

Clara Rockmore, theremin
Nadia Reisenberg, piano

- 1** Liebesleid (2:31) Fritz Kreisler
(1875-1962)
- 2** Air (2:09) Johann Mattheson
(1681-1764)
- 3** Humoreske (3:29) Antonin Dvořák
(1841-1904)
- 4** Pastorale* (4:03) Anis Fuliehan
(1901-1970)
- 5** Ave Maria (4:55) Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)
- 6** Nocturne in C-sharp minor (3:56)
(Op. Posthumous) Frédéric Chopin
(1810-1849)
- 7** Requiebros (4:01) Gaspar Cassadó
(1897-1966)
- 8** Adagio (3:56) Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

- 9** Aria from Bachianas Brasileiras
No. 5* (7:03) Heitor Villa-Lobos
(1887-1959)
- 10** Celebrated Air (5:36) Johann Sebastian Bach
- 11** Midnight Bells (arr. Kreisler) (3:48) Richard Heuberger
(1850-1914)
- 12** Kaddish (4:43) Maurice Ravel
(1875-1937)
- 13** Summertime (2:47) George Gershwin
(1898-1937)
- 14** Water Boy (2:56) Avery Robinson
(1878-1965)
- 15** Estrellita** (3:01) Manuel Ponce
(1882-1948)
- 16** La Vie en Rose (2:01) Louis Louiguy
(1916-1991)

* With ensemble of cellos: Dorothy Lawson (solo in Villa-Lobos), Robert Burkhardt, Mairi Dorman, Sarah Hewitt-Roth, Ludmilla Konstantinova
Jessie Reagen, Peter Sachon, Caroline Stinson

** Guitar part arranged and performed by Jorge Morel

"Claronek, you played like an angel..."

—Leon Theremin

There are very, very few artists who, beyond their own lifetimes, are commonly acknowledged to have been the best in the world. Stradivarius most immediately comes to mind, probably followed by Liszt and Paganini, though in the absence of recordings we have only the legends to go by. When it comes to the ultimate mastery of the theremin, however, there is no doubt that Clara Rockmore reigned and -- to this day -- still reigns supreme. No player has begun to achieve her unique blending of immaculate intonation, phrasing flexibility and deeply sensitive musicianship; no thereminist is more universally admired.

At this point, I will stop calling this remarkable artist Clara Rockmore, since to me she was simply Aunt Clara; for similar reasons, I'll refer to the distinguished pianist Nadia Reisenberg as Mother. I will not carry on about the extraordinary beauty of sound that Clara coaxed out of the air (the special magic of the theremin is that you don't touch it during performance), because you can now hear it for yourself.

Just one brief thought about the collaboration of these remarkable sisters. Throughout her career, Mother chose not to be an accompanist -- I still remember her wrath when a critic in his review referred to the "accompanist" in a Strauss Sonata -- but when Clara played, it was unthinkable for Nadia not to be by her side. Their rapport was loving, instinctive and complete.



Photo: Steve J. Sherman

And once I tell you how this CD came to be, I'll let the three principal artists -- Clara, Nadia, and Robert Moog, who gave Clara a new lease on artistic life when he repaired (more accurately rebuilt) her ailing theremin -- speak for themselves, via historic interviews, broadcasts and other first person statements.

By 1975, Clara had retired from the stage, but her biggest fan, Robert Moog, kept pestering her to document her artistry on LP (as recordings were known in those days). Eventually, she agreed, and in July of that year, she and Mother and Bob taped nearly two hours worth of her then current repertory. Twelve of those pieces were put out by Delos (and subsequently reissued on CD), but sixteen more remained in limbo. Years passed, no "volume 2" came into being, and Clara more and more wistfully spoke of what she called her "Lost Album." When I formed the Nadia Reisenberg - Clara Rockmore Foundation a few years ago, I knew that an early goal would be finally to make these astonishing performances available. Well, here they are.

Because three of those missing theremin and piano pieces were included on "Nadia Reisenberg: An Album of Chamber Music," a 2-CD set issued in 1989 by (and still available from) the International Piano Archives at the University of Maryland, I felt free to refresh those performances with non-keyboard textures. Accordingly, I asked Jorge Morel to fashion a new guitar partnership for "Estrellita," we added the string parts to the Fuleihan "Pastorale," and of course, our eight cellists followed Villa-Lobos' original scoring in the "Bachianas" Aria. Somehow, I feel sure that Clara, Mother and Bob Moog would have smiled their approval.

Finally, great thanks to my son Steve, who took many of the later photographs, and worked hard at restoration of the earlier ones.

—Robert Sherman



Jorge Morel



Clara and Nadia before leaving Russia, c. 1918

Courtesy of the Nadia Reisenberg / Clara Rockmore Foundation

Clara Rockmore: My first very young memories are very clear, I used to hide behind the drapes in our apartment in St. Petersburg, and sing a little rhyme: "I'm not here, I've gone to America."

Nadia Reisenberg: She could pick out tunes at the piano before she could speak, she could read music when she was three, and at 4, she became an unofficial student at the St. Petersburg¹ Conservatory. A year later she was accepted as a full-fledged violin student of Leopold Auer.

CR: I was lucky enough to drink in, together with my mother's milk, Nadia's Chopin. To this day², the whole piano literature is for me very familiar because I was living with Nadia when she was learning all those things.

NR: When Clara was six, we were giving violin and piano concerts together. A few years later we played in several Russian cities, then elsewhere in Europe. We really played our way to America.

CR: In America I resumed my lessons with Auer, and was a very busy violinist when some Russian friends brought me to the Plaza Hotel to hear a new marvel. That's where I first met Professor Theremin and heard his instrument.

1. later Petrograd, Leningrad, now again St. Petersburg.

2. 1984

I was fascinated by the aesthetic part of it, the visual beauty, the idea of playing in the air, and I loved the sound. I tried it, and apparently showed some kind of immediate ability to manipulate it. Soon he gave me, for a present, the RCA model theremin. Several years later, Lev Sergeyevich³ accompanied me when I went to play “Schelomo” of Bloch with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and that was the first major piece he ever heard on his own instrument.

Robert Moog: The theremin is very simple, technically, considering how musically rich it is. The closer you get your right hand to the pitch antenna, the higher the note; as you move your left hand away from the volume antenna, the note gets louder. I began building theremins as a kid in high school, and have been at it on an amateur and professional basis ever since. Clara Rockmore was the greatest theremin virtuoso. Through her professionalism and her musical genius, she greatly elevated the level of awareness and respect for the instrument.



Clara and Leon Theremin, c. 1930

CR: As a musician, I was not satisfied with the RCA model (of the theremin). I could not tolerate the left hand, which I called ‘molasses’ – there was no way of breaking the sound, so everything had to be played glissando.

I needed a faster left hand, to

3. Leon Theremin is the name the inventor used in America. In Russia, he was Lev Sergeyevich Termen (pronounced Tair-MEN). The Bloch performance was at Robin Hood Dell, August 14, 1937.

permit staccato, and I wanted low notes as well as high. All I had to do was to inspire Theremin, to explain what I needed, and he, being the genius that he was, built for me a much more exacting instrument, with a five-octave range instead of three. Controlling it was much more difficult, but it was far more responsive and therefore musically more satisfying.⁴ I had to make—and then meet—my own standards. I had to win the public over into thinking of the theremin as a real, artistic medium.

RM: What is it about Clara as a person, as well as a musician, that enabled her to achieve such incredibly precise control? This might sound a little strange, but at this point in my life,⁵ I believe that whatever we’re able to do is connected to a network out there—the cosmos—that brings us all together, that relates what happened in the past to what will happen in the future. Some people, like Clara are so extremely connected to this that their creativity comes through them not merely as technical virtuosity, but as intelligence. It’s developing something that nobody before could have commanded, and then building it further to the point where it can inspire others.

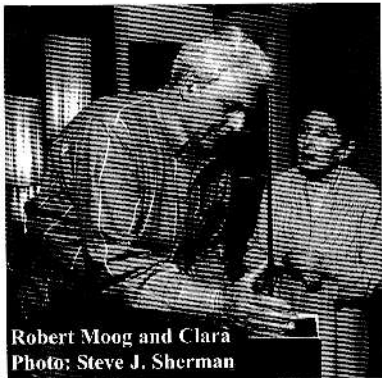
4. Interestingly, further modifications to the instrument – including a lower profile so the player’s hands would be more visible – were suggested by Josef Hofmann, the famous pianist, who was also an inventor with several important patents.

5. March, 2001, during celebrations of Clara’s 90th birth anniversary at Steinway Hall, New York.



Reunion: Leon Theremin & Clara Rockmore
October 16, 1991

Photo: Steve J. Sherman



Robert Moog and Clara
Photo: Steve J. Sherman

CR: I wrote a series of exercises that I hoped would help future players who wanted to make real music – not sound effects – and dedicated it to my very special friend Robert Moog “in appreciation of his continued interest in promoting and reproducing the space-controlled theremin.” If I had to give advice to future thereminists, I’d say less is more. You cannot treat air with hammers, you have to use delicate motions, you have to play with butterfly wings; precision is much more important than strength. You also have to have courage. Playing the theremin is like being a trapeze artist without a net underneath. You don’t know if you’ll land correctly or not, but you have an instinct, you take a risk, and you jump, not only to arrive at the right note, but to hit the middle of the note, so you’ll be in tune.

RM: The high point of my experience with Clara came when she called me because her instrument had become completely unreliable. Building theremins had been a hobby of mine for thirty or forty years, then it became a business, so naturally I was very curious to see what was inside hers that could produce such a beautiful sound. Electronics age faster than people do, and Clara’s theremin, which must have been fifty years old by then, was filled with broken connections, parts that were beginning to fail, others that had shorted out. I replaced various sodders and connectors, and then, with Mike Jason, Clara’s own technician, tried to overhaul the instrument to make it work as much like the original as possible. We started Friday night, worked all day Saturday, and then put

everything back together Sunday morning. Clara tried it out, said “no, it doesn’t sound just right.” The trouble was we didn’t know exactly what “just right” meant, but we fiddled with the adjustments for half an hour or so. Clara tried it once again and “No. Closer, but not close enough.” So once again Mike and I worked, and when she tried it again, she didn’t stop. She started playing “Summertime” and went right through to the end, and when she turned around, she had tears in her eyes. And through her tears she said “I thought I would never play this instrument again.”

NR: I’m very fortunate, in having the wonderful CR as my sister, and it’s a joy to perform with her. I forget what instrument she plays, and in any case, it wouldn’t make any difference to the way we make music together. She is a consummate musician, with impeccable taste, so we could attain wonderful ensemble almost without rehearsing. Balance is not difficult either, because the theremin has a kind of penetrating sound, so you can very freely provide support.

CR: Nadia was the perfect, ideal colleague. It was fantastic. There was really no need for rehearsals: she knew what I wanted to do before I did it. I will never replace that as long as I live. I could play with complete freedom and she was always right there with me. We approached each program together with such love and pride, that not once would I take a bow without her. That may seem like a small thing, but it was important to me.

NR: We loved each other, which probably had something to do with it.

CR: Our whole lives, until the very end, we were never separated musically. There would be no time when there would be a Mahler symphony on the air that Nadia wouldn't call me to say "are you listening?"

NR: Here I am at this ancient age of 75,⁶ and somehow I just don't feel any different. When you're involved with so many things, you don't think about an hour of rest in the afternoon, or that you should be slowing down; there just isn't time to think about those things. As I was coming down in the bus today, I thought to myself, well here I am, it's almost time to summarize what my life is like, and I asked myself a few questions: what were you really looking for in your life, how close did you get, and if you had another life to live, what would you do differently. And I gave myself the answers quite readily. I wanted, first of all, a family that is close, a family that I could love and that could love me. If I had talent, I wanted to have a chance to develop it to its full potential, and as a person, I would like to have enough strength and integrity to fight for the things I believe in. Thinking back, I almost accomplished it all. Of course we cannot get all, but it's very close to what I set out to do, so I consider myself the happiest person in the world. If I had another life to live, I don't think I would want to have it any different. Well, maybe I would want to add a couple of hours to each day, because I'm a very greedy person and like to learn so much, and I just don't have enough time to do it all.

CR: Nadia was always the optimist, we looked up to her, she was the strong one in our family. It may be wrong to say it, but I have a visual picture of Nadia sitting in heaven right now – sitting, not floating like an angel – because her

position was always like that at the piano. I don't see any harps, but I do see her sitting there, watching over us and giving orders, and saying don't forget Clara's birthday.

CR:⁷ I take great comfort and joy in knowing that Nadia's last birthday in this world was celebrated in my house. I have to tell you one thing: many years ago, your young Mother and I, whose repertoire together and separately was almost completely classical, fell in love with a French song popular at that time, "La Vie en Rose." I'm no Wagner, but I adopted that particular song as a leitmotif for Nadia, because it suited her so perfectly, because she enjoyed life so much, because she brought such love to other people and was loved by so many other people. Whenever I wrote her a card, no matter in what language, it always ended with "La Vie en Rose."

To go back to her last birthday, Nadia was full of spirit and joy, and in my house everything was roses, even the napkins and tablecloth had roses on them. We usually played together when our friends gathered, and that day it wasn't anything serious. It was just for



Anna (Newta) Sherman and her sister Clara at exhibition in Nadia's memory, Steinway Hall February 26, 1986

Photo: Steve J. Sherman

6. from a birthday tribute to Nadia broadcast on WQXR, July, 1979

7. from a memorial tribute broadcast on WQXR, July 1984

fun, things like "Summertime" and "Estrellita" and "Midnight Bells," all with lots of feeling.⁸ And, of course, we had to have "La Vie en Rose."

Robert Sherman is an award-winning broadcaster who recently celebrated his 50th anniversary with WQXR, and continues to host the popular folk series "Woody's Children" for public radio's WFUV. For more than forty years, he was a music critic and columnist for The New York Times, and he is currently on faculty at The Juilliard School. Co-author of two books with Victor Borge, Robert Sherman he also joined with his brother, Alexander, to compile a pictorial history of their celebrated mother, Nadia Reisenberg.

IN LOVING MEMORY:

CLARA ROCKMORE, THEREMIN

NADIA REISENBERG, PIANO

ROBERT MOOG, ELECTRONIC PIONEER

8. After that 1984 broadcast, Arnold Steinhardt wrote "Clara's playing is extraordinarily beautiful. I had such empathy -- the feeling as I listened to 'Estrellita' is that I would have tried to play it just that way."

Recorded in July, 1975 at Producers Recording Studio in New York
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Assistant Engineer: Joe Trapasso
Participating Nuisance: Robert Sherman

Photographs: Steve J. Sherman

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Nadia Reisenberg / Clara Rockmore Foundation

"Music at home: Clara, Nadia, New Year's Eve, 1968" (Back Booklet),

"Clara and Nadia before leaving Russia, c. 1918"

"Clara and Leon Theremin, c. 1930"

Courtesy of the Nadia Reisenberg / Clara Rockmore Foundation

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