

Brahms's Schubert

“My love for Schubert is a serious one,
precisely because it is not a passing fancy.”

During his lifetime, the name of Johannes Brahms (1833–97) was coupled with that of one illustrious composer after another. Heralded in Messianic terms by Robert Schumann in a breathless essay of 1853, the young Brahms was seen as the leading representative of “the Schumann school.” Eventually he came to be known as “Beethoven’s heir,” most famously through his First Symphony (1876), with the notorious allusion in its finale to the “Ode to Joy.” And in the cultural debates of the 1880s and beyond, Brahms was regularly—if also too uncritically—viewed as a polar opposite to Richard Wagner or Anton Bruckner (on whom was fastened the odd sobriquet “Wagnerian symphonist”). Less frequently, however, did the wider world acknowledge the strong kinship that Brahms felt toward the music of Franz Schubert (1797–1828). But as Brahms himself put it in the letter quoted above, written during his first sojourn in the Imperial City during the season 1862–63, his love for the Viennese composer was both lasting and deep.

Brahms was, indeed, a true Schubertian. Writing to Clara Schumann in the winter of 1856, he asked, “Aren’t you meeting with Ferdinand Schubert in Vienna? . . . Haven’t you even looked at the complete Schubert and the estate? The brother is said to have ordered everything in a room.” Clara evidently failed to take the bait. During the following decade, as Brahms himself began to spend more and more time in Vienna, he acquired a number of manuscript treasures for his own private library, which eventually included autographs of the *Quartettsatz* in C Minor, D. 703, a handful of Lieder, more than 100 dances for piano, and sketches for the great Piano Trio in E-flat, D. 927, together with a copy made by Ferdinand Schubert of the late Mass in E-flat, D. 950.

Brahms’s devotion was not merely that of a collector. He played a large role in spreading Schubert’s recognition and fame during the second half of the nineteenth century, not only as pianist and conductor—his performances with the baritone Julius Stockhausen, the violinist Joseph Joachim, and the orchestra and chorus of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde are especially notable in this regard—but also through the many arrangements and editions that he made of Schubert’s music. During the 1860s and 70s Brahms orchestrated nine Lieder, for example, and among his editing credits from the same period are the first editions of Schubert’s *12 Ländler*, D. 790 (1864), the piano score of the Mass in E-flat major (1865), the beautiful *Drei Clavierstücke*, D. 946 (1868), the *20 Ländler*, D. 366/814 (1869), the *Quartettsatz* (1870), and the song *Der Strom*, D. 565 (1877). Later, in 1884–85, Breitkopf & Härtel entrusted him with editing the two inaugural volumes of the Collected Edition, containing all seven of Schubert’s completed symphonies, together with the surviving music from the “Unfinished.”

How did this immersion in Schubert’s music influence Brahms’s own art? As early as January 1856, when he enlisted Clara Schumann’s aid in obtaining all of Schubert’s sonatas, Brahms had begun a careful study of the earlier master’s works that ultimately bore fruit in his own music. In many instances, Brahms’s musical response can be linked to a particular experience. In April 1861, for example, he accompanied Stockhausen in two performances of Schubert’s great song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*. The following July the baritone presented his accompanist with a six-volume set of Schubert’s complete Lieder, and in that same month Brahms set to work on what would become his own song cycle, the *Magelone-Romanzen*, Op. 33, giving an early sign of the conviction later expressed to his student Gustav Jenner that “there is no song of Schubert’s from which one cannot learn.” Similarly, the roots of the first movement of the *German Requiem* (dating from around April 1865) seem to lie at least in part in Brahms’s editorial work during that same period on Schubert’s Mass in E-flat, as a comparison of the two movements’ rather similar openings will show. And an even more striking coincidence of editorial and compositional activity emerges in the field of dance music. Brahms’s Waltzes, Op. 39 (January 1865), which the composer himself dubbed “two books of innocent waltzes in Schubertian form,”

succeed his edition of Schubert's *12 Ländler* by only a few months; in the same way, Brahms followed up his later edition of Schubert's *20 Ländler* (May 1869) with his own charming collection of *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, Op. 52 (composed during the ensuing summer).

Brahms's involvement with Schubert during the 1860s (and earlier) found perhaps its most profound expression in the chamber music completed during the first half of the decade, an especially fertile time that saw the publication of the Cello Sonata in E Minor (Op. 38), the Horn Trio (Op. 40), the Piano Quartets in G Minor and A Major (Opp. 25 and 26), the Piano Quintet in F Minor (Op. 34), and the String Sextets in B-flat and G Major (Opp. 18 and 36). The influence of Schubert's sonata forms comes through most forcefully in the opening movements of these works. As James Webster has demonstrated, nearly all their most distinctive features can be traced back to the Viennese master: long lyrical thematic groups in closed forms, modal contrasts on a grand scale, bipartite second groups that manage to integrate what sound like startlingly remote harmonies, and thematic transformations at the heart of certain development sections. By the same token, the last movements in several of these works unfold an unusual formal type—a kind of combination of sonata and rondo—with clear precedents in Schubert's chamber music works. The finale of the Piano Quartet in A Major, Op. 26, moreover, not only displays this Schubertian form but includes thematic resonances to both the finale of Schubert's String Quintet in C Major and the Rondo *Brilliant* in B Minor for Violin and Piano, D. 895 (a particular favorite of Joseph Joachim and Brahms in their concerts together).

Donald Francis Tovey pointed to the F Minor Piano Quintet as the “climax of [this] first maturity,” and to Schubert as Brahms's single greatest source of influence at this time. But Schubertian lyricism and interest in harmonic color are joined at every turn in this work by Beethovenian dynamism and integration of motive and form. Two of Beethoven's own masterpieces in F minor, the “Appassionata” Sonata, Op. 57, and *Quartetto Serioso*, Op. 95, loom especially large. At the same time, however, the Piano Quintet stands out as a truly impressive example of Brahms's favorite technique of what Schoenberg termed “developing variation,” whereby a collection of only a few motives, continually reworked, is sufficient to sustain long stretches of music.

This characteristic blending of Schubertian and Beethovenian elements permeates the orchestral works, as well. The First Symphony offers some compelling examples. Although the main theme of Brahms's slow movement begins with a clear reference to the opening of Beethoven's “Pastoral” Symphony, the second theme, with its duet between oboe and clarinet, offers nothing less than a homage to the slow movement of Schubert's “Unfinished,” in which we encounter many significant points of similarity. In the last movement, on the other hand, the allusion to the choral finale of Beethoven's Ninth that comes in the main theme follows an equally critical reference to Schubert: indeed, the “breakthrough” Alphorn theme of the slow introduction that plays the decisive role in the work's overall dramatic trajectory “from darkness to light” brings to mind the luminous opening theme given to the solo horn in Schubert's “Great” Symphony in C Major. And Schubert's music resonates in each of Brahms's subsequent symphonies. To cite only three examples: the second theme of the Second Symphony, duly famous for its echo of Brahms's *Wiegenlied*, derives even more clearly from the second theme of Schubert's String Quintet in C Major; the opening harmonic progression of the same quintet by Schubert forms the basis of the beginning of the Third Symphony; and the opening unaccompanied melody for French horn in the second movement of the Fourth Symphony may offer yet another reference to the “Great” C Major.

Brahms's most direct allusion to a work by his Viennese predecessor, coming in the Thirteen Canons for Female Voices, Op. 113, is also among his last. To be sure, these pieces date mostly from the 1850s and 60s; but the set concludes with a setting of Friedrich Rückert's poem “Einförmig ist der Liebe Gram” (“Monotonous is love's sorrow”) that appears to have been written much nearer to the publication date of 1891. The altos provide an appropriately “monotonous” accompaniment in a two-part canon on the single word “einförmig.” Over this support sounds a separate four-part canon in which the sopranos put Rückert's words to the tune of *Der Leiermann*, the last song in Schubert's bleak song cycle *Winterreise*, in which the ill-fated protagonist meets his death to the strains of a solitary hurdy-gurdy player. Malcolm MacDonald has recently suggested that

with this melancholic little canon Brahms was “effectively writing Romanticism’s epitaph,” and that seems an especially apt description when we recall that the one hundred years separating the birth of Schubert from the death of Brahms span almost precisely the years of the Romantic Century.

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