**Reflective Piece**

Saman Arfaie. McGill MDCM Candidate (Class of 2024)

The 2020 Pam & Rolando Del Maestro Family William Osler Medical Student Essay Contest

Advised by Professor Roe-Min Kok of the Schulich School of Music

I am particularly grateful for being able to conduct this research during my first semester of medical school at McGill University. First, I was incredibly fortunate to connect with my mentor Professor Roe-Min Kok who kindly shared with me invaluable resources pertaining to Robert and Clara Schumann. Second, as someone who has studied piano since the age of 5, minored in music and has majored in Molecular Cell Biology at UC Berkeley, I find interdisciplinary research highly fascinating. In fact, the values and ideals of the great William Osler reflect a similar line of reasoning which I deeply admire and am impressed by. As he was able to revolutionize the study of medicine with dedication, wit, and commitment, he always continued his learning in other disciplines. This is evident given the wide range of books that he read which is now bequeathed to McGill University.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I certainly felt overwhelmed with the challenges of not being able to access the wonderful resources of the Osler Library. However, thanks to Dr. Mary Hague-Yearl and her colleagues, I was able to redirect my research to online platforms instead. I am incredibly privileged that my own personal library contains over 2,000 volumes of books—many of which are on musicology, music theory and music history. However, not content with what was conveniently accessible, I actively sought to find the best literature available online. Unfortunately, as Professor Kok reminded me, there were two key papers that have been written about Schumann’s mental illness in German by Dr. Reinhard Steinberg; not being fluent in the language, I was unable to decipher them. However, thanks to my friend Mr. Tahmoures Tabatabei, who is a DMA candidate in piano performance at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, and fluent in German, I was able to use his expertise of the language to translate some of the key figures from these papers. Moreover, after some correspondences with Professor Kok and my own research, I was able to obtain a highly valuable chapter, in English, that was recently published (2015) by the same author, Dr. Steinberg, who is an academic neurologist with a strong background in German Romantic music.

By carefully studying numerous books, peer-reviewed journals, and Doctorate-level dissertations within a span of a few months, I was able to gradually develop a *Gestalt* sense of the areas of scholarship that are most pertinent to my study. Moreover, I closely studied many of Schumann’s solo works for the piano and delved through the scores of his Four Symphonies, to better appreciate his harmonic language of composition. In fact, I sight-read some bits and pieces of the *Papillons* (Opus 2), *Carnaval* (Opus 9) and *Kinderszenen* (Opus 15). This was crucial in choosing which musical excerpts I wanted to discuss in my essay.

Another important point I have realized is that most research is purely on clinical matters concerning Robert Schumann’s mental illness. However, very few studies exist that analyze his work in relationship to his neuropsychological conditions. Therefore, this research is an original case-study exploring the connection between achieved creative eminence and psychological disorders. While I feel that there is certainly room for expansion of this study into a peer-reviewed format, I believe that this formative stage has allowed me to fully expose myself to the relevant studies in musicology, music history, neurology, psychopathology, psychiatry, and the psychology of creative genius at the caliber of Robert Schumann.

As someone who aspires to receive a Masters in Piano Performance at the McGill Schulich School of Music during my medical studies, I believe that this eye-opening experience has attuned my brain to focus on transcending the boundaries between disciplines and finding meaningful ways to connect them together. I hope to be able to conduct similar work during my medical studies as well. Therefore, my skills grew immensely in analyzing and appreciating German Romantic music and conducting original interdisciplinary studies. These will be highly relevant to my academic medical career as well since humanity and humility are central concepts in medicine.

This project is relevant to the mission of this essay competition for two reasons: on one level, it is clinically useful in providing us with a better understanding of Bipolar Disorder’s association to creativity through studying a canonical genius via primary documents such as his letters, diaries and compositions. On another level, it incorporates core elements of the humanities through its investigation of musical scores and research on the *Zeitgeist* of 19th century Europe. Working under the supervision of Professor Kok, who is one of the leading Schumann scholars in the world, and a McGill faculty is a fortunate coincidence that I am grateful for.

I am honoured to have participated in the Osler Essay competition and won the first prize alongside the William Osler Medal. Recently, my mentor Professor Kok has kindly offered that a revised version of my essay be published in a volume tilted *Clara and Robert Schumann in Context* contracted with Cambridge University Press for 2022. This is a great honour that I am tremendously grateful for.

Overall, I cannot thank the Osler Library team enough for their kindness and generosity in guiding me through this enlightening endeavour. By participating in the Pam and Rolando Del Maestro Family William Osler Medical Student Essay Contest, I was able to partake in an experience that cultivates critical thinking and emphasizes the link amongst the medical humanities. To all future participants for this wonderful essay competition, should you have any questions about the competition, or need any assistance along your research journey, I would be delighted to be of assistance. Please feel free to [email me](mailto:saman.arfaie@mail.mcgill.ca?subject=Osler%20essay%20contest). Thank you for your time and consideration.

With kind regards and deep respect,

Saman Arfaie (M.D, C.M. Candidate Class of 2024)