Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture* and the Comic Modes

As different as the aims and methods of statistics and aesthetics may be, the disciplines at times converge. A recent study by Siegfried Kross of the performances of Brahms's larger works during the last decade of the nineteenth century tells us something about the *Academic Festival Overture*, Op. 80, that we might have already intuited from its generally sunny tone. Between 1890 and 1902 the *Overture* was one of Brahms's most often presented orchestral works; only the *Requiem* rivaled it in frequency of performance. Its 180-odd renditions in the principal European musical centers represent almost twice the number accorded to the work's more somber companion piece, the *Tragic Overture*, Op. 81. And the popularity of the *Academic Festival Overture* with audiences today shows no signs of abating.

But popularity can exact a price. Occasional works such as the *Academic Festival Overture*—conceived in the summer of 1880 at the behest of Bernhard Scholz to mark Brahms's receipt of an honorary doctorate from the University of Breslau—often eschew the esoteric dimension that goes hand in hand with the nineteenth century's prevailing aesthetic of autonomy. Both the anonymous reviewer for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (after a performance in Leipzig on 13 January 1881) and the author of a short piece for the *Musical Times* (1 May 1881) on the arrangement for piano four-hands agreed that the *Academic Festival Overture* was a more accessible but less important work than its "tragic" counterpart. But since the late nineteenth century the composition has been greeted by a deafening critical silence. In spite of the upsurge of analytical studies devoted to Brahms's works in recent decades, the *Overture's* idiosyncratic sonata structure, replete with introductory paragraphs of exceptional breadth and a rhapsodically executed reprise, has figured little in critical discussions.

Hence we are faced with a paradox: the same factors that have contributed to the *Overture*’s ready acceptance in the concert hall are also responsible for the circumspection of serious commentators. Furthermore, the high-spirited tone of the work seems at odds with received opinion on Brahms's musical persona. Nietzsche's harsh condemnation of Brahms's output as a manifestation of "the melancholy of impotence" has been transformed into a milder assessment that views these works as products of a serious-minded and musically economical temperament. Nonetheless, a residue from the philosopher's charge is still very much a part of the popular wisdom on Brahms. Then too, the comic side of nineteenth-century German musical art remains a little-explored and difficult topic. Schumann homed in on the problem in a letter of 15 March 1839 to his Belgian admirer Simonin de Sire: "It's unfortunate that there are no good and appropriate words at hand in the

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French language for precisely those peculiarities and concepts that are most deeply rooted in the German national spirit, such as the genial (or rapturous) and for humor ["das Gemütliche (Schwärmersiche) un für den Humor"], the latter being the happy union of the genial and the witty ["Gemüldich und Witzig"]. But this situation is bound up with the whole character of both nations.

Schumann goes on to sing the praises of his favorite writer, Jean Paul, and I would like to enlist this most idiosyncratic of poets to help us in opening an interpretive window onto the comic side of Brahms's style as evinced in the Academic Festival Overture. Why Jean Paul? In the first place, the comic modes that were consigned to the appendices of neo-classical treatises on aesthetics take center stage for the author of the Flagellöhre (1804/05). His Vorschule der Ästhetik (1804/1813/1825) gives primacy of place to a studied (and highly amusing) dissection of a wide array of comic categories: the ridiculous, satirical, humor, irony, the lyric comic, and wit. And secondly, the writings of Jean Paul occupied a significant position in Brahms's cultural world. The commonplace book from his youthful Düsseldorf days, the Schatzkästlein des jungen Kreisler (March 1854), includes more quotations from Jean Paul than from any other author. Brahms's copy of the 1840/42 complete edition of the poet's works (a Christmas gift from Clara Schumann) is full of corrected misprints and marginal jottings. Richard Heuberger reports that near the end of his life, "Brahms . . . raved passionately about Jean Paul. He said that we young people knew this man far too little, [and] that there was much splendid stuff in his works." This is not to suggest that the Academic Festival Overture translates a poetic theory into tones, but rather that Jean Paul's anatomy of the comic modes might facilitate our definition of the comic side of Brahms's genius.

There are few traces of Jean Paulian satire, or the "morali zing" comic, in Brahms's Overture. The sarcasm and mockery associated with this mode give way to a gentler irony (or "objective" comic mode) already signaled in the title of the work. Interestingly enough, Brahms's correspondence from between 1880 and 1884 indicates that the title, in his own words, "didn't exactly please him." But after considering other possibilities—"Studentenlieder Overture," "Janissary Overture," "Viadrana Overture" (the latter a reference to Breslau's Oder River)—he seems to have stuck with the original "Academic Festival Overture." As it stands, the title resonates with the inscription on Brahms's doctoral diploma, where he is hailed as "the greatest living German master of the strict musical style." And it is precisely in Brahms's approach to the "strict" or "academic" musical style, that is to the art of counterpoint, that the irony of his Overture emerges. If Jean Paul defined irony as a kind of "feigned seriousness," then this phrase neatly describes the impression created by the work's opening, where a four-measure march tune is answered at the upper fifth, though the absence of a counterpoint to the second phrase rapidly destroys the illusion of fugal procedure. Similarly, the canonic elaboration of the popular song "Was kommt dort von der Höh" dissolves into a string of parallel thirds after two measures (bars 157-58). Brahms's response to his honorary degree discloses the hand of a magister who demonstrates his command over the strict style by casting it in an ironic light.

Humor (or the romantic comic) is no doubt the key player in Jean Paul's anatomy of the comic modes. Viewed as a universal principle of contrast (between finitude and the infinite, idealism and realism, body and soul), humor may take on a "sensuous," "totalizing," "annihilating," or "subjective" form. For Jean Paul, humorous sensuousness requires a plentitude of colorful and contrasting images fancifully grouped. Brahms draws his images from a stock of popular tunes and student songs: the Rákóczi March; August von Binzer's Burschenschaftslied of 1819, "Wir hatten gebaut ein stattliches Haus"; the Landeswiter tune "Alles schweigt! Jeder neige"; the Fuchslied, or freshman initiation song, "Was kommt dort von der Höh"; and the well-known hymn "Gaudeamus Igitur." The "sensuous" aspect of the Overture was at first a source of consternation for Elisabet von Herzogenberg, ever one of Brahms's most astute critics, who wrote in a letter of December 1880: "I am the dullest of mortals, and the form bothered me at first because of its long introduction; also I found it difficult, with all those different themes, to sort out everything in due order." As we will see, the thematic luxuriance (or humorous sensuousness) that Brahms took as his point of departure likewise served as the chief problem for which the overall shape of the Overture represents a brilliant solution. "Humorous totality" and "annihilating humor" are closely related in Jean Paul's explication of the comic modes. In both cases, the poet sets the "small world" against the "great world" (as Jean Paul himself was wont to do in his novels), so that "a kind of laughter, containing pain and greatness, issues forth." Taken by itself, the teasing Fuchslied (which figures in the closing group of the Overture's exposition) is little more than an example of the low comic or the burlesque. But Brahms's treatment of the tune brings it in touch with "totalizing" or "annihilating" humor insofar as we sense a marked cleft between the melody's whimsical character and the sophisticated elaboration it undergoes in bars 157-254. Here the unassuming melody becomes the subject of a series of canens firmus variations, first with the tune in the treble, next in the bass, then combined with a lyric countermelody, and finally restored to the treble.

The split between "high" style and "low" content (or "small" and "great" worlds) recurs at a larger level as the motivating force behind Brahms's self-imposed compositional challenge: the mediation of popularizing medley and symphonic allegro. The Overture to Franz von Suppé's operetta Flotte Bursche (which, like Brahms's Academic Festival Overture, calls on a series of jolly student songs) is an enchanting if slight potpourri. Brahms, the "totalizing" humorist, rises above the medley principle embodied in Suppé's Overture by situating his materials in an unusually imposing design. A broadly unfolding three-key exposition (moving from C minor/major through E to G) is complemented by a similarly conceived response, its initial stages marked by the fusion of developmental and recapitulatory tendencies. To be sure, the resultant binary structure constitutes one of Brahms's favorite sonata forms. Usually reserved for
The highest form of wit, in Jean Paul's estimation, is figurative wit. He explains: "Just as there is no absolute sign, for each sign is also a thing, so in the finite realm there is no absolute thing, since each entity has meaning and signifies something; hence mankind points to the divine, and nature to the human image." The infinitely significative potential of music has inspired some writers to posit a program for Brahms's Academic Festival Overture. In Kalbeck's view, the parade of student songs, their transformation and development, and their culmination in "Gaudeamus igitur" represent the overthrow of an older, oppressive regime by a youthful, enlightened order. Similarly, Brahms noted in 1885 that "the academic overture [sic]...has nothing to do with my miserable doctorate, but rather takes off from around 1809 [could he have meant 1819, the date of the Karlsbad Decrees and the dissolution of the Student League?] and goes through the best and worst times for students and Burschenschaft alike."

Although the mixture of nationalism and Schwärmerie in both accounts may seem somewhat naive, we need not dismiss them altogether. As Jean Paul reminds us, it is in the very nature of "annihilating humor" to celebrate freedom by inverting social ranks and moral values. In this view, comedy represents a motion from a society governed by arbitrary laws and constraints to a utopian state in which youth and liberty prevail. Thus comic structure turns on a point of discovery (or anagnorisis, Aristotle's term for the moment of recognition or discovery in a drama) whereby troublesome obstacles are overcome as a prelude to an obligatory ritual of celebration. Brahms's Academic Festival Overture replicates the spirit if not the substance of Jean Paul's comic mythos. Each portion of its binary form spans an arch from C minor to C major, the second half even more emphatically than the first. The design as a whole—an exposition with developmentally enriched response—likewise projects a comic overcoming of the minor mode. This interpretation helps to account for the oddly bifurcated recapitulation: the C-minor tutti reprise of the opening march idea versus its C-major apotheosis about a dozen bars later. Specifically, the earlier passage functions as the minor-mode foil to the subsequent moment of comic discovery. And finally, the definitive resolution of the comic dialectic comes with a celebratory ritual, aptly suggested by Brahms's stylized presentation of the jubilant and uplifting "Gaudeamus igitur."

Jean Paul noted that the best humorists often "come from a melancholy people." This is no doubt a variation on one of his favorite themes, the notion that comedy cannot exist in an unadulterated form, that "gravity itself is a condition of jest." Our brief critique of the comic impulse in Brahms's Academic Festival Overture lends more than a modicum of support to this point of view.

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