Brahms's Reminiscences

Brahms cultivated no public personality aside from his music and his performances; he left us no memoirs. In fact, he took steps to eradicate the traces of the private world he lived in, so that his legacy of finished musical works should stand on its own: at one point he and Clara Schumann exchanged their accumulated letters, and he abruptly marched to the river and dropped them in; and, although he studied the Beethoven sketches assiduously, he saw no point in preserving such evidence of his own working methods.

Yet, this is not to say that he was not a person of deep reminiscences. His rich but personally convoluted life must have left him in later years with many bittersweet memories; and his music is deeply introspective and ruminative—who has not heard in it a nostalgic quality, an autumnal mood tinged with melancholy, a retrospective character that makes one turn inward and backward in reflection?

It is, in fact, in his music itself that Brahms has left clear traces of his own personal reminiscences; more importantly he has incorporated "reminiscence" into his works on the level of generalized aesthetic experience. I have discussed such reminiscences in several works of Brahms with considerable analytical detail in my "Brahms and Reminiscence: A Special Use of Classic Conventions," in Convention in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Music: Essays in Honor of Leonard Ratner (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1992), pp. 75–112. Here I wish to summarize some of these discussions by reflecting on "reminiscence" as an aesthetic experience of the listener, how Brahms used it, and how it relates to his own personal reminiscences.

Memory is essential to the perception of musical forms, especially large-scale forms which depend upon the repetition of previously heard material. An acute hearing of a classic sonata form requires a good memory of the exposition, especially the order and relationship of its elements, so that when they return in the recapitulation, the differences in their treatment may be fully appreciated. In this context, the classic tradition calling for a repeat of the exposition makes good sense, even when the development and recapitulation are not repeated—since it clarifies and fixes in the memory the presentation of elements in the exposition for easy recognition later.

The recapitulation in the hands of such composers as Haydn and Mozart is a significant event in the form; it is usually carefully prepared, and the pleasure of perceiving its arrival is one which joins the recognition of familiar material with a perception that its arrival comes at just the right point, fulfilling all the expectations built up by preparation and return at the end of the development.

The recapitulation in the hands of Brahms is also a significant event, but sometimes the significance is quite different, and the differences point to an essentially (continued on next page)
Brahms's Reminiscences, continued

Brahms's Reminiscences, continued. Brahms seems to play upon the classic conventions of exact recapitulation; he tends to qualify—even to work against—the clarity and sense of confirmation expected at that point. Sometimes the inception of the recapitulation is masked and can only be recognized as such in subsequent bars. This masking of the recapitulation has two effects. First, it reinforces the classic model of the sonata form as essentially in two parts (binary), joining development and recapitulation without a strong point of demarcation. Second, perhaps more important, is an expressive function: when the beginning of the recapitulation is only recognized as such in subsequent bars, the pleasure of recognizing familiar material is delayed, and when it does occur, it is retrospective; it is a recognition that a certain point already past was the recapitulation. I call this "reminiscence," and I suggest that it has a fundamental role in Brahms's aesthetic; it is a component of that nostalgic quality so characteristic of his music, especially the later music. The reason such delayed recognitions can evoke sentiments of reminiscence for the listener is that the musical processes are analogous to aspects of everyday experience, even to the very precise experience of the recovery of past memory.

This experience can be exemplified by a homely illustration. Assume a street along which I sometimes drive, whose territory is relatively familiar to me, including some remarkable landmarks. I have the occasion to be in its vicinity without realizing it; I turn onto the street and after traveling a few blocks, I recognize one of the landmarks as strangely familiar; this in turn triggers my recollection of the street I knew; in an instant, with a flash of familiarity, I recover the whole context of where I am, enjoying the newly realized orientation to familiar paths, even recognizing in retrospect the blocks already passed.

This experience has two distinctly affective moments: first, the initial intimation of familiarity mixed with strangeness; and, second, the sudden recognition of the broader context which roots the previous intimations in a well-established reality. I propose that Brahms crafts these masked recapitulations for the aesthetic expression of just such a quality. I am applying the word "reminiscence" in this special way, and in what follows, the basic principle is illustrated; then reminiscences with particularly personal resonances for Brahms are explored.

The treatment of the first subject of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony in E minor, Op. 98, is a good example of this kind of masked recapitulation (see the musical example on the next page). It is a typical juncture of the constructive with the affective, built upon a descending diatonic circle of thirds, and expressed in the minor mode with an anacrusis sigh-figure (all this, as Raymond Knapp has shown, is reminiscent of Mozart's G-Minor Symphony, the autograph of which Brahms possessed).

The subject is well fixed in the memory of the listener by being stated twice in the exposition; only after eight measures does its second statement diverge harmonically from the first, at which point it is recognizable as the transition to the second key. After the closing material, the listener expects a repeat of the exposition (as in the first movements of Brahms's other symphonies); this expectation seems to be fulfilled, for the first subject is restated literally in the tonic (m. 145); after eight measures, however, it takes a remarkably different harmonic direction, and only then can the listener realize that there has been no repeat of the exposition, but that the development had begun in the tonic eight measures earlier. This realization is a reminiscence—a reinterpretation of a point earlier in the form; it carries with it the pleasure of seeing in an instant a greater significance of the material than had been suspected.

Another literal repetition in the tonic at the beginning of the recapitulation would have been too much; rather, at the end of the development the first four measures of the first subject are augmented and expanded to twelve measures (mm. 246–58), as if they were a long build-up to the recapitulation; then the first subject proceeds in its original shape beginning with its fifth measure; at that point the listener must reinterpret the previous twelve measures as the beginning of the first subject and of the recapitulation. This is the quintessential moment of reminiscence—the recognition of familiar ground at the resumption of all the features of the initial theme, but also the recognition of "where we are," which causes us in an instant to realize that what seemed to be preparation was really a grand and emphatic restatement of the beginning of the first subject. This experience of recognizing where we are—the sudden flash of familiarity in the present, which simultaneously clarifies a past event—is a most characteristic Brahmsian reminiscence. It differs from the everyday experience described above, however, since it can be rehearsed innumerable times without diminishing its effect, a remarkable feature of aesthetic as opposed to everyday experience.

Brahms's attitude toward such reminiscences may have its roots in the world of Robert and Clara Schumann, who delighted in quotation and allusion in their music. Brahms's wholehearted participation in this world is epitomized by his Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann, Op. 9, and its relation to Robert's Improvisations on a Theme of Clara Wieck, Op. 5 (which I shall address elsewhere). Robert Schumann suggests an important distinction: between recall and reminiscence, Rückblick and Erinnerung. He had designated the recall of the Scherzo in the Finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony a Rückblick, a straightforward restatement, and he practiced such recalls in his own music. He also created reminiscences, such as at the end of the Improvisations, where Clara's theme occurs in a fragmentary way, beginning only at the middle, and trailing off before the end.

Thus an important way of creating a reminiscence is to begin somewhere other than the beginning. This makes use of the way we seem to store memory. Beginnings (of melodies, poems, the first letter of a name) serve as tags by which we recognize things and even search for them in memory. When a familiar melody is quoted from the beginning, our recognition of it is immediate and clear. When it is quoted from elsewhere than the beginning, or when its beginning is masked, our normal manner of recall is subverted, the initial intimations of recognition are experi-
enced as strange or distant, and full recall is delayed until the context of the beginning can be reconstructed.

At about the same time as the Variations, Brahms composed several Baroque dance movements and Clara Schumann played two in concert—a gavotte preceded by a sarabande. Brahms wrote to her, approving the juxtaposition of the dances, saying that they worked together in the same way that the movements of a sonata comprised a whole greater than its parts; he also expressed his joy at hearing her play them so beautifully. These dances were not published in Brahms’s lifetime, but I think Clara’s playing them must have remained long in his reminiscences of her; perhaps this explains why he reused them in later works in a reminiscent way.

The subject of the first gavotte appears in the Sextet in G Major, Op. 36, at the beginning of the scherzo. Its character as a gavotte is muted, and (in the absence of Robert Pascall’s recent publication of the two gavottes) one would scarcely have suspected that the scherzo was derivative of another composition. The movement involves the simple gavotte subject in a tight contrapuntal development; it is only a distant reminiscence of the gavotte, surely one Brahms did not intend for a wider public, since he left the original gavotte unpublished.

Two more of these dances are used in the second movement of the F-major String Quintet, Op. 88. This quintet has only three movements, and the middle movement suffices for both slow movement and scherzo, being the juxtaposition of Brahms’s earlier sarabande with the second gavotte. That this presentation of materials had a reminiscent value for Brahms can hardly be doubted; not only does it recall his prescription to Clara that the sarabande and the gavotte have greater effect played together, but also the very manner of presentation includes an effective formal reminiscence of the dances. The sarabande is stated first, reprise only (in C-sharp major); this suffices as the initial “slow movement” component; it is followed by a light-hearted gigue (in Amajor) contrasting as a scherzo would. The sarabande is repeated (again in C-sharp major) and followed by a presto (Amajor) which is a variation upon the gigue. But this presto is actually the old second gavotte complete; if a listener were to recognize this, then he would realize that the gigue had been a variation on the gavotte; the reminiscence is the realization that the theme for the variation comes after the variation and is a familiar piece. But this is not the end; the sarabande returns, now in the key of the gigue and gavotte (Amajor), and after stating the first reprise of the dance, it adds for the first time the elegant second reprise, closing in A major. The listener who knows the sarabande feels a sense of completion upon hearing the whole dance for the first time, in the key of the original dance. Moreover, the final statement of the sarabande asserts Brahms’s principle that the combination is more than the parts—the completion of the sarabande in the key of the other dances is a methodical working out of their interrelation. A movement of chamber music which does not end in its original key is a rarity for Brahms; it must have a special purpose here—highlighting the concluding form of the sarabande in its relation to the other dances. It is a gloriously ironical that, if Brahms’s wishes can be inferred, the listener was not to have known the dances. The composer himself was the principal beneficiary of those wonderful reminiscences, along with, it might be assumed, Clara and a few other intimates.

If the String Quintet gives a glimpse of pleasant reminiscences, another work reveals poignant ones—the Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60. This work has a curious history. Brahms and Joachim read it in 1856, but to the satisfaction of neither. Brahms revived it early in 1868, finally submitting it for publication in 1875; during that time, he made morbid remarks about it to friends, for example this bizarre note to Simrock:

You ought to publish a picture on the cover, namely a head with a pistol to it. Now you can get a notion of the music. For this purpose I will send you my photograph. You can use a blue frock coat, yellow trousers, and boots, since you seem to like to print colors.

These recurrent remarks all refer, as Kalbeck pointed out, to the conclusion of Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther, where a young man in love with another man’s wife commits suicide, and is found shot above the right eye, lying senseless, fully clothed, wearing his boots, a blue coat, and yellow vest. Though Brahms’s remarks all date from more than a decade after the conception of the work, they still must reflect his own unresolved feelings from a distance about the turbulent years of Schumann’s illness and the ultimate parting of Brahms and Clara Schumann.

The musical shape of the first movement is highly unusual: a sullen and tenuous first subject (incorporating what Eric Sams has suggested is a “Clara” motive) receives an agitated restatement; the second subject is, by the greatest contrast, a series of variations upon a most shapely and balanced theme, remote from the agitation of the first theme; the recapitulation pays little attention to the first

(continued on next page)
subject, slighting the tonic and moving quickly to the second subject, oddly in the dominant, new variations are added whose attenuated style makes them seem like reminiscences of the variations in the exposition and contributes to a sense of irreality, of an overlong escape into a remote world; this is interrupted by a tumultuous coda, which establishes the tonic only near its end. The recapitulation does not effect the classic synthesis of reconciliation of theme and key, but exacerbates the irreconcilability of its elements. This is clearly a movement of tragic character; it is not, however, the narration of a tragedy, but rather the drama of inner states of mind, a dialectic of emotions in response to a tragic situation, ranging between the real world of conflicting motives and an ideal world of grace and beauty.

Brahms's strong personal reminiscences in this work, conceived at the time of a personal crisis and revived after a long interval, explain his attachment to it. The explicit ironic references to Werther are for him uncharacteristically frank, and betray the intensity of his attachment to the work. The quartet was not well received by his own friends; even Clara Schumann did not like the first movement. Its personal significance must have been an important reason that he did not relegate it to the wastebasket, as he had done with so many early works of chamber music.

Reminiscence is a particular and important aspect of memory; the history of the term shows it to be a rich and complex one—including Plato's recall of knowledge from an earlier existence; Aristotle's systematic search of the memory for things not spontaneously recalled; the Romantics' focus upon it as an intimation of something from the distant past, savored for the nostalgia and the evocation of the infinite it engendered; its common use as an autobiographical search and exposition of things from a past more or less distant, imbued with the affective overtones of fond rumination; or even its clinical sense, in which epileptics spontaneously recall a remote but concrete memory string in connection with their malady, and in experimental psychology, as an unconscious improvement of recall over a period of days, or even years. All of these usages have in common the quintessential human experience of momentary penetration of the unconscious for things hidden there. Brahms's music occasionally gives aesthetic expression to just such an experience.

William Mahrt