

## V. SCHUBERT, SCHUMANN & BRAHMS

Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms were towering composers of the Romantic period. Like Beethoven, they were free artists, earning their income from a variety of sources. All wrote beautiful piano music, but they are perhaps better known for their symphonies, chamber works, and art songs. Schubert and Schumann, in particular, are beloved for their *Lieder*. One could easily suggest that the piano setting is even more important than the vocal line in evoking the magic of German Romantic poetry, and that the pianist plays a role equal to that of the singer. From Schubert, listen to *Die Schöne Müllerin* or *Winterreise*; from Schumann, *Frauenlieben und-leben*, *Dichterliebe*, or *Liederkreis*, Op. 39.

**Franz Peter Schubert** (1797-1828) wrote over 600 songs, and made his living composing these and small piano pieces, which were used at social events for entertainment purposes. He dwelt in poverty in Vienna, but had a dedicated circle of friends and artists who were his supporters and collaborators. They gathered together for poetry readings, performances, and to exchange creative ideas in evenings known as “Schubertiads.” During 1827-28, the final years of his short life, Schubert suffered great illness, most likely syphilis, and was painfully aware that he had little time left to compose. He sought to further develop his talent and desired to leave a legacy closer to that of Beethoven. (He also requested to be buried next to Beethoven, as he was). The large form works we think of as Schubert’s most important - the eighth and ninth symphonies, the late string quartets, the octet, the quintet, and the song cycle *Winterreise* - were written during these final years. This music is concerned with tragedy, grief, and the world beyond, revolutionary in its use of harmony and dramatic effects.



Schubert at the piano at a Schubertiad  
Artwork by Moritz von Schwind, 1868

Schubert’s piano music is written in both the classical sonata form and in the more Romantic **character piece** genre. The character piece was a single movement for piano solo, based on a program or one specific idea. During the Romantic era, old rules were broken and art became

both more unfettered and demonstrative, often in simpler forms. Schubert's character pieces include the *Moments musicaux* (1823-28), and the *Impromptus*. Op. 90, published during his lifetime, and Op. 142, published posthumously (1827). One of his grandest compositions is *The Wanderer Fantasy* (1822), based on a song of the same title, *Der Wanderer*. This lengthy work is in four movements played without pause, and the thematic material of all movements stems from the theme of the song, making it the first "cyclical" piano work. The slow movement is a theme and variations and the final movement begins like a fugue. Schubert wrote 21 sonatas, which are classical in form but romantic in sentiment. His most famous sonatas are the final three (C minor, A major, and the much loved B-flat major) composed in the late summer of 1828. All are cast in four movements and are lyrical in character, using dramatic modulations and pianist effects.



Franz Schubert  
Oil painting by Wilhelm August Rieder  
1875, after his watercolor of 1825



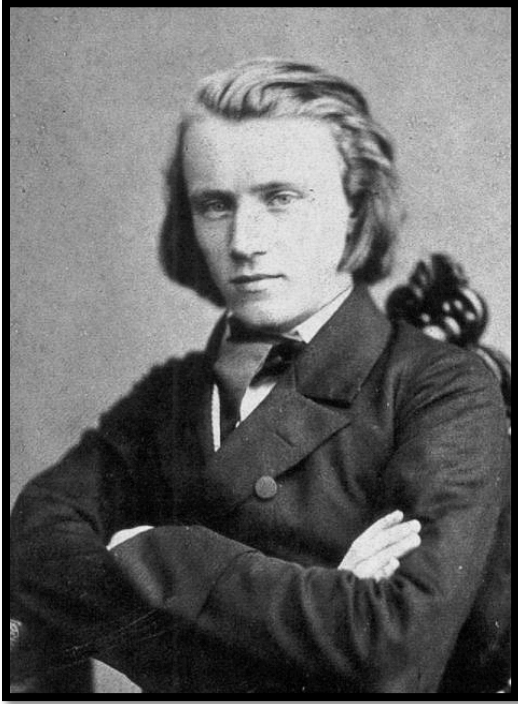
Robert and Clara Schumann  
photograph from 1847  
Bezirksmuseum, Vienna

**Robert Schumann** (1810-1856) came from a literary family, and the written word was integral to his music and his career. He developed the character piece in new ways by writing sets of short pieces or single longer works that used literary ideas, told hidden stories, and even used the letters of the musical alphabet to create themes representing specific individuals. Some of his popular works in this category are the *Davidsbündlertänze*, *Phantasiestücke*, *Kinderszenen*, *Arabesque*, *Noveletten*, and *Carnaval*. *Carnaval* includes musical depictions of Chopin, Paganini (the foremost violin virtuoso of the day), Robert's wife Clara (Chiarina), and other theatrical or literary characters. While he wrote three monumental sonatas, these are not performed as frequently as the character pieces above, or as his most cherished works, the *Fantasie*, *Symphonic Études*, and his concerto. The *Fantasie*, Op. 17 in C Major is in three large movements, like a sonata, and was undoubtedly influenced by Schubert's *Wanderer* and the

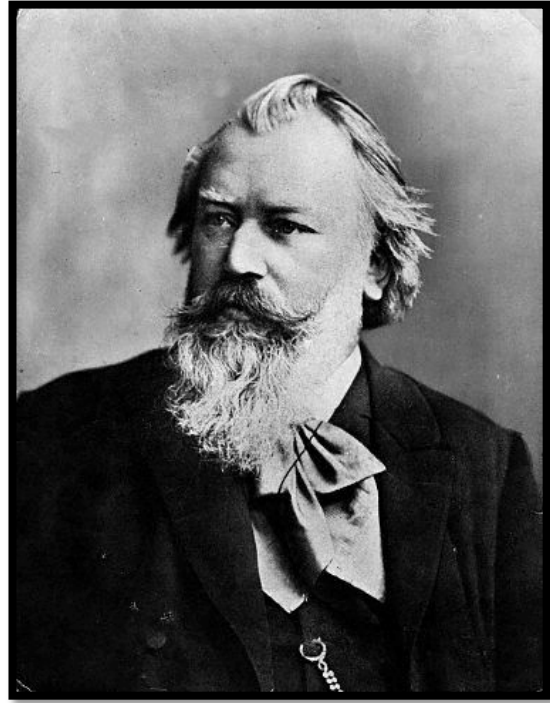
music of Beethoven. It was written in 1836 and dedicated to Liszt. The *Études symphoniques*, Op. 13, is a set of twelve études, nine of which are variations on the slow, solemn theme in C-sharp minor, and it is one of Schumann's most effective works. The *Piano Concerto in A Minor* is beautiful, lyrical, powerful, and one of the world's most beloved concerti. This work represents the great love Schumann felt for his wife. Clara was a virtuoso concert pianist and the daughter of Friedrich Wieck, Schumann's teacher in Leipzig. Wieck's vehement disapproval of their relationship resulted in a long and tumultuous courtship. Eventually they married against his wishes, and their union produced seven surviving children. Robert was most fortunate as a composer. His music was performed by Clara, a soloist highly in demand, and also by Franz Liszt, an international celebrity. Mendelssohn sang his songs and premiered his symphonies at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. He was the mentor and lifelong friend of Brahms. In addition to teaching, conducting, and composing, he was a music critic and founded the music journal, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1834. Sadly, he was overcome with mental illness, which led to attempted suicide in the form of throwing himself into the Rhine River. He later died in a mental asylum. The marriage diaries of Robert and Clara, as well as the two volumes of letters between Clara and Brahms, elucidate their personalities as well as the musical atmosphere of the era. The relationships between Robert, Clara, and Brahms have been the subject of much speculation, and even launched a movie (*Song of Love* from 1947) starring Katherine Hepburn as Clara.

The music of **Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897) is intensely Romantic in emotional content, but strongly influenced by Bach and Beethoven, and his composition is considered conservative in style. He made his living by playing, teaching, and conducting, but shunned the public limelight. With the overwhelming success of his "German Requiem" he was freed from financial concern and able to live quite comfortably. He collected first editions and ancient music manuscripts, made regular trips to Italy and elsewhere in Europe, and spent his summers in fashionable spa towns. He gained notoriety by signing a manifesto directed against the "Neo-German" school, namely Liszt and Wagner. Brahms and both Schumanns were philosophically opposed to any unnecessary excess or showy bravura, and sought to develop a type of romantic music that remained "pure." Brahms was responsible for editing many works of Bach and bringing these into the public consciousness. In 1896 he completed a set of chorale preludes (op. 122) for organ, which draws heavily from Bach and Baroque traditions.

Brahms was a fine pianist, and performed frequently in his younger years. He began composing for piano with the old forms of sonata and theme and variations. As with Schumann, the sonatas are not among his most played or appreciated works. Two sets of variations are marvelous piano writing and frequently performed: the *Variations on a Theme of Händel*, which are highly contrapuntal, as is the music of the baroque composer, and the *Paganini Variations*, which are based on the theme of a Paganini étude, and are, in fact, demanding études themselves. Perhaps Brahms' most popular piano works are the character pieces: ballades, rhapsodies, fantasies, intermezzos, and capriccios. These also make use of counterpoint and complex rhythms, and are deeply expressive. He wrote two great piano concerti, Op. 15 and Op. 83, composed 22 years apart, and some of the best chamber music ever created. Explore the piano quartets, Op. 25, 26, and 60, and the quintet, Op. 34, for piano and strings.



The Young Brahms, c. 1853  
Photographer unknown



The Mature Brahms  
Photograph by C. Brasch

## **Essential Listening**

### Schubert

Impromptus No.1 in C Minor and No. 3 in G flat Major, Op. 90, D.899 A. Brendel

Sonata in A Major D.664 S. Richter OR Sonata in Bb Major, D.960 R. Lupu

### Schumann

Concerto in A Minor, Op. 54 (first movement) H. Gutiérrez

Études Symphoniques, Op. 13 M. Hess OR Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17 R. Prosseda

### Brahms

Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, first movement J. Katchen

Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79 and Intermezzo in E flat Minor, Op. 118 J. Katchen

## **Supplemental Listening**

All/complete works cited above

### Schubert

Sonatas in A Minor D.845 and in A Major D.959

The Wanderer Fantasy D.760

Impromptus, Op. 90, No. 2 and 4, D.899

Winterreise, Op. 89, D.911

### Schumann

Variations on the Name Abegg, Op. 1

Carnaval, Op. 9

Kinderszenen, Op. 15

Arabesque, Op. 18

Dichterliebe, Op. 48

### Brahms

Variations on a Theme of Handel

Variations on a Theme of Paganini

Klavierstücke Op. 116, 117, 118, 119

Concerto No. 2 in B flat Major, Op. 83

Quintet for Piano and Strings, Op. 34