

Schumann String Quartet No. 3 in A Major, Op.41 No.3

Date of Composition: 1842

Note by Vibha Janakiraman

“She wanted to say not one thing, but every-thing. Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. About life, about death; no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low. Then one gave it up; then the idea sunk back again.”

- Virginia Woolf, “To the Lighthouse”

Unlike Beethoven’s will to triumph over despair, Schumann’s ideas emerge and recede like the tide, ultimately unresolved, but by no means defeated or disillusioned. Rather, the emotional impetus of his 3rd string quartet mirrors that of Woolf: hopeful figures flutter in and out, side to side, across the quartet, and the music is spurred on by the ebb and flow of wave-like currents. The work begins with a 2-note falling interval, often referred to as the *Clara* motive (after his wife, famed pianist Clara Wieck) by virtue of its melodic imitation of the utterance of her name. This figure, lovingly yearning, is the underpinning of the entire first movement, the germinal seed from which the exploration arises. Overlapping crests and troughs nudge the motive into various shapes—coy, playful ease, moments of spinning insistence, and a second theme that seems to be perpetually swept off its feet by offbeat figures that follow in close suit, enraptured in fascination for the theme. The movement closes with more wave formations of the Clara motive, and in a final recession back into a trough in the cello, we hear it in the tonic key for the first time. Despite finally achieving harmonic resolution of the theme after a movement-long delay, we are left with what feels at first like an absence of narrative transformation—but of course, we are not exactly where we started, as we cannot be. Our movement is, rather than a hero’s active walk along the coast, like that of a pebble that is simply carried further from the shore by the undulation of the water. Schumann, like Virginia Woolf, rejects the typical kind of narrative development in favor of an exploration of ideas that hang in the air, inviting us into the picturesque inner movement of quotidian life.

The second movement is a theme and variations—or rather, variations *around* a theme. Unlike the former, wherein the variations reimagine the meaning of a theme like the dispersion of white light into colors, Schumann here tells the story of the soul searching for the pure inner truth of its song. It is only through the exploration of each variation that the song is unearthed. The movement begins fraught with a quiet anxiety, struggling to communicate its truth in voiceless gasps, *dismembered, broken up*, as Woolf writes. Schumann gives us skeletal fragments of a melody that refuses to comply with the lilt of its triple meter, not out of stubbornness, but from a desire to find its freedom of expression. The two variations that follow are rich with imitation, each instrument eager to jump in with insistence. In a final attempt to find itself, the music breaks free from the triple meter entirely, catapulting into a fast duple meter in a style evocative of Handel’s Baroque choral works. Only after the desolation of this variation’s close does the true theme emerge in its simple, unmediated lament. The melodic skeleton of the movement’s opening is presented in its fully realized, beautifully sung form. Having made peace with the limits of its own expression, it now embraces the lilt of a slow dance. The violin and viola echo one another in the song—the soul finds what it says reflected back to it. But the soul is not satisfied in simply having found its song, and what follows is, again, an abandoning of lilt for a resolute insistence of

frustration towards the world. In a miraculous parting of the clouds, we find ourselves in F# major in a dreamlike Coda that shines crepuscular rays on the movement's strife.

The cello's final F# becomes its first pitch in the next movement, thus acting as the pivot point from which the slow movement emerges. Sitting atop this selfsame F#, the upper voices descend from their dreamland, like a rotation of celestial spheres, into the bare, vulnerable reality of the opening chords. The music immediately presents itself as something sacred, intimate, yearning, opening with the inversion of the falling Clara motive in the 2nd violin—what was a falling 5th now becomes a rising 4th, and Schumann leaves us to ponder the difference between yearning that exhales (intervallic descent) and yearning which inhales (ascent). After multiple attempts at ascension, the theme recedes back into nothingness. Schumann leads us into nautical exploration in what follows, grounded by the inevitable tides of the ocean in a pulsating dotted rhythm. Suddenly, from a distance: a siren's call, in constant dialogue with the lost sailor who responds in pining imitation, repeatedly thrust backwards by the crashing of waves. The movement seems, at all times, to polarize these three movements: nature's unyielding authority, the allure of the mythical being, and the human who attempts to find his way home. In moments of surging passion and poetic intimacy alike, Schumann overlaps these three musical identities into unity. The music ends with their coexistence, a return of all the motivic fragments presented to us thus far—it is here, and not in the illusory end of the second movement, that the soul finds its peace, finding its home in a world that is both comforting and cruel.

The last movement blazes onto the scene as an off-kilter dance, brimming with exalted anticipation that perpetually compels it to enter one beat early. Schumann begins by recalling the same chord that opens the first movement, associated there with the longing Clara theme, now transformed into incisive exuberance. The nautical dotted rhythm is reimagined here into something undeniably human, jubilant in its communal creation. Schumann presents an array of themes in a rondo-like form, some light on their feet and swept up by gusts of wind, others grounded in the inevitable groove of dance. His take on the folk music idiom is one that contains both measured poise and rustic celebration. The final coda is a reckoning of anticipation and resistance, as the dance fights playfully to find its balance against a world which teases back. In its final moments, it stumbles back into joyful balance.