

# Edexcel AoS2: Clara Schumann Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 17 (first movement)

**David Guinane** is the Head of Music at Beaumont School in St Albans. He has written two books on music education, as well as a range of resources for exam boards, *Music Teacher* magazine and other publishers.

by David Guinane

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## INTRODUCTION

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The G minor Piano Trio is undoubtedly one of Clara Schumann's best-known compositions, and a fine example of Romantic chamber music. This resource covers the essential musical features of the work, as well as important contextual information, and suggestions for wider listening and research. Since this information is available from multiple sources, in order to avoid unnecessary repetition I'll also present a number of potential approaches to studying this set work with A level students.

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## A FLIPPED APPROACH: THE LSO SEMINAR

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Luckily for us, in 2016 the LSO Discovery team presented an excellent seminar covering this work. Presented by Anna Leach, the session covers the essential elements of the piece, with clearly annotated examples from the score. It culminates in a complete performance of the movement, accompanied by on-screen 'signposts' to remind you exactly what is going on.

Such a brilliant resource, made available for free, shouldn't be ignored. Depending on your students, and at what stage in the course you cover this work, you might consider using this seminar in one of the following ways:

### Seminar first

Before your first lesson on this topic, get your students to watch this seminar in their own time. Get them to mark up their scores with everything that's said and played, and to come to the lesson with Anthologies covered in pencil markings.

This can avoid the dry, teacher-led approach that so often plagues the delivery of set works. Your students will come to the lesson with a huge amount of prior knowledge, a good level of understanding, but also many questions, and potentially some misconceptions. Your lesson then becomes more student-led, as they present their findings, get things wrong, and consolidate their learning.

Bear in mind that this approach requires students to have some familiarity with score-reading, a good understanding of musical terms, and a bit of experience with set works in order to follow the seminar on their own.

### Seminar last

If your students are tackling this set work early in the course, or struggle with score-reading, you might consider using this resource as a 'summing-up' activity. They could watch it for homework, having already marked up their scores and discussed the piece in class, with the aim of producing a summary document based on the seminar.

Watch the seminar, think about your students, and decide how best to use this excellent resource.

Also available on YouTube is this video, which shows the score on screen as the performance progresses.

## DOING SOMETHING INTERESTING WITH BACKGROUND RESEARCH

It's both a blessing and a curse that the new A levels place so much emphasis on the wider context of the set works we study. It ensures that students move away from learning and listing facts about a piece, and it encourages them to engage with musical styles on a much deeper level. However, the amount of content requires students to do a lot of work outside of lessons, such as reading around the subject, and researching musicians and styles. In many instances, research can amount to little more than bullet points found on Wikipedia, and it becomes more of a chore than a voyage of discovery. Here's one suggestion for approaching this particular set work:

### Why is Clara Schumann's Piano Trio in the Anthology?

Rather than getting students to list facts about this set work, and Clara Schumann's life, ask them to build a case for Schumann's inclusion in the anthology. There are a few reasons why a work might be placed in an A level Anthology:

- The work is revolutionary in some way, and has had a huge impact on music history.
- The work is very typical of a particular time period, place or tradition, and showcases a lot of common features found in similar works.
- The composer's life and/or circumstances are interesting, and worth discussing.

For me, Schumann's work is in the Anthology primarily because of bullet points two and three. Try giving these bullet points to your students, and ask them to come up with a dossier that justifies this work's place in the Anthology. They might include some of the following bits of essential context:

### CLARA SCHUMANN BEGAN LIFE AS A CONCERT PIANIST AND GIFTED PERFORMER

Clara Schumann (née Wieck) was born in Leipzig in 1819. Her father was a renowned piano teacher, and her mother was a gifted musician and well-known soloist. Dubbed Europe's 'queen of the piano', Clara Wieck began performing internationally in her early teens, and continued throughout her life. She composed music from an early age, but due to the expectations (or expected limitations) of female musicians at the time, she was best-known as performer, and most notably as the chief interpreter of the piano works of her husband, Robert Schumann – which leads us on to...

### CLARA SCHUMANN WAS MARRIED TO THE COMPOSER ROBERT SCHUMANN

Clara married Robert in 1840, the day before Clara's 21st birthday. The pair shared a true musical partnership, collaborating on a huge range of musical projects. Robert always encouraged Clara to compose, but it was Robert himself who became known for his compositions. The pair had eight children, though many died at a very young age. Robert suffered from serious mental illness, and spent the last two years of his life in hospital. He died in 1856, when Clara was 37 years old. Clara continued to perform, compose and teach throughout her life, despite the demands of her familial responsibilities. She also shared a close friendship with the young composer Johannes Brahms, who was hopelessly in love with her.

### THE NATURE OF THIS SET WORK AS A PIECE OF CHAMBER MUSIC

Chamber music of the period was designed for high-level amateur or professional players, for performance in smaller performance spaces. The form existed in the Classical period and was developed throughout the Romantic period.

### THE WORK IS IN MANY WAYS CLARA SCHUMANN'S MASTERPIECE

Much of Clara Schumann's music is written for the piano, and would have often been performed by the composer herself. This Piano Trio is one of the few multi-movement works in her catalogue. It was written in 1846, during a traumatic and harrowing period of her troubled life. Although far from revolutionary, and in many

If your local library subscribes to Oxford Music Online (the home of Grove Music Online), students can access articles for free with a library card number. For A level students, this is infinitely preferable to sites like Wikipedia.

The Clara Schumann-Johannes Brahms tale is a story that's sure to interest your students. A tongue-in-cheek discussion of what we do and don't know about this relationship can be found here.

To develop this point further, you could discuss the nature of the chamber work as a 'domestic' form, and whether female composers of the time were 'restricted' to composing chamber works such as this.

ways a textbook example of this form of composition, it is nevertheless a fantastic piece of music, by a skilled and talented composer.

### CLARA SCHUMANN WAS A FEMALE COMPOSER

Schumann was working at a time when women in music were not considered composers – instead, they were performers of music written by men. Her husband (who supported her composing) stated: ‘Clara has composed a series of small pieces, which show a musical and tender ingenuity such as she has never attained before. But to have children, and a husband who is always living in the realm of imagination, does not go together with composing.’

Late in life, Clara herself said: ‘A woman must not desire to compose — there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?’ Despite living in a society that in many ways discouraged female composers, and caring for a large family, it’s remarkable that Clara Schumann was able to produce such an impressive body of work.

For students who are interested, a journal article entitled ‘The Forgotten Art of Clara Schumann: German Society’s Influence on a Female Composer’ can be found here.

### WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT FEMALE COMPOSERS

In 2015, 17-year-old student Jessy McCabe launched an online campaign demanding the inclusion of female composers in the new Edexcel A level list of set works. It worked, and we now study music from several female composers as part of the new syllabus. A *Guardian* article from the time can be found here.

As part of your introduction to Schumann’s work, I would urge you to make time to talk about female composers. Your students should read this article from the *Spectator*, entitled ‘There’s a good reason why there are no great female composers’. It’s sure to create some interesting discussion!

As part of this course, we have a fantastic opportunity to introduce students to the work of a range of female composers, bad and good, past and present. If you can find time, have a formal class debate: ‘This house believes the inclusion of female composers in the new anthology is feminism gone mad.’ Exposing young people to more works and more composers, and getting them to engage with about gender issues in music can only be a good thing.

## APPROACHES TO PERFORMING THE SET WORK

Performing set works is an excellent way to help students understand what’s going on in a particular piece. Some works lend themselves to class performance much more easily than others – if your class happens to be full of high-level violinists, cellists and pianists, crack on and perform the whole thing! However, if you have musicians who would struggle to play the score as it stands, don’t abandon performing elements of this work. Try these suggestions:

### Principal themes

Write the first and second subjects out into Sibelius (or a similar application), and produce versions for different transpositions, and guitar tab. For the first subject, just the first eight bars are better than nothing, and the second subject can easily be arranged into four or five single melody lines. Get everyone to perform at least one melodic idea from the piece – even a recording of eight bars of melody done for homework will go some way towards helping students engage with the work.

### Key moments

There are some really exciting moments in this piece that could be realised on classroom instruments, even if you assign one or two notes to each student. Here are some examples:

- The homorhythmic moment at bars 22-23, 26-27, 186-7, and 190-1. It is arresting, and really fun – a nice contrast to the contrapuntal nature of most of this piece.

- Bars 127-139: the dialogue between violin and cello demonstrates well how a melodic fragment (the opening phrase) is developed and changed in the development section of a sonata-form piece. The accompaniment is optional, and can be simplified to just the bassline to demonstrate the melody and accompaniment texture.
- Something simple like the rising diminished chord at bars 47-48. Just playing this melodic idea (G, B flat, D flat, E, F) will help students understand the melodic and harmonic language of the Romantic period.

### Extract the chords

A class full of popular musicians might panic when they see a piece like this. They're used to chord symbols and chord diagrams. So, why not give them that? The ending chords are an easy example. You can write out a chord progression of simplified chords. From bar 276 (simplified a little) it goes like this:

Gm  
 Dim (A flat, B, D, F)  
 Cm  
 Dim (A, C, E flat)  
 Gm  
 Dim (A flat, B, D, F)  
 Cm  
 Dim (A, C, E flat)  
 Gm  
 Dim (A, C, E flat)  
 Gm  
 Dim (F sharp, A, C, E flat)  
 Gm  
 Gm  
 G7 (ish)  
 Cm  
 Cm  
 Gm  
 Gm  
 G (just lots of Gs)

The only thing missing here is the G pedal, which can be easily added on a bass guitar, piano or keyboard.

Just moving through these chords will help students better understand the harmonic nature of the piece. If you can add the melodic ideas over the top, even better.

Of course, you will need to extract ideas and play them for your students at the piano, but the more the students can play themselves – even just a few notes – the deeper their understanding will eventually be.

Diminished chord voicings for guitars can be found all over the internet, then adapted for your class: try this site.

# SONATA FORM AND MELODIC IDEAS

In order to help students understand this work as a whole, I'd set aside time to ensure they understand the overall structure of the movement, and how sonata form manifests itself in this piece. Here's a basic breakdown:

Section	Bars	Key	Comments
<b>EXPOSITION</b>			
First subject	1-21	Gm	First 8 bars – key melodic idea.
Bridge	22-45	Gm to B flat	Transition passage.
Second subject	45-85	B flat (relative major)	Starts with syncopated idea, then repeated short patterns. Much less melodic or distinct than first subject.
Codetta	95-90	Gm	Prepares us for the repeat of the exposition.
<b>DEVELOPMENT</b>			
Development	91-164	Mainly Cm, other keys visited	Predominantly based on opening melodic idea, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 104 – dialogue between cello and violin, based on opening idea.</li> <li>• 149 – the opening fragment appears in the piano left hand.</li> <li>• 155 – dominant pedal to prepare for recapitulation.</li> </ul>
<b>RECAPITULATION</b>			
First subject	165-185	Gm	Exact repeat of exposition.
Bridge	186-120	Gm to G major	'Neapolitan' harmony in 191 marks the first difference from the exposition. Bars 191-120 are similar to 27-41, but transposed, and with many variations.
Second subject	210-249	G major	Using the tonic major for the second subject is common in minor key sonata form.
Coda	250-288	Gm	An extended version of the codetta. Ends with long tonic pedal and plagal cadence.

'Not a gifted melodist but skilful handling of other elements compensates.' This was the verdict of Nancy Reich, biographer of Clara Schumann.

## THE SONATA FORM ANALOGY HOMEWORK

If your students need a bit more background on how sonata form works, consider these activities.

Print out the first movement of Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (the score is readily available for free online), and get students to mark in the sections, subjects and keys. It serves as a clear, straightforward example of how sonata form works.

When talking about sonata form, we often use graphics and diagrams to explain the structure. Here is a good example. Once you have done this, challenge students to come up with their own analogies and/or diagrams to explain sonata form in their own words. In the past I've seen sonata form compared to a three-course meal, a row of houses on a street, and even a voyage through inter-dimensional space. I can't guarantee students will come up with anything better than what already exists online, but you'll certainly learn something about how your students' brains work by setting this as homework!

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# ESSAY WRITING AND THE DOTTTSS

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When we get down to the nitty-gritty, students need a list of points organised into the elements of music specified by Edexcel:

- Dynamics
- Organisation of pitch (melody and harmony)
- Texture
- Tonality
- Tempo, rhythm and metre
- Structure
- Sonority

Full disclosure: the acronym DOTTTSS was invented by my students, after spending so many years with MR TIGHTS – melody, rhythm, etc. It works – simply saying ‘do a DOTTTSS’ is usually met with nods of understanding from my classes, as they slowly begin a summary table for a set work.

In order to prepare for the essay, I encourage my students to say something broad about the set work, before diving into examples from the score to illustrate their points.

## Dynamics

As we would expect in a work from the Romantic period, there are a range of dynamic markings and effects. These include:

- *sf* strings and *ff* piano to mark the homorhythm in bars 22-23 and 26-27.
- the sudden drop to *piano* immediately following these moments, in bars 23 and 27.
- a long crescendo from bar 14 to 21, from *p* to *ff*.
- numerous *fp* markings, often used to highlight chords, such as those in bars 42, 59, and 88.
- several crescendos and decrescendos in bars 92-103.
- a curious lack of *mf* and *mp* markings, as Schumann focuses on the extremes of the dynamic range.

## Organisation of pitch: melody

Typical of movements in sonata form, Schumann presents two contrasting themes in her exposition, and develops melodic material over the course of the development section.

- The first subject is heard in the opening eight bars of the violin part. It is a typical example of Classical and Romantic ‘periodic phrasing’: two four-bar phrases, perfectly balanced, harmonised with primary chords.
- Chromatic movement is common, contributing to the darker mood of the work. Passages such as the movement in bars 18-20 highlight this.
- Sequences are a common melodic device in this work. The passage in bars 27-30 present a sequential idea, yet we see subtle changes in the first interval of each motif. This freedom sets the music apart from earlier, more predictable melodic writing.
- In the development section, manipulation of the opening motif is key. Bars 128-132 are based on the opening leaps, with subtle changes in the intervals used, creating much interest.
- Schumann makes use of imitation, such as that seen in bars 81-82. Often, this imitation is developed into a ‘dialogue’ between the instruments. The passage from 104 is a great example of musical dialogue between violin and cello.

## Organisation of pitch: harmony

Harmonic writing of the Romantic period is based on the foundations of tonal functional harmony, which was firmly established during the Classical period. However, as we move forward in music history, more ambitious, experimental, chromatic harmony begins to invigorate the music of this period:

- Schumann's functional harmony relies heavily on chords I and V, as we would expect. Perfect cadences are plentiful, such as the common I<sub>c</sub>-V-I progressions seen in bars 84-85, and 21-22.
- Schumann likes to gently subvert our expectations. We might expect a perfect cadence at the end of our first, nicely balanced subject. However, her imperfect cadence darkens the mood, maintaining an element of tension following this phrase.
- The vast majority of chords are major and minor chords in root position or first inversion.
- Common chord progressions are utilised, such as the cycle of 5ths at bars 73-75 and 139-143.

Chromatic harmony is common, but it's important to remember that Schumann utilises these harmonic devices within the established harmonic language of the Romantic period. This chromatic harmony includes:

- Diminished 7th chords (often used in place of chord V7). These can be found throughout the piece – bars 110-11 and 114-15 are good examples. Note how these two are emphasised, adding to the darkness of the piece.
- Augmented 6th chords, often used to approach chord V, give harmonic variety. These can be found in bars 11 or 148 (both French 6ths).
- Suspensions (prepared and unprepared) and appoggiaturas are common.
- The chord at bar 83 is particularly 'fruity'; a dominant chord (F) with a minor 9th (G flat), and a suspension (B flat falling to the 3rd of the chord, A). It precedes chord I (B flat major), as you would expect from a dominant chord, but the additional dissonant 'twist' is typical of Schumann's harmonic writing.
- The closing chords are expertly described in the LSO Seminar, but students should note the alternation of chords I and IV with diminished harmony, before a plagal cadence closes the work – expert manipulation of established harmonic devices to create a moment of extreme drama, with which to finish the movement.

## Texture

Author's note: in my experience, talking about texture can cause problems for students. This is frustrating: they get bogged down with single-word terms (homophony, polyphony, etc) and forget to simply describe the layers of sound, and how they interact. Manipulation of texture is such a fascinating aspect of so much music, so to reduce it to a few key terms means we lose the chance to talk about how texture is shaping the music we hear.

Some resources for this set work use terms like 'discursive' and 'polyphonically animated homophony' when describing the texture of the movement. Though these are absolutely valid terms, it is important to highlight the fascinating ways in which Schumann manipulates a fundamentally homophonic texture.

Schumann presents a huge range of homophonic textures. Much interest is created through the interplay between the parts, with moments of complex contrapuntal writing:

- The passage from bar 105 is an excellent example of contrapuntal dialogue ('a discursive texture') between the violin and the cello.
- There are a number of piano textures worth mentioning: broken chords, off-beat chords, arpeggiated figures, block chords and octave doubling, to name just a few.
- Moments of homorhythm, such as that at bars 22-23, provide more exciting variety.
- Throughout most of the piece, the instruments have fairly equal roles, with the violin and piano right taking on most of the melodic interest.
- The piano has some solo moments, such as the short passage at bar 59.
- Pedals are common, such as the dominant pedal before the recapitulation at bar 155.

When discussing texture, it's important that your students establish the homophonic nature of the piece, but that they emphasise Schumann's presentation of a wide range of different, exciting textures. Again, we see nothing revolutionary or unexpected for the time, but outstanding compositional skill is apparent through Schumann's use of texture throughout the movement.

### Tempo, rhythm and metre

We would expect the first movement of a piano trio such as this to be fast, or moderately fast:

- This movement is in common time throughout, and is moderately fast (*Allegro moderato*).
- There are two moments where the tempo slows a little, corresponding with brief forays into new keys (D major is hinted at in bars 56-59, alongside a *poco rit.*).
- There is some interesting syncopation in the movement, particularly at the start of the second subject, which begins on a weak beat.

### Tonality and structure

The basic structure (sonata form) has been outlined previously in this resource, and of course this dictates the tonality to a large extent:

- The subjects are presented in the expected keys. In the exposition we hear the first subject in G minor, and the second subject in B flat major (the relative major). The recapitulation presents the first subject in G minor, and the second in G major (which is common in sonata form). The coda closes the movement in G minor.
- Throughout the development section, as we would expect, Schumann explores a number of different keys. Schumann visits G major (bar 92), the chords of Bbm7, Eb7, Ab7 and D7 in a passage beginning at bar 139, as well as F minor and C minor.
- The exposition and recapitulation also briefly touch on different keys, showing the developing complexities of Romantic harmony and tonality. During the second subject's exposition, Schumann visits the fairly unexpected key of D major in bar 56 of the exposition, and B major in bar 223 (the corresponding point in the recapitulation).

### Sonority

The piano trio (violin, cello and piano) was a popular form of Romantic chamber music. The use of instruments throughout largely conforms to the norms of the Romantic period:

- Each instrument has a fairly large range.
- The strings parts are almost entirely arco, save a few moments of pizzicato playing (eg cello, bar 238-246).
- The violin uses double-stopping to add variety at bar 22.
- The piano part is tough, with some technical challenges from bar 276. Pedalling is seldom indicated.



## WIDER LISTENING

Wider listening, or supporting your point in an essay by referring to other works, is a challenge for A level students. Often, when reading students' essays, wider listening can appear bolted-on, as if students have just memorised the name of a piece to use in an essay on a particular set work. To counter this, I encourage students to go into more detail about their wider listening, drawing direct comparisons between the set work, and the additional music they have chosen. I often use a grid like the one below to ensure they are prepared to make meaningful links between a set work and other related music. A blank template is included at the end of this resource, for use with this and other set works.

WIDER LISTENING		
Piece: Clara Schumann, Piano Trio in G minor, first movement		
The piece/context	How does it link to the set work? (Specifics)	Why use it?
Beethoven: <i>Archduke</i> Piano Trio in B flat, Op. 97	Piano trio, written in 1811. Four movements. Independence of parts (violin, cello, piano)	A good example of another piano trio in which all three instruments have fairly independent parts (in contrast to earlier piano trios, where the cello had a more supportive role).
Berlioz: <i>Symphonie fantastique</i> , first movement	Multi-movement programmatic symphony, written for large orchestra in 1830. First movement written in 'unconventional' sonata form.	A good example of how sonata form can be used much more loosely than in this work. Berlioz's opening movement contains a slow introduction, and works as a contrast to the more formulaic approach to themes seen in the Schumann.
Robert Schumann: Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 63	Romantic Piano Trio, thought to have been inspired by Clara Schumann's G minor Piano Trio.	Another example of a piano trio, containing many features also present in Clara Schumann's work, notably the contrapuntal melodic writing apparent from the very start of the first movement.
Mozart, Symphony No. 40 in G minor, first movement	Great Classical symphony. The first movement is in sonata form.	An example of thematic development in sonata form. Like the Schumann, Mozart focuses his development on one melodic fragment from the first subject. Unlike Schumann, Mozart presents both themes in the tonic, G minor, in the recapitulation.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

To close, here are a few suggestions for activities and tasks that you could try with your students, perhaps during revision, to help them fully grasp what makes this set work so special:

- Create a glossary of terms, under the DOTTTSS headings
- Create a 'top five Romantic piano trios' chart, hopefully including the Schumann work somewhere on the list!
- Rearrange the principal themes in the work for classroom instruments, rock band or sequencer.
- Create a list of the 'top five wow moments' from the work, describing what is happening musically to make them so effective.

I hope you and your students enjoy studying this expertly crafted example of Romantic chamber music.

# Worksheet

<b>WIDER LISTENING</b>			
<b>Piece:</b>			
<b>The piece/context</b>	<b>How does it link to the set work? (Specifics)</b>	<b>Why use it?</b>	