

Alexander Wheelock Thayer on Joachim and Clara Schumann in the Berlin Singakademie, 1855

Dwight's Journal of Music 8, no. 10 (December 8, 1855): 78–79.



Nov. 10.— What can I say? I am too excited, too much ‘carried away,’ and yet would fain record, that hereafter I may recall in some faint degree, the feelings with which I have heard CLARA SCHUMANN and JOACHIM again. [The concert took place in Berlin’s *Singakademie* on November 4, 1855 —RWE] Have I sneered at virtuosity? Never at such as this! Where and how to begin? The language of the critics is like Sanscrit to me. I can neither use it myself nor understand it in others. I must—as I can with truth—comprehend all technical description in one phrase—there are no difficulties to them in their respective instruments. What are difficulties to other performers are so easily overcome, are played with such perfect calmness and rest, and glide away so unnoticed from their fingers that you cannot think to wonder at them. Let me go back a week.

It was a concert with orchestra in the Sing Akademie. Again, as last winter, I found it so beautiful in them, when all was ready, to come down to their places in front of the orchestra, so modestly and simply as if the audience was but a meeting of friends—with no display, no evident wish to be greeted with applause, no zany-like contortions of body, nor tossing of heads, but quiet and calm in their strength, without anxiety, without triumph. The overture to Byron’s “Manfred”, led by that excellent director STERN, and played by our new ‘Orchester Verein’, opened the concert. A powerful work, expressive of struggle and commotion of spirit. Schumann’s strong side, as it seems to me. Then followed his Concerto in A, minor, for piano-forte and orchestra, which she played. I was badly seated to get the proper effect of the work, but not to see the mastery with which the pianist ruled her instrument. What force

and what delicacy! How wonderfully those handfuls of notes spoke out the deepest thoughts of Robert Schumann! Here a sigh, and there a tear—here the struggles of a giant, there the soothing voice of an angel. It is this wondrous power of entering into the very soul of the composer, which makes Clara Schumann what she is. Others can equal her in the technicalities of playing, but no woman approaches her in this thing. I met a lady a day or two after, who asked me how Madame Schumann appeared? “She seemed to me care-worn and sad; as well she may, poor woman!” said I. “She appeared just so years ago, when she was a young girl, and came here to triumph over all,” said the lady. “She never had a childhood. Her father was determined to make a virtuoso of her, and the joyousness of youth she never knew. Even then her countenance showed her secret sorrow. Is not this the reason that she plays BEETHOVEN as no other living? Does she not feel that great struggling spirit in his music? does it not sympathize with her, and share every trouble, and soothe, and calm and speak peace? When she plays his music, you think no more of composer and performer than you do of SHAKSPEARE when reading his dramas. On this evening she only played some variations by the great master, in C minor. No mere finger-work, but full of feeling and beauty.

Joachim’s first piece was a sonata for the violin solo, by BACH. I had heard it a day or two before, when he played it to an audience of two, curled up upon the lounge; and as he now stood up before the large audience, there was no change in his demeanor, no variation in his manner of playing; all was just as simple and unaffected as before, and what is the secret of this, but his love for the music? And truly I begin to have some faint conception of that man Bach’s greatness. What power, depth and quaint beauty in this work! The first movement has a grand, sweeping power, producing an effect that one could hardly expect from the instrument. Then follows a quaint fugue, on four subjects, I think; but can that be possible? I heard it twice and hardly dare say it; and then an Adagio, full of soul, and a finale, capricious and wild, and full of technical difficulties hardly to be imagined. One never would imagine it from the manner of Joachim. RELLSTAB says of the performance: “The poet says:

‘In him have I
The model of a perfect man beheld.’

“We can quote these words in relation to this artist, in whom we honor a model of perfect performance. Not the storm of applause at the close, but the breathless stillness during the piece praised him the most. In the solution of his problem not only did no note of the smallest importance fail him, but no stroke of power, no spark of fire, no breath of tenderness; it was the most perfect Daguerreotype of the work.”

But it was in the last piece that I felt his mighty power to the fullest extent This was that grand work of Beethoven's ripest years, the Concerto for violin and orchestra, op. 61, in D. I had heard it at a concert of the Orchester-Verein not long before, the solo by Concert-master LAUB, from Vienna. He had played it with distinguished skill and it had not failed of making its due impression. But now! Still as the tomb was that house, the audience being prepared for the noble orchestral opening by the delicate variations before mentioned, which immediately preceded it. This work was written at that period when Beethoven's genius proved in the fourth Symphony, that as a mere artist, a simple writer of music, he was behind none. So in this work the deep sorrow of the later period does not appear. The giant is there in the Allegro, but a giant rejoicing in his strength. What tenderness, what unheard-of depths of human feeling in the Larghetto! " You need not be ashamed of your wet eyes," said Miss G. to me, "there are many others here in the same state."

If Joachim would only put on a few artist airs, one could think of him; as it is, the stream of music carries us along with it and the very heart strings are vibrating to every tone of that marvellous instrument. If he would not be so calm and utterly buried in his own feelings, there would be some escape. But no. He seizes upon you by his very personal appearance, and after the first tones all escape from his enchantment is impossible. And so the Larghetto ended and the people waked from their trance—the magic bonds were loosed. The deepest feelings had been excited. The British Spy wondered how the audience of the blind preacher could be brought down from the pitch of excitement to which his eloquence had raised them. Had any one but Beethoven written that Larghetto, or had any other than Joachim played the Rondo (Finale), I should have feared like the British Spy. But when did Beethoven ever fail in placing just exactly the right thing after one of his heart-reaching, soul-thrilling Andantes or Adagios? With what abounding life and joyousness did the Rondo spring from beneath Joachim's bow! His own figure, calm as it was, seemed to feel in every nerve the change. The orchestra was inspired to a man, and the audience were electrified. That the "*gloomy* Beethoven!" This last movement is the very champagne of music; Joachim poured it out to us, until we were "like Bacchus, crowned and drunken!"

A. W. T.



Hans von Bülow's Review

Andreas Moser, *Joseph Joachim: A Biography (1831–1899)*, trans. Lilla Durahm (London: Philip Wellby, 1901), 154–55.

Hans von Bülow reviewed this concert in the *Berliner Feuerspritze*:

The hall of the *Sing-Akademie* was brilliantly reinaugurated by means of the concert given by Frau Schumann and Herr Joseph Joachim, and since Franz Liszt such beautiful music has not been heard in this room. This evening will remain unforgotten and unique in the memories of those who partook of this artistic pleasure, which has filled all with lasting enthusiasm. It was not Joachim who yesterday played Beethoven and Bach, Beethoven himself played!

That was not an interpretation of the highest genius, it was a revelation. Even the most incredulous must believe in miracles, a similar transubstantiation has never been. Never has a work of art been brought before the mind's eyes in such life and spirit, nor has the immortality of genius before appeared so lustrous and sublime in its truest reality. One wished to listen on one's knees! Anyway description of the impression which Beethoven's tenth symphony [i.e. the Violin Concerto —RWE] made yesterday would be a desecration.

Frau Schumann surpassed herself in her rendering of Robert Schumann's pianoforte concerto. If all the compositions of the leading modern composers of instrumental music were interpreted with such wonderful perfection, the whole conception so rhythmic and with such subtlety of detail, they would soon make headway even with the most reserved and opposing public. Schumann's pianoforte concerto won the sympathy of all, through the great pianist, who poured her whole soul into her interpretation of it. In addition, we may also mention that the piano solo of this orchestral piece cannot be called otherwise than a 'grateful' part. But how particularly grateful it is for this artist!



Deutscher Text

Andreas Moser, *Joseph Joachim: Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Verlag der Deutschen Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1908), 216–17.

Durch das gestern abend stattgehabte Konzert von Frau Clara Schumann und Herrn Joseph Joachim erfuhr der Saal der Singakademie eine überaus glänzende Rehabilitation. Seit Franz Liszt ist in diesen Räumen nie so schöne Musik gehört worden. Dieser Abend wird unvergeßlich und einzig bleiben in der Erinnerung der Teilnehmer an diesem Kunstgenuß, der jeden mit nachwirkender Begeisterung erfüllt hat. Nicht Joachim hat gestern Beethoven und Bach gespielt, Beethoven selbst hat gespielt!

Das war keine Verdolmetschung des höchsten Genius, es war eine Offenbarung. Auch der Ungläubigste muß an Wunder glauben; eine ähnliche Transsubstantiation ist noch nicht geschehen. Nie ist ein Kunstwerk so lebendig und verklärt vor das innere Auge geführt worden, nie die Unsterblichkeit des Genius so leuchtend und erhaben in die wirklichste Wirklichkeit getreten. Auf den Knien hätte man zuhören mögen! Jede Schilderung des Eindruckes, den Beethoven's *zehnte* Symphonie gestern erregt hat, wäre eine Entweihung.

Frau Dr. Schumann übertraf sich selbst in dem Vortrage von Robert Schumanns Klavierkonzert. Wenn die Komposition des hervorragendsten modernen Instrumentalkomponisten mit solch wunderbarer Vollendung, mit so schwunghafter Totalauffassung und so ausgefeilter Nuancierung aller Einzelheiten interpretiert werden, so brechen sie sich auch bei dem widerstrebendsten, zurückhaltendsten Publikum Bahn. Schumanns Klavierkonzert hat aller Sympathien errungen durch die große Meisterin, die den ihr verwandten Geist so unvergleichlich zur Mitteilung gebracht hat. Hierbei geben wir noch zu bedenken, daß die Klavierpartie dieses Orchesterstückes nichts weniger als eine 'dankbare' zu nennen ist. Wie äußerst dankbar bewährte sich dieselbe aber für die Künstlerin!

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