

Clara Schumann and her Teaching

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0H0P6094-8> / "Clara Schumann and her teaching" – Reminiscences and Examples)

I had the privilege of studying under Clara Schumann [1819–1896] for six years, after one year's preparation with her famous pupil Fanny Davies [1861–1934]. I'm proud to have been the bearer of so great a tradition.

It is now sixty years since Madame Schumann sent me to London to make my first appearance as a finished student at the Saint James's Hall Monday and Saturday Pops [Popular Concerts]. I had the little letter she sent around to my pension telling me she had written to [Samuel] Arthur Chappell [1834–1904] asking him to engage me for the last concert of that season in 1891, which he did without hearing me play. The word of Clara Schumann was sufficient guarantee.

When the moment arrived for me to make my debut before one of the most critical audiences in the world, not forgetting the famous musicians listening in the artist's room, which was merely separated from the platform by few steps, Joseph Joachim [1831–1907], who had just finished playing, approached me, held out his hand, and led a trembling frightened girl to the piano.

I was recently given the published diary of Clara Schumann and it gave me great pleasure to read this: "March the 3rd, 1891. Adelina de Lara has now left my school. She was one of my best pupils and Marie [Schumann] [1841–1929] in particular thinks she will have a distinguished future." Well, the future is now the past, or nearly so. For to me, it is very often more like the present, so clearly do I remember all I learnt and experienced in Frankfurt.

Clara Schumann had not only the Schumann tradition to hand on to her pupils, but she had in direct descent the tradition of [Johann Sebastian] Bach [1685–1750], [Ludwig van] Beethoven [1770–1827], and the other classics. She numbered among her best friends such

masters as [Frédéric] Chopin [1810–1849], [Felix] Mendelssohn [1809–1847], [Adolf von] Henselt [1814–1889], [Ignaz] Moscheles [1794–1870] and [Franz] Liszt [1811–1886]. She told me how often she had played duets with these great ones and sat by the piano while they played to her their compositions.

Of course, everyone knows of her long friendship with [Johannes] Brahms [1833–1897]. He was received in the Schumanns' home as one of the family; and *how* we welcomed him when he came two or three times a year to stay with them! He was so kind and full of jokes – always interested in the few favoured pupils allowed to play to him. He would pop in and out of the music room, smiling at us while we were having lessons, and then come and stand behind one's chair, particularly if we were playing something of his. I would perhaps be going through the Brahms Handel Variations[, Opus 24] or a [Piano] Concerto [Number 1 in D minor, Opus 15 or Number 2 in B-flat Major, Opus 83] and the hints, praise or otherwise one was longing for came forth. Then the lovely *Gesellschaften* – or parties – in his honour, at which I and other students such as Leonard Borwick [1868–1925], Ilona Eibenschütz [1872–1967], and Alice Dessauer [1865–1950] would be asked to play, are never to be forgotten. Very often, I had the honour of turning over the music for Brahms and Madame Schumann, when they played duets together, or for Brahms, who frequently performed his violin sonatas with Joachim.

The use of the pedal is a very important point in our school, so important that, even in these days of many great pianists, sometimes the finest performance can be spoilt by careless use of either pedal. With Clara Schumann, I very soon realized the importance to discover the secret. First of all, one should keep one's heel firmly on the ground, touching the loud or second pedal very lightly with the point of your foot, moving it up and down of course with each change of harmony. Never rest the whole weight of your foot on the pedal and never press it right down, just touch it lightly. It is quite enough on one of our great pianofortes; otherwise, one gets that awful vibration. There are times of course when a sustained pedal note has to be held as in the Number 2 D Major Novelette[, Opus 21 of Schumann].

I take my foot right away from the second pedal sometimes – it makes for clarity. With reference to the first or soft pedal, Clara Schumann would not allow us to use it at all. “Pianissimos should be genuine”, she said. However, if we must, then keep the pedal down a moment or so, release it, and try to sustain exactly the same piano as when the pedal was down. She wished us to be thus masters of our touch and tone and our piano or soft touch must be so perfect as to be heard in the largest hall up to the topmost balcony. Those were her words; get the tone whether loud or soft.

There is much consideration to be given to fingering. I have made a study of it. Having been born with small hands which can barely stretch an octave, Madame Schumann was satisfied with my own fingering, I always realised. She wished that we should never use fingers just to make a phrase easy. A finger to each note is the rule: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; C, D, E, F, G. If one plays C and F-sharp, then of course 1, 4. Some students seems to think fingers can be used anyhow so long as the passage can be made easy. That is very wrong! The hard way is the best way. In this connection too, I have noticed the right hand often helps the left to make a passage easier, when tradition demands it should be all done by one hand alone. This is very bad and my teacher would not have allowed it for one moment. It certainly seems quite different. I’m referring of course to the classics, not modern music. As I have said before, we were allowed no antics, and the octaves were played from the forearm and staccato passages entirely from the wrist, so there’s no need to throw oneself about.

It is hardly necessary to say what rhythm meant in the Schumann school, because no one can be an artist who lacks rhythm – and not only rhythm, there is such a thing as balance. Take the first few bars of the last movement of the [Schumann Fantasie in C Major,] Opus 17. I feel a balance without any undue accent – a sort of swaying movement is hardly perceptible, but it is there.

[Performance example: Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu halten]

Then again in this passage of the Schumann [Piano] Concerto [in A Minor, Opus 54].

[Performance example: I. Allegro affettuoso]

But as for real rhythm, we were told to always remember the conductor's beat, that grand rhythm one gets in a great conductor; and even a trill must be accented.

When we had two chords to play like this [Performance example] in the Schumann Etude [Performance example: Études symphoniques, Opus 13], Madame Schumann in one's early lessons would quickly lift up one's arms between the chords.

[Performance example: Finale. Allegro brillante]

I have often been asked if Clara Schumann lost her temper or became excited when we played badly. Oh, no! Certainly not! When she disliked one's performance, she fidgeted to an extent that was most distressing. The more she fussed about with her hands, feet and shoulders, the worse we played; and the worse we played, the more she fidgeted; and she would not say a word until we'd finished; then a little quiet, but very plain talk was the result. When we pleased her, she would sit perfectly still, never moving a finger, and we were rewarded with a smile and a pat on the shoulder which always warmed my heart.

We had two lessons a week of one hour's duration. The lesson started with Bach or other early masters, then a sonata or a concerto and lighter music to follow. We studied a very large repertoire of the greatest music. We were made to sight-read as much as possible at home and go to the opera nearly every night, where student seats awaited us – also attend every symphony concert rehearsal following the orchestral scores. Madame Schumann lent me such scores very often. She never heard scales or technique; the daughters told us what to do at home when we first entered the school.

Although Clara Schumann was *the* great teacher at the large Hoch Conservatorium, where I had the rest of my musical education, she gave all lessons in her [de Lara has apparently misspoken the word ‘

her' from her written notes as 'our'] house – three pupils in the morning only, and the daughters' pupils were allowed to sit in rows at the back of the large music room to listen to us while we had our lessons.

In conclusion, I will repeat that tone quality, rhythm and phrasing, as well as sincerity of interpretations and absence of affectation in any form whatsoever, are the solid foundations of the Schumann school and the basis of the Schumann tradition. I look back upon the happiest and most peaceful years of my long life: my delightful studies in Frankfurt with Doctor Clara Schumann.

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