



For Clara

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The current recital of piano works by Robert Schumann is titled For Clara and includes two of the composer's largest works for solo piano dedicated to his beloved: the emotionally charged, almost Beethovenian F♯-Minor Piano Sonata, op. 11, a work which on "the title page of the first edition bears the addition of 'Clara zugeeignet von Florestan und Eusebius' [Dedicated to Clara by Florestan and Eusebius]"; and, though dedicated to Liszt on the title page, his equally monumental C-Major Fantasie, a work originally planned as a "Great Sonata for Beethoven," the proceeds of which were to help erect a monument to the Bonn native in his birth city in 1839 (Mendelssohn's D-Minor Variations sérieuses, op. 54 was his contribution to the monument). Though dedicated to Liszt in the preface, the work was truly (should we say emotionally?) written for Clara—his "secret listener."



Both works are among the very greatest Schumann wrote in the solo-piano medium, and both have been well recorded in the last century. That does not mean that there is nothing new to say with this music. But for me, if one is going to choose to tackle these oft-played pieces, then one needs to have something unique to bring to them. There are also some essential qualities that a good Schumann player should have in my book: a lyrical sense, one that allows not just beautiful melodic playing, but also beautiful figurative-melodic shaping; a good rhythmic sense, one that allows the pianist to juxtapose the incredibly dense contrapuntal lines that appear throughout his music, along with Schumann's incredibly difficult rhythmic quirks; and, importantly, a wild side—a Florestan to the calmer Eusebius, allowing one to let go, while still maintaining a sense of the whole. Oh-Havenith certainly has some of these qualities: a lovely warm sound perfect for the numerous moments of quiet reflection in this music—the enchanting opening melody in the second movement's Aria in the Sonata or the lovely figurative broken-chord progression in the Fantasie's Langsam getragen. Check on the first quality. She is equally adept at bringing out the numerous metrical shifts in the music. A beautiful example comes in her lovely second-movement Mäßig: Durchaus energisch in the Fantasie. Check number two. But what I miss in her playing is a bit more of that third quality—the unbridled passion that someone like Horowitz or Richter bring in their performances of the Viel bewegter section that ends the second movement of the Fantasie (the section with the jumps in opposite directions), or the intensity of sound and articulation that Gilels brings in the opening movement of the Sonata—not just in the faster, more scherzo-like sections, but even at the work's very opening. I also miss the almost orchestrally conceived long lines that Schumann surely thought of in the Fantasie's opening movement—something akin to the opening movement of Schubert's B♭-Major Sonata, D 960. Just compare Oh-Havenith's performance here with Edwin

Fischer's magical account—not only are the melodic lines longer in range, but there are also far more colors that he brings out in especially the quieter repeat of the opening melody.

Jimin Oh-Havenith is an excellent pianist with a quiet, almost understated way with this music that is, at times, compelling. Is she bringing out Clara, the “secret listener” here? Perhaps. Does this always work in my book? Not always, but often. That's not to say that her approach won't appeal you. If you like your Schumann more Eusebius-like most of the time, then Oh-Havenith may be your pianist: She brings out a plethora of details, has an attractive sound, and can handle the numerous metrical anomalies in this music. Does she have a wild side? Perhaps she does—just not quite enough to satisfy my needs in this repertoire.



For Clara

Schumann: Piano Sonata No. 1 & Fantasie

Jimin Oh-Havenith (piano)



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