

**Clara Schumann's Career and Gender: The Masculine Gender Role and the *Werktreue*
Paradigm**

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Despite the barriers women faced in the world of music in the nineteenth century, German musician, Clara Schumann, enjoyed a unique reputation as a respected and admired composer and performer.¹ I argue that this exception is the result of a trend that has been long suggested by musicologists studying nineteenth century Germany, wherein gender influenced the reception of genre, instrumental timbres, and musical styles, with masculine gendered attributes having a higher status than feminine.² Internalizing the gendered attitudes that coloured nineteenth century views of music's worth, Schumann experienced imposter syndrome, evident in her diary entries, where, on several occasions, she questions whether women should compose, perform, and how they should fit into the musical landscape.³ Yet, despite these barriers, Schumann was adored by the public and respected by her peers, achieving a greater legacy in comparison to her female contemporaries. So, what set her apart? Competency and persistence are often assumed to be catalysts for advancement in discussions of female pioneers in male-dominated fields. However, is it not unreasonable to assume that no other woman in the nineteenth century had been as competent, persistent, and deserving of success as Schumann? This essay highlights the social and gendered hierarchies that underly seemingly arbitrary aesthetic⁴ preferences and contribute to the success of artists. I suggest that Schumann's anomalous recognition as a female composer and performer is partly due to her embodiment of a masculine music domain witnessed in her repertory choices, performance style, and participation in the *Werktreue* paradigm. I will discuss the two different ideas of virtuosity present in *Werktreue* discourse: *Virtuosität*, celebrated as controlled and masculine, and *Virtuosentum*, viewed as effeminate and emotional, and how

¹ Prince, *(Re)considering the Priestess*, 107.

² Kallberg, *The Harmony of the Tea Table*, 110.

³ Reich, *Women as Musicians: A Question of Class*, 134.

⁴ In this essay, I am using the term "aesthetic" in reference to beauty of art and craft, without the ideological implications modern scholars typically associate with the term.

Schumann's devotion to the former further contributed to her masculine public perception. As a result, Schumann was afforded a unique privilege compared to other female musicians of her day, forecasting a problematic pattern later canonized within second wave feminism wherein women gain success only by minimizing their femininity.

In this essay, the definition of "gender" will be informed by Judith Butler's "Gender Theory", in which gender is a *cultural* phenomenon that is "radically independent of sex". Rather than a result of biological features, Butler theorizes gender as a performative act, "a free-floating artifice with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one."⁵ While Butler's theory separates gender from sex, John Money and Anke Erhardt suggest gender *itself* can be further split into gender identity and gender role; the former comprises one's own perception of their gender, while the latter entails how one's gender is publicly perceived, based on culturally and socially constructed definitions of gender. Despite common overlap, sex, gender identity, and gender role should be viewed separately and do not necessarily coincide.⁶

Clara Schumann, as what would now be termed a cis-gendered woman, embodied a female gender identity that was at odds with her career as a performer and composer. Her gender identity and gender role thus present as contrasting — feminine and masculine, respectively.⁷ Music critics and the public described her with terms associated with masculinity, which, to an extent, indicates a masculine gender role⁸. Because gender role, or, the publicly perceived gender, is responsible for determining treatment toward an individual,⁹ I suggest it also assigns privilege.

⁵ Butler, *Gender Theory*, 10.

⁶ Money and Erhardt, *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl*, 4; Butler, 10.

⁷ Caines, *Clara Schumann the (WO)man and Her Music*, 43-47.

⁸ Caines, 51-71; Raykoff, "Piano Women, Forte Women," in *Dreams of Love*, 189.

⁹ Money and Erhardt, 4.

Thus, given the patriarchal gender hierarchies of nineteenth century Europe, I suggest that Schumann's perceived masculine gender role assigned her a privilege that would have been lacking in female musicians of the same class and social standing who exhibited feminine gender roles. A female identifying individual like Schumann would thus experience privilege for occupying the masculine public sphere. Interestingly, in Schumann's case, this remains true despite the stigma that has historically surrounded any indirect link between gender identity and role. Rather, Schumann's inhabiting of a male gender role provided an excuse to treat her as an exception among women and attribute her abilities to being different from other women.

It should be noted that nineteenth century gender conventions influenced Schumann's career through both her feminine gender identity and her masculine gender role. However, since there is already a considerable body of literature delineating the barriers that Schumann faced due to her feminine gender identity,¹⁰ this essay will focus on the privileges she experienced as a consequence of her masculine gender performance. The latter stems from Schumann's embodiment of a masculine music domain through the *Werktreue* ideal: a nineteenth century artistic paradigm which valued authenticity, rationality, objectivity, and intellectual devotion to one's art — uncoincidentally, traits associated with the dominant culture of masculinity in Germany.¹¹ Schumann's musical education, repertory choices, performance style, and participation in the *Werktreue* paradigm created a masculine public perception of her gender, which privileged her above other female musicians of the time.

Clara Schumann was educated by her father, Friedrich Wieck, a notable German pedagogue of composition, piano, and voice. As Jennifer Caines observed, her education could be

¹⁰ Reich, *Women as Musicians: A Question of Class*, 132-139.

¹¹ Leistra-Jones, *Virtue and Virtuosity*, 4-5, 113, 118-122.

characterized as untraditional, progressive, and unusual for a German woman of the 1830s, aligning better with that of a nineteenth century man, which privileged the scientific, rational, and intellectual approach to music. Caines asserted that “Wieck neglected the traditional instruction of gendered duties like cooking and cleaning, in order to focus on composition [and] counterpoint.”¹² Schumann scholar Nancy Reich illustrates that this sort of education was uncommon for a woman of the early nineteenth century. Contemporaneous institutions for musical education considered subjects like composition, counterpoint, score-reading, and fugue ‘too intellectual’ for women, and thus did not offer these subjects to them until the late 1800s.¹³ Furthermore, Wieck’s ultimate purpose in musically educating Schumann — to train her to be a concert pianist — was by far more typical of a man’s upbringing than a woman’s.¹⁴ On the contrary, the general purpose of women’s musical education was to equip them with the necessary skills to “amuse themselves and their friends, than to practice those arts in so eminent a degree as to astonish the public”.¹⁵ Passivity and domesticity were crucial to the propriety of performing as a female musician, as public performance risked suggesting a neglect of wifely duties or drawing attention to oneself rather than her husband or father.¹⁶ Wieck’s centering of Schumann’s education around ‘intellectual’ subjects and concert pianist skills was itself treatment that was reserved for the male musicians and the masculine gender role. By encouraging Schumann to adopt a masculine gender role which involved privileged education (compared to her female

¹² Caines, 48; for a discussion of nineteenth century norms regarding men’s musical education, see Richard Leppert, *Sight of Sound*, 64.

¹³ Reich, *Women as Musicians: A Question of Class*, 134-137.

¹⁴ Caines, 48.

¹⁵ Erasmus Darwin, as quoted by Leppert in *The Sight of Sound*, 68.

¹⁶ Leppert, 66-68.

counterparts), Wieck molded Schumann to fit into a male-dominated field and provided her with equal opportunities to compete with the male musicians of her time.¹⁷

Another way that Schuman's gender role may be understood as masculine is demonstrated by her performance style and repertory choices, and their alignment with the *Werktreue* ideal.¹⁸ *Werktreue*, translated as "true [or authentic] to one's work"¹⁹ was an ideal adopted by both Friedrich Wieck, and the Brahms-Schumann circle — two of the biggest influences in Schumann's career. Proponents of this ideal divided virtuosity into the positive *Virtuosität*, characterized by authenticity, restraint, responsibility, moral authority, ascetism, and the rational mind, and the negative *Virtuosentum*, characterized by theatricality, flamboyancy, emotion, use of the body, and acknowledgment of the audience during performance (associated with performers like Franz Liszt and Frederic Chopin).²⁰ Karen Leistra-Jones remarks that "Behaviours coded as 'authentic' or 'theatrical' in the later nineteenth century frequently engaged with stereotypes about various social groups."²¹ Upon further analysis, it becomes evident that the core characteristics of *Virtuosität* and *Virtuosentum* directly parallel the contemporaneous perception of masculinity and femininity, with masculinity being at the top of the hierarchy. Particularly amidst the rigid gender norms of the time, masculinity tended to be defined as rational, logical, inventive, scientific, committed to the pursuit of knowledge, and, thus, controlled by the mind and reason; whereas femininity tended to be defined as emotional, desirable and dangerous, and controlled by the body and feeling.²² In the modern era, scholars hesitate to draw such direct

¹⁷ Caines, 5-9.

¹⁸ Pedroza, as quoted by Prince in *(Re)considering the Priestess*, 109.

¹⁹ Goehr, *Being True to the Work*, 1.

²⁰ Leistra-Jones, *Virtue and Virtuosity*, 30-33.

²¹ Leistra-Jones, 120.

²² Green, *Women's Musical Practice*, 14.

parallels between gender and music, as gender is understood to be fluid and subjective.²³

However, given nineteenth century Europe's fixation on gender polarization,²⁴ it is reasonable to assume that the society Schumann performed for would have associated her *Werktreue*-aligned behaviours with the masculine and, therefore, of a higher status.

A key element of *Werktreue* and masculinity in Schumann's career were her repertory choices. In the mid-1840s, Schumann began to avoid popular, flamboyant pieces in her concert programs to focus on the venerable Austro-German canon, such as Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, and Scarlatti (Leistra-Jones, 2012; Stefaniak, 2017),²⁵ as in this concert program from March 2nd, 1856, in Vienna:

1. Beethoven: Sonata op. 53, "Waldstein"
2. Mozart: Recitative and Aria from La Clemenza di Tito
3. Schubert: Moment musicale op. 94, no. 3—auf Verlangen; Mendelssohn: Scherzo à Capriccio
1. Bach: Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, BWV 903
2. R. Schumann: "Waldeggespräch"
3. R. Schumann: Carnaval (auf Verlangen)²⁶

These composers were known for their attention to formal structure, intricate counterpoint, and rational nature, conveying *Werktreue-Virtuosität* characteristics like intellectuality, seriousness, formality, and strength. Moreover, they developed large-scale forms, often based on sonatas and fugues rather than poetic structures of texts. These contrast with the emotional, subjective, and

²³ Treitler and Solie, *Gender and Other Dualities of Music History*, 23-24.

²⁴ Prince, 108.

²⁵ Caines, 18-24; Stefaniak, *Clara Schumann and the Imagined Revelation of Musical Works*, 194-195.

²⁶ Schumann as quoted by Stefaniak in *Navigating and Shaping Local Concert Scenes and Canons*, 210.

showpiece nature of *Virtuosentum* pieces and their composers.²⁷ As Alexander Stefaniak noted, “engagement with the canonic tradition [was a] ... dominant means by which composers and performers sought to garner elevated cultural and aesthetic prestige for their virtuosity”.²⁸ In the following diary entry for instance, Schumann implies the superiority of Bach and Beethoven pieces, going so far as referring to them as ‘real music’:

On Sunday afternoon I played some of Beethoven’s sonatas, but neither [Ernst Adolphe] Becker nor [Carl] Krägen enjoyed them as we enjoy Beethoven sonatas. They have been taught to think more of virtuosity [*Virtuosentum*] than of real music. A Bach fugue, for example, bores them, they are not capable of discovering the beauty which lies in the different parts taking up the theme, they cannot follow it ... I hate all mere technique [*Virtuosentum*]. Concert-pieces, such as Henselt’s Études, Thalberg’s and Liszt’s Phantasies etc. etc. I have grown quite to dislike ... Nothing of that sort can give lasting pleasure.²⁹

This entry not only illustrates the importance of the Austro-German canon in the *Werktreue* paradigm, but also shows the masculine qualities that were assigned to this repertoire during this time. Schumann considers Bach and Beethoven pieces “real music” because composing and understanding their hidden beauty requires a great amount of knowledge and intellect (qualities of the masculine mind), rather than “mere technique” (qualities of the feminine body). In fact, masculinity, as defined by nineteenth century norms, can be observed in the description of nearly all *Werktreue* Austro-German canon.³⁰ For example, Leo Treitler writes that Beethoven “epitomizes the essential masculinity of European music, given the history of the associations of the rational, formal, efficient, and so forth, with the masculine”.³¹ By favouring repertoire that

²⁷ Leistra-Jones, 44-45.

²⁸ Stefaniak, *Clara Schumann’s Interiorities*, 698.

²⁹ Schumann as quoted by Grimes in *Formal Innovation and Virtuosity in Clara Schumann’s Piano Trio in G Minor*, paragraph 9.

³⁰ Leistra-Jones, *Staging Authenticity*, 427-430.

³¹ Treitler and Solie, 35.

aligned with the rational and intellectual ideals of *Werktreue*, Schumann asserted a masculine gender role, that as Stefaniuk states, raised her reputation.

Schumann's performance style also aligned with masculine *Werktreue* ideals. Critics commended Schumann's *Werktreue* and celebrated her masculine gender performance. Nicknamed 'the Priestess' (Prince, 2017) for her devotion to her work,³² Schumann was known to "authentically reveal musical works' inherent essences or composers' intentions". In true *Werktreue* fashion, her performance style was conservative, controlled, and reserved, both in her bodily movement and her musical interpretation.³³ The societal interpretation of these traits as not only masculine but positive can be seen in many of Schumann's concert reviews. Jennifer Caines writes that "her serious nature frowned upon the utilization of extraneous body gestures, which Wieck [Clara] felt took away from the music",³⁴ while John Burk recounts "She went directly at her task, played with straightforward ability, unconcerned with the dramatic gesture or... emotional pose."³⁵ These reviews applaud Schumann's ability to prioritize mind over body, or, in the language of the day, masculine over feminine. Edouard Hanslick directly applauded the masculinity of Schumann's performance, "There is nothing effeminate and retiring, nor any overabundance of emotion. Everything is distinct and clear, sharp as a pencil sketch."³⁶ Critics commended Schumann's performances for their seriousness, authenticity, rationality, and mindful nature, while criticizing the effeminate, dramatic, emotional, theatrical, and bodily. In "Dreams of Love: Playing the Romantic Pianist", Ivan Raykoff observes that "Wieck [Clara Schumann] seemed to project a sort of masculine virtuosity";³⁷ not only did the language surrounding her

³² Prince, 2017 fn

³³ Stefaniuk, *Clara Schumann and the Imagined Revelation of Musical Works*, 1.

³⁴ Caines, 29.

³⁵ Burk, *Clara Schumann A Romantic Biography*, 44.

³⁶ Hanslick and Pleasants, *Music Criticisms:1846-99*, 50.

³⁷ Raykoff, *Dreams of Love*, 189.

playing parallel masculinity, but critics often outright stated she “played more like a man”,³⁸ which was obviously considered a compliment. This not only illustrates a masculine perception of Schumann’s performances but implies her masculine gender role was seen as positive and privileged her over other female performers.

It is not coincidental that music embodying the feminine — a less socially valued domain — was associated with a lower aesthetic preference. In his journal article analyzing the piano nocturne through the lenses of gender and ideology, Jeffrey Kallberg demonstrates that according to the “prevailing attitude of the time... affiliation with women usually led to a lesser ranking in the aesthetic hierarchy...to be associated with the feminine was to be devalored,” and found lacking.³⁹ Schumann’s embodiment of the masculine *Werktreue* domain and the status awarded her performances as a result of this embodiment sits in sharp contrast with Frederic Chopin’s reputation. Composing nocturnes, a genre considered feminine, resulted in criticism — not because Chopin did not have a masculine gender identity, but because he did not perform or compose within the masculine *Werktreue* domain. For example, Ferdinand Hand’s review of his nocturne states that “the representation of sentiment in the nocturno runs the danger of falling into the effeminate and languishing, which displeases stronger souls and altogether tires the listener.” The references to contemporaneous ideas of femininity, both direct (‘effeminate’) and indirect (‘sentiment’ and ‘languishing’) are viewed negatively, just as contemporaneous masculine ideas are viewed positively in reviews of Schumann’s performances.

Interestingly, in contrast to the masculine gender role exhibited in her piano performances, Schumann’s compositional output presents a struggle between feminine and masculine musical

³⁸Henry T. Finck as quoted by Raykoff in *Dreams of Love*, 189.

³⁹ Kallberg, *The Harmony of The Tea Table*, 110.

domains. Julie Dunbar remarks that Schumann composed numerous *lieder* and character pieces, which were characterized as feminine due to their emphasis on sentimentality, mood, emotion, and expression — much like Chopin’s nocturnes.⁴⁰ Furthermore, these compositions were performed in recitals and for domestic amusement, which fit the ‘proper’ reception venue for women’s creative work. Yet, Schumann’s works also include forms and genres (fugue, sonata, piano trio, and concerto), which exhibit the rational and intellectual masculinity of the era through her adept and innovative handling of large-scale forms and counterpoint.⁴¹ Despite the multi-faceted nature of her oeuvre, Schumann’s masculinity is still focused on and admired; one reviewer of her piano concerto wrote “One has to marvel approvingly at the masculinity of the spirit that pervades (the work).”⁴² Such remarks celebrating the masculinity of her compositions likely reinforced her perception of composition as a masculine domain. Dunbar reminds us that despite acknowledging her compositional expertise, Schumann continued to question whether she and women in general were better suited to interpreting composers’ works, rather than composing themselves.⁴³ This may help explain her commitment to performance, as well as her lifelong dedication to editing, arranging, and transcribing Robert Schumann’s pieces in an effort to authentically interpret and preserve them.⁴⁴ Her wavering faith in women’s compositional abilities manifested in imposter syndrome which likely limited her creative prolificacy.

This highlights a problematic pattern wherein the feminine traits Schumann does fulfil are ignored in favour of labeling and celebrating her as masculine, ultimately ignoring the complexity of gender and womanhood. Whether intentionally or not, Schumann rejected traditional

⁴⁰ Kallberg, 110-113.

⁴¹ Dunbar, *Women, Music, Culture*, 152-152.

⁴² Dunbar, 152-153.

⁴³ Dunbar, 153.

⁴⁴ Dunbar, 152-153.

femininity through much of her upbringing, performance practices, and even parts of her compositional work, but this co-existed with her small-scale forms and lieder that were characterized as feminine.⁴⁵ Schumann was also a wife (to Robert) and mother to eight children, thus in her home, she would have fulfilled a feminine gender role.⁴⁶ April Prince discusses the harmful nature of neglecting Schumann's femininity in reference to her nickname, 'the Priestess,' "categorizing Schumann as an 'emblem of sobriety, nonsentimentality, rationality, and objectivity' allowed (and continues to allow) her musical legacy to exist purely within the mindful, "masculine" realm... she is [perceived to be] so successful because she absorbs, reinforces, and upholds the patriarchal boundaries within which she worked".⁴⁷ I suggest that by erasing femininity from the discussion of her accomplishments, Schumann is perceived as an exception among women — one who was uniquely masculine enough to be deserving of respect and recognition. The problems with this erasure are clear. Although appearing to advance gender equality, Schumann's story presented femininity and success as a dichotomy, thereby reinforcing masculinity at the top of the gender hierarchy.

Schumann's career was undoubtedly a milestone in the acceptance of women as composers and performers. However, it is important to acknowledge that her success, compared to other female musicians of the time, was largely a result of minimizing her femininity and celebrating her masculinity — a problematic practice that subtly derives from the continuous diminishing of women in society. Schumann's story is only one example amidst a trend that can be observed throughout history and into the present day. Often left out of historical analysis and discussions is the link between achievement within minority groups and their adoption of traits

⁴⁵ Dunbar, 152.

⁴⁶ Dunbar, 150-152.

⁴⁷ Prince, 108-109.

belonging to the dominant culture. Rather, especially in artistic industries, accomplishments are often viewed as the result of talent, persistence, and arbitrary aesthetic preferences. Yet, the acknowledgment and active consideration of aesthetic hierarchies as inextricably intertwined with social hierarchies is crucial to creating an equitable perception of art and artists. The recognition of Schumann's success as dependant on her embodiment of a masculine music domain and gender role underscores what remains lacking within this feminist discourse: the opportunity to be equally recognized, respected, and successful despite being perceived as feminine.

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