

AUTUMN PIANO FESTIVAL: SCHUMANN THE COMPLETE PIANO WORKS PART III

TUESDAY 28 OCTOBER 11AM
DUKE'S HALL



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Curated by Joanna MacGregor, this year's Autumn Festival continues its two-year project of Robert Schumann's complete works for solo piano, performed by Academy pianists – over 17 hours of the greatest and most original piano music ever composed.

From much-loved masterpieces – the epic first and third piano sonatas and *Davidsbündlertänze*, an expression of passionate love – to later work inspired by Bach, this is a chance to immerse yourself in the intricate world of music's visionary poet. The final edition will be during the Summer Piano Festival, 15-17 June 2026.

11AM INTRODUCTION: EARLY AND LATE SCHUMANN

Joanna MacGregor examines two Schumann pieces representing his early and late career, performed later today: the glittering early cycle *Davidsbündlertänze* Op 6, and his private homage to Bach, *Sieben Klavierstücke in Fughettenform* Op 126.

Seth Schultheis and **Joanna MacGregor**
piano

1PM CONCERTO WITHOUT ORCHESTRA

Robert Schumann (1810-56)

Drei Fantasiestücke Op 111
Piano sonata No 3 in F minor Op 14

Sherri Lun and **Pei-En Melody Wu** piano

PROGRAMME NOTES

Drei Fantasiestücke Op 111 (11')

I Sehr rasch, mit leidenschaftlichem Vortrag (very quickly, with passionate expression)

II Ziemlich langsam (rather slowly)

III Kräftig und sehr markirt (strong and very marked)

Schumann's *Drei Fantasiestücke* Op 111 (1851) provide an interesting contrast to his famous *Fantasiestücke* Op 12, composed 14 years earlier. Written as a tribute to Beethoven's Op 111 sonata, Schumann had just taken up the post of Generalmusikdirektor of the Düsseldorf Orchestra at the age of 41. Although a supremely talented musician, this was difficult role for Schumann, and the impassioned, probing and impetuous character of these pieces might reflect his turbulent experience. The first and last movements are in Beethoven's Op 111 key of C minor; the middle movement, in A flat major, has a peaceful, contemplative atmosphere.

Piano sonata No 3 in F minor Op 14 (30')

I Allegro brillante

II Scherzo. Molto comodo (very relaxed)

III Andantino de Clara Wieck. Quasi variazioni
Prestissimo possibile

It was Schumann's publisher, Tobias Haslinger, who came up with the catchpenny title 'Concerto without Orchestra' – heavily criticised by Liszt and Ignas Moscheles, to whom the work was dedicated. Schumann worked on this huge sonata for most of the summer of 1836, during what he confessed was his 'darkest period.' He originally envisioned it as a five-movement work, with two scherzos – the first 1836 edition was reduced to three – but Schumann re-issued it as a four-movement 'Grande Sonate' in 1853, restoring one of its scherzos. It literally placed Clara Wieck centre-stage: not only does the slow movement weave a set of variations on an *Andantino de Clara Wieck*, but the five-note descending scale of her theme permeates the main theme of the opening movement.

The *Allegro brillante*, like the finale, is a highly personal sonata form, with a tumbling boulder-crash of an opening and the slurred syncopations of the second theme. The scherzo, in D flat major, is even more rhythmically quirky, with continuously syncopated across-the-bar phrases. The tragic heart of the slow movement lies with the ceremonial sadness and coolness provided by Clara's haunting theme. Liszt thought this was a powerful, deeply moving movement, and it closes with nine tragic F minor chords. Like much of this sonata, Schumann reworked the variations and the fourth movement extensively. The scurrying finale was re-notated from 6/16 to the more conventional 2/4 – but the repeating textures and rhythms are still hair-raisingly difficult, culminating in

cadenza-like tremolos and exhilarating final pages.

Despite the championship of Brahms, who gave the first performance in 1862, this sonata remains rarely played: but is amongst Schumann's most passionate utterances.

BIOGRAPHIES

Sherri Lun

Born in 2003, Sherri majored in piano and viola as a junior student at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. She is currently pursuing her master's degree with Christopher Elton as a Leverhulme Scholar while holding external scholarships from the Craxton Memorial Trust, Help Musicians UK Rupert Heggs Award, and the Countess of Munster Musical Trust. Named '2020 Performing Artist of the Year' (South China Morning Post), Sherri has garnered acclaim for her 'pinpoint clarity and convincing bravura' (Chicago Tribune). Selected as a 2025/26 Kirckman Artist, Sherri is also supported by the Keyboard Charitable Trust, Lang Lang International Music Foundation, Lieven Piano Foundation, and KNS Classical, with whom she released her debut CD album in 2023. Since making her concerto debut at the Ravinia Festival at age 10, she has performed in major venues including Wigmore Hall, Fondation Louis Vuitton, and Millennium Park. Sherri has appeared with ensembles such as the Salzburg Chamber Soloists, Munich Chamber Orchestra, Cologne Chamber Orchestra, and been broadcasted on Radio Television Hong Kong; she won First and Audience Prizes at the 2024 Birmingham International Piano

Competition, and is also a 2025 Royal Over-Seas League award winner, following top prizes at the Robert Schumann (Düsseldorf), Zhuhai Mozart, and Steinway & Sons Youth Piano Competitions. This year, she was awarded a Special Prize from the Mozart Society Munich at the ARD International Music Competition.

Pei-En Melody Wu

Taiwanese pianist Pei-En Melody Wu is currently pursuing her Master's degree studying with Ian Fountain, with support from the Leverhulme Scholarship and the Help Musicians Postgraduate Award. Pei-En was awarded Third Prize at the BPSE Senior Intercollegiate Competition 2024, after winning the RAM Beethoven Piano Prize. She also received the Academy's 'Best Original Cadenza' Prize for Mozart Concerti and Second place in the Musicians' Company Harriet Cohen Bach Prize. In 2020, she won Third Prize at the National Student Competition of Music in Taiwan. Despite being born in Taiwan, Pei-En grew up in Shanghai, and studied with Natalia Filippova, professor at the Middle School of Shanghai Conservatory of Music. She has performed in major concert venues across the city, including the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Hall, Oriental Arts Center, and Bechstein Center. Over the years, Pei-En has gained inspiration from masterclasses and lessons with renowned musicians such as Dame Imogen Cooper, Boris Berman, Adrian Brendel, Arnulf von Arnim, Yevgeny Sudbin, and Steven Osborne. As an active chamber musician, she performs regularly with her Gokotta Clarinet Trio and was a finalist in the RAM Strings and Piano Duo Prize 2025.

2.30PM THE SCHUMANN RESONANCE

Robert Schumann

Toccata in C Op 7
Drei Romanzen Op 28
Piano Sonata No 1 in F sharp minor
Op 11

Özel Gunhanlar, Issa Diallo and Chuyu Wang piano

PROGRAMME NOTES

Toccata in C Op 7 (7')

Schumann's diabolically difficult *Toccata* (1836) seems to be the only purely 'technical' piece of his (although most of his pieces are extraordinarily challenging to play!). Unlike his contemporaries – Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, von Henselt and many others – he didn't write études for the piano, although he, too, fell under the spell of Paganini and transcribed several of his *Caprices*. Was it because he'd damaged his right hand, trying to strengthen his fourth finger? Perhaps. As his dream to be a concert pianist disappeared (and he was in love with a woman who was already a famous pianist), technical studies were confining for his creative imagination. Interestingly, Schumann's toccata is the first of any significance written after the Baroque era; it may have inspired the wonderful toccatas written later by Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev and Khachaturian, and helped a revival of the late 19th century organ toccata in France by composers like Widor and Gigout.

Schumann's Op 7 *Toccata* has a joyful, exhilarating character, masking just how

muscular it is to play. Chopin's Op 10 études, published three years later - however taxing - fall beautifully under the hand; and Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*, coming 18 years later, are tone poems as well as studies. Schumann said at the time he'd produced 'the hardest piece ever written,' and it still feels full of bravura and counterpoint, wit and daring.

Drei Romanzen Op 28 (15')

I Sehr markiert (very distinct)

II Einfach (simply)

III Sehr markiert

In 1839 Clara received three Romances from Robert, still her fiancé, as a Christmas present. Robert did not consider them to be 'good or worthy' enough to be dedicated to her. In protest, Clara wrote to him on New Year's Day: '...as your bride you must dedicate something to me, and I know of nothing more tender than your three Romances: particularly the middle one, which is the most wonderful love duet.' He made some revisions before publishing them in October 1840, a month after they were finally married.

Richly energetic, the outer romances (B flat minor and B major respectively) provide a perfect foil to the famous middle one in F sharp major, which became one of Schumann's most famous pieces: beloved as an encore by Moiseiwitsch, Arrau and Kempff. Nearly sixty years later, Clara asked her grandson Ferdinand to play this second Romance for her. It was the last music she heard, on her deathbed: she died on 20 May 1896.

Piano Sonata No 1 in F sharp minor Op 11 (30')

I Introduzione. Un poco adagio - Allegro vivace

II Aria: Senza passione, ma espressivo

III Scherzo: Allegrissimo - Intermezzo: Lento.

Alla burla, ma pomposo (in jest, but pompously)

- Tempo I

IV Finale: Allegro un poco maestoso

Schumann's solo music is primarily remembered for his shorter character pieces. Musicologists and pianists revere the three sonatas for their emotional depth and innovative structures; with thick chordal writing, rapid changes of mood and intricate inner voices. they all demand significant interpretative effort. Composed between 1833-35, Schumann's first sonata is a monumental but underappreciated work. It's constantly surprising, full of fiery passion and lyrical tenderness.

The opening *Introduzione* sets the mood of brooding introspection, before the *Allegro* sets out a 'fandango' motif. The large first movement teems with melodic ideas, including a gentle indication of the slow movement's theme. The *Aria* is based on a song Schumann had written as an eighteen-year-old student, and has enormous restraint, making the music all the more poignant. Liszt singled this movement out for special praise in in the *Paris Gazette musicale*, describing it as 'a song of great passion, expressed with fullness and calm.' The falling fifths punctuating the melody mirror those in the first movement; despite Schumann's overflow of ideas, he goes to great lengths to create unity between the movements. The *Scherzo*, with two trios, is enormously agitated and adventurous. He marks the second trio, or *Intermezzo*, as *alla burla*, a parody of a heavy

polonaise. There's another surprise before the scherzo finally returns: an operatic recitative with a full orchestra, and a little falling 'papillon,' on what he marks as the oboe. The final sonata-rondo displays further orchestral effects: deep tremolandos, pizzicato chords, tutti chords punched out at full speed. And somehow through all the chaos, moments of lament and love song. The music's élan and inventiveness sweep the listener to its triumphant F sharp major conclusion.

BIOGRAPHIES

Özel Gunhanlar

Born in Turkey, Özel studied with Tessa Nicholson at The Purcell School and she is now a third-year undergraduate at the Royal Academy of Music, studying with Florian Mitrea. Özel has given concerts at the Southbank Centre, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Cadogan Hall and St James's Piccadilly, and in June 2022 took part in concerts at ARCUB Cultural Centre and Brasov Philharmonic Hall in Romania. She also joined the 19th Gumusluk Music Festival in Turkey in the same year. In 2024, Özel took part in the International Bellapais Spring Music Festival in Cyprus and won the first prize at the Elite Musicians Competition in Iași, Romania. She also won the Grand Prize with tenor Samuel Mills in the same competition, as a piano-voice duo.

Issa Diallo

Born in Paris, Issa Diallo is a third-year undergraduate studying with Tessa Nicholson at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where he holds a scholarship and the Vivian Langrish Award. He began learning the piano at

the age of 11 under the guidance of Yoko Kobayashi, a disciple of France Clidat and Vlado Perlemuter, a pupil of Maurice Ravel. Issa pursued his studies at the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional de Paris with Judy Chin, graduating with the Diplôme d'Études Musicales (DÉM) awarded unanimously with highest honours. He has received artistic guidance from Cyprien Katsaris, and has participated in masterclasses with Stefan Arnold, Tatiana Sarkissova, Pascal Rogé and Michel Béroff. Issa has performed at notable venues including the Université Paris-Sorbonne, Panthéon, Musée de la Vie Romantique, Musée Carnavalet, and Le Petit Palais in Paris, as well as in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, the UK, and Italy. He also has worked as an accompanist with the Maîtrise de Paris, demonstrating his passion for musical communication and artistic excellence.

Chuyu Wang

Chuyu Wang is a first-year undergraduate who arrived at the Academy just last month, in September. She studies under Professor Joanna MacGregor, having been previously at the Xinghai Conservatory of Music in Guangzhou. As well as performing as a pianist, from 2019 to 2022 Chuyu served as Principal Flute of the Guangzhou Youth Symphony Orchestra Junior Symphony and the Associate Principal Flute of the Guangzhou Youth Symphony Orchestra. She gave her first solo piano recital at the Xinghai Concert Hall in Guangzhou aged ten; at eleven she performed at Carnegie Hall in New York, and at thirteen played all 27 Chopin études in Xinghai. Chuyu has given over thirty solo recitals across major cities in China including Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan,

and Zhanjiang, and has also appeared as soloist with the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra and the Guangzhou Youth Symphony Orchestra, touring Hangzhou, Suzhou, Tianjin and Fuzhou. Chuyu has appeared at the Tianjin Juilliard Piano Festival and at Juilliard Summer Music in New York, and last summer performed with the City of London Sinfonia.

4PM 'TO SEND LIGHT INTO DARKNESS'

Robert Schumann

Sieben Klavierstücke in Fughettenform
Op 126
Gesänge der Frühe Op 133
Davidsbündlertänze Op 6

Seth Schultheis and **Joanna MacGregor**
piano

PROGRAMME NOTES

Sieben Klavierstücke in Fughettenform Op 126 (15')

I Nicht schnell, leise vorzutragen (not fast, presented lightly)
II Mässig (moderate)
III Ziemlich bewegt (emotionally moved)
IV Lebhaft (animated)
V Ziemlich langsam, empfindungsvoll vorzutragen (rather slow, full of feeling)
VI Sehr schnell (quick)
VII Langsam ausdrucksvoll (slowly, expressively)

Rarely performed live, these short, introspective essays in fugal form were composed in 1853. Schumann's love of Bach is apparent in all his piano music: in his ability to write contrapuntally, to think texturally, and to sometimes reference Baroque style, like the French overture rhythms which appear in his First Sonata, *Waldszenen* and the *Études Symphoniques*. He appears to have never stopped studying. Many of these fuguetas bear a resonance with Bach's most elliptical work, *The Art of Fugue*, which Robert had copied out in 1836, emulating a very arcane, traditional way of studying music from the inside (Bach made his own students copy out Palestrina). Around the same time he wrote a still-unpublished, 15-page

treatise called *Fugengeschichte* (*The History of the Fugue*). In 1849 Robert created his own Bach Society, promoting performances of little-performed works, including the *St John Passion*. As late as 1852 Schumann wrote to his publisher asking for scores of Baroque composers he wanted to study, and in 1853, amid growing signs of the nervous condition that would lead to the conclusion of his life in a mental institution three years later, one of his creative projects was what he called 'Bachiana': writing piano accompaniments for six of Bach's solo violin sonatas and the six solo cello suites, and composing these seven very personal fuguetas, Op 126.

Gesänge der Frühe Op 133 (12')

- I Im ruhigen Tempo (in a tranquil tempo)
- II Belebt, nicht zu rasch (lively, not too quick)
- III Lebhaft (animated)
- IV Bewegt (with motion)
- V Im Anfange ruhiges, im Verlauf bewegtes Tempo (first tranquil, then a moving tempo)

The five movements of *Gesänge der Frühe* (Morning Songs) are Schumann's last completed piano works; they were written in 1853, just a few months before his attempted suicide. Dedicated to the poet Bettina Brentano, a friend of Goethe and Beethoven, the music contains radiant spirituality. Schumann famously said, 'to send light into the darkness of men's hearts – such is the duty of an artist,' and he described these pieces as an expression of a feeling, a continuum; the harmony is intensified until, in the final piece, it achieves a boldness reminiscent of Richard Strauss. Opening softly and cautiously, a chorale quietly develops chromatic elements; the second piece, in the same key of D

major, can be seen as a variation, as the harmony eventually engulfs the melody. The third adds rhythmic nervousness and the fourth movement introduces a minor key (F sharp minor, the key of his first sonata). The final movement is superficially calm but inwardly uneasy: an unanswered question.

Davidsbündlertänze Op 6 (34')

- I Lebhaft (Lively, G major; Florestan and Eusebius)
- II Innig (intimately; B minor, Eusebius)
- III Mit Humor, hahnbüchen (with humour, cockeyed; G major, Florestan)
- IV Ungeduldig (impatiently; B minor, Florestan)
- V Einfach (simply; D major, Eusebius)
- VI Sehr rasch und sich ineinander (very quickly and inwardly; D minor, Florestan)
- VII Nicht schnell (not fast; G minor Eusebius)
- VIII Frisch (freshly; C minor, Florestan)
- IX Lebhaft (vivacious; C major, Florestan)
- X Balladenmäßig - Sehr rasch (Balladically very fast; D minor, Florestan)
- XI Einfach (simply; B minor-D major, Eusebius)
- XII Mit Humor (with humour; B minor-E minor/major, Florestan)
- XIII Wild und lustig (wildly and merrily; B minor/major, Florestan and Eusebius)
- XIV Zart und singend (tenderly and singing; E flat major, Eusebius)
- XV Frisch (freshly; B flat and E flat major, Florestan and Eusebius)
- XVI Mit gutem Humor (with good humour; G major and B minor, leading into)
- XVII Wie aus der Ferne (as if from afar; B major/minor, Florestan and Eusebius)
- XVIII Nicht schnell (not fast; C major, Eusebius)

At the beginning of this marvellous, coded work, in the first edition, Schumann placed an Old Saying (Alter Spruch):

In each and every age
Joy and sorrow are mingled;
Remain pious in joy,
And be ready for sorrow with courage.

Charles Rosen wrote: 'With its combination of memory and nostalgia, humour and wilfulness, and a happiness that comes in the saddest of all keys – B minor – *Davidsbündlertänze* seems to hint at something hidden within it: intended for us to guess at, and not be found. It is, in any case, the reticent Eusebius that has the last word.'

The title *Davidsbündlertänze* (Dances of the League of David) needs to be unpacked. The 'League of David' was Schumann's half-real, half-imaginary band standing in opposition to musical philistinism, with the Biblical musician and leader David as their namesake. In the face of empty grandeur, they championed eloquence, wit and poetry. Based on a mazurka by Clara and composed in 1837, Schumann told her that the cycle contained 'many wedding thoughts' and that 'the story is an entire Polterabend [German wedding eve party], during which old crockery is smashed to bring good luck!' Rather than actual dances, the short pieces are musical dialogues between Schumann's alter egos, the impetuous Florestan and introspective, lyrical Eusebius. Each movement is ascribed to one or other of them except for the no 9: 'here Florestan made an end, his lips quivered painfully.' and no 18: 'Quite superfluously Eusebius remarked as follows: but all the time great bliss spoke from his eyes.'

The suite ends with the striking of 12 low Cs to signify the coming of midnight;

and, as Charles Rosen says, the dreamer Eusebius speaks at the end.

Programme notes by Joanna MacGregor

BIOGRAPHIES

Seth Schultheis

Seth Schultheis is an American pianist based in London and he is currently an Aud Jebsen Fellow at the Royal Academy of Music. Completing his Professional Diploma last summer under Mei-Ting Sun, Seth previously studied at the Manhattan School of Music. Fluent in a wide range of styles and composers, Seth is also a dedicated performer of contemporary music. He spent this past summer as a Fellow of the Aspen Contemporary Ensemble, some highlights of which included a world premiere by Samuel Adams and a performance of Boulez's *Sur Incises*. Seth has previously collaborated with Stephen Armstrong, Benjamin Niemczyk, and George Manahan in performances of Mozart's Piano Concerto No 5, Brahms's Piano Concerto No 1 and the Berg Chamber Concerto. Past competition highlights include winning Grand Prize in the Osaka International Music Competition, and Fourth Prize and Best Commissioned Piece at the 2022 New York International Piano Competition. In May this year Seth was awarded second prize in the Dudley International Piano Competition in Birmingham, and upcoming projects include the International Telekom Beethoven Competition in Bonn, as well as a performance of the Clara Schumann Piano Concerto with the New York Session Symphony.

Joanna MacGregor

Joanna MacGregor CBE is one of the world's most innovative musicians, appearing as a concert pianist, conductor, curator and teacher. As Dame Myra Hess Chair of Piano at the Royal Academy of Music she is Head of an international piano department of young pianists from all over the world, many of whom have gone on to great success in major competitions like the Van Cliburn, Leeds, Busoni and Sydney International Piano Competitions, as well as international careers. She also runs two annual Piano Festivals at the Royal Academy of Music, and programmes a year-round recital series at the Wigmore Hall for Academy pianists. As a solo pianist Joanna appears with many international orchestras, performing in over eighty countries. She has been Artistic Director of Dartington International Summer School, Bath International Festival, and Deloitte Ignite at the Royal Opera House, as well as a curator for festivals all over the world. In 2020 Joanna performed Beethoven's thirty-piano sonatas as part of Beethoven's 250th celebrations and gave an immersive series of Schubert's piano music in 2023. She has released over forty solo recordings - many of them on her own award-winning record label SoundCircus - ranging from Chopin and Piazzolla to Bach and John Cage. Joanna has commissioned and premiered many landmark works, and is a regular broadcaster on TV and radio, appearing many times at the BBC Proms. Her collaborative and composition projects encompass jazz, film, visual art, contemporary dance and electronica, and she has just begun overseeing the music for forty-seven silent Sherlock

Holmes films restored by the British Film Institute, involving Academy musicians. A regular conductor, she is Music Director of the Brighton Philharmonic Orchestra, 101 years old, curating and conducting vivid, fresh programming for large audiences. Joanna has five honorary doctorates in music; from 2015-2021 she chaired the Paul Hamlyn Composers Awards and has been a Booker Prize Judge.