

A Study of Schumann's A Minor Piano Concerto

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Abstract: *This study focuses on Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 54, and analyzes both performance practice and teaching aspects. This concerto combines Romantic expression with Classical structure, highlighting Schumann's composition techniques and emotional depth. The research compares the performances of three famous pianists: Claudio Arrau, Walter Kamper, and Martha Argerich. By examining their approaches to tempo, dynamics, and ensemble work, the study shows how each pianist reveals different aspects of the concerto. The study also looks at specific technical challenges such as chords, arpeggios, and the balance between piano and orchestra. The goal is to provide valuable insights for pianists and educators, offering practical solutions to mastering this piece. This research combines historical context, technical study, and performance practice to enhance the understanding of Schumann's concerto and its teaching value.*

Keywords: *Robert Schumann; Piano concerto; Teaching value*

1. Introduction

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) has had a huge influence on the history of music, being one of the pioneers of the Romantic music in the nineteenth century. He took the Romantic style to another level, and in his pieces, there are shades of Classical music as well as innovations, such as dreamy harmonies, that go beyond Classicism. He often describes his life through his music, whether real or daydreaming, passionate and wild or intimate and thoughtful. In other words, his pieces express all the real emotions of human beings. Therefore, in playing Schumann's pieces, the performer is also learning how to express all kinds of human emotions and sentiments in music.

Originally, Schumann's A Minor Piano Concerto was called "Phantasie in A minor." This first version was premiered in Leipzig on 13 August 1841 by Schumann's wife Clara. However, the publication refused to accept the piece as not in keeping with the traditional concerto style. It was not until 1845, when Schumann added an "intermezzo" adagio second movement and a "allegro vivace" third movement, that the piece was finally completed. The complete concerto was premiered at the Gewandhaus concert in Leipzig on 4 December 1845 with Clara as the piano soloist and Ferdinand Hiller as the conductor, which received great success.^[1]

Schumann's A Minor Piano Concerto is the only concerto he wrote, which well illustrates Schumann's compositional style and aesthetic ideas. The piece is full of flowing melodies, colourful harmonies, and varied rhythms. In the first part of this paper, it focuses on the choice of the score edition and the comparison of the recordings played by different pianists, Claudio Arrau, Walter Kamper, and Martha Argerich, with an concentration on their playing styles and techniques. In the second part, along with the suggestions received from the teacher and instructor, specific techniques of chords, octaves, and arpeggios in this piece will be analysed in more detail. The third part discusses the dialogue and ensemble matters between the orchestra and the piano, as experienced through my own practical playing and performance experience. With summarising and outlining the whole piece in the conclusion, this research project along with audiovisual references will serve as a valuable pedagogical source for any pianists learning this piece.

There have been many different editions of this piece, with the more popular being the edition edited by Clara Schumann and the more modern ones being the Peters and Vienna original editions. Clara's version is still available, but this version presents a problem. Clara has included many tempo indications, fingerings, expressions markings, etc., which were not written by Schumann himself. It is important to respect the original score and utilize the original versions from Peters and Vienna. However, the Peters edition of 1956 includes extensive explanations and comparative analyses with the first edition, providing significant documentary value.

2. An overview of the three representative pianists

The three representative pianists, Arrau, Kamper and Argerich, are from different countries, times and backgrounds, but all three presents a special love for this piece, which they have played profoundly during their careers and have received superb praise.

2.1 Claudio Arrau (1903-1991)

The first pianist explored is Claudio Arrau (1903-1991), a pianist from Chile. With impressive technique, his playing style is prominent and his performance is very disciplined. In the recording, his sound is ground and rich, with a comfortable fluidity that accentuates the harmonic fullness and richness, especially when the chords are played with very relaxed arms. Arrau is fully integrated as an important member of the orchestra in this performance. Given the limited development of video technology during Arrau's time and the availability of several versions, the selected study focuses on a video version of Arrau's 1963 performance with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of George Hurst. Prior to this performance, Arrau and Hurst had collaborated closely and recorded many classics, and this performance is no exception. The video demonstrates a harmonious ensemble, and it is notable for being the only version with video footage.^[2]

2.2 Walter Kamper (1931-2015)

The second pianist, Walter Kamper (1931-2015), is a pianist from Austria. In my opinion, he plays the piece with a unique charm, and a clean, smooth, and punchy tone. He plays it fast, and I probably played it too slowly and lacked drive. Of the available audio material, I have chosen Kamper's 1963 version with the Vienna State Opera Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Hans Swarowsky. Kamper in particular, who is my teacher's teacher, enabled me to learn more profoundly under his heritage.^[3]

2.3 Martha Argerich (b. 1941)

One of the most legendary female pianists alive, Martha Argerich (b. 1941), is a renowned Argentinean pianist. Her playing is characterized by passion, full of character and exuberance. Her style embodies both a feminine and romantic sensibility, along with masculine power and speed. The music is infused with delicate yet profound emotion, making it particularly well-suited for performing Schumann's works. Among the available recordings, the 2014 version by Argerich with the Berlin Philharmonic under the baton of Riccardo Chailly has been selected for further analysis. This recording marks Argerich's return to the Berliner Philharmoniker after a seven-year hiatus.^[4]

3. Performance characteristics of the three representative pianists

In terms of the technique and style of Schumann's A minor Piano Concerto as performed by Arrau, Kamper and Argerich, all three have their own characteristics, and while fully presenting the main theme of the piece, each performer has created their own individual interpretation of the piece, and is therefore able to bring a different feeling to the audience.

Arrau was accustomed to playing with full lyricism through the right hand, having the left hand for harmonic underpinning. The bass melodic line is fully revealed with the left hand, and the right hand runs make the melody sound very pronounced (see Figure 1). The first notes of the right hand and the bass in the left hand form a very imposing contour. They are accentuated as indicated, so they make up one phrase. Both hands are balanced here in terms of power. In the analysis of this recording, the left hand is played with great depth of sound, providing full support for the right-hand accents and unifying the overall contour. On the other hand, Kamper is more concerned with the overall flow of the music here, with no particular emphasis on the accents of each bar, while Argerich follows her inner feeling and keeps driving the music forward.



Figure 1: Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor Op.54, mov. 3, bars 57-60.^[5]

In Kamper’s performance, his right hand brings out the poetic meanings of the piece to drive the music forward. His emphasis is on the fast playing to highlight the compactness of the music, on the powerful technique in pursuit of the inner joy of the music, and on the simplicity of the sound to bring out the purity of the music. The following table shows that Kamper plays the first and second movements faster than the other two pianists (As shown in table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of the length of performance by the three pianists.

	First Movement	Second Movement	Third Movement	Orchestra	Year
Claudio Arrau	16 mins	5 mins 30 secs	10 mins 44 secs	London Philharmonic Orchestra	1963
Walter Kamper	13 mins 53 secs	4 mins 40 secs	10 mins 20 secs	Vienna State Opera Symphony Orchestra	1963
Martha Argerich	15 mins 20 secs	5 mins 30 secs	10 mins 20 secs	Berliner Philharmoniker	2014

Argerich’s performance is often characterised by a wild and unrestrained attitude, giving the music a distinctive and spirited style that is both powerful and explosive, but also allows the music itself to sound light and airy when need it. Figure 2 show the end of the third movement. This phrase consists of fast running arpeggios and explosive chords. Argerich demonstrates more personality here, showing a wild and unrestrained attitude with a distinctive spirited musical style. She makes the playing powerful and explosive yet light and airy. On contrary, Arrau's playing in this section is deeper and more introspective in its rigour and relatively steady in its tempo. Argerich's playing is preferred in this context.



Figure 2: Schumann Piano Concerto in A minor Op.54, mov. 3, bars 806-809.

4. Experiences and teaching values of three representative pianists

In short, all three performers have their own style in their playing, which provides me with a different feeling and reference for my studies.

In my keyboard performance class, I performed the Schumann's A minor Piano Concerto with second pianist Nicholas Ashton. During this keyboard performance lessons, Nicholas gave me two very important pieces of advice:

First, I should use the pedal more cleanly. In Figure 3, in my previous practice, I used to pedal as the score indicates – one pedal per harmony (arpeggio). But during the performance with the second piano, I noticed that the sound was rather muddy and did not allow for a very clear and flexible arpeggio sound. Nicholas recommends only pedaling the first half of every arpeggio to get a clearer sound.

Previously :



Now:



Figure 3: Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor Op.54, mov. 1, bar 67.

Second, for the theme of the piece, Nicholas recommended me to bring out to the top the chords, which form the melody. (See figure 4)



Figure 4: Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor Op.54, mov. 1, bars 12-19.

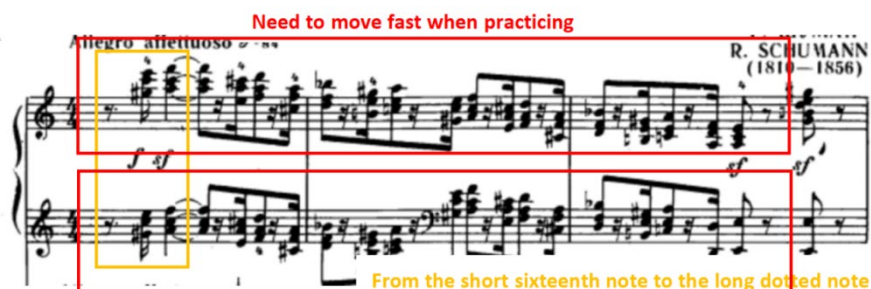


Figure 5: Schumann Piano Concerto in A minor Op. 54, mov. 1, bars 1-3.

In addressing the technical difficulties and potential resolutions based on practical experience, the

technique of chords will be discussed first. There are three types of chords to consider. The first type is successive chords that are fast and strong. Figure 5 illustrates a short and powerful introduction to the first movement, featuring descending chords in a dotted rhythm that culminate in a powerful chord played with the orchestra, adding significant drama and tension.

For this phrase, the downbeat should be played without the slightest hesitation or slackness, but with determination and boldness, with a full and clear tone and with attention to rhythmic accents. To achieve a full, rich tone, it is necessary to use all the strengths of the fingers, hands, arms simultaneously, and the wrist must be flexible and not rigid. In other words, the more weight applied to the keys, the fuller and brighter the sound would be. In addition, each weight application should be applied for every two chords, as bracketed in yellow in Figure 5. If a pianist aims to produce a louder sound, all movements need to be executed with greater speed.

Therefore, when learning the piece, the pianist should first sit in an adjusted position to ensure that the lower limbs have a solid base. Next, the pianist should practice slowly with attention to phrasing, pressing down the keys as quickly as possible while temporarily ignoring the dotted rhythm. Practicing each chord separately to achieve a clear sound is also essential. Finally, the dotted rhythm can be reintroduced, maintaining explosive force along with relaxed muscles and rapid speed. Using this method, the pianist can achieve playing a series of chords in a single stroke with the desired effect.

Deep and lyrical chords are the second type of chordal technique I will discuss. Figure 6 shows the evocative main theme of the first movement, and it perfectly expressed the composer's deep inner torment and depression.



Figure 6: Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor Op. 54, mov. 1, bars 12-19.

This section requires a deep and emotional performance, with particular attention paid not only to the singing quality but also to the coherence of the theme. When playing this melody, a pianist should first highlight the melody in the highest voices in both hands, using focused fingertips to avoid unclear sounds. Following the articulation of the score while mentally humming the melody, special attention should be given to balancing the voices in both hands so that the melodic line is clearly heard. Additionally, the second most important voice, the bass in the left hand, should be brought out to create a sound that is mellow, supportive, and full. During the performance, emphasis should also be placed on the overall syntactic coherence, the direction of the phrases, and the upcoming development of the music.

The last type of chordal technique, chord jumping, demands high accuracy. When this technique appears, it is used to express passionate and exciting emotions.

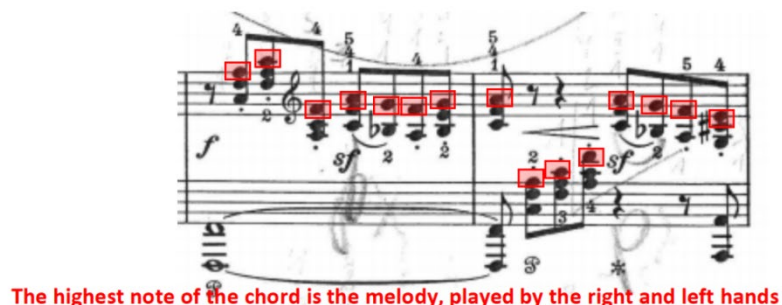


Figure 7: Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor Op.54, mov. 1, Cadenza, bars 420-421.

Figure 7 is taken from the section marked cadenza, characterized by its dramatic progression. The music moves forward from an initial inner struggle to a temporary breakthrough of reason, culminating in a final heartbreaking madness. When practicing this section, a pianist should start by moving from a slow to a faster tempo to determine the appropriate fingerings. The fingers should remain strong, with particular attention to the fingertips. The palms should be kept high, with relaxed and flexible wrists, and

the arms should be loose. The sound should be clear and full, with an emphasis on the upper notes of the right-hand chords. Finally, it is essential to maintain the integrity and coherence of this section throughout the performance.

Moreover, this piece employs a large number of arpeggios in various forms. The use of arpeggios creates a coherent, supple, fluid, and driving force. The third movement is almost entirely devoted to technical passages of rapid running arpeggio played at speed, with many large jumps, which place great demands on the dexterity and accuracy of the fingers.

For playing fast-running arpeggios, the position in which one sits is very important. The distance between the player and the piano must be adjusted before playing. If the player is too close to the piano, it can easily lead to an unstable centre of gravity. Also, the pianist must relax the shoulders, pay attention to weight movement and transfer the weight following the direction of the arpeggios. Finally, the pianist must be aware that the fingers should be ready for the next changes in advance, without stopping, so that the sound can be even and smooth with accuracy. In general, the weight has a tendency to follow the direction of the arpeggio, while the sound should have a flow of strength and intensity that matches the shapes of the arpeggio.



Figure 8: Schumann Piano Concerto in A minor Op.54, mov. 1, bars 68-71.

Figure 8 is played with alternation in the right and left hand. This makes it more difficult to play because it requires both hands to sound like one, while it is easy to have uneven tones. In practice, attention must be paid to the coordination of both hands, the finger control and the distribution of forces. The pianist should follow the slurs and accents indicated in the score, aiming to create one large phrase every four bars.



Figure 9: Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor Op.54, mov. 3, bars 162-167.

For the arpeggios in Figure 9, the pianist should first create waves in dynamics according to the direction of the phrase. Next, the focus should be on the rhythmic sense to show the displacement of the groupings, with a slight emphasis at the beginning of each group. Finally, due to the speed and registral span of this section, the pianist should practice in different registers to develop a sense of distance and muscle memory, ensuring that the sound has a clear sense of granularity along with the musical flow.



Figure 10: Schumann Piano Concerto in A minor Op.54, mov.2, bars 30-34.

In the second movement, the main theme of this section is played by the orchestra, with the piano

playing propulsive arpeggios as an accompaniment, which is another type of arpeggio that I will elaborate. In the piano, the right hand plays the arpeggios with a hazy feel, lengthening the phrase. Each bar needs to be played with more impetus to make the music flow and broaden. The octaves of the left hand needs to be deep and penetrating, driving the music along with the second piano (see Figure 10).

Although the piano plays a leading role, the composer also gives the orchestra as important a position as the piano, with clear voices and beautiful melodic lines. The orchestra also often leads the theme, so the piano and orchestra are in a complementary relationship.

Throughout piece, the effect and tone of the piano is perfectly accentuated by the brilliant and atmospheric orchestral part, which is in supportive of the piano. As it is a piano concerto, the pianist needs to listen carefully and grasp the melodic line of the orchestral part while practicing. Additionally, understanding the structure of the entire work and the role of the piano in relation to the orchestra is essential, so that the integration of the piano and the orchestra can be effectively executed and balanced in actual performances.

In the first movement, there are many important themes introduced by the orchestra, which have the role of driving the piece forward and introducing transitions, while the piano part often provides fast running accompaniment. The performer should pay attention to controlling the volume of the piano against the orchestra, and actively follow the musical flow of the orchestra to balance the strength and intensity of its supporting role, helping to highlight the theme in the orchestra. (See the ending of the first movement in Figure 11).

showing piano role in supporting the orchestra.

Figure 11: Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor Op. 54, mov. 1, bars 516-526.

In addition, there are many sections that reflect the dialogue between the piano and orchestra (see Figure 12). When analyzing the score, the pianist should also have an in-depth analysis of the orchestra, the angles can be from the structure, harmony, melodic direction, etc. The pianist should also practice with the second pianist in a complementary and unified approach in terms of tempo and timbre. This requires the pianist to have not only decent performance skills, but also sufficient musical imagination and comprehension.

Dialogue

Figure 12: Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor Op. 54, mov. 2, bars 1-4.

Another ensemble feature of this piece is the piano's imitation of the orchestral themes. In Figure 13, at the beginning of the first movement, the theme is first played by the orchestra, and then the piano imitates the orchestra's theme immediately afterwards. The performance of this theme plays a leading role in the whole concerto. While playing this theme, the aural impression of the tempo and emotion of the whole piece is presented, and the piano enters immediately afterwards, so the piano needs to imitate the tone and the musical feeling of the orchestra as much as possible.

The image displays a musical score for the first movement of Schumann's Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54, specifically bars 4 through 18. The score is presented in four systems. The first system shows the piano part (piano) and the orchestra part (orchestra). The second system shows the piano part (piano) and the orchestra part (orchestra) with a red box highlighting the piano's imitation of the orchestra's theme, labeled 'Similar melodies'. The third system shows the piano part (piano) and the orchestra part (orchestra) with a red box highlighting the piano's entry, labeled 'The piano needs to appear immediately after the orchestra'.

Figure 13: Schumann Piano Concerto in A minor Op.54, mov. 1, bars 4-18.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, detailed discoveries with musical examples of the three pianists' approaches have informed us that Arrau's interpretation is relatively more on a secure side with thoughtful planning; Kamper's performance pushes the momentum the most, resulting in a more straightforward sense and tempo; and, Argerich's illustration risked the most in terms of emotions with drastic contrasts.

Together with a summary of the difficult challenges categorized in three aspects of chords, arpeggios, and ensemble along with a documented journal of my studies and a demonstrative video of my mid-term exam,^[6] I have not only clarified my own thoughts on problem solving, but also been empowered to apply the knowledge into my future piano studies. More significantly, I believe this study will be a valuable reference to any pianists and teachers who would like to study this piece.

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