Program notes by Dr. David Cole

On the surface, it sounds like perfect fodder for today’s supermarket tabloids: a famous musician takes a talented but impoverished younger colleague under his wing, even opening his home to the younger man. The new houseguest grows infatuated with his mentor’s wife, even though she is 14 years his senior. In true Hollywood fashion, the older musician descends into insanity, leading to a suicide attempt. Throughout the husband’s madness and after his tragic death, his protégé provides emotional support to the young widow as well as assistance with her children; the two maintain a close although occasionally fractious relationship until her death.

This would be one of the great love triangles in the history of classical music except for one small detail: there is very little evidence to suggest that Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms were ever anything more than close friends, despite the flurry of passionate correspondence between them. In 1855, Brahms wrote to Clara:

“I can do nothing but think of you…What have you done to me? Can’t you remove the spell you have cast over me?”

That passion may have been mutual. After Robert’s death in 1856, Clara and Brahms visited Switzerland together, after which Brahms returned home to Hamburg. Neither Brahms’ letters nor his other writings provide any details of the vacation, but Clara’s journal entry for the day they parted contains this sorrowful and suggestive line:

"I felt as if I were returning from a funeral."

Over the next 40 years, Brahms and Clara met often and corresponded frequently. Over time the fires of Brahms’ ardor were banked, replaced by a warm glow of friendly affection and a great deal of professional respect for Clara. Brahms sent all of his works to her for evaluation and feedback, and Clara never sugar-coated her criticism when she felt that Brahms was not producing his best work. Not only would Clara comment on the emotional aspects but the musical elements as well, frequently suggesting changes to small details and to the overall structure of the work.

With Clara’s death, Brahms’ creative muse almost completely vanished. He was diagnosed with cancer and his death followed hers a year later. We are left with only circumstantial evidence about what transpired between these three creative geniuses and perhaps further baseless speculation should be, as Leon Trotsky said, “consigned to the dustbin of history.” Thankfully, we are left with a legacy of great music from these three immortal composers, and those works will long outlast any salacious gossip from times past.

The deterioration of Robert Schumann’s mental health may have been predestined from early in life. From contemporary descriptions of his behavior from his wife, his colleagues and from his own writings, contemporary psychologists have concluded that Schumann was bipolar, a trait he shared with other composers, including Hector Berlioz and George Frideric Handel.

Recognition of the “light” and “dark” sides of Schumann’s personality can be seen in his own writing. He was a founder of the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik (New Journal for Music), one of the first publications devoted solely to reporting on musical events and new compositions. Schumann often wrote under two aliases (possibly indicating his awareness of his mental duality). Each alias represented a different aspect of the Romantic temperament. “Florestan” portrayed the active, dynamic, Romantic – the bold adventurer, the passionate lover, the fire-breathing, swashbuckling soldier of culture, single-handedly leading the assault against the bastions of artistic conservatism in order to establish a new musical order. Schumann named Florestan’s alter ego “Eusebius” – a lover not a fighter, given to contemplation rather than confrontation, dreaming rather than drama, though both the contemplation and the dreaming could lead down dark paths. These two personalities often engaged in dialogue and argument in print and also in music (both appear in Schumann’s piano suite Carneval, Op.9), lending fascinating insights into Schumann’s personality.

Given Schumann’s identification with both sides of the Romantic psyche, it’s not surprising that he was drawn to the conflicted hero of Lord Byron’s epic poem Manfred as a source of musical inspiration. In 1848 he fashioned an overture and incidental music for concert presentation, including several entr’actes and choruses. The first performance of the complete incidental music took place at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig in 1852, conducted by the composer. The incidental music is rarely given in full, but the overture retains a place in the concert hall.

The overture begins with three passionate chords, with the tension increased by the Schumann writing them as syncopations (the chords sound after the conductor’s beat, rather than with it). The brooding introduction that follows sets the scene of Manfred isolated in his high Alpine castle. The tempo gradually increases to allegro, reaching an impassioned climax before collapsing in despair. The opening tempo returns to bring us full circle and the music descends back into darkness.

Clara Josephine Wieck was born into a musical family, her father a pianist and her mother a singer. Her parents were ill-matched, and they divorced when Clara was five. Her father was given custody and immediately began training young Clara for the life of a child prodigy. He was a relentlessly demanding and ill-tempered taskmaster, giving her daily lessons in piano, violin, and singing and daily training in theory, harmony, composition, and counterpoint. She made her recital debut at the age of eight and was touring Europe at the age of eleven, performing for Goethe and impressing Paganini, who offered to perform with her. At eighteen, she gave an impressive series of recitals in Vienna, where she won the admiration of both Chopin and Liszt.
The young Robert Schumann came to live in the Wieck household when he was 20 and Clara was 11. The claims that Robert was immediately infatuated with her are largely unfounded, though he did admire her playing and enjoyed her company and conversation. Camaraderie slowly grew into love; when she turned 18, Robert asked Friedrich Wieck for Clara’s hand in marriage. Wieck flatly refused, being very uncertain of Schumann’s future as a pianist after the young man permanently injured himself using a device intended to strengthen his fingers. Clara, however, accepted his proposal and she and Schumann relentlessly pressured her father to give his consent. After three years they took the matter to court, where the judge ruled in favor of the young couple. In response to his newfound marital bliss, Schumann composed over 100 *lieder* in the first year of his marriage, almost all of which were about love.

With Robert’s death in 1856, Clara needed to provide for her family. She received assistance both from Brahms and from Joseph Joachim, who arranged for her to tour with him in the years after Robert’s death.

While Clara’s career as a female concert pianist and composer was important, her influence on piano performance may be her greatest legacy. She was one of the first pianists to perform from memory in orchestral concerts and solo recitals. She changed the content of the piano recital from a collection of virtuoso display pieces to substantial works by major composers. She maintained a remarkable 61-year performing career, retiring from concertizing in 1891.

Her Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 7 was completed in 1835. She gave the first performance of work in November 1835 with Felix Mendelssohn conducting the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. The work displays the inventiveness of a young composer coming to grips with her own talents while trying to imitate Classical models and then reach beyond them. In sound and gesture it resembles the piano concertos of Mendelssohn and Chopin, but in structure she follows her own distinctive path. One wonders if the cello and piano duet in the slow movement was heard by Brahms and recalled when he was writing the slow movement of his Piano Concerto No. 2 years later. The rondo finale attests to both Chopin’s influence and influence of contemporary violin concertos by Viotti, Spohr, and other virtuosi.

**Johannes Brahms: Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73**

“I shall never write a symphony!” wrote Johannes Brahms to a friend in 1873. “You have no idea what it’s like to hear the footsteps of a giant like that behind you.” The giant was Ludwig van Beethoven, specifically his towering legacy of nine symphonies, the last of which tore down the boundaries of the Classical symphony and pointed the way to the Romantic era. The question composers like Brahms faced was: After Beethoven, what exactly IS a symphony?

While he was perfectly comfortable writing for orchestra (as witnessed by the Serenade No. 1 from 1858), Brahms proceeded with great deliberation before daring to label any of his symphonic works as a symphony. Over twenty years after the initial sketches were put to paper, the First Symphony premiered in 1876. If Brahms’ paranoia about living up to Beethoven’s legacy weren’t enough, the conductor, Hans von Bülow, dubbed the work “Beethoven’s Tenth.” Some found similarities between Brahms’ First and Beethoven’s Fifth, both of which begin in “tragic” C minor and end in “triumphant” C major. Others
noted that the noble tune that begins the allegro section of Brahms’ finale resembled the “Ode to Joy” theme from Beethoven’s Ninth (to which Brahms groused “Any ass can see that!). Rather than exorcising the specter of Beethoven, Brahms’ First Symphony gave it new life.

Rather than giving up symphonic composition, Brahms set immediately to work on his Second Symphony, completing it in the fall of 1877. After all the fuss over his First, Brahms had a little fun with his publisher, Fritz Simrock, when sending the Second to him for printing:

‘The new Symphony is so melancholic that you will not be able to bear it. I have not yet written anything quite so sad, so ‘minor’: the score must appear with black borders and in mourning.’

In fact, the opposite is true: Brahms’ Second Symphony is one of his sunniest creations, miles removed from the turbulent emotions of the First. This atmosphere of tranquility may have been influenced by the setting where Brahms wrote the work, the village of Pörtschach am Wörthersee in Austria. Brahms found the alpine lakeside atmosphere conducive to his creativity. After playing through a piano score of the symphony, Theodore Billroth wrote to the composer:

“It is all rippling streams, blue sky, sunshine, and cool green shadows. How beautiful it must be at Pörtschach.”

The première took place in Vienna in December of 1877 under the baton of Hans Richter. As Clara Schumann had predicted, the Second Symphony achieved immediate popularity with the audience; the third movement had to be repeated at the première.

The opening of the Second reveals that Brahms still followed Beethoven’s principles. The cellos and basses present a simple idea: a four-note figure, consisting of a rocking half step (D-C#-D) descending to A. It is this seemingly innocuous idea that will generate the structure not only of the first movement, but of all four movements in the symphony. Even though Brahms’ Second has been compared to Beethoven’s Pastorale, it bears closer resemblance to the earlier composer’s Fifth Symphony, where the opening four-note motto pervades every movement. The lyrical second theme of this movement is unusual for two reasons: it first appears in the remote key of F-sharp minor before appearing in the “correct” key of A major, and the melody bears a striking resemblance to his Wiegenlied, Op. 49, a tune most of us know as “Brahms’ Lullaby.”

The slow movement is the one solemn part of the work, spinning out a stately melody clothed in the dark colors of low strings, bassoons, horns and tuba. Much like the slow movements of Beethoven’s Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, the principal melody is developed and modified with each subsequent appearance.

The third movement, Allegretto grazioso, manages to combine the elements of both minuet and scherzo, its lilting 3/4 time opening transformed into a skipping duple-meter dance in the central section (Presto non assai), and into a bubbling divertissement in 3/8 time later in the movement, with accents
placed to throw the sense of meter slightly off-kilter. After all these cheeky orchestral hijinks, the tempo relaxes and the elegant music of the opening has the final say.

The finale is one of the few movements in Brahms’ music where the mood is untroubled and happy. Any philosophical doubts have been utterly vanquished, and the movement bubbles along in boundless energy and good humor, beginning quietly and then exploding into exuberant celebration in the 23rd bar. The vivacious conviviality pauses only briefly for a few lyrical episodes. One of these is the second theme of the movement, first heard quietly in strings and woodwinds but returning as a sublime apotheosis, where it is sung with passionate ardor by the entire string section. This joyful movement ends with a thrilling sprint to the final cadence, driven by exultant fanfares from the woodwinds, horns, and trumpets.