

Brahms

SOCIETY

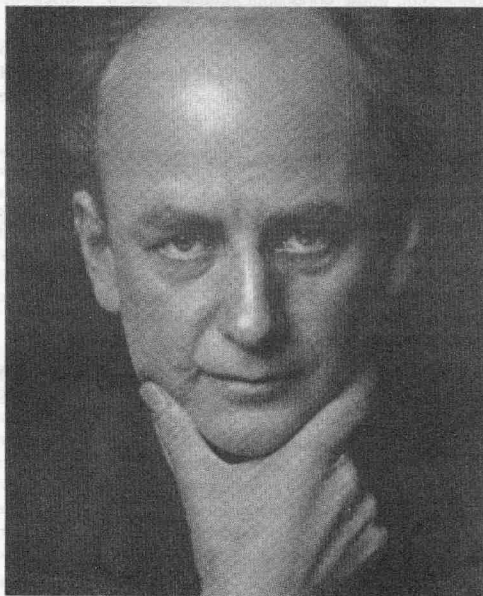
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Wilhelm Furtwängler's Brahms Essays of 1933–34 and the Clash of Political and Cultural Nationalism

Anniversaries furnish a useful vantage point from which to view shifts in their subjects' historical meaning. As it happened, the Brahms centennial in 1933 shortly followed Hitler's seizing of the German Chancellorship. A glut of nationally tinged tributes to Brahms reflected the politics of the day. Music history has paid little attention to Brahms reception during this period, particularly if compared with the heightened interest scholars have shown for the Nazis' use of music by Brahms's contemporaries Richard Wagner and Anton Bruckner. Among the most frequently cited and reprinted examples of nationalistically stamped Brahms literature from that time are a pair of essays by the pre-eminent German conductor of the day, Wilhelm Furtwängler. The first of two Brahms essays he penned originally served as the inaugural address for a week-long centennial festival in Vienna. This event was sponsored jointly by Vienna's Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde and the Berlin-based Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, of which Furtwängler was Chair. His essay offers a poignant example of Brahms reception during *die Wende* [turning point]—the designation for the official drive toward political, social, and cultural transformation that followed Hitler's coup—articulating a type of German nationalism that Furtwängler regarded as strictly cultural.

Brahms festivals were plentiful throughout Europe in 1933, especially in German-speaking lands. The celebrations in both Hamburg and Vienna, which naturally drew special attention, were disrupted by racist incidents. In Hamburg Alfred Rosenberg's Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur suspended festivities briefly because some Jewish performers had been hired for the event. A few weeks later, the larger Vienna Brahms-Fest was rocked by rumors that the composer's name derived from the Jewish "Abramson." It was in this climate that Furtwängler made his remarks on 16 May 1933.

Furtwängler himself remains a problematic figure because of his ambiguous relationship with the Nazi regime.



Wilhelm Furtwängler in the 1930s

Although he actively sought first protection and then safe passage for many Jewish members of the Berlin Philharmonic, his critics have contended that he may have been motivated less by compassion than by a will to exercise his influence. And, wittingly or not, Furtwängler provided the Nazis with a symbol of cultural legitimacy by staying in Germany and continuing to conduct there and in Austria throughout the war. In few accounts was Furtwängler a Nazi or an open anti-Semite. Rather, he believed in an idealized, purely "cultural" German nation beyond the reach of politics and the ideology of the Third Reich, which led him to opine, "There never was a Nazi Germany—only a Germany under the heel of the Nazis." Such statements are generally regarded nowadays as wishful denial, but we can better understand his view of Brahms if we accept that he sincerely

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held that vision of Germany. Nearly all of Furtwängler's essays on canonic German composers are laced with references to their German identity; many of them, indeed, focus on this point.

Thus, in his 1933 address Furtwängler places Brahms in an explicitly German artistic lineage:

Brahms belonged to the giants of German music, which begins with Bach and Handel, is carried forward by Beethoven, and in which a colossal physical power is combined with the greatest tenderness and sensitivity. His character and stature are thoroughly Nordic. To me he has always seemed like an offspring of the greatest old German or Dutch painters, such as van Eyck or Rembrandt, whose works unite intimacy, fantasy, and fervent, often impetuous vibrance with a wonderful sense of form.

Furtwängler writes that Brahms had "the special ability to live out and to feel the great suprapersonal community of the *Volk*," expressed in his music through the folk-like qualities of his melodies:

Like the great ones before him, Brahms was able to write a melody that was his down to the final detail, yet sounded like a true folk song. Or, expressed another way, he could write a melody that was an authentic, indisputable folk song—and yet undeniably also by Brahms. The process was completely different from that of someone like Mahler, for example. Mahler was a foreigner in the realm of folk song, no matter how ardently his restless soul wished and longed for it like a safe haven. He took it upon himself to create "artificial" folk songs. Brahms himself embodied the "Volk," embodied the "folk song."

On the face of it, little new ground is broken here. Early in Brahms's career commentators had identified folk-song qualities in his music; indeed, this has continued to be a familiar theme in Brahms reception. But any focus on an artist's *völkisch* credentials in Germany in 1933 warrants close scrutiny given the place of *das Volk* in Nazi ideology. And Furtwängler holds our attention when he bestows the same connection between folk song and personal style on another pair of composers: "Wagner and Bruckner possessed the same gift, and I have no hesitation in maintaining that it represents creativity at its highest and constitutes the mark of a genius." Echoes of folk music are less obvious in the compositions of these two composers (particularly Wagner), but *völkisch* rhetoric of this type would become rampant, especially in the cult of Bruckner that developed during the 1930s.

And consider Furtwängler's quite different appraisal, in the quotation above, of Gustav Mahler's use of folk melody. Furtwängler's comments are laced with the catchwords often found in anti-Semitic writings at the time: "foreigner," "restless," "artificial" (he does make complimentary remarks about Mahler in other essays). While Mahler may have been cited for his status as a modernist as much as for his Jewishness, the two identities were not easily separated at that time in Vienna—and elsewhere in Europe. For by 1933 a strong strain of anti-Semitism had become apparent in the cultural battle against modernism. Anti-Semitic music critics at least as far back as Wagner had first accused Jews of merely aping German speech in a futile

effort to make themselves sound German, then quickly drawn a connection to Jewish attempts to write music in the German tradition. Furtwängler merely omits the first step. By the early twentieth century, reactionary German ideologues had forged a dichotomy between pure art, which can spring only from *das Volk*, and the empty derivative art of Jews that had corrupted an originally folk-based German culture. Modernism was the focal point for those discontents.

It is an odd twist of history that in 1933 Brahms could be brandished as a man of the *Volk* and a tool of anti-modernism. After all, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century it had been Brahms's own values—rational thought, formal clarity, belief in scientific progress, loyalty to Bismarck and the Prussian state—that defined "modernity." Because of these values Brahms's supporters had seen him as a bulwark against the art and ideas of Wagner, who railed against the earlier brand of modernism. Apparently Furtwängler shared some of this sentiment; without criticizing "the incomparable figure of Wagner," he obliquely condemns "the developments that came with Wagner and which exercised such a fascination on [Brahms's] contemporaries." Brahms, by contrast, receives Furtwängler's praise for his "passionate objectivity."

The last paragraph in Furtwängler's address, presented in full below, sums up the picture of an anti-modernist, ultra-Germanic Brahms, a view that reached its peak in the political climate of Austria and Germany in the 1930s:

The *Volk*, the folk song from which Brahms descends is German. He was able to accomplish what he did by the strength of his Germanness. And not—this must also be stated—because he *wanted* to be a German, but rather because he *was* a German. He could be nothing else; and if his heart was open to all sorts of inspirations from beyond Germany (also a typically German attitude), his Germanic nature instinctually sought to overcome and subdue these influences. His art, in its bitterness and sweetness, in its apparent exterior hardness and inner resilience, in its imagination and abundance as in its self-discipline and compactness, is German. He was the last musician to reveal to all the world's eyes, with undeniable clarity, the greatness of German music.

After the Second World War, Furtwängler argued that this forcefully nationalistic reading of Brahms was not intended to support the new Nazi regime back home, but rather to stake out a cultural turf distinct from political developments of the time—an argument that his defenders are still making today. Certain turns of phrase make this claim hard to accept: for example, the emphasis (Furtwängler's) in the line "not because he *wanted* to be a German, but rather because he *was* a German," which seems almost openly anti-Semitic in light of Furtwängler's comments about Mahler. Furthermore, no comment about "overcoming and subduing" foreign inspiration made in the Germany (or Austria) of 1933 can be read so innocently as Furtwängler would have it. Yet Furtwängler apparently did distinguish between contemporary political reality and the nationalistic cultural agenda that he espoused. While his rhetoric may have stirred pan-German sentiments among the Austrians in his audience, he was speaking in a still independent Austria, which he claimed as a German

Mai 1933
Johannes Brahms-Fest, Wien
 (100 Jahr-Feier)

Ehrenschutz:
 Reichspräsident Paul von Hindenburg / Bundespräsident Wilhelm Miklas
 veranstaltet von der Deutschen Brahms-Gesellschaft (Berlin) gemeinsam
 mit der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien

Musikalische Leitung:
Wilhelm Furtwängler

Ausführende:
 Bronislaw Huberman, Pablo Casals, Arthur Schnabel, Paul Hindemith,
 Adelheid Armhold, Hans Hermann Nissen, Franz Schütz
 Die Wiener Philharmoniker — Der Singverein der Gesellschaft der
 Musikfreunde — Das Wiener Sinfonieorchester

Großer Musikvereins-Saal

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| <p>Dienstag, den 16. Mai, mittags 1/2 12 Uhr Eröffnungs-Feier*</p> <p>Mittwoch, den 17. Mai, abends 8 Uhr Ein deutsches Requiem</p> <p>Donnerstag, den 18. Mai, abends 8 Uhr Erstes Kammermusikkonzert Klaviertrio o-moll Klavierquartett A-dur Klaviertrio H-dur</p> | <p>Freitag, den 19. Mai, abends 8 Uhr Erstes Orchesterkonzert Trübsale Overtüre Sinfonie Nr. 4, 2. Satz (Korner) / Violino u. Cello (Hobmann-Casals) / Akademische Fervorrevue</p> <p>Samstag, den 20. Mai, abends 8 Uhr Zweites Kammermusikkonzert Klavierquartett o-moll / Klaviertrio C-dur / Klavierquartett g-moll</p> <p>Sonntag, den 21. Mai, mittags 1/2 12 Uhr Zweites Orchesterkonzert Variationen über ein Thema von Haydn Klavierkonzert B-dur (Arthur Schnabel) / Sinfonie Nr. 11, o-moll</p> |
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* Nie für gleiche Gies und Jose Festschreiben, welche
 Ertum zu allen Veranstaltungstagen langem haben.

Klavier: Bösendorfer

Preise der Abonnements für sämtliche Veranstaltungen: Schilling 95,-, 71,25,
 57,-, 47,50, 36,-, 25,25, 28,70, 23,75 usw.

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 Fiedlerstraße 7, zu richten, welches auch die reisenerleichterliche Durchführung übernimmt. Für die
 auswärtigen Feststellnehmer ist seitens der österreichischen Bundesbahnverwaltung
 auf den österreichischen Linien eine Ermäßigung von 15 1/2 % für die 1. und 2. sowie von 17 1/2 % für
 die 3. Wagenklasse gewährt.

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 schaft der Musikfreunde, Wien I, Bösendorfer Straße 12, Österreichisches Verkehrsbüro und Deutsche
 Brahms-Gesellschaft, Berlin-Schöneberg, Hauptstraße 35.

Schedule for the Vienna Brahms Festival, 1933

cultural, not political, province at the beginning of his address: "we belong to one and the same cultural world." Rightly or wrongly, he seems to have believed in the separation of culture and politics.

However vain his attempt to separate cultural from political nationalism may have been, Furtwängler nevertheless strikes a resonant chord with a constant in Brahms reception from the composer's own day down to the present, namely that his music belongs to an idealized cultural realm untouched by politics. One year after the centennial festival in Vienna, Furtwängler penned another (shorter) piece on the composer, entitled "Brahms and the Crisis of our Time." Much of his Vienna address is recapitulated and abbreviated in this essay. The notion of Brahms as an objective composer whose music speaks to posterity is, however, more pronounced than it had been one year before, as is clear in the opening paragraph:

Great artists, as we have observed more than once, often experience a gradual change of attitude towards their environment and their own art, a change that begins with middle age and continues thereafter. The complete correspondence between the demands of one's environment and the demands of one's own self, so easily attainable in youthful exuberance, begins to dissipate as one ages. . . . Thus is the way cleared for the most personal and the most universally relevant insight that such artists have to offer. We confront this process no matter whom we chose as an example,

whether we speak of Goethe or Rembrandt, Bach or Beethoven. Bound up with this increasing inner insight is a growing alienation from one's surroundings, an onset of loneliness, a transcendence of one's own time.

Brahms is plucked from his own time in a familiar gambit that links him more closely to other "timeless" masters than to his contemporaries. As the essay unfolds, that from which Brahms would have dissociated himself becomes clear: "He would relinquish neither himself nor his art to the spiritual crisis that has plagued Europe for the last fifty years"—in other words, modernism. In large part, Furtwängler is rehashing his anti-modernist thrust of a year before. But now, instead of pitting Brahms as a child of the Volk against modernism, he places him above the fray, a model to whom contemporary musicians and audiences can look for guidance out of the "Crisis of Our Time." A side effect of this maneuver—perhaps an intentional one on Furtwängler's part—is to render Brahms apolitical, unscathed by the worldly issues of his day, as well as by its artistic direction.

Brahms still maintains much the same reputation that Furtwängler afforded him: a composer of Classical instincts in a Romantic musical climate, the absolute-music composer *par excellence*. (Even the recent focus on allusion in his music does not change this fact: we are still speaking of "music about music.") But claiming universality and detachment for Brahms's art itself constitutes a kind of cultural nationalism. German intellectuals and artists had been making such claims about German art (especially music) since the early nineteenth century. Indeed, much of our modern attitude towards absolute music as an abstract and elevated art form developed from that philosophical tradition. One may read Furtwängler's comments as apolitical, and therefore disassociated from Nazi ideology, but they speak to a form of cultural nationalism that could be (and was) exploited by the Nazis themselves, *i.e.*, the elevated, transcendent, and spiritual status of German art music. In the end it is difficult to separate cultural from political nationalism as Furtwängler wished to do, just as it has been difficult for his biographers and other historians to agree on whether and to what degree he was complicit in, or resistant to, contemporaneous political realities. Even more difficult to determine is whether and/or how artists' attitudes and biases (cultural, political, etc.) should affect our appreciation and understanding of their creative work (the example of Wagner looms large here).

With the present essay I make no attempt to settle such scores. Rather, through a critical reading of Furtwängler's remarks on Brahms I hope to suggest how some of our own most common platitudes about Brahms's music (universality, objectivity, timelessness) derive in part from an earlier, long-standing tradition of German cultural nationalism.

Daniel Beller-McKenna

Original versions of the two essays critiqued here may be found in Wilhelm Furtwängler, Ton und Wort, 6th edition (Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1955). The author wishes to thank Marilyn McCoy for assistance with the translations used here.