

differences
for four hands



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DIFFERENCES FOR FOUR HANDS

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for Michael Gizzi, his part in it

Note: DIFFERENCES FOR FOUR HANDS uses Lyn Hejinian's *Gesualdo* as a syntactical matrix. A direct quote from the book has been appropriated for Robert Schumann's voice.

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I

CLARA & ROBERT SCHUMANN,

AN INTRODUCTION

CLARA, I NEED TO TALK TO YOU. These keys are slippery.
Fame tips your fingers. Between them, staves run out of brief
happiness into the cold. Run. Seven children through the house.
The Rhine into the sea.

Robert. Alarming symptoms, increasing frequency, A all around
him, fear of death, shivering fits. Plunges: A-major into the river,
and motion is stillness, the banks of the Rhine begin to flow
along the water's stanced melody.

Clara, play for us. The performance over, your name drops back
out of the air. Records now, of course. Groove dreams whipped
stiff. You never stepped twice. Mortal moments, climate of
blood. A fire that could melt our souls, but shades, gently, into
the shapeless sea.

II

CLARA & ROBERT, A COURTSHIP

CLARA AND ROBERT, two rare talents, here in daguerreotype, smiling, a moment fixed between squalls of music.

Clara, the name looks good on a poster, announces, excessively thin, the 6-year-old pianist, but “with more strength than six boys.”

Clara in the “chiroplast” (for proper posture). Clara walking three hours a day (accompaniment: trees) “to get her nerves solid.”

Robert in love, and time presses: “all of fourteen she is, skipping and running about like a child.”

A plan of sympathy: “As I can’t visit, tomorrow, on the stroke of one, I’ll play the adagio and think of you. If you do the same our spirits will meet, an unseen motion, at or near the Little-Thomas-Gate.”

Green, green grass, all of fourteen and skipping and wild. But Robert fords rivers of coffins. Wind ships his eyes. A brother is not immortal, a mother not to take with you, lodged in the spine. Only the piano can vary the pitch of bruised eyelids, pit color against pain, rainbows in tenuous air. In this lies comfort. Solid slabs of sleep. Yet he wishes to be out of place. Already we see distress, extreme pulsating rushes of water.

Clara is famous and on tour.

“Clara, Clara, I’ll put my chords in order. I’m clear about my heart, moody and restless, broken, violent, improbable and proven. It’s impossible: Your father cannot refuse. I have complete confidence in my music and presentiments of death. I cannot stand in the wind. I’m more like venetian blinds than either heat or cold. Yet, though you say you love me, you go on tour with your father.”

Cholera in Paris, recital washed out into hollow caution. But Vienna, Clara, there you turn pages. Of history, the “Appassionata,” desires, whose and for what, Father Wieck’s, his cloven hoof, his greed. Robert offended by absence.

Blows you the prick of a pen found on Beethoven’s grave, rusty seal on a dream of waters stranger than deeper bodies to come. Metallic sighs, you know it gets lonely holding a pen, not a common rusty prayer. Cadence continues into color. Completed by an introspective slowness neither simple nor soft. Robert goes to court, minor key and cause.

Clara, your fingers drift, parallel fish, through preludes and fugues. There's time, you think, each drop a cool, nude promise. It's terribly time for Robert, for shortcuts to master technique: a fine contrivance, mechanical, sling up the fourth finger, strait jacket, the weak held straight and still and will never again move a key.

He is all clouds and shadow. Vacillates when he stops to think. Threatened by rivers. His quest for agitation sidetracks, restless eddies, fluid of eyes. He'd like to be still.

Clara give up something by marrying? Never occurs to him. Or her.

Any two are opposite. You walk on sound. The coldest wind blows from the edges of fear. Which has been written down. Passion's not natural. But body and soul are bruised by melancholy, fruit of dry, twisted riverbeds. Loss discolors the skin. At times you devour apples, at others bite into your hand.

III

CLARA & ROBERT, A MARRIAGE

INTO HAPPINESS, into the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Robert, perhaps his two souls alas, his wayward moods, now into *Du meine Seele*, all around him, a celebration for voice.

Form is defined as fits the years. Yet to stretch against softening: “fragments, aphorisms, sheer reveling in strangeness.” Plunge, head-on, into his fears. Overlapping keys: the large tune, the constant, could be lost in assuming endings. Golden light, not a blank which lies to your worries, a splendid body to body, relations of like and surprise worthy of being desired.

Now watch Robert. His new strictness and sunbaths. Himself to forge with a rusty pen. No fleeting emotions, sudden stampede, sixteenth notes whirling the interest into fluid dissolves. Instead, the old four poster frame to nail time into bars, square the intricate into the simple. Thus he is eloquent, thus devours poems and sets them, slow in meter, some in the chromatic daring known as the rose’s most ruthless red.

“Clara has been a great help with the orchestration.”

Gait and greeting more at ease, his shoulders not rehearsing the weight of coffins, immersed in a diminished seventh, push out of tonality in a soar of wings opening their feathery texture, the mystery of down. Whether from vertigo or fear of casual conversation, he burrows into domestic, thicker, more matted chords.

And Clara. Cool and green, your moments, hammered in light. Love under your skin. New color of keys. The very morning strokes you, a secret music, before scales start running, and children's feet.

Clara on music: Not for a tickle of ears. I feel more clearly intimate. Expecting is a twofold breath, a second voice enters, subterranean stream. More elements compressed into relation, in smaller circles. There are only two sins: denying the sound, denying the silence. Together they let the soul move through its inner space.

But many times impatient to practice: "Music's my vice, my secret pleasure and detachment." Thin walls, the evil of. Confluence of sounds. Packed into the same dream, envy and desire: to carve into air too deep for our errors. A static stream.

By what authority, wistful, her eyes on her piano, composer comes before pianist, husband before wife, and babies, babies. Run. Three children through the house. Rename the dimensions Marie, Elise, Julie, tune cut, repeated, turned in and out, voice close to sleep.

A complex grid, the fields of love, the way your mother bore you in the streets of Leipzig, the way Robert's skin stretches into your body, name wrapped in flesh. Wet rush. The land green and pregnant again.

"What will become of my work? But Robert says children are blessings."

Your body all around him.

Technique and passion, intelligence, grace. Dissonance rendered as dissonance, fire unfolding, electric. Much for your eye on meaning your body blazes the full force of the score, whirls our vertigo wide.

Clara, you get letters smothered in sugar. Your touch grows green in the sarabande. Its life seasonal, feel of walking on grass or snow. Not stupor, bravura, not cascades of glitter. You play, the composer you are, with scruples. Though never transparent. Not that illusion. A womb loops its blood.

Run. Three children through the house. "What will become of my work?" Robert says procreation is music, a measure stolen on shivers, on fear of death.

Children all around him.

Into travels. You hold your head up. Pianist and wife. "I wish you would interpret my feelings a little more generously, accenting warmth which I mean central. I also owe it to my reputation not to retire completely. I shall be quite forgotten in a few years when perhaps we shall *want* to make a tour."

Robert would like to be still.

Clara, you won't be forgiven. Your secret pleasure and detachment. Cheeks flush, you mount the platform, ride his floundering storms.

"Companion to Clara."

"The artist's husband."

"Ah, Herr Schumann. Are you also a lover of music?"

Clara, you're too successful. This sudden pain in your finger can be addressed by many names. You can't account for it, no wonder. Loss of 400 gulden or a mocking drift of keys. Only tentative moonlight. Clarity of passion's not natural. Robert would like to be out of place. We must allow for the wind that blows from the edges of fear. *Du meine Seele*. Dense brooding settles on the score.

Your fingers all around him.

The fine fire of music and performance. A blaze of forever at once. Abrupt changes of key to exorcise fear of death. Crashes through classical modulation, searing color, unclenched intensity. Harsh tempo takes his breath out of his head.

Run. Four children through the house.

Time moves slowly, a bass line putting on weight. Clara, your playing goes overboard. Transitions off the keys onto the floor. You get cold feet and cultivate the second theme when anyone's loneliness is enough to straddle two piano stools. Later when his fits of forgetting threaten, we watch the sun set *en forme de variations*. Not a wasted motion, but that the overwhelming ruddy beams thin into silken filaments is no surprise.

Robert raises fears, Clara, children, and buries one. It's tempting to insinuate. Who stands in the wind takes off his skin. Too many notes like dust. Practical is too heavy. The idea of an anchor drives him out of his style.

Repetition. An anchor. Unyielding, a white cell. He will remember to drown, to burrow deeper into his fright for no reason of fourth finger, but sickening pulse.

IV

CLARA SUGGESTS AN APPOINTMENT

COULD HE NOT lift a baton, he had studied, not stand on a podium, with compositions his own and a wife and children?

Subscription concerts, weekly practice. The first rehearsal is easy to blend with going slow. Emancipation of dissonance, flight from tonal centers can no longer be considered technical inability, but a new horizon to judge our hearing deficient.

Tempo all around him.

Room full of percussive trills. The Düsseldorf orchestra arranged in the shape of a heart, strings pulsing under air. The piano opens with noble amplitude, not softening the impact of its size. General fervor: a victory over the aggressive brass with a rising fifth worthy of syncopation and delicacy and restraint. The audience is moved to clapping.

Asymmetry is incurable. Sometimes understanding comes late. Image under eyelid. Rhythmic spasm. Expansion more diffident by means of an additional slow movement. All tempi are too fast. Compressed, melodic, large scale from minimal motive which is a bannister for all four movements to go safely without fear of falling, death, or violent shivers.

Run. Four children through the house.

Clara too confident, too hopeful, too black and white, because the piano. Runs. Clara. Her life, competently, hers, his, menaced and melancholy. Alarming symptoms, increasing frequency, 440 hertz, A all around him, cold wind at his heels, he marries the river.

Complexity is not confusion. Color drenches the tonal regions, their dominant weight. He can't consider isolated notes. Harder yet to arrange them all in one boat. The definitions taken on board, pilots toward an ideal of form, have come down with the flu.

Repetition all around him.

The length of time Robert stands silent, common in solitary men, but judged unsuitable in a conductor: to take half an hour to bring down the baton? Unable to explain the note in his head, the waiting river, the reason, the parts to correct, the silence insistent. Didn't notice the strings had stopped, the choir left.

Run. Five children through the house.

Robert wary and high-walled, a river's breath in his throat, clear weft of procreative wind hard to imagine less lavish than lost in a chord.

In the grip of this theme, in the grip of fear. Bold repetition toward stillness, dangerous, with more than the usual figment. Full circle. All roads lead to A. Alarming symptoms, shivering fits, A in his ears, A all around him, aching orchestration and horror of arpeggios.

Clara plays. Her touch contains impossible *alternativos*. Containing is melancholy, but what other safeguard? Clara, play. Your belly swollen. Already late all around him. The theme enters in poignant nakedness, a momentary illumination, while embroidering sequence with gratitude and not abandoning, not ever abandoning a single note.

Run. Five children through the house.

“The noise of the carnival night changes into silence. The tower clock strikes six.” Vertical sevenths fade along the river. He walks with a different voice now. Without preparation. Pushes to perplexity the change of tempo to wash off the sharp glandular stench. Abrupt all around him. Plunges, A-major, into the Rhine. All tempi are too fast, all notes A, all keys Clara’s.

Blue screams. The sky, the river, A, strident, hangs between his eyes, a blue pain between, sharp among flatward veerings. Torn, the tension tumbles into repetition, its form, its form, its form. Finger in a sling hitched to the stars, frantic for their steady cool. “Clara, my Clara, the Rhine...”

V

WHEN A TRILL IS NOT FOLLOWED BY ANY
NOTE, AT THE END, FOR INSTANCE,
UNDERSTANDING IS LEFT TO ITSELF

DISSONANT CHORDS, exhausted with apprehension, Robert
fished out of his Symphony by boatmen, each day of his death blue
under your skin.

“Clara, my Clara, I feel as if I were facing a terrible calamity. How
dreadful if I should not see you again. The A, the infernal A sounds
in my ears, I cannot get it out of my head.”

Blue pain in his lungs, most daring progression, new tonal world
as much divine delight as stillness equals sequence. If all notes are
A a dozen tempi inhale clouds.

Example: cold baths. “I have greath faith in the healing power of
water.”

Clara, your fingers lie awake on the long night. Run. Six children through the house. You have cause to compare distressed to Düsseldorf. *Nachtstücke and Kinderszenen*, their easy wandering a faulty reading in retrospect. Clara, who crashed, a performer dreaming a long green summer, who jumped, a composer, off the bridge, without father and mother, of no care and crashed. This in variations (“On a theme by Robert Schumann”).

The Rhine all around him. Destruction splashed high as the roof. Jealous, Clara? He tossed himself first, the first stone. All madmen are beautiful. His body, naked amulet washed bland. You have no choice now. Run. Six children through the house. No giving in to shivers that strike the keys from your hand. You can't afford to give up ship. To sink into depression is a long blue that must be stopped. Can you stop it?

To ward off epidemics the college of physicians approves the firing of guns. A pianist's touch a personal matter, intangible. Too deeply earnest your eyes (blue). Your contrast between reality and difference, between grief. He of your love. Enter the only way your body. Love a matter of white cells. How long can you stand on your fingertips? His lips come to you out of a bandage of fog. You owe him. Another child, another stranger. Six children, not enough, not enough to drown the note in his brain all around him.

Clara. A schedule of constant travel. Six children want dinner. Keys plough the air. Clara, devoted, one of our finest, desperately holds on to the keys slip through her fingers, the works of Robert Schumann nearly drowned, a wound lodged under her skin. Clara, your sorrow, you hold it in, impossible *alternativo*, dig into the keyboard, touch gone to pain.

Clara, you play the more difficult part, play your losses, sticking it out. Often you lose your last stitch of laughter. Materials wear down. Morning rises against you, without resonance. Sick of applause. Somebody should hold your hand. Strong nerves, steady heart, his head still floats in the Rhine.

Run. Seven children through the house, seven children afraid of thunder, seven children in bed with the measles, one in his grave. And Robert. A white cell. Silence mounts to the ceiling, gelatinous waves.

Robert put his hand to his mouth as usual.
"Look," said the doctor. "He often does this."
"He's always done this."
"Yes, so I've been told."

Clara, you don't see. You still hope, hammer your fists against the A fills your eyes. The past runs over. Little Ludwig cannot be sent to school. Mockery of repetition can't be hammered away, is hammered all around him.

Recitals. Recitals. Sometimes the adagio's awash, your fingers wade, whorls of memory, the master of strangely familiar, webbed eyelids stuck shut. Ivory blurs to tell, lament and push chromatic exaggeration to white respite.

Moments of searching, now all has changed, turned your breath grey. You play your past, wish you were there, your future, lost in hasty modulations, sideslips through five keys, suffering the passage to break windows, fire exit and semi-tonal drop back to the ground. You refuse the ladder, your doubt. Not that practical. What loyalty, this strong, astonishing. But more and more your bones protest. Skin aches over his pain. Extreme fatigue, blue, poor state of health. Most desperate watching the waves spill from his spine.

A degree of impartiality, an intensity you demand of performance and give. Rip him whole from silence according to your art, a priestess. "You would hardly believe how the reverence for Robert is increasing. I cannot help feeling sad when it was here he made so many vain attempts."

He never mentions your name anymore.

"They were all very kind to me, but no sign of any honorarium. The Princess gave me a bracelet which was so hideous that I could not wear it, and the moment I got here I sold it and discovered that it was filled with lead."

Run. Seven children through the house. Clara, you must try. Keep your depression down. Your eyes are not above water. Nightmare by nightmare, the fishface gulps, a passion for pairing, now husband now son, a round, repetition, a full circle, now son. Repetition has always been cold, blue-lipped, and no one returns.

“Ever since May the process of recovery has been arrested.”

Plunged into his fear, the promise of bottom. Now the dark wave has folded over him and the heavenly music. Who can remember, haunted by stillness, but clings to a fractured voice, breaking in whispers. A dead man’s skin all around him.

Each day of his death. Nothing to hold but by a lame finger, immobile, still, a storm in the staves, tricks played by a postcard of pleasure. Not clarified by slipping into the river, his Rhenish Symphony. He can’t be fished.

“I have pissed myself into the Rhine like a nightingale in vain washed into a fear of time. I confess its music is lovelier than my almost, almost, like breathing into your blue water. I hold I sang myself into a deep thirst, endless, like desire.”

Clara, you wont be forgiven. Surviving. And by how long. Too practical, too competent. Not yours, the seal of pathos. Clara, I need to talk to you. I too admire the gift for destruction. I need your help on the long way round to death. Difficult. For all but the most sure-footed. You hold the keys, navigate the narrows, the space of music in the proportions of blood and air. Strongly the chords, the cascades of angels, falling in counterpoint and entire conclusion.

Play for us, Clara. Play the music we breathe.

