G-Minor Trio, Clara's trio also shares the disc with Robert's 1842 *Fantasiestücke*, which, though otherwise named, is his actual first work in the medium, though not designated or numbered as such. The present program therefore makes this new release unique, at least insofar as other current listings are concerned, although another recent disc, which also happens to be in SACD format, contains Clara's trio and Robert's G Minor-Trio, but not Robert's *Fantasiestücke*. That recording by the Boulanger Trio on the Ars Produktion label was filled out with a work for piano trio by Wolfgang Rihm, and was favorably

reviewed by Steven E. Ritter in 33:5

I've not heard the Boulanger disc, but the playing here by the Swiss Piano Trio leaves nothing to be desired. I doubt that Clara's trio has ever received a more loving performance. The only word that describes the ensemble's tone is voluptuous, and Audite's perfectly positioned and balanced recording affords that ideal sweet-spot perspective. I do agree with Steven that Clara's trio is not Robert's. One has only to listen to the first few bars of Robert's G-Minor Trio to recognize the difference between talent and genius. But I honestly have to say that I don't think I've ever appreciated Robert's trio as much as I have in this performance. The Swiss players seem to be absolutely swept away by the score, sweeping me away in turn. It doesn't even feel like they're performing the piece as much as they're becoming one with it and living and breathing it.

This is definitely going on my provisional list of Want List candidates for 2013, and I most strongly urge you to acquire it. The Swiss Piano Trio, in my opinion, has rapidly risen to become one of the very top piano trio ensembles on today's stage.