



Schumann String Quartets  
Emerson String Quartet



Cover image: *Snow Storm; Steam-Boat off Harbour's Mouth* (1842)

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851)

Created in 1842, the same year that Robert Schumann wrote his three string quartets, Turner's painting fully conveys the Romanticism, modernity and intensity of these extraordinary compositions.

## Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

### String Quartet No. 1 in A Minor, Op. 41/1

1	I. Introduzione. Andante espressivo — Allegro	9. 11
2	II. Scherzo. Presto	3. 46
3	III. Adagio	5. 34
4	IV. Presto	6. 19

### String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 41/2

5	I. Allegro vivace	5. 54
6	II. Andante, quasi variazioni	7. 23
7	III. Scherzo. Presto	3. 15
8	IV. Allegro molto vivace	6. 52

### String Quartet No. 3 in A Major, Op. 41/3

9	I. Andante espressivo — Allegro molto moderato	6. 57
10	II. Assai agitato	6. 17
11	III. Adagio molto	8. 01
12	Finale. Allegro molto vivace	7. 11

Total playing time: 76. 46

#### Emerson String Quartet:

**Eugene Drucker**, first violin in Quartets Nos. 1 & 2

**Philip Setzer**, first violin in Quartet No. 3

**Lawrence Dutton**, viola

**Paul Watkins**, cello

At a time when lives, livelihoods and the performing arts have been threatened by a worldwide crisis, we are grateful for the opportunity to share a labor of love that pre-dated the pandemic: our recording of Schumann's three quartets, opus 41. We've lived with this music intermittently since our early years, having recorded opus 41 no. 3 in the mid-1980s and occasionally performed the other two works within the next decade. But our immersion in the entire opus, which was the result of a "miracle month" of Schumann's creative inspiration in the summer of 1842, has been enormously gratifying for us.

We performers feel an intense connection to each of the great composers whose works we are privileged to interpret. Few classical musicians can live happily without the spiritual sustenance afforded by the music of Bach and Beethoven, or the elegance and sheer beauty of Mozart. We relish the emotional and sonic extremes of the quartets of Bartók, Berg and Shostakovich. The entire Romantic period provides us with a rich vein of personal expression, ranging from Schubert's powerful lyricism to the folk-inspired inflections of Dvorak.

Schumann's music occupies a special place in our repertoire as individual players and as a quartet. Rarely has mental instability provided such fertile soil for a rich aesthetic harvest. All three of the slow movements of opus 41 are gorgeous outpourings of pure feeling, full of unusual textures and prominent solos for each instrument. We hear echoes of the slow movement of Beethoven's opus 127 in the Andante of Schumann's opus 41 no. 2: the mellow key of A-flat Major, the lilting theme spun sensuously across its 12/8 meter, and the variation technique that takes us on a long, often surprising journey, describing a narrative arc that comes full circle. In the impetuous finale

of opus 41 no. 1, when the music suddenly becomes more peaceful and shifts from minor to major, the use of drones on A reminds us of the musette section in Beethoven's opus 132. Indeed, the shadow of Beethoven looms over each of these quartets, in which we also find evidence of the contrapuntal skill that must have come from Schumann's intensive study of Bach's fugues. Perhaps in the mercurial scherzo of opus 41 no. 2 we can hear a reference to the gossamer-textured scherzos of Schumann's friend Mendelssohn. But throughout this body of work there are unmistakable signs of Schumann's unique artistic personality: the obsession with syncopations and rhythmic displacement; sudden shifts of mood and key, as in the slow, somber introduction to the A Minor quartet, which rouses itself to herald the optimistic tone of the Allegro; and the ominous martial figure that dominates the next movement, to name just a few of the idiosyncratic touches we love.

During this shutdown, some of us may find it difficult to summon the organizational and creative energies that have filled our lives until now. Sometimes it's hard even to practice our instruments without a clear idea of what or when we'll rehearse, or where our next concert might take place. With such uncertainty, it's helpful to think of the mood swings — the alternating periods of depression and manic creativity — that governed Schumann's life. Feeling vulnerable, we are inspired by the artistic strength of this fragile genius. Listening to the final edits of these quartets, we stop thinking of our own wishes and demands as instrumentalists and start to connect to the deep spirit of the Romantic period, as embodied in the life and work of Robert Schumann.

**- Eugene Drucker**

## Schumann's String Quartets: Life and Music in a Turbulent Time

In February of 1842, Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896) embarked on a concert tour of northern Germany and Denmark. The 22-year-old piano virtuoso, well-known since her early teens, traveled with her husband of a year-and-a-half, 31-year-old avant garde composer and “new music journalist” Robert Schumann (1810-1856), and the first of their eight children. The Europe through which they traveled was in deep sociopolitical flux, poised, as it were, between revolutions: the “Second French Revolution” of 1830/32, and the broader, more convulsive revolutions of 1848 — the short-lived “Springtime of the Nations” — also the year of the Communist Manifesto. It was a time of mass migration from the country to urban centers, upending old class-structures and economies. The aesthetic revolution that Schumann, Berlioz, Wagner, Delacroix, Turner, Hugo, Poe, et

al were fomenting was coincident with the revolution of technologies like steam and electrical power (making possible the railroad and telegraph systems which were starting to criss-cross Europe); mass production in agriculture, manufacture, and building; the commercial development of photography — all of which were quickly transforming the charming localities of the Old Order into our modern, globally connected, industrial/capitalist world. (As if to symbolize this historical passing, a few weeks after the Schumanns begin their journey, Constanze Mozart von Nissen, widow of Wolfgang Amadeus, dies in Salzburg, comfortable and prosperous at last, at the age of 80.)

Change happened fast, with the usual unintended catastrophic consequences. In May 1842, for example, just after Clara returned from her tour, the young rail industry suffered its first major disaster — a derailment on the Paris-Versailles line killing up to 200 people, wherein the

concept of “metal fatigue” was discovered and which led to the beginnings of governmental regulation of the rail system. Accelerating transport and trade also aided the spread of disease, cholera in particular, which was carried from India to Europe, North America, and beyond, killing over 30 million people in a series of six pandemic waves across the 19th century. In the summer of 1833, Schumann lost his brother and sister-in-law to the second wave (1826-37), precipitating a debilitating bout of suicidal depression, the first in a series which would plague him until his death at 46.

Schumann's mental/emotional turmoils have long been part of popular classical-music lore [referenced in a *Seinfeld* episode, no less [“The Jacket”, 1991], as has his tumultuous courtship and marriage, which one may see hilariously misrepresented in films such as *Song of Love* (1944, with Katherine Hepburn as Clara) or *Spring Symphony* (1983,

Nastassja Kinski, ditto). A condensed, unsentimentalized overview of the story might be helpful here, since it will set up our couple as they begin their trip — which will lead, more or less directly, to the composition of the Three Quartets, op.41.

Mental illness was pervasive in Schumann's family. His father, a small-town bookseller and publisher who supported and nurtured his very talented son's artistic ambitions, developed some kind of “nervous disorder” shortly after Robert's birth; his older sister is described as having had serious developmental issues, dying in her late teens; and two of his children with Clara had mental issues severe enough to require institutionalization. Schumann's own life, from his early 20's, teetered between periods of almost superhuman creative exhilaration and crippling depression, psychosis, and suicide attempts. He was 16 when his father died; his mother was not as keen on his musical

career and insisted he go to law school. Unsurprisingly, his foray into law did not take, as he spent most of his time absorbing the newest music of the time, improvising at the piano, writing overheated bits of novels and plays, and indulging in plenty of late-adolescent carousing [this autobiographical sketch gives a flavor: "Easter 1828. Night raptures. Constant improvisation daily. Also literary fantasies in Jean Paul's manner. Special enthusiasm for Schubert, Beethoven too. Bach less. Letter to Franz Schubert (not sent)." When Schubert died later that year, Schumann was disconsolate and "wept loudly through the night."]. After some pleading, his mother allowed him to petition to study with Friedrich Wieck, a well-known piano teacher in Leipzig. Wieck was sufficiently impressed to take him on, going so far as to say he could make Schumann into a famous virtuoso after a few years of study. But the course of study was not smooth. Schumann, full of enthusiasms

and indiscipline, couldn't have been an easy student, and Wieck's attention was increasingly taken up with another pupil, his daughter Clara, whose virtuoso career he had been planning since before her birth. She was nine when Schumann first began his study and 11 when she began concert touring, and Wieck would be gone for longer and longer periods as he traveled with her. Schumann's trajectory was further deflected when he suffered some sort of injury or dystonia to his right hand [the popular story is that it was a result of using some kind of finger-strengthening contraption. However, historians — and Clara as well — have doubted that the machine was the root cause. Schumann was a *seriously* tense guy; all you have to do is play his music at the piano to understand how he might have ended up with stress-related issues.] and eventually had to abandon hopes of a performing career. Always an enthusiastic promoter of modern music, he began writing articles, and even started his own new music periodical.

In 1834, he became engaged to the adopted daughter of a wealthy landowner, but when it came to light that she was illegitimate and would bring no dowry, meaning he would "have to work like a day laborer," he cancelled the engagement. One may not applaud his actions, but it is true that the economic prospects for a composer at that time ranged from poor to destitute. The era of aristocratic patronage had died with the revolutions and the bourgeoisie were becoming the new audience; the marketplace suddenly looked quite different. If you weren't a flashy performer or teacher, publishing was your only option. However, the symphonies and chamber music that Princes Razumovsky or Esterhazy were happy to pay for were a harder sell to the newly birthed middle class, who wanted popular songs and facile salon numbers. According to Henry Raynor's *Music and Society Since 1815* (1978), Franz Schubert, for all his miraculous fecundity, made the modern

equivalent of only a few thousand dollars per year during his entire creative life.

Schumann spent his twenties, especially after recovering from his 1833 breakdown, creating a torrent of fantastical, inventive, and, for the time, very unusual solo piano music — *Carnival*, *Kreisleriana*, *Childhood Scenes*, *Novelettes*, et al — which still forms the basis of his popularity. His position at the time, however, was probably more that of an edgy avant gardist (think, for example, of a composer/pianist like Cecil Taylor or Thelonious Monk). Through the Wiecks, Schumann had met Mendelssohn and Liszt, who began to champion his music (if, at times, warily). Around 1835, his relationship to the now 16-year-old Clara turned from collegial to romantic. Although Wieck himself seems to have been a thoroughly deplorable character, one might understand why he wasn't thrilled to see his teenage daughter coupled with a crazy composer, 10 years her senior,

with no visible means of support — and he did everything in his power, including libel and threats, to thwart it. Clara and Robert's letters, throughout their besieged five-year courtship and sixteen years of marriage, reveal a truly deep connection. But they are also shot through (especially to modern eyes) with issues of career, money, and gender roles. Clara may have indeed represented true love, but she also represented a professional lifeline and economic security. As a popular and widely respected performer, she brought his music to a wide audience, though in his lifetime she was by far the more well known of the two. The ramifications of Clara's motivations in all of this run through much of what is covered in this essay. However, having neither the expertise nor the space here to explore them in greater detail, I would redirect those interested to the following sources: [Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life, Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters. Berthold Litzmann, Cambridge University

Press; Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman. Nancy Reich, Cornell University Press; "Clara Schumann" in Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950. Nancy Reich, University of Illinois Press.]

Now — accompanying his wife on a tour where he was primarily "Clara's husband" — all this seems to have been very much on his mind. He was increasingly dismayed at his marginalization and in mid-March bolted the tour and returned to Leipzig. He was too depressed to compose and, ever insecure about his essentially self-taught compositional technique, spent his time between drinking "beer and champagne" doing counterpoint exercises and studying Beethoven and Mozart quartets. (From the sound of his own quartets, he was studying some Schubert, too). Both Clara and Liszt had urged him to expand beyond songs and short piano pieces into large-scale instrumental works — symphonies and chamber music, grown

up and mature, like the big boys wrote — and it is a good guess that during these six difficult weeks alone he was gearing himself up to take on such a challenge. Clara returned at the end of April, as did his energy and confidence. His pattern was to compose in bursts (the manic side of his bipolarity, if you will). In 1840, his marriage had provoked an outpouring of 140 extraordinary songs, and similarly, in early June 1842, something clicked: after a bit of sketching, he began the first quartet on the 4th and, before finishing, began the second a week later. Both were done by the end of the month. Between July 8-22 he wrote the third. All three are substantial, 4-movement works. He arranged a run-through of the complete set on September 8. He then proceeded to write his marvelous Piano Quintet op.44 between Sept 23-Oct 12; then the Piano Quartet op. 47 in November, and the *Fantasy Pieces* for piano trio op. 88 in December — much of his best chamber music in a remarkable six-month surge.

In one sense, the history and aesthetic of the Romantics can be seen as a reaction to the socio-economic revolutions that were taking place. Artists were increasingly drawn to the fantastical and macabre, to the otherworldly characters inhabiting the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Poe, to the alienated, to the insane. *Frankenstein* was written in 1818 and vampires began appearing in stories, plays, even an opera (*Der Vampyr* (1828), by Heinrich Marschner), throughout the 1820's and 30's. The "*alle Menschen*" of the Revolutionary Era was giving way to a focus on individual and subjective experience. (Thoreau, another contemporary of Schumann, would decamp to Walden in 1845.) In his ground-breaking piano music of the 1830's, Schumann had created musical portraits of a quasi-mythical cast of characters derived from different aspects of his own personality and his friends'. He even formed them into a secret society dedicated to artistic freedom

and the eradication of Philistinism (the *Davidsbündler*, or “League of David”). The music itself seems to leap out at you from the first note, with an in-the-moment urgency that reveals its roots in improvisation. Every piece is highly characterized — you get the vibe from the very beginning. The basic texture, derived from Schubert’s piano writing, is a long, multi-phrase melody spun out over an accompanying network of pulsing rhythmic/harmonic patterns (and yes, this could also be a description of some jazz practice). Each piece, essentially, *is* the melody: when it ends, the piece is over. Schumann would create larger structures by collaging many melodies together into nested, repeating patterns, and though he had a film-editor’s knack for knowing what to follow what with, the music doesn’t “build” but rather remains in a gripping present tense.

This is not Sonata Form, the thesis/antithesis/synthesis that drives Classical



*Robert Schumann in 1839*  
Lithography by Josef Kriehuber (1800-1876)

structuring. Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven would start with musical cells, phrases that often, on their own, were so generic as to have almost no inherent emotional content. But out of the material’s contrast, dialogue, and eventual resolution they built complex, dramatic architectures. So it is interesting to see, as we do in the music on this recording, how Schumann met the challenge of confronting Beethoven on the latter’s “home turf”: the string quartet. He had already confronted Beethoven on his own turf, the piano, in his *Fantasy*, op.17 — written as part of a project to raise money for a Beethoven monument. In it, he forged an original, effective large-scale form that grows naturally out of its impulsive material and owes very little to conventional sonata practice. In the string quartets, however, he completely embraced Classical form as he saw it. This might be seen as yet another reaction — this time to his wayward youth and scattershot

ambitions and towards the older, established structures of his artistic fathers. The quartets are dedicated to Mendelssohn, who had, years before, traded his youthful spark for a smooth, “Great Master” respectability. The classic forms may not have been as natural a fit for Schumann’s talent as they were for Mendelssohn’s, but he brought it off with a wonderful sort of seat-of-the-pants mastery.

He took as his model the 4-movement template, prevalent from Mozart’s late symphonies and chamber music through Middle Period Beethoven, then taken up by Schubert: a grand first movement in sonata form, followed by a slow movement and a scherzo, in either order, capped with a rondo finale. (Beethoven’s late quartets, in which he completely exploded the template, were still considered so weird that neither Schubert, Schumann, nor Brahms ever attempted emulating them formally.) The

“received” forms of the slow movement and scherzo more easily accommodated Schumann’s process since they were sectional and based on tunes. The outer movements, the pillars that support the structure, were, in the Classical style, constructed of an ongoing and ever-developing series of phrases; even when motives or melodies came back, they were always transformed in some way. If you are familiar with this kind of music and with Schumann’s piano music, it is fascinating to hear him adapting his style to this kind of diction. He is not always successful, especially in the “development” bits, too often relying on strings of obsessively repeated sequences in an attempt to whip up some Beethovenian momentum. Also, his sense of pacing can feel a little off at times — there are moments when the music seems to reach a truly satisfying resolution, but then goes on to repeat some melody or other because the Form demanded it. I will not specify particular moments

because criticisms like these are, at root, personal opinions, and my job is not to prejudice but, I hope, to enlighten.

## Short Notes on the Individual Quartets — Intended for Those Who Love Music But Don’t Understand Music Theory Lingo.

### No.1, in A Minor

#### I. Introduzione. Andante espressivo — Allegro

Nothing says, “We’re being serious here,” like a slow introduction — a clear shout-out to Beethoven’s fondness for them. Once the Allegro gets rolling, beautiful melodies and beguiling harmonies alternate with bouncy, sequential Beethoven-ing.

#### II. Scherzo. Presto — Intermezzo — Presto

Rhythmically obsessive; lots of syncopation. An “Intermezzo” suddenly puts the brakes on, harmonic motion is suspended — a magical effect.

### III. Adagio

A gorgeous, long-lined cantilena whose first notes bear a *strong* resemblance to the slow movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. A declamatory middle section further summons the spirit of the Master.

### IV. Presto — Moderato — Presto

A jolly, chattering romp. Right near the end, everything suddenly halts and we hear what sounds like bagpipes from afar — a strange, unbidden memory (and echo of a similar passage in Beethoven’s Quartet, Op. 132).

### No.2 in F Major

#### I. Allegro vivace

Schumann seems to have gotten most of the overt Beethoven-ing out of his system in the first quartet and No.2 begins with a sweet, almost Haydnesque melody. The second theme has a bittersweet, yearning quality that threatens to

become the emotional center of the movement.

## II. *Andante, quasi Variazioni*

Theme, six variations, and a coda. Though very slow, each variation features a different kind of obsessive, syncopated rhythm. The downbeat can feel elusive, the mood is unsettled.

## III. *Scherzo. Presto — Trio. l'istesso tempo — Presto*

More obsessive syncopation — everything begins on the upbeat, which keeps the rhythm tumbling forward. The oddly hushed, minor-key atmosphere gives this scherzo (literally, a “playful piece”) a disturbing overtone. As if trying to lighten things up, the Trio is slap-stick silly.

## IV. *Allegro molto vivace*

Schumann is hitting his stride here — you really start to hear his individual voice coming through. A careening, surprising, and invigorating ride.

## No.3 in A Major

### I. *Andante espressivo — Allegro molto moderato*

Schumann was fond of creating themes out of friends’ names by turning the letters into notes. The slow introduction of the third quartet focuses on a falling two-note phrase that can only be heard as the actual vocalization of “Cla-ra!” The main theme of the Allegro also starts with this motive, and is followed by a stream of notes that seems to expand it to “Clara! — there are a million things I have to talk to you about!” Because it feels like a communication from one soul to another, this quartet is the most emotionally direct (and original) of the three — you follow the rise and fall of a melody as if it were the trajectory of hope and doubt.

### II. *Assai agitato; variations*

Instead of a scherzo, four variations and coda on a pulsing, “very agitated” theme.

### III. *Adagio molto*

An extraordinary outpouring that sounds like a letter written late at night and from the depths of the soul. A spooky repeated note figure, like the ticking of a clock, appears and recedes. The writer seems to be trying to get everything into this letter, but it grows ever later, and gradually, with the ticking, the movement falls asleep.

### IV. *Allegro molto vivace*

A rocking, syncopated, folk-dance revolves among other, smoother episodes—a carousel of shifting moods that recalls the quicksilver changes of his piano music. He has, in a sense, finally made the string quartet his own.

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## Acknowledgments

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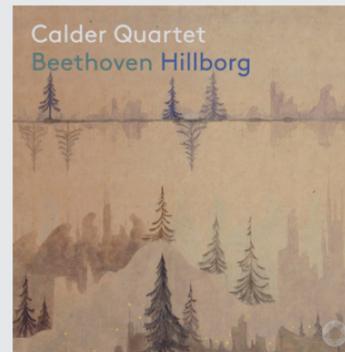
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