

## **Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**

### **Piano Quintet in E flat Major, Op. 44 (1842)**

In 1829, after abandoning law studies, the driven Robert Schumann moved in with his teacher Friedrich Wieck and began intensive work to develop his piano technique to a height of perfection. Things went well and by 1830 Wieck was extremely optimistic. He said, "I pledge myself to turn him into one of the greatest pianists."

But Schumann had been complaining of some soreness in the finger of his right hand that worsened with practice. Differing accounts give the impression that it could be the middle or index finger, but it is unclear. An intensely rigorous regimen of piano exercises for hours a day suggest that the pain was likely a form of tendonitis. His injuries were treated with a bizarre series of so-called cures that helped little. But the major blow came next.

In a misguided attempt to help develop strength and independence in the fingers, he used a machine that would stretch and exercise them. These types of contraptions were sold in music shops, though most teachers were wary of them. Not long afterward he developed an incurable paralysis in his overworked hand that permanently crippled it. There are other theories as to the cause of the injury including syphilis or neurological disease, but the known evidence seems to suggest the self-imposed one.

But this tragedy quickly transformed itself into an equally intense desire to compose, and he pursued this goal with all his heart. Within a few years Schumann had achieved the degree of fame with his pen that he had been denied with his hands.

As a composer, Schumann tended to concentrate on particular areas of music. Up until 1840, he wrote almost exclusively for the piano; next he discovered song; then a predilection for orchestral works; and soon afterward he lovingly nurtured a fondness for chamber music. It was during the latter phase that the German composer wrote, in a few short years, three String Quartets, two Piano Trios, a Piano Quartet and the great Piano Quintet, Op. 44.

The work was written for his beloved wife, Clara, herself one of the most formidable pianists of her era. For this reason, the piano tends to dominate the whole, but the generous thematic material is shared by all the instruments causing a remarkable oneness in the ensemble.

The bold opening theme of the first movement gives way to melancholy, especially in the beautiful duet between cello and viola. But here the heroic triumphs over the meditative, eventually winning out in the end.

The second movement is a musing funeral march, the heroic making a sudden, memorable appearance in the middle section. The excitement settles down with the appearance of a lovely, elegiac passage, which beats a hasty retreat as the funeral procession returns.

The lively, vigorous Scherzo displays a hearty optimism in its rising and falling scales, drawing us in to the thrilling spectacle. Unusually, this movement presents two trios rather than the traditional solo appearance. The first is a lovely song, the second a manic rush that eventually finds its way back to the opening theme.

The energetic finale takes us by the hand and leads us on a fantastic virtuoso journey. The remarkable movement is crowned by a coda in which the main theme of the first movement is used as the subject for a fugue-like passage with the finale's theme as its second subject creating a solid unifying element to the whole. Hold on to your chairs.