

JEREMY DENK, PIANO

Virtual Performance for Friends of Chamber Music
January 20 – 27, 2021

PROGRAM

Robert Schumann	<i>Papillons</i> , Op. 2
Clara Schumann	<i>Three Romances</i> , Op. 21
Missy Mazzoli	<i>Bolts of Loving Thunder</i>
Johannes Brahms	Four Pieces, Op. 119

NOTES

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) started his young adult life as a law student, though his dream was to be a virtuoso pianist. Studying piano with the celebrated teacher, Friedrich Wieck, Schumann met his daughter, Clara Wieck, whom he would eventually marry. He ultimately gave up the goal of concertizing due to debilitating physical problems with his right hand. Schumann later became active as an influential music critic, while simultaneously pursuing a career as a successful and prolific composer. Schumann was plagued with a disabling mental disorder and in 1854, he attempted suicide by throwing himself into the Rhine River. He was rescued and institutionalized until his death. Clara was forbidden to see him for nearly two years and was only allowed to visit him several days before his death.

Regarded as one of the most distinguished pianists of the Romantic Era, **Clara Schumann** (1819-1896) enjoyed a concert career of over 60 years. A child prodigy, who studied with her father, Clara began touring at the age of eleven. She and Robert Schumann married after a messy legal battle with her father, who opposed the union. In addition to performing, Clara began composing early and commanded an international reputation. She wrote numerous works, including one complete piano concerto and one partially finished concerto, a Piano Sonata, Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann and many piano arrangements of Robert's orchestral and chamber compositions.

Robert and Clara befriended and mentored a young Johannes Brahms, who was unfailingly supportive of Clara when Robert was hospitalized. Robert raved about Brahms and his works in his influential journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Music* and Clara reviewed some of Brahms' compositions.

Missy Mazzoli (b.1980) is the Mead Composer-in-Residence at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and an active pianist and keyboardist. Her works have been performed around the world by Opera Philadelphia, the Kronos Quartet, Eighth Blackbird,

and many others. In 2018, she made history as one of the first two women (with composer Jeanine Tesor) to be commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera. Mazzoli wrote *Bolts of Loving Thunder* in 2013 for pianist Emanuel Ax, who asked for a piece that would appear on a program with works of Brahms. Remembering playing Brahms's *Rhapsodies* and *Intermezzi* as a young pianist, Mazzoli wrote that she "wanted to create a work based on this romantic, stormy idea of Brahms, complete with hand crossing and dense layers of chords." This is the first time her work has been performed for Friends of Chamber Music.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) became a musician in spite of his family's opposition. It is well known lore that the young Brahms, living in poverty, earned money by playing the piano in bars, taverns and other questionable venues. He gave his first public solo concert at the age of 15.

Brahms was deeply indebted to Robert Schumann and the role his sponsorship had on his career. After hearing about Schumann's suicide attempt and subsequent hospitalization, Brahms returned to Düsseldorf to be near the Schumann family until Robert died. There have been many questions about the nature of the relationship between Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann. Towards the end of their lives, they each returned all the letters that they had written to each other over the years. Brahms destroyed his, as he did many other works and writings.

This last collection, Opus 119, is Brahms' last work for piano. The first intermezzo was a birthday present for Clara Schumann in 1893. His note to her:

I am tempted to have a short piece of music copied for you, as I should very much like to know how you get on with it. It teems with discords.... It is exceptionally melancholy, and to say "to be played very slowly" is not sufficient. Every bar and every note must be played as if ritardando were indicated, and one wished to draw the melancholy out of each one of them, and voluptuous joy and comfort out of the discords. My God, how this description will whet your appetite!

Clara responded, "One actually revels in the discords..." and called the Intermezzo "...a grey pearl. Do you know them? They look as if they were veiled, and are very precious."