New Paths

Mari Kodama

Now he has arrived, a young blood, at whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch. His name is *Johannes Brahms*. [...]

Robert Schumann, *Neue Bahnen (New Paths)*, 1853

NEW PATHS

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

	Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 1	
1	I. Allegro	10. 42
2	II. Andante	5. 19
3	III. Allegro molto e con fuoco - Più mosso	5. 28
4	IV. Allegro con fuoco - Presto non troppo ed agitato	7. 03
	Variations on a Theme by Schumann, Op. 9	
5	Thema. Ziemlich langsam	1. 15
6	Variation 1. L'istesso tempo	1. 18
7	Variation 2. Poco più moto	0. 25
8	Variation 3. Tempo di tema	1. 20
9	Variation 4. Poco più moto	0. 39
10	Variation 5. Allegro capriccioso	0. 47
11	Variation 6. Allegro	0. 52
12	Variation 7. Andante	0. 56
13	Variation 8. Andante (non troppo lento)	1. 27
14	Variation 9. Schnell	0. 36
15	Variation 10. Poco Adagio	1. 46
16	Variation 11. Un poco più animato	0. 50
17	Variation 12. Allegretto, poco scherzando - Presto	0. 46
18	Variation 13. Non troppo Presto	0. 40
19	Variation 14. Andante	0. 54
20	Variation 15. Poco Adagio	1. 40
21	Variation 16. [Adagio]	2. 09
22	**Theme and Variations, Op. 18B**	11. 09

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

	Myrthen, Op. 25, No. 1	
23	Widmung (arr. Clara Schumann 1819-1896)	2. 30

Total playing time: 60. 45

Mari Kodama, piano

Relationships

Hardly any relationship is as well-documented as that of Robert and Clara Schumann to Johannes Brahms: a lifelong three-way friendship in which Robert Schumann remained ever present even after his early death. The fascination that emanates from this connection of lives has touched me so much over the years that it has always been a concern of mine to musically tell the story of its beginning at some point. A 20-year-old from Hamburg came to Düsseldorf to visit the Schumanns, who were more than enthusiastic about his talent. "Your son Johannes has become very precious to us, his musical genius has created joyful hours for us. To facilitate his first walk into the world, I have publicly expressed what I think of him," Robert wrote to Brahms's father. The enthusiasm was mutual. For the young Brahms, the Schumanns became a point of reference, the collaboration with Clara a constant inspiration, the mutual trust, which was not limited to artistic creation, ultimately vital — not only for Brahms, but also for Clara during the very difficult phase of her husband's illness and afterwards. I have always been moved by the depth of this bond, its absolute reliability, which became so significant for artists in the mid-19th century, in a world where traditional norms began to dissolve and society became increasingly individualised.

The pieces I have chosen demonstrate the power that came from this friendship, the strength and energy, the tenderness and affection — you can hear all that in them.

Brahms's first piano work, which begins so energetically in the style of Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata only to soon take a different turn, is a highly complex, refined sonata — of course also the show piece of a 20-year-old on the move and full of hope of conquering the music world with his ground-breaking talent. Then Brahms's *Variations on a Theme by Schumann*, which he wrote in 1854 while staying at the Schumanns' in Düsseldorf and dedicated to Clara, as well as his *Variations for Piano* on his String Sextet and finally *Widmung* from the song cycle *Myrthen*, which Schumann gave to his wife for their wedding: "Du meine Seele, Du mein Herz ...Du meine Welt, in der ich lebe" (You, my soul, you my heart... you, my world, in which I live) — the piano arrangement was again by Clara herself.
Life did not necessarily treat Clara and Robert Schumann well. His fate is well known. Not only Clara, but also Brahms suffered. As he grew older, he changed. The late Brahms is more sombre, melancholic, sometimes fearsome in his brusqueness towards others, his music more melancholic.

In this recording, I am interested in the young Brahms. When I play his early works, the three piano sonatas for example, I see him in front of me, at home with the Schumanns, sitting at Clara's piano in his early twenties, full of energetic self-confidence. Hopeful, resilient and yet so sensitive and dreamy, in deep affection for an extraordinary pair of artists, without whose friendship his musical career would certainly have been different.

"You, my soul, you, my heart"

Johannes Brahms and his early works for piano cannot be considered in isolation from his close relationship with Robert and Clara Schumann. This "friendship triangle" (Mari Kodama) unfolded its power over many years. Brahms's works recorded here are all from his early creative period.

On his first visit to Düsseldorf on 30 September 1853, Brahms, who was only twenty years old, appeared to his host Schumann as a pianistic and compositional Messiah. Schumann then gave enthusiastic expression to his almost prophetic enthusiasm in the famous essay 'Neue Bahnen {New Paths]' in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*: "I believe that someone would and must [...] suddenly appear [...] whose mastery would not gradually unfold, but, like Minerva, would spring fully armed from the head of Jupiter. And now he has arrived, a young blood, at whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch. [...] He actually carried, also outwardly, all the signs that announce to us: he has been called upon. Sitting at the piano, he transported us to wondrous regions. We were drawn into ever more enchanting realms by his playing, full of genius, which turned the piano into an orchestra of lamenting and jubilant voices. The pieces were sonatas, but sounded more like veiled symphonies."

"So joyful, so fiery"

Schumann was particularly taken with the *Piano Sonata Op. 1 in C Major*. His admiration for the young pianist and composer was actually also shared by other artistic heavyweights. The violinist Joseph Joachim, for example, described Brahms's piano playing as "so delicate, so imaginative, so free, so fiery" and Schumann saw him as able to capture in his compositions "the highest expression of the time in an ideal way." As early as December 1853, Op. 1 was published in print by Breitkopf & Härtel — on Schumann's recommendation, for which Brahms in turn thanked him.

We know that Brahms had already composed a sonata movement alongside his F-sharp Minor Sonata before the journey to Düsseldorf, which is presumed to be part of another sonata he had destroyed. Brahms's decision to give the C Major work, which was not composed until 1852/53, the significant opus number 1 must therefore have had other reasons connected with the work concept of the sonata as such. Brahms expert Christian Martin Schmidt sees this in the "interweaving of classical balance and technical rigour on the one hand with Romantic expressiveness and immersion in musical detail on the other".

How does this manifest itself in the work itself? In form and disposition, the C Major sonata follows the model that Beethoven had raised to an unheard-of level in his 32 contributions to the genre. The opening sonata movement is followed by a slow variation movement, a scherzo and a fast final movement that incorporates both rondo and sonata-like elements.

In the first movement, Brahms not even attempts to conceal that Beethoven serves as his model. On the contrary, there is a quotation-like reminiscence of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata* Op. 106, but also echoes of the *Waldstein Sonata* Op. 53 (which the 16-year-old Brahms had already added to his pianistic repertoire). The Romantic expression of the work, on the other hand, is clearly evident in the weighty use of a folk song in the slow movement (the old German Minnelied *Verstohlen geht der Mond auf, blau, blau Blümelein* was the model here) and in the "lyrical rhapsodic character" (Schmidt) of the opening movement. It starts with an alternation of single and four-part scoring, as a call and response between a precentor and a choir, after which the theme gains in expressive intensity and also expands pianistically.

Even though Brahms basically follows the sonata form in the opening movement, he repeatedly softens its basic harmonic rules. Be it through the harmonic shift of the secondary theme from the dominant to the tonic parallel A Minor or through the dominant entry of the recapitulation via the seventh B-flat. The motivic-thematic work now comes to the fore.

All these are signs of an individual expansion and interpretation of the genre norm by a young innovator. And Brahms also stages the *Scherzo* as a stormy innovation, here with staccato double octaves, with metric and rhythmic conflicts and jams as well as performance indications such as *feroce* (wild) and *strepitoso* (noisy). The chromatic trio then appears enchanted, even yearning, with echo imitations. In the final movement, Brahms emphasises the inner relationship of almost all the themes — in the first theme, for example, there is a rhythmically modified variant of the opening of the first movement. And in the coda, we understand Schumann's reference to the "veiled symphonies", when truly symphonic sounds arise.

"I sometimes make observations about the variation forms". [The package of three sonatas was followed until 1863 by a phase of intensive study of a new form of composition. Now the variation moved into Brahms's focus. The theoretical foundation for his own concept of composing variations was laid in a letter to Joseph Joachim in June 1856: "I sometimes make observations about the variation forms and find that they should be kept stricter, purer. The ancients strictly retained the bass of the theme, their actual theme, throughout. But I sometimes find that new composers (both of us!) [meaning Brahms and Joachim themselves] rummage about the theme. We all anxiously retain the melody, but do not treat it freely, do not actually create anything new from it, but only burden it, making the melody not recognisable at all."

Brahms researcher Schmidt establishes a direct connection between this passage in the letter and the *Variations for Pianoforte on a Theme by Robert Schumann* Op. 9, which were written in the summer of 1854 and appeared in print in November of the same year. According to Schmidt, Op. 9 falls outside the framework of a genuinely Brahmsian notion of form. The theme comes from the first of the five *Albumblätter* from Schumann's *Bunte Blätter* Op. 99, and in some of the 16 variations Brahms cleverly weaves in motivic components from Robert's and Clara's pens (in the 9th and 10th variations, for example).

In general, a close emotional connection to the Schumanns is perceptible not only stylistically in the piano movement (a furtive side glance at Robert's *Symphonic Etudes* helps here). Clara, for her part, had written variations on the same theme in 1853, and now Brahms dedicated his version to her. The tension between Classical rigour and Romantic freedom, which he had already tried to reconcile in Op. 1, is also evident in Op. 9. Particularly the contrapuntally-oriented variations with the climax of No. 10 in the autograph were marked with "B." for Brahms, while he marked the more virtuosically-expansive movements with "Kr." for Kreisler (in relation to E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Kater Murr*).

Variations once again

Brahms completed his *String Sextet* Op. 18 in the summer of 1860. It was his first chamber music work without piano and at the same time the first step towards broad public recognition. Brahms took its second movement and arranged it for piano two hands. (In fact, there is also a version of the complete string sextet for piano four hands from 1861/62). The *Andante in D Minor* Op. 18b was written in 1860 and intended as a birthday present for Clara Schumann. Brahms designed the movement as a sequence of variations in which historicising and folkloristic elements predominate. The

melancholy theme itself, in conjunction with the accompanying chordal strokes, represents a stylised baroque dance from the 17th century, a follia. In the first three variations, Brahms continuously increases the static accompaniment to stormy demisemiquaver notes. The melody is successively evaporated in the same breath. The fourth variation leads to a serious calm surface in D Major, after which the fifth variation, with its quasi impressionistic treble leaps over a relaxed, dotted melody seems almost enraptured. In the last variation, Brahms returns to D Minor, the theme appears in its original form, and towards the end the music dissolves inward, as well as to D Major with pianissimo final turns.

Clara Schumann: Piano Transcription of Robert Schumann's "Dedication"

Robert Schumann gave his wife a special gift for their wedding anniversary in 1840: the song cycle *Myrthen* Op. 25. In the first song, 'Widmung' (Dedication), on a poem by Friedrich Rückert, Robert addressed Clara directly — with a wonderfully emphatic, soaring melody, orienting himself entirely to the words "Du meine Seele, du mein Herz" (You, my soul, you, my heart"). Clara wrote in her diary: "Polterabend [referring to the night before the wedding]! My Robert gave me another beautiful bridal gift, *Myrthen* — I was quite moved! Cäcilie handed me the myrtle wreath, and I felt quite holy when I touched it."

Franz Liszt wrote the first virtuosic piano transcription of 'Widmung' in 1848, which still has a permanent place as an indestructible encore on the concert stage. But the Schumanns were not very fond of it, because "fundamentally [...] I am not a friend of song transcriptions — and the Liszt ones are really abominable to me" (Robert Schumann).

Long after Robert's death, Clara Schumann complied with a French publisher's request in 1873 to arrange some of her husband's songs for piano. Not fully convinced, she wrote to Brahms: "At first I didn't want to do it because I don't like such arrangements, but then they would have given it to someone else who might have done it even less well."
In the same year, "30 mélodies de Robert Schumann, transcrites pour Piano par Clara Schumann" appeared — "Dedication" opened the collection. But Schumann took a different approach to Liszt, by no means was virtuosity to take centre stage. Rather, she retained the ductus of the original. There are no extras or additions; the songfulness of the piece is always preserved. The arranger has completely put her own ego aside here and thus demonstrated a deep understanding of the original song.

Jörg Peter Urbach

(English translation: Calvin B. Cooper)

Acknowledgments

PRODUCTION TEAM
Executive producer **Renaud Loranger**
A&R coordinator **Miljana Parcetic**
Recording producer, balance engineer & editor **Erdo Groot** (Polyhymnia International B.V.)
Musical assistant **Ientje Mooij**
Piano technician **Shunsuke Yokoyama**
Concert piano **CFX#6540800** provided by **Yamaha Music Europe**

Liner notes **Jörg Peter Urbach**
English translation **Calvin B. Cooper**
Cover photography **Lyodoh Kaneko**
Cover design **Francesca Mariani & Marjolein Coenrady**
Product management & Design **Francesca Mariani & Kasper van Kooten**

This album was recorded at Reitstadel, Neumarkt, Germany, in July 2022.

PENTATONE TEAM
Vice President A&R **Renaud Loranger** | Managing Director **Sean Hickey**
Head of Catalogue, Product & Curation **Kasper van Kooten**
Head of Marketing, PR & Sales **Silvia Pietrosanti**

Also available on PENTATONE

PTC5186490

PTC5186658

PTC5186841

PTC5186579

Sit back and enjoy