

JAVIER PERIANES

piano

CLARA SCHUMANN (1819-1896)

Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann Op. 20

(approx. 13 minutes)

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 14

III. Quasi variazioni. Andantino de Clara Wieck

(approx. 8 minutes)

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann Op. 9

Thema. Ziemlich langsam

Var. 1

Var. 2 Poco più moto

Var. 3 Tempo di tema

Var. 4 Poco più moto

Var. 5 Allegro capriccioso

Var. 6 Allegro

Var. 7 Andante

Var. 8 Andante (non troppo lento)

Var. 9 Schnell

Var. 10 Poco adagio

Var. 11 Un poco più animato

Var. 12 Allegretto, poco scherzando

Var. 13 Non troppo presto

Var. 14 Andante

Var. 15 Poco adagio

Var. 16 Adagio

(approx. 20 minutes)

Intermission

ENRIQUE GRANADOS (1867-1916)

Goyescas Op. 11

Los Requiebros

Coloquio en la reja

El Fandango de candil

Quejas, o La Maja y el ruiseñor

El Amor y la muerte (Balada)

Epílogo: Serenata del espectro

(approx. 60 minutes)

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Clara Schumann

Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann Op. 20

In 1852 Robert Schumann published a collection of piano miniatures under the picturesque title *Bunte Blätter* (colourful leaves). The reference was to the “leaves” (pages) of a picture album, each small piano piece being conceived as a kind of casual sketch or watercolour from the album of an amateur artist.

No. 4 in the collection, marked *Ziemlich langsam* (rather slowly), caught the attention of his wife, the pianist-composer Clara Schumann, who composed a set of variations on it and presented the work to her husband in June of 1853 as a present for his forty-third birthday.

The theme in F# minor on which this work is based is a curious one that hides many secrets in its short 24-bar span. Barely rising above *piano* in its dynamic level, it traverses an emotional mood somewhere between forlorn and resigned, struggling to find hope in an occasional major-key cadence to relieve the pervasive sadness of its minor-mode tone colouring.

The three repeated notes of its opening phrase evoke a kind of numb bewilderment, an inability to move on from grief, especially when they land on a heart-breaking dissonance in the second bar:



The “static” quality of this theme — only partially mitigated by a recurring chromatic dotted figure in the inner voices — is reinforced when the following phrases remain “stuck” in the key of C# minor:



But there is a hypnotic eeriness about this theme that makes it an engaging point of departure for a set of variations.

The first thing to remember about the set is that it was composed by a musical conservative in an age of flashy pianism, and both tendencies are reflected in the layout of the work.

Clara Schumann keeps the original melody line clearly audible throughout, whether singing out at the top of the texture in the right hand or nestled in the middle in the tenor range and intoned by the left. The fundamental harmonic structure remains the same, and the bar structure is not altered or extended until the coda in the last variation.

What does change is the keyboard texture within which the theme's melody is swaddled. The first variation merely adds a rippling elaboration of the bass, but the second puts on a display of ringing piano tone in a continuing chatter of chordal staccatos, perhaps taking inspiration from a similar texture in several of the variations in her husband Robert's *Symphonic Etudes*:



This is immediately followed, however, by a chorale-type arrangement in the third variation with slithering chromatic alterations to the harmony that showcase the composer's considerable compositional chops:



In this work, Clara Schumann is eager to show that she is both a piano virtuoso and a learned composer, so she regularly alternates serious compositional “treatment” of the theme with impressive keyboard “arrangements” of it.

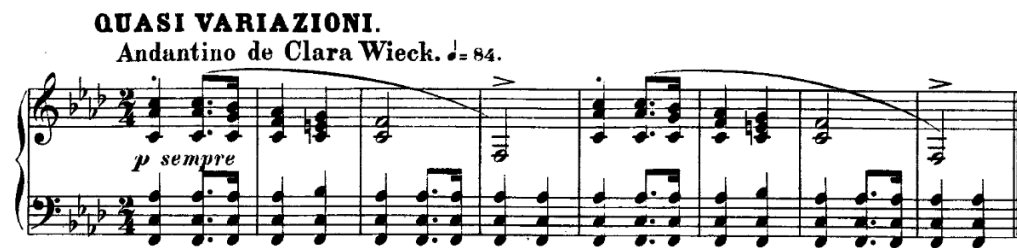
What she accomplishes by the end is to show that this sad little theme deserves the happy major-mode ending it receives in the long final variation.

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Robert Schumann Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 14 III. Quasi variazioni. Andantino de Clara Wieck

In the summer of 1836, Robert Schumann was pining for his new love — and future wife — the sixteen-year-old piano prodigy Clara Wieck. Her father, Friedrich Wieck (Schumann's erstwhile piano teacher), had arranged a concert tour for her, thinking to break up the romance and avoid acquiring a son-in-law he considered too emotionally volatile and psychologically unstable.

Schumann, of course, would not be so easily discouraged, and contrived to have his beloved with him, at least in spirit, by sewing her into the very musical fabric of his Sonata in F minor, Op. 14. Clara is represented by a five-note descending scale figure that opens the first movement and appears in the other three, and in none so prominently as in the third movement, which would later be called *Variations on a Theme of Clara Wieck* and become a favourite encore piece of Vladimir Horowitz.



There is a ceremonial sadness to this haunting theme, rendered especially ghoulish by the austere coldness and bare-bones texture of its second phrase, like footsteps echoing above the tombs of the dead in an empty cathedral.

The first two variations let the theme speak out over the murmurings of gargoyle voices in the bass below. Schumann's penchant for rhythmic and metrical distortion come to the fore in the antics of the third variation, which is peppered with constant syncopations.



The tragic heart of the movement, however, comes in the final variation, which pleads its case in whimpering phrases and cries of heart-rending despair alternating with poetic daydreams and expressions of intimate tenderness.



The movement ends with a sequence of repeated F-minor chords that fade into the distance, leaving smoky echoes of the enigmatic theme lingering in the air.

Johannes Brahms

Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann Op. 9

Johannes Brahms was just 20 years old when in September of 1853 he paid a visit to Robert and Clara Schumann at their home in Düsseldorf. Hearing later of Robert's suicide attempt, he returned the following year in March, staying for some time to help Clara with the children and managing the household after her husband was admitted to a sanatorium.

During that time, he undoubtedly encountered Clara's *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann* and began his own set of 16 variations on the same theme.



Brahms' youthful inventiveness and harmonic daring is at a peak in this work, in which he not only displays his fascination with counterpoint — canonic imitation in particular — but also manages to include personal references to Robert and Clara Schumann's own published works.

Variation 1 begins the set unpretentiously with a thin texture that inverts the original scoring, putting the melody in the left hand and the accompaniment in the right.

The theme is hard to find in **Variation 2**, which changes the meter to 9/8 and pays tribute to Schumann's penchant for rhythmic anomalies. It features a jumpy dotted-rhythm ostinato in the left hand, conspicuously mismatched with an ever-so-slightly off-kilter pattern of heavily syncopated chords in the right.

Variation 3 ingeniously nestles the theme in the middle of the texture while triplet figures both above and below constantly obsess over the sigh motive that begins the theme.

Variation 4 spins out long strands of seemingly carefree melody over a softly pulsing accompaniment of repeated sixteenth notes in the left hand.

These repeated sixteenths — a speeded-up variant of the theme's opening melody notes — then take centre stage in the arresting opening of **Variation 5**, which features a recurring sequence of these stuttering hammer blows tumbling down repeatedly from the high register to the bass, sometimes creating some shocking harmonic surprises when they land.



Variation 6 changes the hammer blows to cascades of arpeggio figures kept harmonically on track by leaping bass notes. The harmony veers far afield to C major (a tritone away from the initial F# minor) only to return thrillingly to the fold in the final bars.

Variation 7 returns to the sigh motive with which the theme began, repeating it over and over in a series of echoes between high and low registers. This variation seems almost motionless, its forward progress limited to small semitone changes in harmony.

Variation 8 displays Brahms' uncanny ability to artfully conceal his artfulness. While the complete theme is serenely showcased in the top voice with its original harmonies, not far below is a murmuring of tremolo octaves in the left hand's tenor voice that repeats the same melody two bars later in strict canon.



Variation 9 fixates repeatedly once again on the theme's opening sigh motif, but Brahms puts it in the middle of a whirling swirl of figuration with the two-note sighs offset from the strong beats of the bar. This variation is a virtual copy of the texture of No. 5 in Schumann's *Albumblatt*, from which the set's theme is taken.

Variation 10 is set in a peaceful and happy D major and is the most contrapuntally complex of the set. It features a right-hand melody that is actually the bass line of the original theme, with its own bass line as an inversion of itself!



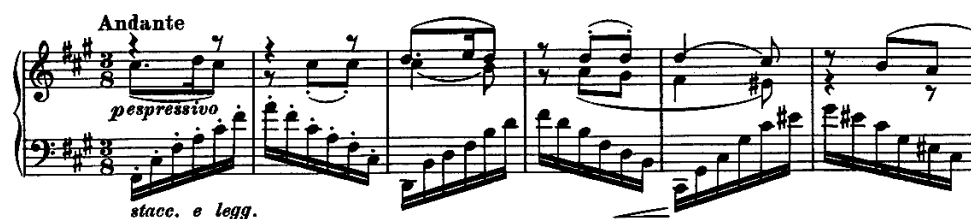
This inverse imitation passes through other voices in the texture almost 'incognito' as a rich carpet of rolling arpeggios in the bass soon soothe the ear with harmonic cover. To round out this astounding display of compositional cleverness, Brahms includes a quote from the Clara Wieck theme from the first of Schumann's Op. 5 Impromptus as a tip-of-the-hat to both the composer and his wife.

Variation 11 is equally gently paced and comforting in mood. With its long-held pedal points in the bass it seems to have no particular harmonic agenda but merely muses in its right-hand octaves over the theme's opening sigh motive once again.

After sojourning in the major mode for some time, in **Variation 12** Brahms returns to the theme's original key of F# minor to rough up the texture with a scherzando variation that moves spasmodically forward in a series of chordal leaps. Perhaps in tribute to Schumann's trademark rhythmic "off-sets," this variation prefers to land bizarrely on the second sixteenth note of the bar.

Variation 13 channels the double-note chatter of Schumann's *Toccata*, Op. 7, in an iridescent display of the theme's harmonies but without reference to its melody.

Variation 14 is contrapuntal puzzle masquerading as a Viennese waltz. The two voices in the right hand are in canon while a trotting accompaniment of staccato arpeggios in the left hand aerates the texture to make the counterpoint clear to the ear.



Variation 15 is set in G-flat major, to prepare us for a major-mode ending. It features a slow-moving canon between treble and bass with a pervasive undulating ripple of arpeggiated chords in the middle. Because of small melodic inflections in these arpeggios in the medium to low register, this variation is exceptionally tricky to pedal.

Variation 16 concludes the set with an extremely bare-bones rendition of the theme's bass line (from Variation 10) in solemn passacaglia style against throbbing syncopated chordal resolutions above.



Like Clara, Brahms eschews a triumphalist ending in favour of a quiet one, in a sign of reverential respect for her husband Robert.

Enrique Granados Goyescas Op. 11

The immensely gifted Spanish pianist and composer Enrique Granados expressed his admiration for the starkly emotional canvasses and etchings of Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) in a suite of evocative piano pieces that he called Goyescas (1911). The work's subtitle, *Los Majos Enamorados* (The Young Lovers), indicates an intention to depict the amorous adventures of the lower classes of Spanish society. Its subject matter is the courting rituals and social interactions of the swains (majos) and the maids (majas) inhabiting the working-class neighbourhoods of Madrid in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Granados' piano style is among the most flamboyant in the repertoire, so fulsome that it is often written on three staves to accommodate sonorities extending over four to five octaves in a single phrase. The style of writing is also very sensual from a harmonic point of view: virtually every important chord seems to be a dominant seventh, symbolic of yearning.

The first piece in the set, *Los Requebro*s (Flirtatious compliments), begins with the tale of a pick-up line and its reception. A guitar-like flourish opens the work:



The opening has the eight-syllable rhythm of the jota, a form of Spanish popular music danced and sung to the accompaniment of castanets. These latter are picturesquely represented in the score by means of twinkling mordents, snappy triplet figures and scurrying inner voices, the throw-away character of which figures among the major technical challenges of the work as a whole. Tempo changes of a stop-and-start character mark the various stages of the negotiation, but the sumptuous tonal banquet offered on the last page of the score leaves listeners in no doubt as to just how rapturously the flattering initiatives referred to in the title were welcomed.

Coloquio en la reja (Conversation at the window grill) is a love duet that pictures the young couple speaking through the iron grill of a window. The conversation opens slowly but soon turns to confessions of love, symbolized by this dreamy melody of affectionate embrace constructed from wide-ranging chordal arpeggios:

un poco meno mosso



A different love theme then takes over, a rising scale of rising hopes decorated with quintuplets:



These two themes, repeated and re-phrased in various guises — but always sounding fresh and sensuous — drive this movement to a series of passionate climaxes in its second half before they settle into a quiet reverie of mutual adoration.

El Fandango de candil (Fandango by candlelight) presents a more advanced stage of the relationship, in which the couple are presented as dancing at night by candlelight to the infectious, ever-present rhythm of the fandango.

Gallardo.

un peu lentement avec beaucoup de rythme



The not-too-fast pace of this dance allows you to imagine the courting couple slowly circling round each other as they stare into each other's eyes, to the insistent accompaniment of clacking castanets. That is, until the candles go out, at which point, it is implied, the dance continues...by other means.

Quejas, o la Maja y el ruiseñor (Lament, or the maid and the nightingale) is based on a Valencian folk tune and is the best-known piece in the suite.



Its sad theme may be intuited from the scene in which it is used in the opera that Granados composed from the Goyescas suite: a young woman fears for the life of her jealous lover who has gone off to fight a duel and pours out her soul to the nightingale.

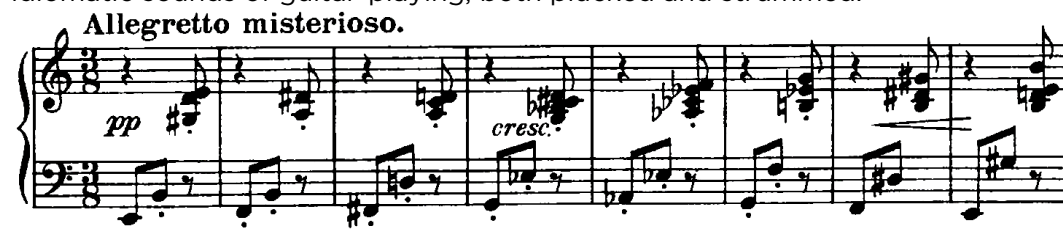
Her lament is presented in the simplest possible form at first, then in five voluptuous variations. The nightingale has the last word in a coda replete with warbling trills and bird calls.

The scene depicted in *El Amor y la muerte* (Love and death) derives from an etching by Goya featuring a young woman holding in her arms the limp body of her dead young lover. This movement is starkly emotional, savagely raw and wondrously mysterious. It opens with cruel parodies of both the quintuplet-ornamented love theme and the arpeggiated love theme, heard before in the happier days of the Coloquio en la reja movement:



This movement paints its two protagonists in vivid contrasts of register, the inevitability of death resonating up from deep in the bass, the pleadings of love shimmering down from the high treble. Granados said that all of the themes of the entire suite are united in this piece, "intense pain, nostalgic love and final tragedy — death."

Epílogo: Serenata del espectro (Epilogue: the ghost's serenade) features the spirit of the dead lover returning to serenade his beloved from the grave. The movement is filled with the idiomatic sounds of guitar-playing, both plucked and strummed.





And so ends this musical tale of love won in life and love lost to death.

Program notes by Donald G. Gíslason 2024