

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

"I can do nothing but think of you and gaze constantly at your dear letter and portrait. What you have done to me? Can't you remove the spell you have cast over me?"

- Johannes Brahms to Clara Schumann, 1855

Preparing this piece for performance has been one of the great joys of my career. In many ways, it feels like a homecoming for me. It is a return to Mercury, a company I worked with very early on, when Antoine welcomed me first as a singer and then as I began to stretch my wings as a director. It is a return to Houston, where I have lovingly hung my hat for over a decade and a half, but because of the traveling nature of my work, not spent nearly enough time, often just coming home to unpack and repack. This show is a return to some performers (in the orchestra and onstage) that I have known and admired for years, and eagerly grabbed at the chance to create in the same room with them again. But probably most significantly, it is a return to Clara Schumann, her wonderful music, and her fascinating life.

The life of Clara Schumann and her talented and troubled husband, Robert, is fairly familiar to most students of music. Achieving near "rock star" status as a concert pianist during the male-centric Romantic era in which she lived, she was an obvious choice for early inclusion as musicology began to turn its eye to women and other less celebrated groups in our rich history. She occupies a fairly unique space, as "muse to genius" for two very well-known composers, but also was a child prodigy, widely-acclaimed performer, mother to eight children, primary breadwinner, and fine composer in her own right. She lost her husband in her mid-thirties, first to the horrors of an un-diagnosed mental condition, then confinement in an asylum and an early death.

She found solace in the friendship of a very young Johannes Brahms, sparking rumors and speculation that have not died to this day.

The dramatic events of Clara's life seem absolutely destined for the stage, and indeed they have been the focus of several cinematic efforts, but it has long been my dream to tell her story through music written by the people in question. This era was a rich time for lieder writing: small jewel-like songs featuring the rich poetry of the Romantic poets, contemporary at the time of their setting. It is the bread and butter of music students today, but heard far too rarely in the hands of seasoned performers. Preparing this piece, developing a narrative from the vast catalogue of incredible music available, was primarily a matter of thoughtfully (often painfully!) trimming away, trying to curate an evening that told the story with most impact.

Antoine and I have been captivated by this remarkable music for well over a year. We have schemed and planned and sometimes pulled our hair out over details and logistics, but overall, we have felt incredibly lucky. We have grappled with roadblocks both typical and extraordinary (including but not limited to the many complications dealt us all by Hurricane Harvey!), but what an amazing gift it is to spend time with this music, this story, these talented creators you will see onstage. It is a rare opportunity to do this kind of work.

Yes, we have been lucky, and we hope you will feel lucky too.

-Tara Faircloth