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Extra-compositional References and Private Meaning in Clara Schumann's Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann, Op. 20

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Abstract

Although it has been called “one of her finest works” (Reich, 2001), Clara Schumann's *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, has received relatively little scholarly attention. Yet the circumstances surrounding its composition and its place in the lives of the Schumanns and Brahms render it an ideal candidate for intertextual analysis. Written in 1853 and dedicated to Robert for his forty-third birthday, the work features an F-sharp minor theme that Robert wrote in 1841 and later published as part of his *Bunte Blätter*, Op. 99. Aside from the well-documented quotation of her *Romance variée* (which served as the basis for Robert's *Impromptus on a Theme of Clara Wieck*, Op. 5), Clara also interweaves references to a number of Robert's works including *Concert sans orchestre*, Op. 14, Violin Sonata No. 2, Op. 121, and “Auf einer Burg” from *Liederkreis*, Op. 39. In addition, she alludes to works by Mendelssohn—works which she was performing, and therefore practicing, at the time. Not only would Robert have recognized these extra-compositional references, but he also would have discerned the private meaning that they were meant to communicate, rendering this piece the ultimate birthday present. Rooted in the fields of hermeneutics and semiotics, this paper builds upon the type of intertextual inquiry advanced by scholars such as John Daverio, Paul Berry, and Eric Sams. Schenkerian analysis and Schoenbergian motivic analysis are combined with an examination of historical evidence to uncover the references in Clara's Op. 20 and to consider their expressive meaning.

Clara Schumann composed her *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann* in less than a week, between May 29th and June 3rd of 1853. At the time, the Schumanns were enjoying a period of relative calm in between the various stresses of 1852 and Robert's permanent institutionalization in 1854. The mere fact that the work was conceived as a birthday present for Robert and based on one of his own themes begs the question, “To what extent does Clara speak directly to Robert through her music?” Based on Robert's own proven history of encoding private messages into his music through such methods as melodic quotations and ciphers, it is

only reasonable to assume that Clara would do the same, especially in a piece so intimate and personal. Table 1 lists the more-or-less indisputable ciphers that Robert had used in his music, while Example 1 provides an example of his quotations: in *Carnaval*, he quotes his *Papillons*, even labeling it in the score with “Papillon?”

Table 1: Known Ciphers in Robert Schumann’s Works.¹

Composition	Cipher and Musical Notes	Meaning
<i>Thème sur le nom Abegg varié pour le pianoforte</i> , Op. 1 (1830)	“Abegg” A-B \flat -E-G-G	name of fictional dedicatee: Countess Pauline d’Abegg
<i>Carnaval, Scènes mignonnes sur quatre notes</i> (1834–35)	“Asch” / “Scha” A-E \flat -C-B / E \flat -C-B-A	Asch=Ernestine von Fricken’s hometown Scha=Schumann
2-bar cadential figure in Schumann’s fanciful review: “Bericht an Jeanquirit in Ausburg über den letzten kunsthistorischen Ball beim Redacteur” (1837)	“Beda” B \flat -E-D-A	fictional character
“Rätsel,” No. 16 from <i>Myrthen</i> , Op. 25 (1840)	“H” B	the answer to the song’s riddle
“Mondnacht,” No. 5 from <i>Liederkreis</i> , Op. 39 (1840)	“Ehe” E-B-E	“marriage”
4-bar fragment, setting of “Auf Wiedersehn,” from a letter to Joachim (1844)	“Gade ade!” G-A-D-E-A-D-E	“Goodbye, Gade!”
<i>Sechs Fugen über den Namen BACH für Orgel oder Pianoforte mit Pedal</i> op. 60 (1845)	“Bach” B \flat -A-C-B	J. S. Bach
“Rebus,” originally intended for <i>Album für die Jugend</i> op. 68 (1848)	“(L)ass das Fade, fass das Ächte” A-E \flat -E \flat / D-A-E \flat / F-A-D-E / F-A-E \flat -E \flat / D-A-E \flat / [A-E]-C-B-D-E	maxim: “Ignore what is merely fashionable, seize that which is genuine.”
“Nordisches Lied” no. 41 from <i>Album für die Jugend</i> op. 68 (1848)	“Gade” G-A-D-E	composer, Niels Gade
“F.A.E.” Sonata for Violin and Piano, Intermezzo (mvt 2) and Finale (mvt 4) (1853)	“F.A.E.” F-A-E	Joachim’s motto: “frei aber einsam”

¹ List adapted from John Daverio, *Crossing Paths: Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 76.

(M.M. ♩ = 120)

dolce

p

Example 1a. Robert Schumann, *Papillons*, Op. 2, no. 1, mm. 1–4.

ritenuto - *sf* - *Adagio* *a tempo*

leggiere

sf *sf* *ritenuto* (*sf*)

Adagio
(Papillon?)

a tempo *sf* (*p*)

Example 1b. Robert Schumann, *Carnaval*, Op. 9, “Florestan,” mm. 7–25.

Analyzing Clara’s Op. 20 variations from an intertextual perspective allows us to uncover references that would have been meant for Robert alone and understood by only a select few. In the years following its composition, the piece continued to play an important role in the lives of both the Schumanns and Johannes Brahms, further rendering it an ideal candidate for intertextual analysis.

Only one extra-compositional reference in Clara's Op. 20 has been addressed in the literature. In the coda, Robert's F-sharp minor theme returns in its entirety, and tucked into the inner voices is a quote of Clara's *Romance variée*, Op. 3, which she wrote in 1833 and dedicated to Robert. Robert subsequently used the *Romance variée* theme as the basis for his Impromptu on a Theme of Clara Wieck, Op. 5 of 1833.

Aside from this one well-documented quotation, scholars have stopped short of drawing out additional references. I believe that Clara did compose in specific extra-compositional and extramusical references, and that they may be elucidated using a variety of historical-biographical and analytical criteria. The present study aims to do just that—it approaches the work from an intertextual perspective, and in doing so uncovers additional layers of meaning.

The additional references that I will argue for fall into two broad categories. First, there are references to Robert's own works, works with which Clara would have been intimately familiar, having performed them and/or having served as their dedicatee or inspiration. Second are the references to works which Clara was performing, and therefore practicing, around the time she composed her Op. 20 variations.

But before we delve into the music itself, a word of caution. Any intertextual study aimed at uncovering extra-compositional references necessarily involves a certain degree of subjectivity and speculation. Unless the composer actually left proof of an intentional reference (through letters, diaries, reminiscences of acquaintances, etc.), we can never know for certain whether the links we are uncovering were intentional, subconscious, or an arbitrary result of a shared musical language. In order to minimize the subjectivity, I will apply the following set of criteria:

- 1) Biographical-historical connections (details involving the people, places, and events that surround the work's conception and composition which make an intentional connection possible or even likely);

- 2) Obvious surface-level links (texture, gestures, etc.);
- 3) Veiled surface-level links (motivic structure);
- 4) Middleground structural links (voice leading, shown through Schenkerian analysis).

My hope is that by applying theoretical methods and introducing criteria that deal more specifically with the music itself, we can uncover references beyond the most obvious allusions and quotations. Although we may never be 100% certain of the composer's intentions, the application of these music-theoretic criteria provides an objective way to test the strength of musical connections.

The Theme

Let us first turn our attention to the theme on which the variations are based and its own intertextual resonances. Robert composed the F-sharp minor theme in 1841 and later published it as part of his *Bunte Blätter*, Op. 99. In 1841, the Schumanns were enjoying their first full year of marriage after five long years of courtship and the infamous legal battle with Friedrich Wieck, Clara's father. As in so many of Robert's works from this time, Clara served as inspiration, with Robert often encoding her directly into the music. The opening five notes of the F-sharp minor theme comprise the so-called "Clara" cipher, first identified as such by Eric Sams:²

$$\begin{array}{c} C\# - B - A - G\# - A \\ (C - L - A - R - A) \end{array}$$

Whether or not Robert intended the collection of notes as a cipher for Clara is still up to debate; scholars such as John Daverio, Michael Struck, and James Webster question Sams's claim.³

² Eric Sams, *The Songs of Robert Schumann* [1969], 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 24.

³ Daverio, *Crossing Paths*; Michael Struck, "Nähe und Distanz: Robert Schumann in Johannes Brahms' Sicht," *Die Tonkunst: Magazin für Klassische Musick und Musikwissenschaft* 4/3 (July 2010), 380–96; James Webster, "The *Alto Rhapsody*: Psychology, Intertextuality, and Brahms's Artistic Development," *Brahms Studies* 3 (2001), 19–45.

Regardless, as a new husband and expecting their first child, Robert must have had Clara at the forefront of his mind when he composed the F-sharp minor piece, and as such, he may have also been harkening back to another of his Clara-inspired works—the theme and variations movement from his *Concert sans orchestre*, Op. 14.

Robert wrote the *Concert sans orchestre* in 1835 and 1836. Having declared his love for Clara in late 1835, it is no wonder that Robert chose one of the movements to be a set of variations on an “Andantino de Clara Wieck.” The similarity between Clara’s Andantino theme and Robert’s F-sharp minor theme is remarkable. The characteristic phrase from each theme is reproduced in Example 2 (with Audio Example 2). Both are in minor mode and feature a descending five-note scale. They are intimate themes, marked *piano* at the beginning and maintaining a hushed quality accentuated only by occasional hairpin dynamics. In addition, they share a similar phrase structure, one that results in a 24-measure theme, divided into three 8-measure units. Clara’s Andantino theme consists of regular 4-bar phrases: *a a | b b | c c* . Although the middle of Robert’s F-sharp minor theme contains one 8-bar phrase instead of two 4-bar phrases, the sentence structure of the phrase results in a clear division between the four-bar presentation and the four-bar continuation: *a a' | b (sentence) | a'' a'''*. In addition, both themes are in 2/4 meter and feature a similar rhythmic profile, distinguished by the dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythm on the second beat.



Example 2a. Robert Schumann, *Concert sans orchestre*, Op. 14, movement 2, theme, mm. 1–4 (1836).



Example 2b. Robert Schumann, F-sharp minor piece, mm. 21–24 (1841).

Variation 1

If Clara's Andantino theme played a significant role in the composition of Robert's Op. 14 variation movement and subsequently his F-sharp minor piece, it follows that both pieces would likely play a significant role in Clara's Op. 20 variations. Indeed, we need look no further than her first variation to see another connection to Robert's Op. 14. Example 3 (with Audio Example 3) provides the beginnings of Robert's Variation 2 and Clara's Variation 1. The connection here is mainly a textural one, with both variations placing the theme in the soprano and featuring triplet-eighth accompaniment. However, the particular rhythmic notation both composers used is rare enough to call attention. The sixteenth-note that first appears on beat 2 of the first measure clearly aligns with the third triplet-eighth.



Example 3a. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 1, mm. 1–4.



Example 3b. Robert Schumann, *Concert sans orchestre*, Op. 14, movement 2, variation 2, mm. 1–4.

Variation 2

The second variation in Clara's Op. 20 contains a reference not to a work of Robert's that held personal significance from her past, but one that she was actually performing at the time. According to the account of her concert repertoire produced by Claudia de Vries, Clara's first performance of Robert's Violin Sonata in D minor, Op. 121 was in Düsseldorf in 1853.⁴ This would have been at the Lower Rhine Music Festival, which occurred in May of that year, with Joseph Joachim as soloist. Therefore, when she sat down to compose her Op. 20 variations at the end of that month, the piece would have been fresh in her fingers and ears. The opening of her Variation 2 bears a striking similarity to the A section material of the second movement of Robert's D minor Violin Sonata. They are in closely related keys and feature a repeated F-sharp within the texture, as you can see in Example 4 (with Audio Example 4). They employ the same pianistic technique: staccato repeated chords with the F-sharp pedal point serving as a sort of left-hand anchor. Despite the difference in meter, the speed and frequency of attacks would have been almost the same. For Clara, whose pianistic skills served as an important tool when composing, these two passages would feel remarkably similar and the link would have been

⁴ Claudia de Vries, *Die Pianistin Clara Wieck-Schumann: Interpretation im Spannungsfeld von Tradition und Individualität* (Mainz: Schott Musik International, 1996), 373.

obvious. Having just performed Robert's piece, she may have even come to the second variation through improvisation, using the initial texture as a point of departure.

Example 4a. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 2, mm. 1–4.

Example 4b. Robert Schumann, *Violin Sonata in D minor*, Op. 121, movement 2, mm. 11–14.

Upon closer inspection, we can uncover voice-leading features that show a deeper connection between these two passages. Example 5 provides Schenkerian voice-leading reductions of the excerpts in example 3. Note the importance of the pitch F-sharp, mentioned above, as seen

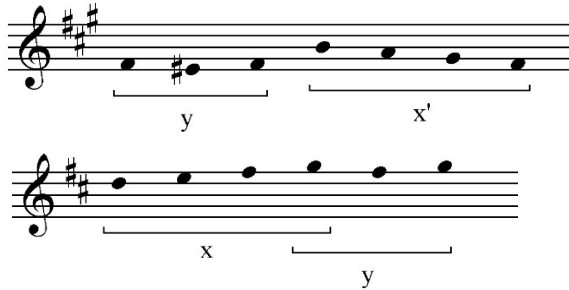
particularly in the alto voice of each excerpt and in Clara's choice to maintain the bass F-sharp through the downbeat of measure 2. The voice-leading reductions also highlight the similar inner-voice neighbor motion in the tenor. And although each has a fundamentally different harmonic structure, the essential melodic voice leading is a linear descent that moves to an inner voice in the final chord. Also illuminating is the relationship in motivic content. The figure that accompanies the melody in Clara's variation is built from the same motivic content as Robert's melody, where x' is the inverse of x (see Example 6).

$f\#:$ I (IV_4^6) IV $V \begin{matrix} 8 & \text{---} & 7 \\ 6 & \text{---} & 5 \\ 4 & \text{---} & 3 \end{matrix}$ I

Example 5a. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 2, mm. 1–4, voice-leading reduction.

$b:$ $V_4^6 \begin{matrix} \text{---} & 5 & \text{---} & 6 & \text{---} & 5 \\ \text{---} & 3 & \text{---} & 4 & \text{---} & 3 \end{matrix}$

Example 5b. Robert Schumann, *Violin Sonata in D minor*, Op. 121, movement 2, mm. 11–14, voice leading reduction.



Example 6. Motivic content of example 3 excerpts (first measures only).

Variation 3

After the pervasive sixteenth-note motion of variation 2, Clara’s variation 3 moves to the parallel major and presents the theme as a chorale. The wide spacing, however, is more reminiscent of the organ than of a four-part choral texture, requiring the pianist to either roll/break the chords or to find creative ways of redistributing the notes between the hands. Robert chose this type of organ-like texture to present Clara’s theme in the second movement of his Op. 14, in the theme itself and in the final two phrases of variation 1. One could argue, of course, that this type of texture was common in both Robert and Clara’s compositions. However, since we know that Clara gave an impromptu performance of the *Concert sans orchestre* for Robert and Brahms on October 8, 1853, only four months after composing her Op. 20, it is safe to assume that this piece and its highly personal second movement held a privileged place in her repertoire.⁵ Such a piece would be a likely candidate for intertextual resonances—in composing a set of variations on *his* theme, Clara references his set of variations on *her* theme.

If Clara did indeed have Robert’s Op. 14 in mind when composing her Op. 20, it would also shed light on another distinctive feature of her third variation. Despite the chorale style, the highly chromatic voice leading is anything but vocal, with the harmonies gradually mutating as

⁵ Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: An Artist’s Life, Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters* [1902–08], trans. Grace E. Hadow [1913] (New York: Vienna House, 1972), vol. 2, 44.

individual pitches slither around by semitones. Measures 17–20 of this variation are particularly chromatic. Example 7 provides a quasi-Schenkerian reduction of the outer voices of this passage. Notice that the intervallic structure consists of parallel tritones! The first four measures of the variation also feature this type of chromatic motion, though not quite to the same extent, and they have a clear predecessor in Robert’s Op. 14. Example 8 (with Audio Example 8) shows the voice leading of Robert’s variation 2 (*b* phrase) and Clara’s variation 3 (*a* phrase). In variation 2 of Op. 14, the melody descends for the first two measures while the left-hand accompaniment ascends chromatically. Likewise, by altering the harmonic structure of the original theme and using applied leading-tone seventh chords as passing harmonies, Clara achieves the same effect—a stepwise ascending bassline which moves in contrary motion to the descending melody. It is particularly striking that, despite being in distantly related key, their bassline structures are almost identical (compare the voice leading reductions of examples 8a and 8b).

Example 7. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 3, mm. 17–20, voice-leading reduction.

$F\#:$ I vii^{07}/ii ii V_4^6 vii^{07}/vi vi V_5^6

Example 8a. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 3, mm. 1–4, score and voice leading reduction.

$A\flat:$ IV^6 vii^{07}/vii° vii° vi^6 vii_5^{06} I^6 ii^6 V^7

Example 8b. Robert Schumann, *Concert sans orchestre*, Op. 14, movement 2, variation 2, mm. 9–12, score and voice leading reduction.

Variation 4

The fourth variation in Clara's Op. 20 owes its textural identity to Robert's *Impromptu on a Romance of Clara Wieck*, Op. 5, which as previously mentioned, is based on Clara's *Romance variée*, Op. 3, and it is the same theme that Clara interweaves into the coda of her Op. 20 variations. It is the first of Robert's works to explicitly refer to Clara by name or by music,

and so the piece would have undoubtedly been close to Clara's heart. In addition, Robert revised the set in 1850, and therefore it would have likely been fresh in Clara's mind. The seventh impromptu features Clara's theme in the left hand, played mostly with the thumb in order to facilitate the lower grace notes, along with a rippling sixteenth-note accompaniment in the right hand. Much in the same way, Clara's variation 4 puts Robert's theme in the left-hand thumb, and although there are no grace notes, the width of the chords necessitates breaking them in such a way that the bass becomes like a grace note (see Example 9, with Audio Example 9). Played at a *piano* dynamic and accompanied by running sixteenth-note triplets, the effect is the same and requires the same kind of pianistic technique.

Example 9a. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 4, mm. 1–8.



Example 9b. Robert Schumann, *Impromptus on a Romance of Clara Wieck*, Op. 5 (1833 version), impromptu 7 (labeled 8 in the first edition) mm. 1–8.

Variation 5

Variation 5 was possibly inspired by one of the pieces Clara was practicing and performing in 1853—Mendelssohn’s *Variations sérieuses*, Op. 54.⁶ Mendelssohn was a dear friend of the Schumanns before his untimely death in 1847, and both Robert and Clara owe some stylistic debts to him. According to Claudia de Vries, Clara performed Mendelssohn’s *Variations sérieuses* more than ten times between 1850 and 1856, and so they would have been firmly in her hands, and references to them would have been immediately recognizable to Robert. Thus, including a subtle hat tip to Mendelssohn in her variations for Robert, Clara was not only honoring a dearly missed friend, but also embedding additional layers of meaning for Robert’s ears alone. Example 10 (with Audio Example 10) provides Clara’s variation 5 and Mendelssohn’s variation 3.

⁶ Vries, 369.

Poco animato.

Example 10a. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 5, mm. 1–8.

Variation 5 is significant in that it is the first point in the Op. 20 set where Clara indicates a tempo different from the original. The theme is marked *Ziemlich langsam*, and variation 5 is marked *Poco animato*. It is fitting, then, that she would choose to allude to the one variation in Mendelssohn's set that is designated *Più animato*. In addition, both variations begin with a second inversion minor triad in the right hand. The accompanimental pattern consists of sixteenth-note octave patterns which usually begin with a sixteenth-note rest. Phrases are punctuated by longer runs of sixteenth-note octaves, Mendelssohn's ascending and Clara's descending. And while the intervallic structure of the left hand sixteenth-note octaves is not identical, they do often end with a downward leap. For a pianist of Clara's caliber, these downward octave leaps would probably be the only aspect of Mendelssohn's variation requiring

any notable practice, and therefore, they would be distinctive enough to make their way into her own variation.



Example 10b. Felix Mendelssohn, *Variations sérieuses*, Op. 54, variation 3, mm. 1–8.

Variation 6

Variation 6, in the learned style, is a canon at the interval of a fifth. There are many general stylistic models that may have inspired Clara more broadly: variation 10 from Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* or Etude 1 from Robert's *Études symphoniques*, to name two from her 1853 performing repertoire. However, the extra-compositional references and extramusical associations in Clara's variation 6 are much more personal, intended very specifically for Robert alone. At the beginning of this variation, Clara chooses to begin with the theme's melody in the soprano, on C-sharp. The *comes* enters one measure later in the tenor, on F-sharp (see Example 11, with Audio Example 11). Due of the nature of the theme, which begins with three repeated notes, the first measure consists only of two solitary C-sharps. In

combination with the entrance of the *comes* in measure 2, the overall effect this creates is of a falling fifth—C-sharp to F-sharp. The texture in measure 2, due to its sparsity, does not interfere with the auditory prominence of the falling fifth. This is the first time in the entire set that the texture is so thin, and following the loudest and most animated variation immediately before, the beginning of variation 6 sounds suddenly hollow. The effect is akin to Robert’s “Auf einer Burg,” No. 7 from his Op. 39 *Liederkreis*, which follows a rather energetic piano postlude in No. 6 “Schöne Fremde” (see Example 12, with Audio Example 12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRhuBh9NixM>).

Example 11. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 6, mm. 1–8.

Example 12. Robert Schumann, “Auf einer Burg” from *Liederkreis*, Op. 39, mm. 1–8.

The sudden textural change, in addition to the falling fifth, gives us a clue that Clara may have had Robert's "Auf einer Burg" in mind when composing this variation. However, we must dig a bit deeper to uncover the full extent of the connection and to explore the possibility that the reference was made intentionally. Considering that the variations were intended as an intimate gift of music for Robert's birthday, it would follow that Clara would be thinking of the most intimate and personal of Robert's own compositions—compositions which spoke directly to her. "Auf einer Burg," as with so many of the songs written in the year of their marriage, is closely connected to Clara. In a letter to Clara dated May 22, 1840, Robert wrote, "The Eichendorff cycle is probably my most Romantic music ever, and there is much of you in it, my dear bride."⁷ Eric Sams has shown the falling fifth motive to be associated with flowers, especially roses, in Robert's songs.⁸ In addition, the descending fifths at the opening of "Auf einer Burg" are specifically the pitches B-E-B-E, and Schumann was known to use the E-B-E cipher for "marriage"—the German word "Ehe," spelled "E – H – E," represented with the notes E, H (our B \flat), and E. Further still, Robert alludes to his Impromptus on a Theme of Clara Wieck, Op. 5 with the sudden modulation to the submediant in measure 7 and a direct quote of the bassline from Op. 5: C–F–G–A. Compare this to one of the most distinctive moments in the Op. 5 Impromptus, where, in impromptu 7, we find a classic Schumannesque interpolation (see Example 13, with Audio Example 13). In the middle of a phrase and without any preparation, Robert suddenly moves to the distantly related key of E major (chromatic mediant to the

⁷ Eva Weissweiler, ed. *Clara und Robert Schumann Briefwechsel : kritische Gesamtausgabe*. (Basel : Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1984), vol. 3, 1043.

⁸ Sams, *The Songs of Robert Schumann*, 17.

surrounding C major, a harmonic relationship that Sams finds to be associated with verbal interpolations in the songs), and he inserts a prominent and wholly unrelated E–B–E–B bassline.⁹



Example 13. Robert Schumann, *Impromptus on a Romance of Clara Wieck*, Op. 5 (1833 version), impromptu 7 (labeled 8 in first edition), mm. 6–16.

The links between “Auf einer Burg” and the Op. 5 Impromptus further point to a clear and intentional infusion of Clara into the song. Despite the text’s strange juxtaposition of an old and lonely knight with the lively wedding party below and the surprise last line indicating the bride’s tears, Robert chooses music that emanates Clara, and Clara would have no doubt been aware of this when referencing the song in her sixth variation.

As previously mentioned, Clara fashions the canonic voices in variation 6 to begin with C-sharp and then F-sharp, but she also introduces a bass voice on the downbeat of measure 3 on C-sharp. Had a fourth voice entered, we could imagine it would have continued the pattern and completed the parallel to Robert’s B–E–B–E descent in “Auf einer Burg.” Since the theme of the variation set is in F-sharp minor, an exact-pitch replica of Robert’s descending fifths would have

⁹ See John Daverio’s brilliant discussion of Robert Schumann’s interpolations in *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), Chapter 3, “Schumann’s Systems of Musical Fragments and *Witz*,” 49–88.

been unlikely. However, Clara does take pains to emphasize the pitches E and B elsewhere, particularly in the alto line. And although Clara's descending fifths are a step higher than Robert's, the canonic voices are given to the soprano and the tenor. Might it have been that Clara intended the soprano voice, beginning on C# to signify herself and the tenor voice to signify Robert? A final link to "Auf einer Burg" may be found in Clara's decision to end the variation with a prominent 4–3 suspension, just as Robert ended "Auf einer Burg" with the same.

Variation 7 and Coda

The final variation in Clara's Op. 20 is characterized by a rippling accompaniment in 32nd notes which adds an undercurrent of quiet agitation and finally breaks free in the B section, where waves of cascading arpeggios support a crescendo to one of the few *forte* indications in the piece (see Example 14). There is a clear textural connection to some of the repertoire she was performing at the time, such as the 13th variation of Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* and the third of Robert's *Symphonic Etudes*. However, the more interesting and meaningful connections lie in the coda, which begins unexpectedly, interrupting variation 7 two measures before its final phrase would have ended. The most obvious extra-compositional reference in the coda is the previously mentioned quote of Clara's *Romance variée*, Op. 3, which was the basis for Robert's *Impromptus on a Theme of Clara Wieck*, Op. 5. In the middle of the coda, Robert's theme is heard in its entirety almost exactly as it was in variation 3, with the same harmonies and voice leading. The only difference is that, this time, Clara's theme is skillfully interwoven into the texture, speaking in duet with Robert's theme (see Example 15, with Audio Example 15).

Example 14. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, variation 7, mm. 1–4.

Example 15a. Clara Schumann, *Romance variée*, Op. 3, opening, mm. 6–13.

Example 15b. Robert Schumann, *Impromptu on a Theme of Clara Wieck*, Op. 5 (1833 version), opening, mm. 14–24.



Example 15c. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, coda, mm. 8–16.

Table 2 provides an overview of the coda’s form. Notice that it has a symmetrical structure with the “coda beginning” and codetta framing the chorale-theme, which itself has a symmetrical ABA’ structure. The central portion of the coda harkens back to variation 3, whose highly chromatic voice leading, as you recall, has substantial ties to the second movement of Robert’s *Concert sans orchestre*, Op. 14. Clara also frames the chorale-theme of the coda with the same type of chromatic voice leading that characterized variation 3 and the excerpt from Robert’s Op. 14. Example 16 shows the voice-leading reductions for measures 3–7 of the coda, which immediately precede the chorale-theme, and measures 33–37, which immediately follow the chorale-theme. Notice that these two passages are exact inverses of each other: measures 3–7 feature an ascending fifth, C#–G#, and measures 33–37 feature a descending fifth, C#–F#. Both the ascending and descending fifths include chromatic passing tones just as we saw in variation 3 (see Examples 7 and 8 above).

Table 2. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, Coda overview.

	[.....THEME—chorale (like Var. 3).....]			
Coda beginning <i>molto espressivo</i>	A	B	A'	Codetta <i>calando</i>
	*contains quote of Clara's op. 3 Romanza		*fragments of Clara's theme	
(8 mm.)	(8 mm.)	(8 mm.)	(9 mm.)	(12 mm.)
				↓ Phrase expansion ...overlap w/ codetta

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the Coda of Clara Schumann's *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20. The first system, measures 3-5, features a treble clef with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass clef with a V6 chord. The second system, measures 33-37, shows a treble clef with a chromatic line and a bass clef with a whole note chord labeled 'I'.

Example 16. Clara Schumann, *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 20, coda, measures 3–5 and 33–37, chromatic voice leading.

Conclusion

Considered as a whole, the extra-compositional and extramusical references in Clara's Op. 20 variations offer us a window into the intimate relationship between her and Robert. They allow us to hear her variations afresh and to forge a reading of the work that takes into account not only the internal properties that provide coherence and intrinsic expression, but also the

external connections which add additional layers of expressive meaning. And although the references were intended as private communications over 150 years ago, the insights their recovery affords us are reason enough to continue with this sort of inquiry. Are we essentially eavesdropping on a private musical conversation? Yes. Are we warranted in doing so?

Absolutely.

