

Gili Loftus, Montréal

Communing with the Shadows of the Schumann-Piatti Circle

A Performer's Reflections on Reverential Playing and
'Reading Between the Lines'

Introduction

Reflecting on her student years during the first decade of the twentieth-century, Marion Bruce Ranken, a violin student at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik of Karl Klingler (a pupil-turned colleague of Joseph Joachim), wrote:

Imagine a composer to whom a melody has suddenly occurred. While this is still a liquid and live thing in his mind and while the emotion which gave rise to it is still there he writes it down in case he should forget it – puts the bird in a cage, in fact – to prevent it from flying away. This in itself is doing a violence to the idea as it is to the bird, but that can't be helped [...] But put the same thing in the hands of a real artist, *and one would find, I expect, that he, far from being less observant of the text, both studies and follows it more carefully than the other, only that his study is like that of one who tries through close observance of the shadow to get in touch with the real thing* that has cast the shadow, and, after communing with this reality, he gives us, not a grinning gargoyle with each feature equally hard and unnaturally marked, but a face with a guiding spirit in it; not a string of unconnected words, but a sensible sentence (emphasis mine).¹

¹ Marion Bruce Ranken, *Some Points on Violin Playing and Musical Performance as learnt in the Hochschule für Music (Joachim School) in Berlin during the time I was a student there, 1902–1909* Edinburgh 1939, p. 72. Emphasis mine.

Ranken's writing style in this paragraph is captivating and vivid, and beyond the poetry of her words lies an invitation, even a call, to reevaluate the way in which interpreters had come to understand the purpose and function of a musical text. For according to this platonic view, a piece of musical notation is only ever a silhouette: it represents a forever unattainable (though always to be reached for), faded trace of the "liquid and live" primordial soup of inspirations from which it has sprung. Being inheritors of late twentieth-century tastes and habits,² geared as those were towards the reenactment of faithful reproductions of musical 'works', and in their tireless promotion of the idea of interpreter-as-conduit, rather than interpreter-as-(temporary)-co-author,³ makes it virtually impossible for us to grasp unaided at this reality that lies beyond the score.

And yet, a nagging question presents itself: should we really be after this elusive and unattainable "real thing" to begin with? In his examination of the origins of the HIP (historically informed performance) revival and its relation to the 'work concept' ideal, John Butt writes "[...] were we to hit upon exactly the 'right' historical performance of a piece of music we would never be able to know it as such; it would not conveniently leap out at us leaving all the other attempts in the dust. [...] Platonist historical performance is by necessity both impossible to achieve and impossible to recognize and therefore it is difficult to know what practical purpose it could possibly serve."⁴ In adopting this view, Ranken's position is ultimately revealed to be a futile one, for how can there ever be one "true" reading of a score? If I could respond to Ranken, I would suggest that in fact, not only are the shadows all that we ultimately have, but that the shadows themselves *are* the actual

² Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style. Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950*, Cambridge 1992, p. 237.

³ This idea is explored in great depth in relation to cellist Friedrich Grützmacher in Kate Bennett Wadsworth, *Precisely Marked in the Tradition of the Composer: the performing editions of Friedrich Grützmacher*, PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2017.

⁴ John Butt, *Playing with History: the Historical Approach to Musical Performance*, Cambridge 2002, p. 64.

meanings that we are after; they are the birds in the cage. The performative act, in all its varied and inexhaustible dimensions, *is* the “real thing”. By broadening our interpretive approach to include more cross-dimensional, pan-instrumentalist methodologies, I would like to suggest that it is in deliberate communion *with* the texts that we unlock not one, but many, guiding spirits, and that it is possible, if ever briefly, for our reach to extend our grasp; and in doing so, that we can successfully arrive at communing with these caged shadows.

In the autumn of 2021, a small team (David Eggert, cellist; Johann Günther, Tonmeister; Paul McNulty, piano builder and technician; and myself, fortepianist) gathered at the Teldex recording studio in Berlin in order to begin work on *Down With Romanticism*, a long-awaited recording project fuelled by this interpretive approach and through which we explored performance practices of the Clara Schumann/Alfredo Piatti circle.⁵ In the following pages, I will share some reflections on how, through our work on this project, we reframed our notion of ‘reverence’ as it is brought to bear on the act of interpreting and interacting with a musical score; and how, through the combined study of original piano solo scores with the transcriptions of these made by leading nineteenth-century cellists, as well as through close observation and analysis of primary sources in the form of two early twentieth-century recordings of two of Clara Schumann’s students, we were guided through this exercise in embodied performance by two of the nineteenth-century’s most influential artists: Clara Schumann and Alfredo Piatti.

⁵ Particular gratitude is extended here to David Eggert, my *Down With Romanticism* brother-in-arms, no less for his ever inspirational playing and cherished friendship as for his insight and conversation, during which many of the reflections and ideas presented in this essay were first discussed.

Down With Romanticism

The tongue-in-cheek title we had chosen for this recording project, a double entendre, refers to the interpretive approach we had decided to adopt throughout the making of the album: appreciative yet critical of the Romantic aesthetic.

The call of ‘down with [something]’ is often used to express “that one does not like something and wants it to stop or fail.”⁶ One might, for example, passionately declare: “Let us be rid of indulgent self-expression, let us be rid of looseness and unpredictability,⁷ let us be rid of the traditions of centuries past – Down With Romanticism!” Indeed, in the 1920s the music critic Leonid Sabaneev encountered this very rhetoric calling for the end of (what he identified as) romantic playing in favour of a more “modern” musical aesthetic that Sabaneev found to be crude, harsh, and “anti-poetic.”⁸ In a scathing indictment of what he viewed as an

⁶ *Down with, Idiom*, Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, Merriam Webster definition, accessed February 14, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/down%20with>

⁷ I take these descriptions from Philip 1992 (cf. note 2), p. 229.

⁸ Leonid Sabaneev and S.W. Pring, *The Destinies of Musical Romanticism*, *The Musical Times* LXIX/1020 (February 1928), p. 115. In words that feel as if they could easily be descriptive of life in 2022 as much as in 1928, Sabaneev writes that “[...] There is a noticeable acceleration of the psychological tempo, and a diminution of the psychological form, and these are echoed in creative work”, p. 115. Writing around the same time as Sabaneev, Fanny Davies (one of Clara Schumann’s most famed students) echoes this sentiment: “We all know that the trend of to-day is to rush and hurry, short cuts, machinery, commercialism, hectic speed, a great deal of superficiality, much conceit and self-advertisement, all of which is most antipathetic to Schumann’s ideals”, in Fanny Davies, *On Schumann: and reading between the lines*, in: *Music & Letters* VI/3 (July 1925), p. 216. For further reading on the decline of nineteenth-century playing styles (including the decline of improvisation), see Clive Brown, *The Decline of the 19th-Century German School of Violin Playing*, *Collection of Historical Annotated String Editions* (CHASE), <https://mhm.hud.ac.uk/chase/article/the-decline-of-the-19th-century-german-school-of-violin-playing-clive-brown/>, and Dana Gooley, *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music*, New York, NY 2018.

expressionless modernism, Sabaneev wrote of a war being waged on romanticism by “prominent composers,” and he worried that the “tempo and rhythm of contemporary life seriously paralyze the romantic prerequisites of creative work in the sphere of music.” He grieved for musicians who had “ceased to be philosophers,”⁹ and ended his article with a sincere (through rather hopeless) desire for the “restoration of a genuine romanticism.”¹⁰ Seen another way, however, and if spoken with a slight change of inflection and tone, the contemporary idiom of ‘down with [something]’ may be used to convey an entirely different, and opposite, meaning. For example, were one to *be down* with romanticism (Sabaneev most certainly was), that would indicate that one heartily approved of it, had an interest in it, and genuinely enjoyed engaging and experimenting with it.¹¹

The dual meaning of the “down with” idiom presented an appealing framework within which to consider the duality of our experience as being twenty-first century musicians, interested in the recovery of the romantic performance aesthetics of a century long gone. On the one hand, we are tasked with continually trying to find ways to tap into a genuine “romantic state of mind” as described by Sabaneev,¹² through rigorous study and reflection on historical source materials, or what musicologist Mary Hunter might refer to as an “improvisationally obedient approach”.¹³ On the other hand, we find ourselves bucking up against the values of the canon-forming, faithful-to-the-letter-of-the-score, “Down with

⁹ Sabaneev 1928 (cf. note 8), p. 115.

¹⁰ Sabaneev 1928 (cf. note 8), p. 115.

¹¹ *Be down with (something), idiom*, The Free Dictionary, accessed March 2, 2022, [https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/be+down+with+\(something\)](https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/be+down+with+(something)). Also *Down with, Idiom, US slang*, Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, Merriam-Webster definition. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/down%20with>

¹² Sabaneev 1928 (cf. note 8), p. 115.

¹³ Mary Hunter, ‘*To Play as if from the Soul of the Composer*’: *The Idea of the Performer in Early Romantic Aesthetics*, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* LVIII/2 (Summer 2005), pp. 357–398.

Romanticism!”, generation from which we inherited an ideology of *Werktreue*, which has had a lasting and pervasive influence on countless aspects of our contemporary musical life and thought. Increasingly in recent years, artists and scholars have been interested in exploring what Richard Kramer has described as the “discomforts of tackling these paradoxes,”¹⁴ resulting in a variety of very imaginative performative (re)enactment studies of nineteenth-century performance practices.¹⁵ This essay, born out of the insights gained from our own attempts at *getting down* with romanticism, aims to join this exciting wave of inquiry.

Reading Between the Lines

There is strong evidence to suggest that Clara Schumann’s view of the act of interpretation varied greatly from how we have come to perceive it. By the century’s end, she had earned herself a reputation as a guardian¹⁶ of the musical identities of the classical masters of the past.¹⁷ Significantly, however, this distinction was awarded in an era that also still very much encouraged improvisatory practices and spontaneous creativity in one’s musicianship; issues of degree and style might have been up for debate, but not the underlying premise of whether to do so or not. There is every reason to think that Schumann would have been cognizant of the emergence of two similar (yet not identical) aesthetic concepts with roots in a

¹⁴ Richard Kramer, *Unfinished Music*, New York 2008, p. ix.

¹⁵ To name but a few: The Romantic Lab (<https://www.romanticlab.com/>), the Brahms Lab (<https://katebennettwadsworth.com/?cat=2>), and the various activities of La Nouvelle Athènes Centre of Romantic Pianos in Paris, France.

¹⁶ The gendered underpinnings of the fact of a woman being the nurturer and care-taker of musical masterworks that were predominantly written by men is not lost on me. My thanks to Dr. Lidia Chang for bringing this up in our correspondence.

¹⁷ For a study of Clara Schumann’s concert programming and its relation to the emerging canonic tradition, see Alexander Stefaniak, *Clara Schumann’s Interiorities and the Cutting Edge of Popular Pianism*, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* LXX/3 (Fall 2017), pp. 697–765.

more romantic (and improvisatory) state of mind: considering a piece of music in historical terms, and considering a piece of music in canonic terms. It is hard to exaggerate the challenge that we now face in our attempts to reconstruct how improvisatory/romantic playing might coexist with such accrued reverence for the text of a musical masterpiece,¹⁸ when modern sensibilities have guided us to view these two approaches as mutually exclusive and have (arguably) resulted in performers that are valued for their powers of interpretation (as we understand that concept today), over their powers of active in(ter)vention and their responsibility for creation.¹⁹

Historical recordings from the turn of the century offer a telling piece of evidence in this regard, as the performers in these recordings clearly exhibit an interpretative style that chooses to emphasize the “characterization of musical events”²⁰ through a wide

¹⁸ Valerie Woodring Goertzen wrote extensively on Clara’s use of improvisation as a programming device (also when playing works by J.S. Bach): see her *By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th- and Early 19th- Century Pianists*, *The Journal of Musicology* XIV/3 (1996), pp. 299–337, and Clara Wieck Schumann’s *Improvisations and Her ‘Mosaics’ of Small Forms*, in: *Beyond Notes: Improvisation in Western Music of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by Rudolph Rasch, Turnhout 2011, pp. 153–162. On how Clara’s improvisatory practices engaged with the performance of historical/canonical works in order to make these more accessible to contemporary audiences, see my *À la Clara: thinking through Clara Schumann’s Hands*, in: *Keyboard Perspectives* 9 (2016), pp. 57–74.

¹⁹ Among writers who have addressed this topic, both Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and David Dolan elegantly speak to this phenomenon. For material by Leech-Wilkinson see *Classical Music as enforced Utopia*, in: *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15 (July 2016), pp. 325–336, and *What’s Wrong with Classical Music?*, <https://challengingperformance.com/dido-belinda/#1511203354013-d73eccc6-d3dc> (accessed February 14, 2022). For material by David Dolan, Henrik J. Jensen, Pedro Martínez-Mediano, Miguel Molina-Solana, Hardik Rajpal, Fernando Rosas and John Sloboda, *The Improvisational State of Mind: a multidisciplinary study of an improvisatory approach to classical music repertoire performance*, in: *Frontiers in Psychology* 25 (September 2018). <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01341/full> (accessed February 14, 2022).

²⁰ Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (cf. note 2), p. 230.

variety of tone colours as well as the bold use of rhetorical and temporal devices over a controlled and literal representation of a musical text.²¹ Exploration of such extant piano rolls and historical recordings that capture turn-of-the-century performance style reveals how much we have distanced ourselves from a kind of music-making that successfully negotiated two spheres – cultivating a “romantic state of mind”²² on the one hand, and careful and sympathetic reading of a musical score on the other – and was a defining aspect of nineteenth century cultural and musical life.

I would therefore suggest that we view Ranken’s memoir, in which she so eloquently describes her philosophy of spontaneity *through* textual observance, as a kind of missing link in our comprehension of what ‘reverence’ and ‘reverential’ score reading may have implied for nineteenth-century artists, such as those of the Schumann/Piatti circle and their pupils. In adopting a Rankenesque approach to score fidelity (in as much as that it is *through* the “close study of the text” that we may arrive at more comprehensive and profound understandings of it), we crack the notion of *Werktreue* wide open to new understandings, thus inviting with it a much wider range of possible interpretations and interactions with a score, if not with the act of musicking more globally.

Fanny Davies, one of Clara Schumann’s most well-known (and oft recorded) students, directly invokes the concept of reverence in relation to reading a score (in this case, in relation to Robert Schumann compositions): “Read his works reverently, not only the notes, but according to the written indications set down by him

²¹ Ibid, pp. 229–230. As to the quickly developing scholarship devoted to the study of early recordings, the Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music project (2004), the British Library sound archive, the Yale Historical Recordings collection, the highly active “celebrating romantic-era performance practice” Facebook group, as well as the subsequent work of Bruce Haynes, Clive Brown, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, David Milsom, Kai Köpp, Neal Peres da Costa, Anna Scott, among many others, provide useful examples.

²² Leonid Sabaneev, *The Destinies of Musical Romanticism* (cf. note 8), p. 115.

and then try to read between the lines”.²³ Upon returning to her native England in the 1880s, Davies quickly established herself as a leading and well-respected Schumann interpreter and led an active career both as a solo, and chamber musician. Indeed, one of the musicians she performed with most often was Alfredo Piatti,²⁴ who by this time was a long-time resident of England, having made London his home base since 1846,²⁵ and who would have been at this point firmly established at the height of English musical society. What I particularly appreciate about the Davies quote above is the way in which it comes to a close. Once one has read reverently, and after one has observed and studied the written indications on the score, one must then unite analytical knowledge (observation and study of the written indications on the score) with innate musical feeling – and, as Fanny concludes, “try to read between the lines”.²⁶ In a criticism of violinist Henri Vieuxtemps’ chamber music playing, Joseph Joachim is reported to have similarly said: “he adhered too strictly to the lifeless printed notes when playing the classics, not understanding how to read between the lines.”²⁷

²³ Fanny Davies, *On Schumann: and reading between the lines*, in: *Music & Letters* VI/3 (July 1925), p. 221. According to Davies, Clara Schumann was in the habit of instructing her pupils to “play what is written; play it as it is written. It all stands there...”, p. 215.

²⁴ Dorothy de Val, *Fanny Davies: A messenger for Schumann and Brahms?*, in: *The Piano in Nineteenth-Century British Culture: instruments, performers and repertoire*, ed. Therese Marie Ellsworth and Susan Wollenberg, London 2016, p. 217–237.

²⁵ Thomas Synofzik, *Clara Schumann in Britain*, in: *Schumann-Journal* 9 (spring 2020), p. 207.

²⁶ The sentence that immediately follows in Davies’s article (cf. note 23) also bears quoting: “First find out what the line is, then see what that line passes through: *both as to phrases and emotional value*. Find the balancing point – and then will come the original reading.” Emphasis mine.

²⁷ In Andreas Moser and Joseph Joachim, *Ein Lebensbild*, Berlin 1908–1910, vol. II, p. 292, as quoted in both Clive Brown, *Reading Between The Lines: the notation and performance of Mozart’s chamber music with keyboard*, in: *Mozart’s Chamber Music with Keyboard*, ed. Martin Harlow, Cambridge 2012, pp. 235–264, and Wadsworth 2017 (cf. note 3), p. 2. Broadly speaking, the Schumann/Piatti circle can be effortlessly extended

In her examination of the performance editions of Friedrich Grützmacher (a contemporary of Piatti's)²⁸ and their reception history, Kate Bennet Wadsworth expounds on this notion of “Werktreue on the page, flexibility on the stage”²⁹ type of playing. The following extract from a letter written by Grützmacher to his Peters editor proves particularly illustrative in the conflation of the idea of ‘reverence’ with an active and deliberate kind of engagement with a musical score: “The Schumann Concerto, as it has been written, is impossible to play; every cellist changes it in his own (naturally often very unsatisfactory) fashion, and thus an approved, effective (and, if I may say so, reverent) arrangement would be greeted with enthusiasm.”³⁰ Grützmacher and Clara Schumann played together in concert on a variety of occasions following Robert Schumann’s death in 1856.³¹ Grützmacher took special pride in the fact that his editions received an endorsement directly from such an authoritative source as Clara Schumann, as we learn in another missive from Grützmacher to his publisher in 1884:

Naturally, Schumann and Mendelssohn cannot pronounce their judgement of me, but to my vindication and satisfaction I can cite that my interpretation of the little Schumann pieces has in its time enjoyed the full approbation of Clara Schumann, and that for my arrangement of the Schumann Cello Concerto I have a very approving written recognition from W. Bargiel (the master’s relative and severe

to include both the Joachim and Brahms circles, all of which influenced and intersected one with the other. As this essay is focused primarily on the figures of Clara Schumann and Alfredo Piatti, the wider Joachim and Brahms circles are not explicitly mentioned, though they are by all means implied.

²⁸ Piatti was not only aware of Grützmacher’s numerous performance editions, but used them occasionally himself. Wadsworth 2017 (cf. note 3), p. 52.

²⁹ Wadsworth 2017 (cf. note 3), p. 49.

³⁰ Quoted in *ibid*, p. 51. Emphasis mine.

³¹ George Kennaway, *Playing The Cello: 1780–1930*, Surrey 2014, p. 221.

critic of the performance and treatment of Schumann's works), which I will gladly show you on your upcoming visit.³²

Characterizations of spiritual reverence, fidelity, and even restraint are often found in the contemporary historical record describing Clara Schumann and her on-stage identity. It is difficult to reconcile such calm and collected descriptors with a public performing persona that must have been nothing short of magnetic, in sight as much as in sound. The ecstatic responses to a young Clara Wieck taking Vienna by storm in 1838, following her performance of Beethoven's *Appassionata* sonata, are a case in point.³³ Such terms were used from early on in Schumann's career, and have persisted and endured to this day, without an (as yet) significant body of rigorous scrutiny to challenge them. April Prince confronts these classifications in her nuanced analysis of subversive elements in Clara Schumann's portraiture and iconography, where she writes that such classifications "still attach Schumann to a nineteenth-century ideal that demanded the performer defer to the musical work [...] While it is clear that both critics and Schumann herself cultivated this kind of performing ideal, it cannot be ignored that this characterization became a way to obfuscate almost entirely the presence of the feminine in music and of Schumann herself."³⁴ She claims furthermore that the "visual evidence asks us to acknowledge that the creation of Schumann as priestess was insti-

³² Quoted in Wadsworth 2017 (cf. note 3), p. 39.

³³ For descriptions of the young Clara Wieck's performances in Vienna, see Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: the artist and the woman*, Ithaca etc. 2001, pp. 78–80 as well as Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: an artist's life, based on materials found in diaries and letters*, trans. Grace E. Hadow, London 1913, pp. 129–130. Later into the century, Anton Schindler (begrudgingly) describes the overwhelming embrace of Clara Schumann as the "greatest model of Beethoven performance" by contemporary German music critics. See Anton Schindler, *Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven*, 2 vol., Münster 1860, p. 263.

³⁴ April L. Prince, *(Re)Considering the Priestess: Clara Schumann, Historiography, and the Visual*, in: *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 21 (2017), p. 109.

gated and perpetuated likely because of the social unease surrounding the public feminine body, which portraiture – because of the nature of the medium – helps expose.”³⁵ I, too, find this enduring tendency to think of Clara Schumann as a saintly, even genderless,³⁶ musical muse perplexing, and it seems to me that by continuing to think of her predominantly in terms of religious devotion and piety, as some kind of ‘priestess’³⁷ of great musical works, we only rob ourselves of an opportunity to engage with the historical record in much more imaginative and original ways.

Scholars have often commented on the impressive longevity and stability of Clara Schumann’s career on the stage. This is a career that lasted over sixty years, and boasted at its peak an average of just under forty concerts per season, with performances across Europe, England, and Russia.³⁸ Schumann collaborated with a wide variety of artists throughout this time, and barring Joseph Joachim, the musician she performed with the most was Alfredo Piatti.³⁹ It is interesting to note that a similar type of language found in descriptions of Clara’s public persona was used to describe Piatti’s stage presence as well. With a “restrained” use of

³⁵ Ibid., p. 109.

³⁶ Reich 2001, *Clara Schumann* (cf. note 33), p. 177.

³⁷ The notion of Clara as a ‘priestess’ abounds in the literature. For but one example, see Reich 2001 (cf. note 33), pp. 9 and 152. Mentioned also in Thomas Synofzik, *Clara Schumann and Ilona Einbenschütz – Addendum*, in: *Schumann-Journal* 9 (spring 2020), p. 173.

³⁸ Reinhard Kopiez, Andreas C. Lehman and Janina Klassen, *Clara Schumann’s Collection of Playbills: a historiometric analysis of life-span development, mobility, and repertoire canonization*, in: *Poetics* XXXVII/1 (2009), pp. 57–58.

³⁹ Schumann and Piatti performed regularly together (often joining forces with Joachim when playing piano trios) over the course of thirty years, and shared the stage a total of 175 times. Their well established professional partnership is unfortunately not reflected in their extant correspondence, of which there is remarkably little. See Synofzik (cf. Note 25), p. 207, as well as Job Ter Haar, *The Playing Style of Alfredo Piatti: learning from a nineteenth-century virtuoso cellist* (PhD diss., Royal Academy of Music, 2019), p. 81.

vibrato and an “austere classicism”,⁴⁰ Piatti’s playing style is said to be marked by “a chaste cultivation of style”.⁴¹ To be sure, Piatti was described also in much more passionate terms, as a player of great feeling and pathos,⁴² but in comparison with contemporary descriptions of Clara Schumann, which overall err much more on the side of propriety, one can’t help but wonder at the gendered implications of being a male, as opposed to female, performer in a 19th-century context.

When taking into consideration all of the above and putting it against the evidence of the very different kind of playing that is clearly heard on the recordings of both Fanny Davies and Adelina de Lara, two pianists who both studied with Schumann directly, and were known to have performed alongside Piatti, it would seem that playing reverentially must require a great deal more risk-taking and elasticity than we might otherwise be accustomed to thinking.

Echoes and Shadows:

reverential readings of Robert Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15

In preparation for our reverential reading – “à la Piatti and Clara” – of Robert Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15 (in the Grützmacher transcription for cello and piano),⁴³ David and I consulted a wide variety of sources, both documentary and aural. Our main auditory sources (our echoes) were two recordings of the original solo piano version of the piece, made by two of Clara Schumann’s most celebrated students: the previously mentioned Fanny Davies and her 1929 recording for Columbia and a recording by Adelina de Lara,

⁴⁰ Kennaway 2014 (cf. note 31), pp. 137–138.

⁴¹ Quoted in Haar 2019 (cf. note 39), p. 50. Ter Haar provides a great many more citations of contemporary reviews of Piatti’s playing.

⁴² Haar 2019 (cf. note 39), pp. 51–52.

⁴³ Robert Schumann, *Kinderszenen*, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1839 (first edition), as well as Robert Schumann, *Kinderszenen*, arr. Friedrich Grützmacher, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1873.

which was committed to tape towards the end of her life.⁴⁴ These two principal recordings were supplemented by other turn-of-the-century recordings of pianists, cellists, violinists and singers we found particularly inspiring.⁴⁵

For our main textual sources (our shadows) we primarily consulted the Grützmacher transcription of the piece, as well as Piatti's transcriptions for cello and piano of the Mendelssohn collection of *Lieder ohne Worte* (one of which we also recorded).⁴⁶ Both transcriptions contain considerable markings in the cello part: fingerings, shift indications, slides, bow changes, additional dynamic and tempo markings beyond what is included in the original piano solo text, and at times even additional melody lines – In short, a whole host of “reverent” markings. As regards the piano part, this admittedly turned out to be a rather curious experience to perform. On the one hand, having the luxury of sharing the texture with another

⁴⁴ Schumann, Robert. *Kinderszenen, op. 15*. Fanny Davies. Recorded February 1929. Columbia L2321, WAX 4182. This recording has been conveniently uploaded onto YouTube. For Adelina de Lara's recording, see *Pupils of Clara Schumann*, vol. 4, piano. Adelina de Lara. Pearl: GEMM CDS, 1991, compact disc. De Lara was also a prodigious recorder. She was ten years Fanny Davies's junior, and following a period of preparatory study with Davies, she began instruction with Clara Schumann (briefly passing through the tutelage of Marie Schumann, Clara's daughter), which lasted from 1886 to 1892. This recording is likewise very conveniently found on YouTube.

⁴⁵ The following list contains but a small selection of some of our ‘heavy hitters’; recordings we found ourselves returning to over and over again, for reference, as well as inspiration. It is by no means exhaustive, and is meant purely in the spirit of sharing recordings which we grew to love. Some of these recordings have been uploaded on to YouTube. Alexander Verzhbilovich's 1904 recording of Karl Davydov's *Romance sans paroles, op. 23* is a study in elasticity and rubato; Adelina Patti's 1905 recording of *The Last Rose of Summer* is a wonderful example of vocal portamento, and although much later, Maria Grinberg's 1967 and 1968 radio recordings of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* (and really anything under her fingers) are exemplary.

⁴⁶ Felix Mendelssohn, *Lieder ohne Worte*, arr. Alfredo Piatti, 4 vols., ser. 3, Berlin: N. Simrock 1874.

voice (external to my own) brought along with it a certain degree of ease to the proceedings: at its most basic level, there were simply less notes to play. However, the piano in these transcriptions is by no means relegated to a purely accompanimental role vis-à-vis the cello. Melodies are freely exchanged between the two instruments throughout the set, and the responsibility of creating fluid gestures and dislocated arpeggiated textures is likewise shared between the two instruments. As a pianist, used to being self-sufficient in much of my music-making, the sensation was novel: partly liberating, as I relished in the enjoyment of sharing with a trusted other the activity of characterizing and molding the musical scenes of Schumann's composition or the soaring gestures of a Mendelssohn melody; but also partly restrictive, as I had to trust in someone else to build momentum and directionality that normally would have been mine alone to shape. This was felt in an almost physical dimension as well. To give one example, in moments where the cello carried the tenor line in a given phrase, the sensation was almost one of having a number of my fingers taken from me, to be then given to David and his cello, where they embarked on a kinetic journey that was distinct, and yet connected to my own. In essence, one could say that playing these Piatti and Grützmacher transcriptions created of us a kind of hybrid being: bow-holding and pedal-pressing.

Our final guides in our reverential reading were, naturally, the instruments themselves, as there is crucial information that can only be gained through the tactility and physicality of playing on a historical piano,⁴⁷ or by the physical gestures that emerge from the embracing of an, at times, radically different kind of cello technique. In order to arrive at an understanding of these pieces, each of these strata – documentary sources, early recordings, and our own embodied knowledge – were layered upon each other, compared, and juxtaposed while all the while imagining the possible connections between a web of interlinked historical influences

⁴⁷ We are grateful to have been able to use Paul McNulty's beautiful Op. 6747 Streicher fortepiano (1868), and a 1758 Mathias Wenceslaus Staudinger cello kindly on loan from Johannes Walter.

(Schumann, Piatti, Grützmacher, Davies, and de Lara), exploring the creative and interpretive potential that could be mined from them all.

In the following section, I will share two instances from the Grützmacher transcription of Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15, where shadows and echoes engaged in particularly thought-provoking dialogue.

The "slip and trip"

The first example is a striking moment in the cycle's second movement, *Kuriose Geschichte*. Both Davies and de Lara are in agreement in taking exquisite care of how they shape the phrase starting at the upbeat of m. 17 going to m. 20 (see example 1). At this instance, the movement has momentarily veered to the key of F major (Grützmacher transposes a number of movements in the set; in the original piano version the transition would be to G Major), and in Schumann's original version, we are presented with a dynamic indication of *p*, as well as a *crescendo-decrescendo* marking over the course of three bars.

Ex. 1: Robert Schumann, *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15: No 2 *Kuriose Geschichte*, mm. 17–23, (solo piano version)

In both de Lara's and Davies' recordings, there is a clear relaxation of tempo here, as under their fingers the descending semi-melismatic melody unabashedly indulges in the simple beauty of its own line, before finding its way back to the main theme and blithely resuming its original course. But de Lara and Davies opt for somewhat different approaches; a more self-assured approach from Davies (which we came to affectionately call "the barging in" approach) compared to a more understated one from de Lara ("the sneak"). Noteworthy as well is the two musicians' very attractive dislocation of the left and right hands throughout these bars. Both pianists are clearly united in their intention of marking this short B-section as particularly poignant, and do so by holding back temporally (each in her own way) as well as by highlighting the interplay in the multi-voiced texture of the passage. This highly expressive moment is not lost on Grützmaker. In mm. 18 and 19 of his transcription (see example 2) he indicates two very expressive fingerings.

With regard to m. 19, the three note gesture (A – B-flat – A) is in principle possible to accomplish via other, much easier, means (simply utilizing the open A string, for example). The shift onto the D string occasioned by the indicated 3rd finger is strictly speaking a shift that lies outside the standard conventions for cello scale system fingerings. Certainly this would be the case for Piatti as well, as can be seen in the scale system and other pedagogical materials that Piatti presents in his own cello method, which was first published in 1882.⁴⁸ The resultant effect of following these two fingerings in the cello part is a highlighting of the descending figure across mm. 18 and 19, the melody gently ambling downwards, each note harder to let go of than the last. This is particularly detectable in Davies's rendition of these bars (*sans* cello), where her way of shaping this phrase sounds as if she is doing everything

⁴⁸ Cf. *Piatti's Pedagogical Materials*, in: Haar 2019 (cf. note 39), pp. 91–104. Both the first edition of Piatti's cello method, as well as the second edition by Whitehouse and Tabb (1911), are open source and can be found on IMSLP.

in her power to draw out a vocal *portamento* from the piano's percussive, felt-covered hammers.

One bar earlier in m. 18 the 4th finger is on the D, followed by, in m. 19, the 3rd finger on the A, which in order to produce, requires an impractical shift onto the cello's D string (and with it, a darker and more mellow tone colour). One can safely assume that a portamento is likewise implied here.⁴⁹ In order to execute the 4th finger on the D (m. 18), the cellist is required to accomplish an inconvenient fingering comprising of a descending shift with an ascending finger. The "slip" relates to the almost unavoidable and ever-so-slight *glissando* (like a port de voix) that is caused by the string/finger shift. The "trip" is what results when the notated finger (in this case, the 4th), due to the kinetic energy caused by the momentum of the slip, puts on the brakes by gently hammering down on the arrival string, creating a declamatory emphasis.



Ex. 2: mm. 17–19, cello part in Friedrich Grützmacher's transcription of Robert Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15

In giving a name to this expressive, yet inconvenient, cellistic choreography, we were able to develop a shared musico-linguistic vocabulary, which in turn gave us the tools to immediately identify such emotive moments as we came across them throughout the piece. As two twenty-first century performers bonding over the

⁴⁹ Clive Brown has demonstrated how portamento in string playing goes hand in hand with fingering practices, see Brown 2018 (cf. note 8). For those who wish to dive deeper into the detailed mechanics of cello technique as practiced by nineteenth-century practitioners, see both the Wadsworth 2017 (cf. note 3) and Haar 2019 (cf. note 39) sources mentioned previously, as well as George Kennaway's monumental survey of cello playing from 1780 to 1930 (cf. note 31).

shared experience of interacting with this performing style, these kinds of shorthand communications (whether verbal or physical) became part of our embodied knowledge; much in the way it would have been for our historical counterparts. A particular interaction described by Fanny Davies, and which occurred during a rehearsal of Johannes Brahms' piano trio in C minor, op. 101, between Brahms (who was at the piano), Joseph Joachim and Robert Hausmann (with Clara Schumann turning the pages) comes to mind. Davies describes how Brahms looked "with those penetrating grey-blue eyes, at Joachim and Hausmann, for the start; then lifting both his energetic little arms high up and descending 'plump' on to the first C minor chord – somewhat in the manner of the incomparable Rubinstein – as much as to say: 'I mean *THAT*.' (emphasis in original)."⁵⁰

The "Unnecessary" Portamento

Example 3 features the final phrase of the penultimate movement of the set: *Kind im Einschlummern* (mm. 27–32). For this final sequence of rocking sixth and seventh intervals, Grützmacher indicates two consecutive "slip and trips", this time requiring of the cellist to shift on the same note. The almost unavoidable, yet subtle, portamentos that result of the physical motion of the fingers having to shift along the same string are a beautifully affecting by-product.⁵¹ This extraordinary sequence, concludes with a wonderfully 'unnecessary' glissando to a flageolet. Rather than a glissando, the resolution from the G–E interval down to the D in m. 30 could

⁵⁰ See George S. Bozarth, *Fanny Davies and the Performance of Brahms's Late Chamber Music*, in *Performing Brahms: Primary Evidence, Evaluation, and Interpretation*, ed. Michael Musgrave and Bernard Sherman, London 2003, pp. 172–176.

⁵¹ See Haar 2019 (cf. note 39), p. 143, for a description of these kinds of same-note 'slip and trips' in Piatti's cello parts (Ter Haar refers to these as 'finger replacements on the same string'), and the "small portamento" that comes along with them, only possible to avoid if the player makes "a special effort to mask" them.

easily be executed without shifting at all. One need only maintain the hand firmly, and comfortably, in the cello's 3rd position and not even have to break a sweat. By asking for a glissando at this moment, Grützmacher gives the performers no choice but to stretch time, and generously so, thus expressively shaping the indicated *ritardando* marking of Schumann's original version (example 4).



Ex. 3: Robert Schumann, *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15: No 12 *Kind im Einschlummern*: mm. 27–32, cello part in Friedrich Grützmacher's transcription

Ex. 4: Robert Schumann, *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15: No 12 *Kind im Einschlummern*: mm. 25–32 (solo piano version)

An additional marking to the piano part added here by Grützmacher that may be of interest is the inverted hairpin with which this

phrase begins and ends (see example 5), and which is not so explicitly marked in the original Schumann piano solo version.

Ex. 5: Robert Schumann, *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15: No 12 *Kind in Einschlummern*: mm. 25–32, piano part in Friedrich Grützmaker's transcription of Robert Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15

The idea of this hairpin can be plainly heard in the Davies recording. Her tone gloriously opens up at this moment (m. 27), her right hand in dialogue with her left hand, who has just jumpstarted the whole sequence. Davies painstakingly delineates each of the intervals as she rocks them up and down the descending circle of fifths, gradually losing steam in the most astoundingly drawn-out *ritardando*.⁵²

With regard to the transcription itself and the relationship between the two instruments, Grützmaker's division of roles is pretty much as can be expected. The piano's right hand line is given to the cello, while the original left hand piano line is bumped up an octave, now given to the right hand of the pianist to play. The left hand thus remains in charge of the descending fifths in the bass, and is fortified with slightly fuller chords than in the original. Due

⁵² For recent sources on hairpins as markers of temporal and rhythmic fluidity as well as agogic inflection and flexibility see David Hyun-Su Kim, *The Brahmsian Hairpin*, in: *19th-Century Music* 36 (2012), pp. 46–57; Cheong Yew Choong, *Decoding Idiosyncratic Hairpins: Dynamic Changes or "Notated" Rubato?*, in: *Mahidol Music Journal* 2 (March–August 2019), pp. 4–20.

to the requirement of staying within the natural range of the cello, the resulting layering of the voices differs slightly from the original Robert Schumann version: the highest voice resides with the pianist's right hand, while the cello takes charge of the middle range and the lowest voice is given to the pianist's left hand. The piano, in effect, cradles the cello within it, and with the last two sixteenth notes of m. 31, both instruments glissando off to sleep.

Conclusion

How then to summarize this whole exercise in reverent interpretation à la Schumann and Piatti? I suggest we return to Mary Hunter, and her tracing of the evolution of early Romantic performance concepts. In her summary of Hegelian philosophy vis-à-vis his contemplation of musical performance, Hunter describes a notion by which "self expression and fidelity to the work are not only not in conflict with one another, but they are two sides of the same coin; a result achieved by the spiritual work of the performer."⁵³ Hunter primarily explores the ideological paradigm shift that occurred at the start of the nineteenth-century, and which gave rise and value to the interpretative performer model (as opposed to the composer-performer or improvising virtuoso model of the preceding centuries). Within this new framework it emerged "that there was another kind of discourse about the act of bringing works to life, one in which the performer's role was considered to demand genius and in which the performer – even, or especially, the interpretative (as opposed to the improvising virtuoso) player – was regarded as a fully fledged artist on a par with the composer".⁵⁴ When seen from this lens, it is possible to read Clara Schumann's often quoted letter to Joseph Joachim, in which she writes "even if I am not a creative artist, still I am re-creating,"⁵⁵ not as an admission from a "self-obliterating", "submissive"⁵⁶ performer – but

⁵³ Hunter 2005 (cf. note 13), p. 363.

⁵⁴ Hunter 2005 (cf. note 13), p. 361.

⁵⁵ As quoted in Reich 2001 (cf. note 37), p. 229.

⁵⁶ Hunter 2005 (cf. note 13), p. 361.

rather an empowered declaration of a self-assured and formidable interpretative artist.

That inhabiting a state-of-mind in which loyalty and fidelity need not compete with self-realization is a joyful experience, will likely not come as any big surprise, neither will the present author's enthusiastic endorsement of adopting a kind of reverential playing of musical masterworks that is rooted in a polyvalent historical-contextual approach. Such an approach does not "uphold one single and only way of arriving at a great goal,"⁵⁷ but rather revels in the "wholehearted dialogue with the past"⁵⁸ which casting a wider net of inquiry opens up to us. Let us then do as the Schumann/Piatti circle do, and set to our spiritual work, communing with that which is between the lines and amidst the shadows.

⁵⁷ Fanny Davies as quoted in Bozarth 2003 (cf. note 49), p. 176.

⁵⁸ Butt 2002 (cf. note 4), p. 71.

