



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2023-2024 chamber music season

Up Close 1: Big Sky

Sunday, March 17, 2024, 4 PM at Goethe-Institut, Boston

Program:

Clara Schumann, Piano Trio in g minor, Op. 17

Joan Tower, *Big Sky*

Franz Schubert, Piano Trio No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 100, D. 929

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896) was one of the most celebrated pianists of the nineteenth century. She was the daughter of Friedrich Wieck, a piano dealer and repairman who was also acknowledged as a leading piano teacher in Leipzig, and Marianne (Tromlitz) Wieck, a fine pianist and teacher herself who came from a family of professional musicians. They were divorced when Clara was only five years old, and she and her brothers remained in her father's care. It soon became clear that Clara was a child prodigy; she performed at the Leipzig Gewandhaus when she was nine and gave her first concert tour at age twelve. In the tradition of virtuosos of the time, she performed her own compositions and improvisations alongside works of other composers. Friedrich managed her early career with a heavy hand, pushing her in ways that sometimes appeared cruel, but she later acknowledged his overall positive influence on her character and musicianship.

When Clara was about nine years old Robert Schumann came to the Wieck household to study piano with Friedrich. Within a few years they were in love and wanted to be married, but Friedrich was bitterly opposed to his famous young daughter wedding a relatively unknown composer. The ensuing legal battle ended with marriage in 1840, and Friedrich ultimately reconciled with them. Despite giving birth to eight children over the next fourteen years, Clara continued to perform, compose, and teach. She and Robert were unique musical partners, studying scores and poetry together and supporting each other's respective careers enthusiastically – with the caveat that Clara's practicing and composing not interfere with the quiet time Robert needed for his own creative work. Her greater fame as a performer helped tremendously to establish his reputation, as she was more often than not involved in his premieres.

Following Robert's tragic death in an insane asylum, she tirelessly promoted her husband's legacy, editing new editions with the help of friends and performing his music all over the world. She was appointed principal teacher of piano at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt in 1878 and attracted students from far and wide. In addition to her husband's music, she was the dedicatee of works by Mendelssohn, Brahms, Smetana, and Anton Rubinstein, among many others. Clara was extremely close to Johannes Brahms; their relationship has been the source of speculation, as they destroyed most of their correspondence.

Despite her tremendous successes as a performer, Clara Schumann always assumed herself an inferior composer to her husband, doubting her music as effeminate and sentimental. In 1839 she wrote: "I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose – there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?" She was only twenty years old at that time, however, and it was only after Robert's death that she stopped composing entirely.

In fact, Clara was a fine composer in her own right, and though the time demands of performing kept her from writing as much music as her husband, she did beat him to the piano trio genre! Her Piano Trio in g minor, Op. 17, was composed in 1846, a year before Robert's d minor Trio. Pregnant with their fourth child, she was unable to tour and therefore had the time and mental energy to produce something on a large scale – the only four-movement piece of chamber music she published. It is considered by many to be her finest work, with a clear command of sonata form in the first movement, a gentle scherzo followed by a particularly beautiful and lyrical andante, and a highly effective and dramatic use of counterpoint in the finale.

Joan Tower (born 1938) is widely regarded as one of the most important American composers living today. During a career spanning more than sixty years, she has made lasting contributions to musical life in the United States as composer, performer, conductor, and educator. Her works have been commissioned by major ensembles, soloists, and orchestras, including the Emerson, Tokyo, and Muir quartets; soloists Alisa Weilerstein, Evelyn Glennie, Carol Wincenc, David Shifrin, Paul Neubauer, and John Browning; and the orchestras of Chicago, New York, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Nashville, Albany NY, and Washington DC among others. Her recent commissioned premieres include the cello concerto *A New Day*, the orchestral *1920/2019*, and the chamber work *Into the Night*.

In 2020 Chamber Music America honored her with its Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award; *Musical America* chose her to be its 2020 Composer of the Year; in 2019 the League of American Orchestras awarded her its highest honor, the Gold Baton. Tower is the first composer chosen for a Ford Made in America consortium commission of sixty-five orchestras. Leonard Slatkin and the Nashville Symphony recorded *Made in America* in 2006 (along with *Tambor* and *Concerto for Orchestra*). In 2008 the album collected three Grammy awards: Best Contemporary Classical Composition, Best Classical Album, and Best Orchestral Performance. Nashville's latest all-Tower recording includes *Stroke*, which received a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary Classical Composition.

In 1990 she became the first woman to win the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for *Silver Ladders*, a piece she wrote for the St. Louis Symphony where she was Composer-in-Residence from 1985-88. Other residencies with orchestras include a 10-year residency with the Orchestra of St. Luke's (1997-2007) and the Pittsburgh Symphony (2010-11). She was the Albany Symphony's Mentor Composer partner in the 2013-14 season. Tower was co-founder and pianist for the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players from 1970-85. She has received honorary doctorates from Smith College, the New England Conservatory, and Illinois State University and is the Asher B. Edelman Professor in the Arts at Bard College, where she has taught since 1972.

Composer's Program Note:

Big Sky was commissioned by the La Jolla Chamber Music Society for their "SummerFest La Jolla 2000" music festival.

This slow seven-minute trio for violin, cello and piano was intended as a companion piece to a short and fast trio entitled *And... They're Off* (which was commissioned by the Scotia Festival in Canada where I served as composer/conductor-in-residence in 1996). The common subject of these two works is horses – namely race horses. As a young girl – and like many young girls – I had an obsession with horses. When I was growing up in South America, my father bought me a racehorse. This was in Bolivia, where horses, even racehorses, were very cheap. I loved this horse and took very good care of it in our makeshift garage/stable. My obsession with horses continued into my teens when I learned to jump. More recently (and many years later), I found a partner whose main love is playing the horses!

Big Sky is a piece based on a memory of riding my horse "Aymara" around in the deep valley of La Paz, Bolivia. The valley was surrounded by the huge and high mountains of the Andes range; and as I rode I looked into a vast and enormous sky. It was very peaceful and extraordinarily beautiful. We never went over one of these mountains, but if we had, it might have felt like what I wrote in this piece.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) is the only major composer associated with Vienna who was actually native to the city. He was only first-generation Viennese, however; his father had moved to the capital from a section of Moravia that is now part of the Czech Republic. Schubert's family was not wealthy, but his father was a teacher so his children were well educated in academic subjects as well as music. The violin was young Franz's first instrument, and the family string quartet was the laboratory for some of his earliest compositions. By the time he was seven years old, his family had noted enough talent to send him to sing an audition for Antonio Salieri, the court music director, and he filled a vacancy in the Salieri's *Hofkapelle* choir in 1808. With the choir position came free tuition and board in the prestigious Imperial and Royal City College, the best school in the city for non-aristocrats. Music played a large role in the program at the College, with an excellent student orchestra in which Schubert was soon a member of the second violins. He also had the opportunity to take regular lessons with Salieri.

After five years at the Imperial and Royal City College, Schubert left for a teacher-training course, in order to follow his father and older brothers in the teaching profession. Despite producing an impressive number of compositions, he had shown no signs yet of being able to support himself as a musician. He grudgingly taught school for a number of years, but was nonetheless able to continue writing music with increasing facility. The years 1814 and 1815 in particular mark the blossoming of his compositional skills. Always able to work fast, Schubert composed almost 150 songs, two string quartets, two symphonies, two masses, and at least four *Singspiele* – in a period of only fifteen months. His output during this time averaged at least 65 bars of music a day, which would have been remarkable for a full-time composer. Schubert was also teaching year-round at his father's school, taking twice-weekly composition lessons with Salieri, attending operas and concerts, teaching privately, and socializing with numerous friends. Unfortunately, Schubert's circle of friends included several whose lifestyles were largely idle and pleasure-seeking, and he spent a great deal of time and money drinking heavily and living hard.

He was eventually able to make a reasonable living and enjoy some fame as a composer, but he was the first of the major composers who did not also earn regard as a sought-after performer. By 1823, just around the time that he was beginning to be compensated well for the commissions and publications of his works, Schubert began to turn down requests to appear in person due to illness. All evidence points to the first stages of syphilis, which afflicted as many as one in five in some European cities at the time. Over the next five years until his death, Schubert was often forced to retire to his bed, to the countryside, or occasionally the hospital, trying to cure the various manifestations of the disease. Although he remained productive throughout his illness, he died just short of his thirty-second birthday. Considering the quantity and range of his output in such a short time, one can only guess what his impact on music history could have been had he lived even ten more years.

The piano trio genre evolved rapidly from the works of Haydn to Beethoven, its foundation in the Baroque trio sonata – which doubled a functional, supporting bass line in the cello and a keyboard instrument – giving way to a meeting of equals, due to the development of increasingly sonorous fortepianos. In the final year of his life, Schubert built on the pioneering work of Beethoven to leave two marvelous trios, early pinnacles of the genre that are large in scale but warm and intimate in sentiment. The Piano Trio No. 2 in E-flat Major was the second of the two, even more ambitious than the first in B-Flat Major. One of Schubert's very few works published outside of Vienna in his lifetime, it was also one of the few to receive a public performance. On March 28, 1828, Schubert gave his only public performance, at the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna, to an overflow crowd of ardent admirers. The E-Flat Major Trio was the centerpiece of the program, along with several songs, a string quartet movement, and a piece for male chorus. The concert was a rousing success, aiding Schubert's finances and international reputation significantly, but he only lived for a few short months afterwards.

- Gabriel Rice
Tower biography provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Rice
© 2024 Chameleon Arts Ensemble, all rights reserved