

Where did all the pieces go?

Jeremy Polmear on the repertoire he chose for his Robert and Clara Schumann CD with Diana Ambache

Among the oboe's many qualities is its suitability as a Romantic instrument, ideal for expressing feelings of longing, sadness and love. Writers of music for film or TV, when confronted with a touching scene, often reach for an oboe or cor anglais solo to heighten the emotion.

The Romantic composers of the mid to late nineteenth century knew this too, and created some of the best-known solos in the orchestral repertoire - Brahms in the slow movement of his Violin Concerto, Tchaikovsky in his Fourth Symphony and 'Swan Lake' ballet, and Dvorak with the cor anglais (english horn) solo in the 'New World' Symphony.



But one looks for oboe chamber works by these composers in vain. Perhaps the demise of the European Courts reduced the opportunities for professional chamber music; perhaps they just weren't friendly enough with the oboists of the time. Whatever the reason, the cupboard is bare.

With one shining exception - the three *Oboe Romances Opus 94* of Robert Schumann. These pieces express the tension of longing unfulfilled and the resolution of fulfillment too; they are a worthy part of Schumann's *oeuvre*, and oboists will forever be grateful to him.

But they are difficult to play, and not just emotionally. It's the breathing that's a real challenge - the second piece doesn't have a single rest until four bars before the end. Of course one makes time between the phrases, but all the same one wonders if he ever checked the music out with a player before the final draft. Either Schumann himself or his publisher provided versions for clarinet and violin, which makes one further wonder how much the oboe was part of his conception.

But if Schumann was flexible, perhaps that helps us in the practical business of creating a CD of his music. As a very private composer, he wrote lots of excellent chamber music, some of which might be suitable for the oboe or cor anglais. A natural companion work is his *Adagio and Allegro Opus 70* for horn in F - or violin - or cello - or, I contend, cor anglais in F. I have heard this piece played on oboe and oboe d'amore, but fewer amendments are required when playing it on the cor - just the odd octave change here and there. And what a splendid piece it is, exemplifying the extremes in Schumann's writing with a yearning Adagio followed by an impulsive, fiery Allegro.

Looking somewhat further afield, there is an excellent set of cello pieces, *Stücke im Volkston Opus 102*. This is a suite of five movements, not actual folk music, but written in a popular style. The first movement is a kind of goblin's dance, the second a gorgeous dreamy lullaby, the third like a sad folk-song, the fourth a March (with a bit of yodeling in the coda) and the fifth a splendidly exciting finale. Using the cor anglais brings out interesting qualities in the music, though it uses its full compass and dynamic range. Oh, and the breathing is difficult too.



Much has been written about the close relationship between Robert and his wife Clara - so much so that it has been postulated that Clara actually wrote Robert's Romances, he having a breakdown at the time of their composition. It's hard to know exactly the nature of their collaboration, but what we can do is listen to Clara's own Romances and see the similarities and differences for ourselves. They were written for the violinist Joseph Joachim and published as Opus 22 in 1855, four years after Robert's. They transfer to the oboe with hardly any adaptation, though they use a wider compass than oboists of the day would have been able to play. And, of course, there are not many rests.

So how do Robert and Clara's Romances compare? Like Robert, Clara starts with a yearning movement, but her phrases are longer than his, and build slower.

There is a moment of lightness in the middle, as if the sun comes out, but it doesn't stay long, and the last section has a quiet nostalgia that is very typical of her music. The second Romance is tender, even whimsical, with a sunny, open-air middle section; and in the third the oboe floats its sad song over a ferociously difficult piano part (Clara was, after all, one of the finest pianists of her generation).

But above all, I think these two sets of Romances are of equal artistic merit, and in Clara's we have a worthy addition to the repertoire of Romantic music for oboe.

Also on the CD is a pair of matching miniatures. Clara's is an arrangement of a piano *Romanze* of 1853, and Robert's an arrangement by Joachim of an *Abendlied* of 1849. Clara sings her typical quiet, sad song, and Robert wishes us a tender, fond, goodnight.

Illustrations:

Robert Schumann after a portrait of 1844

Clara Schumann, photo by Harfstaengl, 1857