

## **Robert SCHUMANN**

(1810 - 1856)

*Piano Concerto in a minor, opus 54*

Robert Schumann was the quintessential artist whose life and work embody the idea of Romanticism in music. He was rather uncomfortable with larger musical forms such as the symphony and the concerto, expressing the full range of his lyrical genius in songs and short pieces for piano. Schumann's father was a bookseller who encouraged his son's musical and literary talents. The young Schumann started studying piano at age 10 and, in 1828, enrolled at the University of Leipzig as a law student, although he found music, philosophy, and Leipzig's taverns to be far more interesting. There was a family history of serious mental illness, and the composer, who most likely suffered from a manic-depressive condition, approached madness with the typical Romantic combination of fear and fascination. A compulsive womanizer and a heavy drinker, Schumann led a life that aggravated his psychological problems. His efforts to become a concert pianist failed after he developed partial paralysis of his right hand. Settling on a career as a composer and musical writer, he co-founded the influential "Neue Zeitschrift für Musik".

Schumann's music, with its sharp changes in mood, reflects his tumultuous inner life. Wieck's highly talented pianist daughter Clara grew up and fell in love with Schumann, to her father's horror. Despite Wieck's opposition, Clara and Robert gained the legal right to marry in 1840, a day before Clara's 21st birthday. During this period, Schumann composed feverishly. Spellbound by a musical thought, he would work himself to exhaustion, enthusiastically cultivating a particular genre for a period of time. He held several musical jobs, including teaching at the newly-founded Leipzig Conservatory and becoming the town music director in Düsseldorf, but without much success. On February 27, 1854, he threw himself into the freezing waters of the Rhine. After his rescue, he voluntarily entered an asylum. Although he had periods of lucidity, his condition deteriorated, and he died there in 1856.

In 1841, Schumann composed his "Fantasie in a minor for piano and orchestra". Schumann almost certainly wrote this affectionate music for his new wife Clara and though he tried to have it published under various titles, his efforts failed. Only temporarily daunted, Schumann put the "Fantasie" to much better use in 1845 as the first movement of his "Piano Concerto in a minor. Clara Wieck Schumann, Robert's wife, premiered the completed concerto in Leipzig at a Gewandhaus concert on New Year's Day of 1846.

Unlike the prevalent style of the day where the concerto was primarily a vehicle for virtuosic display, Schumann's "Piano Concerto" has a quasi-symphonic character. Schumann was always loath to compose empty, showy music and he had declared himself incapable of writing for "the virtuosos" and that he must craft a "compromise" between the genres of concerto, symphony, and solo sonata. His concerto would be work of great structural integrity and thematic connection and not a simple technical thriller. It is surprising, given his highly capable and highly inspiring muse, Clara, that Schumann never wrote another piano concerto.