

## CD Reviews

### Clara Wieck Schumann: Art of Preluding

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Mo-Ah Kim *pf*

CD Baby 2353004X, 2019 (1 CD: 35 minutes). \$21.69

### Clara Schumann: Romance – The Piano Music of Clara Schumann

Isata Kanneh-Mason *pf*, Jonathan Aasgaard *cond.*

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

Decca 4850020, 2019 (1 CD: 76 minutes), \$13.95

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Mo-Ah Kim's album, *Clara Wieck Schumann: Art of Preluding*, and Isata Kanneh-Mason's *Romance – The Piano Music of Clara Schumann*, with Jonathan Aasgaard and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, form part of a welcome re-appreciation of Clara Schumann's work as performer, composer and educator.<sup>1</sup> These discs contribute richly to the serious, sustained effort – spurred on by the two-hundredth anniversary of Schumann's birth in September 2019 – to expand our understanding of her work through dialogues across performance, musicology and pedagogy. This allows us to learn more about Clara Schumann and to understand the vital role she played in the development of pianism, with its multifaceted richness, in European classical music.

Clara Schumann was the daughter of Friedrich Wieck (1785–1873, originally a household tutor who, despite being mostly self-taught in music,<sup>2</sup> developed a highly sophisticated pedagogical system for teaching piano), and Marianne Wieck, *née* Tromlitz (1797–1872, a soprano soloist and pianist with the Leipzig Gewandhaus). We cannot determine how much Marianne Wieck's skills in both areas of piano and singing might have influenced the young Clara, as the Wiecks divorced when she was only four and a half years old, and – in accordance with Saxon law – her father became her sole legal guardian from when she was five.<sup>3</sup> However, we do know that the importance of piano tone, especially the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Clara Schumann's role as an educator see Natasha Loges, 'Clara Schumann's Legacy as a Teacher', *Clara Schumann Studies*, ed. Joe Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 271–91. Annekatriin Babbe, *Clara Schumann und ihre Schülerinnen am Hoch'schen Konservatorium in Frankfurt A. M.* (Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag der Carl von Ossietzky Universität, 2015). For a broader context in performance research in Clara Schumann's time, see Anna Scott, 'Romanticizing Brahms: Early Recordings and the Reconstruction of Brahmsian Identity' (PhD diss., Universiteit Leiden, 2014); Neal Peres da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 97, 171.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy B. Reich, 'Clara Schumann', in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986): 252.

<sup>3</sup> Julia M. Nauhaus, trans. Thomas Henninger, 'Mariane Bargiel, Mother', [www.schumann-portal.de/mariane-bargiel-mother.html](http://www.schumann-portal.de/mariane-bargiel-mother.html), accessed 17 August, 2022.

concept of 'singing tone', remained with Schumann throughout her performing career and became a prominent part of her teaching methodology.

Central to Clara's Schumann's approach to the piano – and particularly relevant to the albums under consideration here – is the emphasis that Friedrich Wieck placed on the quality of piano tone, in contradistinction to an approach based on vacuous virtuosity, where tone risks being relegated to secondary importance.<sup>4</sup> Wieck returned frequently to the significance of tone in his book *Clavier und Gesang und andere musikpädagogische Schriften* (published in English as *Piano and Song / How to Teach, How to Learn, and How to Form a Judgment of Musical Performances*).<sup>5</sup> He questioned the use of knowing how to read music 'to the piano-learner, if he has no touch, no tone on the piano-forte'.<sup>6</sup> He asserted how, with his teaching method, he 'taught a correct, light touch of the keys from the fingers'.<sup>7</sup> And he made sure to impress upon his reader the connection between singing and playing the piano: 'I have also paid great attention to the art of singing, as a necessary foundation for piano-playing'.<sup>8</sup> This is evidenced in Wieck's *Clavier und Gesang* where the following instructions have a particular pertinence for our understanding of Schumann's approach to preluding:

Before you perform a piece, play a few suitable chords, and a few appropriate passages or scales up and down (but play no stupid trash, such as I have heard from many virtuosos), in order to try whether the condition of the instrument presents any unexpected difficulties. Try carefully also the unavoidable pedal. A creaking, rattling, grating pedal is a frightful annoyance.<sup>9</sup>

Of equal importance to Friedrich Wieck were a number of holistic approaches to piano pedagogy: the early development of the ability to memorize and to transpose;<sup>10</sup> an early approach to piano that was not reliant on reading music but instead was based on aural, visual, and tactile input;<sup>11</sup> a constant exposure to musical performances by having his daughter Clara regularly attend 'orchestral and chamber music concerts as well as productions of drama and opera';<sup>12</sup> the development of a rounded musicality with Clara's training including 'lessons not only in piano, but also in voice, violin, improvisation, theory, harmony, counterpoint,

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Stefaniak, 'Clara Schumann's Interiorities and the Cutting Edge of Popular Pianism', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70/3 (2017): 700.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Wieck. *Piano and Song / How to Teach, How to Learn, and How to Form a Judgment of Musical Performances* (Boston: Lockwood, Brooks, & Company, 1875).

<sup>6</sup> Wieck, *Piano and Song*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Wieck, *Piano and Song*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Wieck, *Piano and Song*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Wieck, *Piano and Song*, 272.

<sup>10</sup> Wieck, *Piano and Song*, 37. The ability to perform from memory was not commonplace in the early nineteenth century. The emerging trend was spearheaded by Clara Schumann who performed Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, the 'Appassionata', Op. 57, from memory in 1837 at the age of 18. See Jennifer Mishra, 'A Century of Memorization Pedagogy', *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 32/1 (2010): 3–18.

<sup>11</sup> Wieck states, 'With my own daughters I did not teach the treble notes till the end of the first year's instruction, the bass notes several months later', Wieck, *Piano and Song*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001): 255.

and orchestration',<sup>13</sup> and a staunch refusal to let his students spend time on the 'so-called feminine arts'. In fact, 'all his piano pupils were advised against sewing, knitting or crocheting'.<sup>14</sup>

The album *Clara Wieck Schumann: Art of Preluding*, building on Mo-Ah Kim's DMA dissertation, is exemplary of recent work that combines research and performance.<sup>15</sup> Kim observes that Schumann likely studied Czerny's *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte, Op. 200*, in which Czerny categorizes 'three "Fantasieren ("Improvisieren") types': 1) a prelude to be performed before the beginning of a piece, 'Preludien ("Vorspiele") vor Anfang eines Stückes'; 2) cadenzas and fermatas in the midst of a piece 'in der Mitte eines Stückes'; and 3) full-fledged fantasy-like improvisation 'Fantasieren' ('Improvisieren').<sup>16</sup> Czerny further distinguishes between two types of preludes:

First [Preludes and Short Fantasies before the Beginning of a Piece to Be Performed], quite short, as though through only a few chords, runs, passagework and transitional materials, one were trying out the instrument, warming up the fingers or arousing the attention of the listeners. These must conclude with the complete chord of the principal key of the work to be performed. Second, [Preludes of a Longer and More Elaborated Type], just like an introduction belonging to the following piece; therefore, even thematic materials from the latter can be introduced therein. A prelude such as this, which already allows for some modulation, must conclude with a cadence on the seventh-chord of the dominant of the following piece and, by that token, become connected with it.<sup>17</sup>

Clara Schumann's half-sister Marie Wieck – herself an accomplished pianist, singer, composer, and educator – published a collection of etudes by Friedrich Wieck, wherein she points out that 'at the beginning, the exercises are to be played very calmly and with a soft touch: only after long and sustained study should the tempo gradually be accelerated to the point of greatest velocity. The order [of the exercises] should be determined by the teacher according to the individuality of the student'.<sup>18</sup> Such advice reveals that while 'greatest velocity' was a necessary goal, at no point should tone be sacrificed for the sake of speed alone. This concern with quality of tone was to remain a constant for Schumann as performer and as educator.

Clara Schumann embraced and further developed these distinct strategies, absorbing them into her own playing and adapting them for her teaching studio. As recent scholarship has shown, Schumann was not only a touring virtuoso performer and a serious, dedicated composer, but also a committed pedagogue who helped define many of the teaching strategies that are still in use today in European classical music. In addition, through her performances of such composers as

<sup>13</sup> Marian Wilson Kimber, 'From the Concert Hall to the Salon: The Piano Music of Clara Wieck Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel', in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, ed. R. Larry Todd (New York: Routledge, 2004): 316.

<sup>14</sup> Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, 255.

<sup>15</sup> Mo-Ah Kim, 'Towards a Revival of Lost Art: Clara Wieck Schumann's Preluding and Selected 20th-Century Pianist-Composers' Approaches to Preluding' (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Kim, 'Towards a Revival of Lost Art', 12.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte: Opus 200 / Carl Czerny*, trans. and ed. by Alice L. Mitchell (New York: Longman, 1983): 5.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Wieck, Preface to *Pianoforte Studies* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1901): [2].

Chopin, Robert Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, Schumann was instrumental in developing the canon of European classical music.<sup>19</sup>

From the vantage point of Clara Schumann's bicentenary in 2019, Mo-Ah Kim and Isata Kanneh-Mason occupy an important place in a lineage of pianism that can be traced both backward from Clara Schumann – to the golden age of pianism and improvisation of the early nineteenth century – and forward from Clara Schumann – through the twentieth century, to the recordings under consideration in this review and beyond. Earlier pedagogical resources of which Schumann was aware include Friedrich Wieck's pedagogical musings and etudes,<sup>20</sup> Czerny's numerous books of etudes, exercises and methods for piano, and Robert Schumann's piano etudes for children.<sup>21</sup> While these and numerous other composers and educators actively published material for a growing market of avid consumers of piano literature,<sup>22</sup> Schumann declined to publish any preludes or etudes/exercises in her lifetime. Her reluctance to do so is doubly aggravating for both pedagogues and performers, as it limits our ability to understand her pre-luding approach to its full creative and pedagogical extent. The lack that results from the reluctance to publish these pedagogical materials – much like her reluctance to embrace the role of composer<sup>23</sup> – also speaks to the sexism of Clara Schumann's age which dictated that a woman ought not to publish such material,<sup>24</sup> thereby depriving later pianists of it. Kim's album is thus a welcome contribution to the process of developing a deeper, more detailed understanding of the talent and innovative genius of Clara Schumann.

Recent recordings that foreground Schumann's contribution to Western concert music include Domenico Codispoti's *Clara Wieck Schumann: Piano Works*<sup>25</sup> and Ragna Schirmer's *Clara Schumann: Piano Trio and Concerto*,<sup>26</sup> among

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<sup>19</sup> These include the creation of a pedagogical canon based on a tradition of great Western composers; a system of sorting in which students entering her studio would begin by having lessons with Schumann's daughters for their first year of lessons; a masterclass setting in which students would receive instruction in groups of three; and an emphasis on the need for performers to be truthful to the composer's meaning. Adelina De Lara, 'Clara Schumann's Teaching', *Music & Letters* 26/3 (1945): 143–7; Natasha Loges, 'Clara Schumann's Legacy as a Teacher', *Clara Schumann Studies*, ed. Joe Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 271–91; Alexander Stefaniak, 'Clara Schumann and the Imagined Revelation of Musical Works'. *Music & Letters* 99/2 (2018): 194–223.

<sup>20</sup> Wieck, *Piano and Song*, and Friedrich Wieck, *Pianoforte Studies* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1901).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Schumann, *Album for the Young, Op. 68* (Milano: Casa Ricordi, 1919).

<sup>22</sup> These include Hanon's *The Virtuoso Pianist in 60 Exercises*, Hummel's *A Complete Theoretical and Practical Course of Instructions on the Art of Playing the Piano Forte*, Burgmüller's *25 Études faciles et progressives, Op. 100*, to name but a few.

<sup>23</sup> See Susan Wollenberg, 'Clara Schumann's "Liebst du um Schönheit" and the Integrity of a Composer's Vision', in *Women and the Nineteenth-Century Lied*, ed. Aisling Kenny and Wollenberg (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015): 123–39.

<sup>24</sup> See Marcia J. Citron, 'Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon', *The Journal of Musicology* 8/1 (1990): 102–17.

<sup>25</sup> Clara Wieck Schumann, *Piano Works*, Domenico Codispoti, Piano Classics PCL10193, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Clara Schumann, *Piano Trio and Concerto*, Ragna Schirmer. Berlin Classics – 0301325BC, 2019.

others.<sup>27</sup> In *Clara Wieck Schumann: Art of Preluding*, Kim focuses on the preludes and exercises that Clara Schumann transcribed for posterity at the insistence of her daughters. Kim delineates the scope of her work as follows:

The fundamental goal of this document is a revival of preluding. My aim is not to offer aesthetic judgements of the individual preludes preserved through manuscripts and recordings, but rather to advocate for increased understanding of the role of preluding in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century programs and to provide suggestions for pianists interested in reinvigorating this practice in their own performances. Although the term revival can be rendered in various ways, my intention is to carry this tradition of preluding not only in scholarship but also in applying it to performance.<sup>28</sup>

To accomplish this, Kim set out to record all the written exercises and preludes by Schumann. Musically speaking, the exercises are fairly straightforward – geared towards the development of arpeggio and broken chord facility at the keyboard. Kim performs them with accomplished speed without any sacrifice of tone, a technique entirely in keeping with that instilled in the young Clara Wieck by her father. The preludes showcase a more inventive and creative approach, with Schumann revealing her notable command of harmony and chromaticism, as well as her ability to generate introductory material for the pieces that were to follow the preludes in performance. Kim vividly demonstrates the technical and harmonic range of the preludes, her consummate command of the material highlighting both its compositional and performative qualities. Also included in the album are two pieces from Robert Schumann's *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 12 – I. 'Des Abends' and VII. 'Traumes Wirren', as well as Chopin's *Impromptu* No. 1 in A-Flat Major, Op. 29, and the Rondo section from Weber's *Piano Sonata* No. 1 in C Major, Op. 24. This historically motivated choice draws attention to Schumann's practice of using the preludes to connect the separate works in the concert programme.<sup>29</sup> Two of Schumann's simpler preludes for students ('Einfache Praeludien für Schüler'), were recorded in their original form, but have also been arranged by Kim to demonstrate how to derive a fully-fleshed prelude from a harmonic progression originally outlined in basic block chords.

Kim's album (as with her richly informative dissertation on preluding in the long nineteenth century) is a vital addition to the growing catalogue of recorded works by Clara Schumann. Whether Kim's stated goal of generating a revival of preluding within the macrocosm of classical music will come to fruition remains to be seen.<sup>30</sup> This album certainly sets a high standard for those who decide to pursue that goal.

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<sup>27</sup> Until recently, Clara Schumann's music frequently was paired in recordings with that of her husband Robert Schumann or included in compilations of pieces by 'women composers'.

<sup>28</sup> Mo-Ah Kim, 'Towards a Revival of Lost Art'.

<sup>29</sup> Mo-Ah Kim, 'Towards a Revival of Lost Art', referencing Goertzen, 'By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th and Early 19th-Century Pianists', *Journal of Musicology* 14/3 (1996): 304, 320.

<sup>30</sup> For a far-reaching understanding of the pianistic conventions of the nineteenth century, one can look to the scholarly research carried out by Valerie Goertzen, 'Clara Wieck Schumann's Improvisations and Her "Mosaics" of Small Forms', *Beyond Notes: Improvisation in Western Music of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Rudolf Rasch (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011); Dana Gooley, *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in*

Isata Kanneh-Mason's *Romance – The Piano Music of Clara Schumann*, provides a wonderful overview of the compositional prowess and pianistic virtuosity of Clara Schumann. Through her wide-ranging selection of pieces on this album – namely the Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 7, 3 Romances, Op. 11, the Piano Sonata in G Minor, and the 3 Romances, Op. 22 (with Elena Urioste on violin), as well as the two Robert Schumann pieces, including 'Widmung', from *Myrthen* (Op. 25/1), and 'Mondnacht', from the *Liederkreis* (Op. 39/5), both arranged by Clara Schumann – Kanneh-Mason exhibits a deep command of the much-acclaimed 'singing tone' that Clara Schumann so emphasized in her teaching. Kanneh-Mason is a rising star in the classical world, with a series of prizes, achievements and awards supporting that recognition. She received an undergraduate degree from and continues to study at The Royal Academy of Music, under the tutelage of Carole Presland (Presland is part of a lineage of pianists and piano educators that can be traced back to Arthur Schnabel, through Renna Kellaway and Franz Osborn, and has worked extensively with András Schiff). While Kanneh-Mason clearly has her own mature voice, her skilful ability to animate inner voices is reminiscent of the playing of András Schiff. This can be heard throughout the whole album, but it is demonstrated with particular sophistication in the Op. 11 Romances and the Piano Sonata in G Minor.

There are clear differences in the audio quality of these two albums. Kanneh-Mason's album is a Decca release, with the excellent audio quality associated with that label. The instrument balance in this album is very piano-centric and, though this is apt for the Piano Concerto, it seems a little too much in Op. 22, with the violin a little too far back in the mix. In Kim's album, two main issues stand out. First, the microphone placement leads to the mix occasionally featuring too much damper pedal noise, especially in sections that require fast pedalling. Secondly, the overall mix tends to lean toward being overly bright at times, with the 1kHz range and above occasionally a little too prominent. Kim's playing more than makes up for these audio issues, however, and these technical aspects should not be an encumbrance for most listeners.

Both of these albums are to be highly recommended not only for the exquisite pianism, but also for how they help to better understand Clara Schumann as composer, improviser and performer.

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*Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Kenneth Hamilton, *After The Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).