

# Schumann's Last Piano Work: *Geistervariationen*

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## Abstract

Robert Schumann was one of the greatest composers of the nineteenth century. Schumann suffered from a long-term mental disorder dating back to 1833 and his health deteriorated in February 1854. His Theme and Variations, WoO 24, a set of five variations known as *Geistervariationen* (Ghost Variations), was his last piano work, written between February 10 and 28, 1854, in the midst of his final mental breakdown, which resulted in a suicide attempt. The complete Theme and Variations were not published until 1939 as his wife Clara Schumann (who was also one of the most recognized musicians of the day) jealously guarded the manuscripts of this piece. The *Geistervariationen* is infrequently played and considerably different from his earlier sets of variations, such as the *ABEGG Variations*, Op. 1 and *Études symphoniques*, Op. 13. This article discusses the details of the work in relation to the state of his health and his compositional process, which is pieced together from the diaries of his wife Clara Schumann and other sources, as well as comparing the work with Clara Schumann's *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann* Op. 20, which was written and dedicated to her husband in 1853.

**Keywords:** Schumann, *Geistervariationen*, Clara Schumann, Variations, Piano Works

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## Introduction

Robert and Clara Schumann are renowned as an eminent musician couple of the nineteenth century. Called the most Romantic of the Romantics, Robert Schumann (1810–1856) wrote numerous imaginative piano compositions. Clara Schumann (1819–1896), established her reputation as a child prodigy, and went on to become one of the most successful pianists of her times. She was also a composer, a piano teacher, an editor of Robert Schumann's work, a mother of eight children, and the wife of a great yet mentally unstable composer.

The author has been fascinated by the beautiful love and friendships between Robert and Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), which were expressed in many of their compositions. In the author's piano recital in 2019 to commemorate Clara Schumann's 200th birth anniversary, the program featured six sets of variations by the three composers, namely *Romance variée*, Op. 3 by Clara Wieck, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20 by Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 9 by Johannes Brahms, *Theme and Variations*, Op. 18b by Johannes Brahms, *Theme and Variations (Geistervariationen)* by Robert Schumann, and *Variations on a Theme of Schumann*, Op. 23 for piano four hands by Johannes Brahms. While working on the program, the author became interested in the background of Schumann's *Geistervariationen*, his last piano work, which is not performed very often in concert and is considerably different from his earlier sets of variations, such as the *ABEGG Variations*, Op. 1 and *Études symphoniques*, Op. 13. This article will reveal the composition process of the *Geistervariationen* and take a close look into the theme and each variation, as well as comparing the work with Clara Schumann's *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, Op. 20.

Berthold Litzmann's *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life, Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters* is a wonderful primary source material to learn the origin of the title, *Geistervariationen*, and Clara's observations and concerns over the unstable condition of Robert Schumann during the time of the composition. Dina Maria Neglia-Khachatryan's DMA dissertation "Schumann's Violin Concerto: A Neglected Treasure?" is a thorough analytical study of Schumann's Violin Concerto, which was written just four months earlier than the *Geistervariationen*, and reveals the concerto's dedicatee, Joseph Joachim's reaction to the work. Paul Rickard-Ford's PhD thesis "Portfolio of Recorded Performances and Exegesis: The Late Piano Works of Robert Schumann" includes a chapter discussing the *Geistervariationen*. Minoru Nishihara's profound research in his *Schumann: A Study of All Piano Works* describes Schumann's complicated process of each composition as well as his various allusions both to his own works and to those of others. Peter Ostwald's perspective psychobiography, *Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius* is highly informative, especially in the opening chapter focusing on the crucial year of 1854. John Worthen's *Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician* also provides valuable insights on Schumann's life, attempting to free the composer from common preconceptions about his mental illness. Nancy B. Reich's *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* is probably the most complete and reliable biography of Clara Schumann. Eric Sam, the regular contributor to *The Musical Times* in

1965–1980, was known for his research on Schumann’s and Brahms’s ciphers and music codes. His article “Brahms and his Clara Themes” demonstrates “Clara’s themes”. G. Henle Verlag’s chief editor, Dr. Wolf-Dieter Seiffert, wrote an article “Robert Schumanns Thema mit Variationen Es-Dur, genannt ‘Geistervariationen,’” in which he discusses the possession of the manuscript copy of the variations after Schumann’s death. In Henle’s musical score, *Schumann Thema mit Variationen*, which was used for the author’s performance and research, the Preface written by Wolf-Dieter Seiffert also provides helpful information for this study.

### Background

Before their marriage in 1840, Robert Schumann had suffered from a long-term mental disorder dating from 1833. In 1850, although he became music director of the Municipal Orchestra and Chorus in Düsseldorf, his health gradually worsened, and by 1853 his capacity to hear and to perform music – in particular, to play the piano, or to conduct – had begun to be seriously impaired in ways of which he was unaware. Clara Schumann wrote and dedicated *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, Op. 20 for her husband’s 43rd birthday on June 8, 1853. It was, however, his last birthday spent with the family. Schumann had to resign from the music director position in the fall of 1853.

On September 30, 1853, Robert and Clara Schumann were visited by Johannes Brahms, another great composer of the nineteenth century but still unknown at that time. Marie, the Schumanns’ eldest daughter, then 12 years old, recalled the arrival of the young composer, who was 20 at the time: “Both parents were in the most joyful excitement—again and again they began and could not speak of anything but the gifted young morning visitor, whose name was Johannes Brahms.” This meeting was to change Brahms’ life as Schumann discovered the young man’s talents and highly praised him in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Journal of Music).

Around the time of Brahms’ visit, Schumann composed his Violin Concerto in D minor at the request of Joseph Joachim (1831–1907), one of the most prominent violinists of that time. According to Dina Maria Neglia-Khachatryan, Joachim delayed performing the work publicly during Schumann’s lifetime because, as he confided to Clara after Schumann’s death, Joachim believed the concerto was the inferior product of an unstable mind. Clara Schumann was also always uneasy about the works of Schumann’s last years, fearing that the music was weaker and showed signs of the mental confusion he suffered. Schumann’s five *Romanzen* for cello and piano were written in the first week of November 1853 but Clara destroyed the work in 1893 because she feared that they would be published after her death. Just as she had feared, many of the works whose publication she had opposed appeared in the twentieth century. These included the above-mentioned Violin Concerto, published in 1937; the *FAE Sonata*, a four-movement sonata for violin and piano produced collaboratively in October 1853 by Schumann, Brahms, and Schumann’s pupil Albert Dietrich (1829–1908), which was published in 1935; and the Theme and Variations in E-flat major, published in 1939.

### Schumann's Health and Compositional Process

The Theme and Variations is Schumann's last piano work and was written in February 1854 during the period when he was suffering a severe nervous breakdown and emotional collapse. By February 10, his final breakdown had begun. Clara noted increasingly frequent auditory hallucinations, headaches, and sufferings beyond anything she had ever seen. Clara recorded in her diary:

On the night of Friday the 10th and Saturday the 11th, Robert suffered from so violent an affection of the hearing that he did not close his eyes all night. He kept on hearing the same note over and over again, and at times he heard chords. By day it became merged in other sounds.<sup>3</sup>

According to Seiffert, Clara notes the date of the first draft of the Theme as February 10.<sup>4</sup> On February 14, Ruppert Becker, concertmaster of the Düsseldorf orchestra, noticed at a restaurant how Schumann's "inner concert started" so that he could not read his newspaper.<sup>5</sup> Clara wrote the following entry in her diary on February 17:

On the night of Friday the 17th, after we had been in bed for some time, Robert suddenly got up and wrote down a theme, which, as he said, an angel had sung to him. When he had finished it he lay down again and all night long he was picturing things to himself, gazing towards heaven with wide-open eyes; he was firmly convinced that angels hovered round him revealing glories to him in wonderful music.<sup>6</sup>

Clara continues on the following day, Saturday 18: "Morning came and with it a terrible change. The angel voices turned to those of demons and in hideous music they told him he was a sinner and they would cast him into hell."<sup>7</sup> Clara observed: "In short, his condition grew into a veritable nervous paroxysm; he screamed in pain, because the embodiments of tigers and hyenas were rushing forward to seize him."<sup>8</sup> On Sunday 19, he stayed in bed, "under the great agony of evil spirits," and told Clara that his "cranial nerves were terribly over-stimulated."<sup>9</sup> The next day, Monday 20, Schumann spent at his desk, "paper, pen and ink in front of him and listened to the angels, then writing some words occasionally, but only a few, and then always listening."<sup>10</sup> Becker's diary on February 21 states: "What I had not dared to think would happen has happened! Schumann has been insane for several days now... Frau Schumann looks as if she is suffering as she never has before. She is in the eighth month of pregnancy [actually the fifth or sixth] and has not closed an eye since his illness. The poor, unfortunate woman! During the night she sits by his bed and listens for every movement."<sup>11</sup>

Seiffert says that probably on February 22 or 23, according to Clara's and Becker's diary entries, he composed a set of variations on the theme offered by angelic voices.<sup>12</sup> Becker continues on February 24:

I visited him at noon and Frau Schumann asked me to go walking with him. During the hour I spent with him he spoke quite rationally, except when he told me that the spirit of Franz Schubert had sent him a wonderful melody that he had written down and on which he had composed variations.<sup>13</sup>

Clara's diary states that Schumann was better on February 26, playing music and having a large supper in the evening: "Then suddenly, at 9:30, he stood up and said he must have his clothes, he must go into the asylum as he no longer had his mind under control and did not know what he might not end by doing in the night."<sup>14</sup>

According to Clara's diary, Schumann spent the morning of February 27 making a clean copy of four of his variations and was working on a fifth.<sup>15</sup> In the midst of this activity he left his home half-dressed and threw himself into the icy waters of the Rhine in an attempt to commit suicide. He was immediately rescued. Marie, the eldest daughter of Schumann, who was 12 years old at the time, recalls: "When I went out to the street I saw a large noisy crowd of people coming toward me, and as I came closer I recognized my father, supported by two men under his arms, and with his hands in front of his face."<sup>16</sup> When Schumann returned home, his doctors advised Clara to move out and stay with Rosalie Leser, Clara's blind friend, so that he would not become overexcited.<sup>17</sup> Clara was not allowed to see him; she did not even know he had left the house in order to kill himself.

Schumann was back at his desk the following day, February 28; Albert Dietrich (1829–1908), a student of Robert and very good friend of the Schumann family, reported that "as before" he "seemed completely in his right mind."<sup>18</sup> He completed the work he had interrupted so dramatically. "*Clara Schumann gewidmet*" (dedicated to Clara Schumann) was written next to the title on his autographed manuscript. Her diary records that she received these variations on February 28, with a note from Schumann suggesting that she should play them to her friend Leser.<sup>19</sup> After the dreadful suicide attempt and the completion of his variations, Schumann was taken to a hospital in Endenich on March 4, 1854 and remained there for another two and a half years until his death on July 29, 1856. Clara, being five or six months pregnant at that time, remained at Leser's house until after Schumann had left and did not see him again until two days before his death.

### The Theme of *Geistervariationen*

The theme of Schumann's last piano work is written in the key of E-flat major and consists of 28 bars in binary structure (16 bars + 12 bars), repeating only the second half, which is indicated by a repeat sign. This structure remains the same through all five variations except for the last one, which has light extensions in the second half. The first phrase of the theme includes a pair of three descending notes, G–F–Eb and Ab–G–F, joined by an ascending fourth interval as seen in bars 1–2 of Figure 1.



Figure 1. Schumann, Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24, b. 1–8. Source: G. Henle Verlag. Used by permission of the publisher.

The bass begins simply with tonic octaves as a pedal tone in the first four bars, followed by a descending scalar motion, which anticipates the melodic line of bars 6–8 in the manner of a canon. The canonic descending melody in those three bars includes five descending notes: C–Bb–Ab–G–F. The pattern of the five descending notes frequently appears in Schumann's works, such as the opening theme of the first movement of his Piano Sonata No. 3, Op. 14 (originally written in 1836), the very beginning of *Fantasie* Op. 17 (originally written in 1836), and Noveletten Op. 21, No. 8 (1838) in the section called "Stimme aus der Ferne" (A Voice from the Distance). This descending five-note pattern is known as one of "Clara's themes"<sup>20</sup> because the pattern may have been originated in Clara Schumann's earlier compositions. Most notably in "Notturmo" No. 2 from her *Soirées musicales*, Op. 6 written in 1834–36, which contains the descending five-note pattern and bears a significant resemblance to the "Stimme aus der Ferne" section of her husband's Noveletten Op. 21, No. 8. The opening theme of Clara's Variations Op. 20 is actually an exact restating of Robert's little piano piece, *Bunte Blätter* (Colored Leaves) Op. 99 No. 4, which also starts with the descending pattern of "Clara's theme."

As mentioned earlier, Clara's diary on February 17, 1854, indicates that Schumann wrote down a theme, which, as he said, an angel had sung to him. Many scholars observe, however, that the theme resembles some of his previous works: the first violin part in the second movement of the String Quartet, Op. 41, No. 2 written in 1842 (Figure 2); "Frühling Ankunft" from the *Liederalbum für die Jugend*, Op. 79, No. 19 written in 1849 (Figure 3); and the solo violin part in the second movement of the Violin Concerto in D minor, WoO 23, written in 1853 (Figure 4).



Figure 2. Schumann String Quartet, Op. 41, No. 2, II, b. 32–39, first violin. Source: Breitkopf & Härtel.

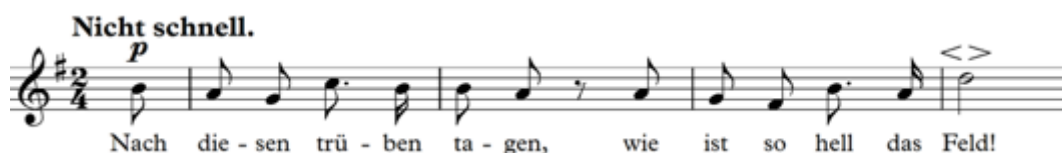


Figure 3. Schumann "Frühling Ankunft," Op. 79, No. 19, b. 1–4. Source: Breitkopf & Härtel.



Figure 4. Schumann Violin Concerto in D minor, WoO 23, II, b. 3–7, solo violin. Source: Muzgiz.

### Five Variations Compared with Clara Schumann's Op. 20

The following five variations show some parallels with Clara Schumann's Variations Op. 20. The first variation (Figure 5) decorates the theme with triplet figures in the inner voice. Those are highly chromatic with frequent neighbor tones.



Figure 5. Schumann Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24, b. 29–32. Source: G. Henle Verlag. Used by permission of the publisher.

Triplet rhythm and non-chord tones are also employed in the first variation of Clara's Op. 20 (Figure 6). Both Clara and Robert use dotted rhythm with triplets simultaneously in polyphonic texture.



Figure 6. Clara Schumann Variations on a Theme by Schumann, Op. 20, Var. I, b. 41–44. Source: Breitkopf & Härtel.

Variation 2 is written in canon (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Schumann Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24, b. 57–64. Source: G. Henle Verlag. Used by permission of the publisher.

Schumann uses canonic form in his various piano works: for example, Nos. 3 and 9 of *Papillons* Op. 2 (1829–32); No. 1 of *Intermezzi* Op. 4 (1832); Nos. 1, 4, 5, 6 and 8 of *Études symphoniques* Op. 13 (1834–35); and the “Quasi Andantino” movement of the Third Sonata Op. 14. His writing of canonic imitation may be due to his studies of counterpoint and thoroughbass with Heinrich Dorn (1804–1892) in 1831 as his early accomplishment under Dorn is seen in *Fugen und Kanons* Anh: F19.<sup>21</sup>

The second variation is marked “*Canonisch*.” Why did Schumann bother writing this about a variation that is obviously canonic? He never indicated it in the other



canonic works mentioned above. Could it be a sign of Schumann's insanity? Clara also wrote the sixth variation of her Op. 20 (Figure 8) using canonic imitation between the soprano and tenor, first at a fifth and then at an octave interval in four-part counterpoint.



Figure 8. Clara Schumann Variations on a Theme by Schumann, Op. 20, Var. VI, b. 148–155. Source: Breitkopf & Härtel.

Unlike Clara's canonic variation, Schumann's variation remains at an octave below the theme: first one beat later (bars 57–60), then two beats or one bar (bars 61–72), and finally two bars later (bars 73–80) (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Schumann Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24, b. 72–76. Source: G. Henle Verlag. Used by permission of the publisher.

Variation 3 can be compared with the fourth variation of Clara's Op. 20. In both variations, the theme swaps to the tenor voice of the left hand, which is decorated by sixteenth-note triplet figures by the right hand. Schumann marks his Variation 3 *Etwas belebter* (somewhat busier) (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Schumann Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24, b. 86–89. Source: G. Henle Verlag. Used by permission of the publisher.

His sixteenth-note triplet figures begin with a motive pattern including repeated notes with a grace note in between, remaining mostly in the middle register of



the piano. Later more continuous figures appear as an intricate mixture of broken chords and non-chord tones in bars 92–93 (Figure 11), 100–101, and 105–113, which might be hinted at by the fourth variation of Clara's Op. 20 (Figure 12).



Figure 11. Schumann Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24, b. 92–93. Source: G. Henle Verlag. Used by permission of the publisher.



Figure 12. Clara Schumann Variations on a Theme by Schumann, Op. 20, Var. IV, b. 100–101. Source: Breitkopf & Härtel.

In Variation 4, Schumann changed to G minor, the mediant key of the original key of E-flat major (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Schumann Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24, b. 114–117. Source: G. Henle Verlag. Used by permission of the publisher.

The minor key theme is now accompanied by a new motive: two quartet notes ascend in various intervals, appearing alternately in the soprano and bass. This new element seems to be important as Schumann marks a crescendo on almost every motive. The appearance of an A-flat in bars 125–126, and bars 137–138 creates a momentary modulation to E-flat major but soon goes back to G minor through a pivot chord, A-flat major chord, which functions as the Neapolitan chord of G minor, appearing in bars 127 and 139.

The fifth and last variation is written with a new rhythm of thirty-second notes – the same as the last variation of Clara's Op. 20. The melody changes to perpetual sixteenth-note lines, highly chromatic and full of non-chord tones (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Schumann Theme and Variations in E-flat major, WoO 24, b. 142-145. Source: G. Henle Verlag. Used by permission of the publisher.

The inner voice is also chromatic with the rhythmic pattern of a thirty-second rest and three thirty-second notes alternating between two hands, and is consistently decorated by neighbor tones, for instance, Ab–G–Ab, G–F#–G, C–B–C, and Bb–A–Bb in bar 142. Figures with neighbor tones shared by two hands are also featured in the last variation of Clara's Op. 20 (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Clara Schumann Variations on a Theme by Schumann, Op. 20, Var. VII, b. 172-175. Source: Breitkopf & Härtel.

In Robert Schumann's work, the original theme is hardly recognizable in the last variation due to its extremely dissonant texture; the sixteenth-note melody in the soprano is accompanied by the thirty-second note inner voice in close and narrow registers along with the tonic pedal tone (or the dominant pedal later) in the bass. The structure of the variation is almost unchanged and not developed at all.

### Publication of the Theme and Variations, WoO 24

Schumann completed the Theme and Variations on February 28, 1854, one day after his suicide attempt. There is speculation that he might have intended further variations; but it never happened. Richard-Ford observes that Schumann's signature at the end of Variation 5 in the manuscript could certainly be interpreted as the composer signing off a completed work.<sup>22</sup> Clara noted in her diary that "he wrote touching, peaceful variations on the wonderfully peaceful, holy theme."<sup>23</sup> However the Variations were not published until 1939 as Clara jealously guarded the manuscripts of this piece. Only the "Theme" was included as Schumann's "last musical thought" in the Collected Edition of Schumann by Brahms in 1893. Richard-Ford states that the title *Geistervariationen* (Ghost Variations) first appeared in Jörg Demus's 1973 recording but the exact origin of this title is unknown.<sup>24</sup> The title of the work in the Henle Edition is *Thema mit Variationen* with *Geistervariationen* in parentheses.

In 1861, seven years after the Variations were composed and remained unpublished, Brahms wrote his variations on Schumann's *Geistervariationen* theme for piano four hands. According to Seiffert, Clara gave a copy of her husband's E-flat Variations to Brahms on an unknown date, on the following conditions: that the Variations were a precious and holy possession that could not be used or altered for any other purpose.<sup>25</sup> Clara was upset with Brahms because he chose the title *Geister-Thema Schumanns* when he wrote his own variations on the theme of Schumann for piano four hands; she had no objection to the publication but felt the title was capitalizing on Schumann's name and reputation. A compromise was reached: Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann Op. 23 was published in November 1861 and dedicated to Julie Schumann, third daughter of Robert and Clara Schumann.

After Brahms, at least two other composers quoted from Schumann's *Geistervariationen*. A German composer Carl Reinecke (1873–1916), who studied with Schumann, incorporated the *Geister* theme in the second movement of his Trio in B-flat major for Clarinet, Horn and Piano, Op. 274, written in 1906. The movement entitled "Ein Märchen" creates the atmosphere of a Schumann fairy tale in the key of G major.

More recently, another German composer Aribert Reimann (b. 1936) made use of the *Geistervariationen* in his *Sieben Fragmente für Orchester* (Seven Fragments for Orchestra), which was written in 1988 and dedicated to "Robert Schumann in memoriam." Reimann keeps the lyrical character of the original composition while breaking up the theme into the third, fifth and seventh fragments.

### Conclusion

Schumann's Theme and Variations in E-flat major was written between February 10 and 28, 1854 in the midst of his final mental breakdown and suicide attempt. It was unfortunately his last piano work before his death in 1856 and was not published until 1939. Did the composer expect the work to be published? Or as Clara Schumann claimed, would it not have been worth publishing? Although his last

piano work may not be as brilliant and virtuosic as his earlier *ABBE Variationen* Op. 1 and *Études symphoniques* Op. 13 in terms of the structure and thematic development, the author finds the essence and originality of Schumann in a work that nobody else would be able to write, and hopes the work is recognized and appreciated more, and not in the way his wife perceived it.

## Endnotes

- 1 Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, Rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 117.
- 2 Dina Maria Neglia-Khachatryan, "Schumann's Violin Concerto: A Neglected Treasure?" (DMA diss., Indiana University, 2015), 2–3.
- 3 Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life, Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters*, vol. 2, trans. Grace E. Hadow (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 55–56.
- 4 Wolf-Dieter Seiffert, "Robert Schumanns Thema mit Variationen Es-Dur, genannt 'Geistervariationen'," In *Compositionswissenschaft: Festschrift Reinhold und Roswitha Schlötterer zum 70 Geburtstag*, ed. Bernd Edelmann and Sabine Kurth (Augsburg: Wißner, 1999), 190–191.
- 6 John Worthen, *Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 348.
- 6 Litzmann, 56.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Peter Ostwald, *Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985:6.
- 9 Worthen, 350.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Reich, 120.
- 12 Robert Schumann, *Thema mit Variationen* (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1999), ii.
- 13 Reich, 120.
- 14 Litzmann, 57.
- 15 Worthen, 355.
- 16 Reich, 121.
- 17 Paul Rickard-Ford, "Portfolio of Recorded Performances and Exegesis: The Late Piano Works of Robert Schumann," (PhD diss., The University of Adelaide, 2010), 8.

18 Worthen, 357.

19 Litzmann, 59–60.

20 Eric Sams, “Brahms and his Clara Themes,” *The Musical Times*, 112, May 1971, 432.

21 Minoru Nishihara, *Schumann: A Study of All Piano Works* 2 vols. (Tokyo: Ongaku-No-Tomo-Sha, 2013) 1:20.

22 Rickard-Ford, 8.

23 Litzmann, 56–57.

24 Ibid.

25 Seiffert, 196–197.

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