

SCHUMANN: *Fantasia in C Major Op.17* • BRAHMS: *Sonata No.2 in F Sharp Minor Op.2*

Pianist
Ludwig Olshansky

MCS 2127



SCHUMANN Fantasia in C Major, Op. 17

BRAHMS Sonata in F Sharp Minor, Op. 2

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Robert Schumann: Fantasia in C, Op. 17

In 1828, in deference to his mother's wishes, Schumann entered the University of Leipzig as a law student. The following year, he went to Heidelberg to study with Anton Thibaut, an eminent professor of law who was also seriously involved in music as a choral director, collector, and writer. It was in Heidelberg that Schumann began to study music in earnest. In 1830, at the age of twenty, Schumann obtained his mother's permission to abandon law for the pursuit of music. He returned to Leipzig, where he lived and studied piano with Friedrich Wieck. Though he also studied composition at this time, Schumann's main interest was still the piano. However, a contraption that Schumann designed to develop the independence of the fingers ended his hopes for a career as a piano virtuoso. (The device involved keeping the fourth finger in a sling while he practiced with the others. Instead of promoting the independence of that finger, the invention weakened it.) Perhaps as a compensation for his blighted prospects as a pianist, Schumann devoted the first ten years of his composing career to music for the piano. All his published works from 1830 to 1840 are for that instrument, and his most brilliant music dates from this period, including *Papillons*, *Davidbündlertänze*, *Toccata*, *Carnaval*, *Fantasiestücke*, *Symphonic Études*, *Kinderszenen*, *Noveletten*, and the *Fantasia in C*.

Schumann's stormy romance with Wieck's daughter Clara, a gifted pianist and composer in her own right, dates from 1835, when she was sixteen and Schumann twenty-five. Though he was Schumann's host and teacher, Friedrich Wieck did not think enough of Schumann's future to approve of the relationship. The years from 1835 to 1840 were difficult for the lovers, with enforced separations bridged by fervent letters and passionate music. Schumann wrote to Clara in 1838: "I have just finished a fantasy in three movements [the *Fantasia in C*], which I sketched down to its details in June, 1836. I do not think I have ever written anything more impassioned than the first movement. It is a profound lament about you. You can understand the *Fantasia* only if you transport yourself back to the unhappy summer of 1836, when I had to give you up. [Clara's father had taken her to Dresden to discourage the affair.] I have no reason to compose in so miserable and melancholy a way now!" (By 1838, apparently, the lovers' predicament was more hopeful: Schumann was becoming established as a composer and as a writer about music, and two years later, when he received a doctorate from the University of Jena and his future seemed more secure, he and Clara married.) In another letter of 1838 Schumann writes: "The next things to be published are some fantasies, but to distinguish them from the *Fantasiestücke* I have called them *Ruine*, *Siegesbogen*, and *Sternbild* [the *Fantasia in C*] and *Dichtungen*."

Actually, the *Fantasia in C* had its beginnings in 1835. In that year, funds were being raised throughout Germany to erect a monument to Beethoven in Bonn, that composer's birthplace. Schumann intended that all profits from the publication of the *Fantasia* be turned over to the monument fund. The monument to Beethoven was abandoned for ten years (and Schumann abandoned his original title, which translates as *Ruins*, *Triumphal Arch*, and *Wreath of Stars*), but Schumann's monument to Clara was beautifully realized.

The score is dedicated to Franz Liszt, a lifelong champion and performer of Schumann's music. A quotation from

SIDE ONE

SCHUMANN Fantasia in C, Op. 17 30:30

- Band 1. Sempre fantasticamente ed appassionatamente (12:45)
- Band 2. Moderato. Sempre energico (7:20)
- Band 3. Lento sostenuto e sempre piano (10:25)

SIDE TWO

BRAHMS Sonata in F Sharp Minor, Op. 2 24:30

- Band 1. Allegro non troppo, ma energico (6:00)
- Band 2. { Andante con espressione } (9:40)
 { Scherzo. Allegro. }
- Band 3. Finale. Introduzione: Sostenuto. (8:50)
 Allegro non troppo e rubato

Schlegel on the title page, however, tells us that Clara is the proper subject of the *Fantasia*: "There is for the secret listener one gentle note through all the tones that sound in earth's fitful dream."

Johannes Brahms: Sonata in F-sharp minor, Op. 2

There are several links between Schumann's *Fantasia in C* and Brahms's *Sonata in F-sharp minor*. In 1853, the celebrated violinist Joseph Joachim (for whom Brahms later wrote the *Violin Concerto*) heard Brahms in a concert and supplied the twenty-year-old composer with a letter of introduction to Schumann. Schumann was so impressed with Brahms's talent that he hailed him in print as the new musical hero. Besides his professional and personal conquest of the older composer, Brahms became dear and deep friends with Clara Schumann, a relationship that was to last and to become more profound until Clara's death in 1896, a year before Brahms's. The *Sonata in F-sharp minor*, together with three books of Brahms's songs and his other two piano sonatas, was published at Schumann's instigation and is "Respectfully dedicated to Frau Clara Schumann."

Despite the earliness of the piece, and despite the influence of the late Beethoven sonatas, there is much in the *F-sharp-minor Sonata* that anticipates the mature Brahms. The four movements are subtly interrelated. While no material from one movement is literally quoted in another, the melodic contours of all the movements are similar. They are closest in rhythm and atmosphere. Movements one and two employ similar rhythms, but again the effect is completely different because of changes in texture and mood. The fourth movement sounds materially furthest removed from the others, but on close inspection the melodic shapes follow directions like those of the other movements, the first movement in particular, and the strong use of the upbeat echoes and reinforces similar but less consistently followed procedures in the first movement. The finale also makes use of the Hungarian folk idiom that Brahms was to exploit in much of his later music, including the *First Piano Concerto*, the *Hun-*

garian Dances, the *G-minor Piano Quartet*, and, with utmost sophistication, the *Clarinet Quintet*. A neglected work of youthful mastery, the *Sonata in F-sharp minor* holds much historical and musical interest for today's listener.

Notes by Michael Brozen

Some Olshansky Reviews:

"There have been two great recordings of the piece (Schumann's *C Major Fantasy*)—by Curzon and by Horowitz—and now there is a third, maybe the most satisfying of all, by the young American Ludwig Olshansky . . . Olshansky's secret is his understanding (very rare among young artists) that passion is best expressed as an apparent struggle against control rather than as a wild beating about. The effect is achieved by an equally rare mastery of meter, a harpsichordist's sense of how accents can be stressed or softened by delaying or hurrying, almost infinitesimally, the attack on the next note. The resulting performance conveys a sense of great rhythmic freedom, but is in fact strictly controlled by choices of tempo. Olshansky's Schumann is romantic piano playing at its best, and Monitor has given him an excellent recording, with almost eerily noiseless surfaces!"

Martin Mayer in *Esquire Magazine*.

"Olshansky's *Fantasy* (Schumann) is a beauty. His performance is one of nobility and total commitment. It radiates warmth continually, yet never approaches sentimentality. I find his way with the piece especially moving after listening to Horowitz' brilliantly pianistic account and Geza Anda's detached performance; both of the latter bring intellect to bear but fail to communicate the passion of one of Schumann's most passionate keyboard works."

S.L. in *High Fidelity Magazine*

"The very early Brahms (*Sonata in F Sharp minor, Op. 2*) is dedicated to Frau Clara Schumann and is very lovely—filled with portents of the later Brahms. It is beautifully played and realized. Monitor's sound is excellent and there are good liner notes."

William A. Olsen in *The New Records* (Phila.)

"Ludwig Olshansky, a pianist entirely new to me, gives us so dramatically passionate and poignant a performance of the great Schumann *Op. 17 Fantasy in C* that it doesn't suffer from comparisons with the Ashkenazy and Horowitz versions."

R. D. Darrell "The Tape Deck" (*High Fidelity Mag.*)

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