

VARIATIONS

SOMMCD 0603

Céleste Series

Clara (1819-96) and Robert (1810-56) Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47), Johannes Brahms (1833-97), Nico Muhly (b.1981), Vijay Iyer (b.1971)

Mishka Rushdie Momen *piano*

Clara Schumann
 [1] – [8] Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op.20 11:46

Robert Schumann
 [9] – [19] Impromptus on a Theme by Clara Wieck, Op.5 (1850 version) 17:57

Nico Muhly
 [20] Small Variations* (2019) 4:28

Felix Mendelssohn
 [21] – [38] Variations sérieuses, Op.54 12:18

Vijay Iyer
 [39] – [41] Hallucination Party (from a Theme by R. Schumann)* (2019) 10:30

Johannes Brahms
 [42] – [58] Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op.9 19:30

Total duration: 77:12

—————*First recordings—————

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Clara Schumann
 Robert Schumann
 Brahms
 Mendelssohn
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 Vijay Iyer*

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MISHKA
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Clara Schumann: Variations, Op. 20 on a Theme by Robert Schumann

1	Thema – Ziemlich langsam	1:11
2	Variation I	0:48
3	Variation II	1:07
4	Variation III	1:15
5	Variation IV	0:55
6	Variation V – Poco animato	1:16
7	Variation VI	1:11
8	Variation VII	3:59

Robert Schumann: Impromptus, Op. 5 on a Theme by Clara Wieck

9	Ziemlich langsam – Thema	1:39
10	Impromptu I	0:53
11	Impromptu II – Lebhafter	0:50
12	Impromptu III – Sehr präcis	0:50
13	Impromptu IV – Ziemlich langsam	1:21
14	Impromptu V – Lebhaft	1:37
15	Impromptu VI – Schnell	1:09
16	Impromptu VII – Tempo des Themas	0:58
17	Impromptu VIII – Mit großer Kraft	2:18
18	Impromptu IX	1:03
19	Impromptu X – Lebhaft	5:15

20	Nico Muhly: Small Variations (2019)	4:28
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Mendelssohn: Variations sérieuses, Op. 54

21	Andante sostenuto	0:53
22	Variation 1	0:40
23	Variation 2 – Un poco più animato	0:31
24	Variation 3 – Più animato	0:22
25	Variation 4	0:23
26	Variation 5 – Agitato	0:26
27	Variation 6 – a tempo	0:27
28	Variation 7	0:25
29	Variation 8 – Allegro vivace	0:19
30	Variation 9	0:26
31	Variation 10 – Moderato	0:48
32	Variation 11	0:38
33	Variation 12 – Tempo del Tema	0:32
34	Variation 13	0:45
35	Variation 14 – Adagio	1:08
36	Variation 15 – Poco a poco più agitato	0:31
37	Variation 16 – Allegro vivace	0:19
38	Variation 17 – Presto	2:37

Vijay Iyer: Hallucination Party [from a Theme by R. Schumann]

39	I – Moderato	3:22
40	II – Serene but firm, with a steady pulse and flowing 16ths	2:03
41	III – Clean, nonchalant	5:04

Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 9

42	Thema – Ziemlich langsam	1:08
43	Variation 1	1:13
44	Variation 2 – Poco più animato	0:28
45	Variation 3 – Tempo di tema	1:02
46	Variation 4 – Poco più moto	0:43
47	Variation 5 – Allegro capriccioso	0:59
48	Variation 6 – Allegro	0:54
49	Variation 7 – Andante	0:57
50	Variation 8 – Andante (non troppo lento)	1:45
51	Variation 9 – Schnell	0:36
52	Variation 10 – Poco Adagio	2:12
53	Variation 11 – Un poco più animato	0:53
54	Variation 12 – Allegretto, poco scherzando – Presto	0:47
55	Variation 13 – Non troppo Presto	0:34
56	Variation 14 – Andante	1:04
57	Variation 15 – Poco Adagio	2:06
58	Variation 16	2:02

A set of variations is an act of questioning. A narrative interrogation of possibilities, of how things can change, of why they stay the same – which elements are integral to character and what happens if these elements are disturbed. I like to think of a theme as the protagonist of a story, making a declaration: “This is who I am, at this moment”. And what is it that makes us who we are?

The possibilities of the variation form seem infinite. To some extent the choices feel as if they are dependent on the nature of the theme; but out of a single theme from Robert Schumann’s *Bunte Blätter*, Brahms, Clara Schumann, Nico Muhly and Vijay Iyer have excavated completely different, sometimes opposing, sets of mutations. In such imaginative writing, these very different choices each have a sense of inevitability.

I find **Clara Schumann’s** treatment of her husband’s theme extremely touching. Often – in the First, Fourth, Sixth (in canon) and Seventh Variations – we are presented with the theme simply, as it is, with smaller notes looped around it, highlighting the harmonic motion but not altering its shape. I love the sense of freedom this brings, allowing the character of the theme to breathe and develop, unhurried. Only in the Second and Fifth Variations is the theme truly aware of the disturbance around it, responding in kind to create urgency and drama. The ending is a fading away in the tonic major key; through this exploration of the theme’s potential, something is quietly, positively, resolved.

Clara presented these variations to Robert for his birthday with the dedication, “To my beloved husband on the 8th of June 1853 this humble, renewed essay

by his old Clara". That is how I see this work, too; as an outpouring of generosity and love for the theme, with the suggestion of renewal.

After hearing Clara's variations, close family friend **Johannes Brahms** was so impressed that he was inspired to write his own set on the same theme just one year later, dedicating it to her. His response is more of a 'journey' than hers. Almost twice the length, the theme undergoes a psychological transformation in each variation. For me, it is one of Brahms's most intimate and personal expressions, somewhere between a set of variations and a fantasy.

In the manuscript, Brahms signed many of the individual variations; lyrical ones – Nos. 4, 7, 8, 14 and 16 – with "B" (Brahms), and more fiery ones – Nos. 5, 6, 9, 12 and 13 – with his alter ego "Kr", named after Johannes Kreisler, the protagonist of ETA Hoffmann's satirical novel *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr* ('The Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr'). This clearly recalls Robert Schumann's twin alter egos, the extrovert Florestan and introvert Eusebius.

Variations often feed off each other, absorbing the energy of the previous one and directing it into the next, thereby creating an internal narrative. Here, the early variations are essentially forward-moving, growing to a passionate climax in the Sixth, before the questioning stillness of the Seventh Variation. I see the Eighth Variation as a mid-point – a moment of reckoning. We hear the original theme melody in the top voice, like a serenade, but in the last bars it modulates to the tonic major. This eloquent re-emergence of the theme is incredibly moving, after all that has disrupted and provoked it in the previous variations.

It's perhaps interesting to note in passing that Brahms presented Clara Schumann with Variations 10 and 11 separately three months later, titled *Rose und Heliotrop haben geduftet* ('Rose and heliotrope smelled sweet'), which reflects their generous and more positive character. At the final cadence of Variation No.10 we hear a quotation of Clara's Romance (Op.3), the theme upon which Robert Schumann wrote his Op.5 Impromptu.

Some change is irrevocable. After the melancholy siciliano mood of Variation 14, we move to the enharmonic equivalent key of G flat major in No.15, a slow, harp-like augmentation of the theme. I really have the sense here of tectonic plates shifting – the tonality is the same, but we are at the very furthest point from where we began. In the last variation, the melody has fragmented into sighing phrases suspended above the skeleton of the bass line – this is the vision of the theme which finally remains.

Nico Muhly's *Small Variations* is, for me, a squeezing of the most heightened elements of both Schumann's *Bunte Blätter* theme and the Brahms Op.9 Variations (built on that very theme) into a five-minute chorale with an explosion halfway through it.

This piece seems, somehow, to exist simultaneously in very different spheres of time; there is at once a flexible, Romantic understanding of rubato, a Renaissance chorale-like way of phrasing and breathing, and a very modern fearlessness of fragmentation, of isolating the essential elements of music. After the opening chorale, we have a kind of 'new version' of the Second Variation of Brahms' Op.9 – a mercurial, destabilising rhythm that winds itself to a granitic peak. Nico's

chorale does not just fragment like the end of the Brahms – it shatters. It is a retelling of the chorale in which the voices can no longer line up, thrown into their own metres. It has shattered, but the pieces are crystalline, glittering.

Robert Schumann's Op.5 Impromptus, like the *Davidsbündlertänze* and the Op.13 *Études Symphoniques*, exist in two distinct versions, the first from 1832 and the second re-published after significant revision in 1850. Comparing the two, it is difficult to choose between them. Overall, the revision reflects a general inclination towards simplification and clarity, but the earlier version also contains many treasures of rhythmic subversion and features of his early style. These later alterations make the work more cohesive, and the new ending much more poignant.

Modelled after Beethoven's *Eroica* Variations, these Impromptus are a set of variations on a theme by the 13-year-old Clara Wieck (later Clara Schumann), from her Op.3 Romance. Schumann begins only with a bare iteration of the bass line, as Beethoven did, and similarly ends with a fugue (which is sandwiched by a gigue, recalling a Baroque suite). Each Impromptu is a burst of harmonic and rhythmic invention; within a symmetrical structure, we are displaced, thrown out of alignment, transformed.

Felix Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* were also inspired by the *Eroica* Variations and written in response to a request by the Viennese publisher Pietro Mechetti, who wanted to raise money for the Beethoven monument in Bonn from the proceeds of a "grand Beethoven album", which would also feature works by great composers including Chopin, Liszt, Czerny, and Thalberg.

This is one of Mendelssohn's most concise, rigorously constructed works. From the tragic, contrapuntal theme in four parts, the variations gather a cumulative intensity, increasing in passion and agitation until the end of Variation 13. At this moment there is, for the first time in the piece, a fermata written into the score; a pause, before Variation 14, a chorale in D major. From Variation 16, the music is propelled inexorably to a furious coda, an incredible transformation of the theme which makes me think of Kafka's metamorphic Gregor Samsa and also the film *Flubber*, in which sentient green goo with enormous amounts of elasticity and kinetic energy wreaks uncontrollable havoc. It is as if one hand is chasing the other, until, having spent all of their energy, they collapse in despair.

Vijay Iyer's *Hallucination Party* is, as the title suggests, a fever dream. Part of the joy of sharing a new work is that listeners can hear it without pre-conceptions, and so I feel reluctant to spoil too many surprises, of which it yields many.

I will say only that, also based on Robert Schumann's *Bunte Blätter* theme, the first movement is like a DNA sequencing of the theme followed by a bird singing about it – single lines of vital information seen through a haze. There is something both sculptural and dance-like about the second movement, marked "serene but firm", in which the first elements of discord appear, the theme embedded in fragments. And the final movement is a true hallucination, a set of variations whirling towards ecstasy.

Mishka Rushdie Momen © 2019

MISHKA RUSHDIE MOMEN studied with Joan Havill and Imogen Cooper at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and has also studied with Richard Goode and Sir Andrés Schiff, who presented her in recitals in Zurich's Tonhalle, New York's 92Y, Antwerp deSingel and several cities in Germany and Italy for his 'Building Bridges' Series. A committed chamber musician whose partners have included Steven Isserlis, Midori, and members of the Endellion, Belcea and Artemis String Quartets, she played in the Marlboro, Krzyżowa and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Music Festivals and regularly participates in Open Chamber Music at the International Musicians Seminar in Prussia Cove, Cornwall.

Mishka Rushdie Momen has given solo recitals at the Barbican Hall, the Bridgewater Hall, St. John's Smith Square and major venues across the UK, as well as abroad in New York City, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland and India. Her 2020-21 season includes concerts at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall and the Haydn Festival in Eisenstadt, Austria.

She released her first commercial recording, produced by SOMM Recordings, to critical acclaim in 2017, appearing as one of the soloists alongside Peter Donohoe and Valerie Tryon in Mozart's Triple Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

She is currently studying at the Kronberg Academy as part of the Sir Andrés Schiff Performance Programme for Young Pianists. This study is funded by a Henle Scholarship endowed by the Horizon Foundation.

Mishkarushdiemomen.com

 @mishkapianist



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