

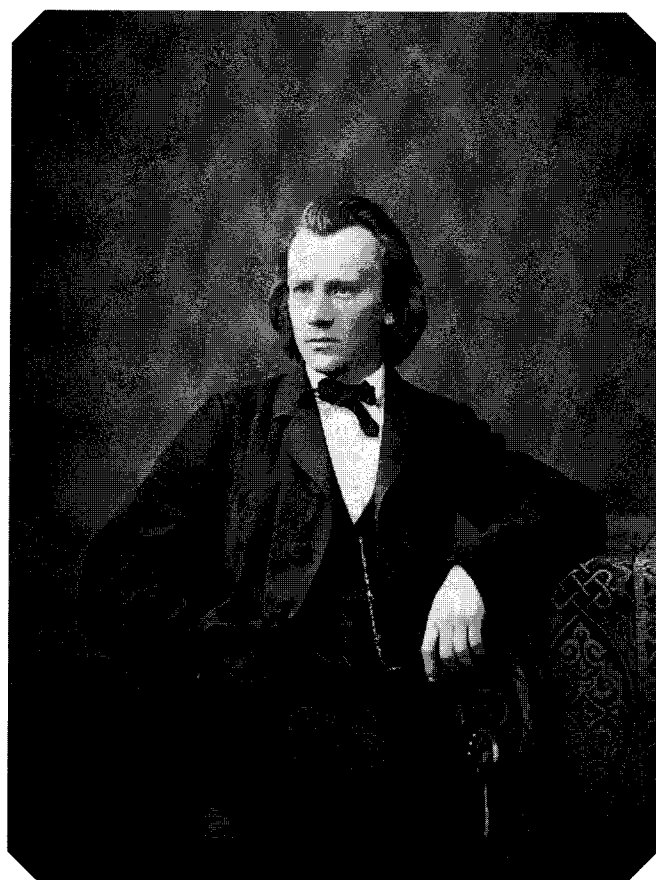
Brahms

Great Expectations—Faint Praise:
Brahms's *Rinaldo* in
His Century and Ours

Part I

Johannes Brahms's cantata *Rinaldo*, Op. 50, composed 1863–68, is his only large-scale composition for male chorus and orchestra. Together with *A German Requiem* (completed 1866–68), the *Alto Rhapsody* (1869), and the *Song of Triumph* and *Song of Destiny* (1871), it springs from Brahms's most intensive period of choral-orchestral writing. Yet *Rinaldo* is the least known of Brahms's large works. It was performed fewer than a dozen times in his lifetime, and is the least recorded of his major pieces today. Tracing issues raised in *Rinaldo*'s reception during Brahms's lifetime through his correspondence and the critiques of early performances reveals some of the root causes of the cantata's obscurity and forms Part I of this article. Part II will consider *Rinaldo* through the biographical and work-study literature that continues to influence its reception.

The text of *Rinaldo* is a 146-line poem by Goethe based on an important scene in Torquato Tasso's 16th-century epic poem of the First Crusades, *Gerusalemme Liberata*. In Tasso's story, the heroic Christian knight, Rinaldo, is spirited away by a powerful and seductive enchantress, Armida. She magically conjures an island paradise, where Rinaldo remains, captivated by her charms and literally "under her spell," while the army at Jerusalem languishes without its champion. Goethe's theme is Rinaldo's transformation from an enraptured lover back into a strong, independent hero. The poem opens with a chorus of men setting sail to find Armida's enchanted island ("To the shore! To the ship!"). They find Rinaldo alone in a magical garden ("Oh let me stay here a moment longer"), and at first attempt to break Armida's spell gently ("Oh, upright words and a friend's summons now heal his wounds and solace his hours"). As Rinaldo sees Armida approaching, they realize that only a bold stroke will "awaken him from his dreams" and place before Rinaldo a diamond shield in which his image is reflected. Immediately the knight is profoundly affected ("Must I see myself reflected so deeply degraded



Johannes Brahms, photographed by
C. von Jagemann (Vienna, mid-1860s)

thus?"), and the spell is broken. Leaving the island, Rinaldo looks back and sees Armida a second time, at first weeping for his return, but then angrily destroying the enchanted paradise ("She looks and acts just like demons do"). Rinaldo reflects on his release from "the depths of destruction," yet Goethe hints at the hero's inner turmoil as the knights embark with winds "favorable" for sailing, yet also "unfavorable" for Rinaldo, for they push him away from Armida.

Brahms owned an edition of Goethe's collected works published by Cotta in 1860 inscribed "18. Jan. 1862." Based on this date of acquisition and on markings found in the volumes, this edition was probably the source for *Rinaldo*'s

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(*Rinaldo*, continued)

text. It contains five extended poems that Goethe called “Cantatas,” including *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*, which Mendelssohn had set to music in 1832, and *Rinaldo*. Brahms had conducted Mendelssohn’s cantata in Detmold in 1859 and was familiar with Tasso’s epic poem from Friedrich Martin Duttonhof’s translation, which he had acquired in Düsseldorf in 1855. However, while these experiences may have drawn his attention to the text of Goethe’s “*Rinaldo*,” other, more practical forces were also at play. In early 1863 the Aachener Liedertafel announced a competition for a large work for male chorus and orchestra with a prize of 400 Thaler. In a letter to Joseph Joachim in the summer of 1863, Brahms indicated that he intended to submit *Rinaldo* to this competition, although he ultimately failed to do so. (First prize was awarded for *Heinrich der Finkler*, composed by Franz Wüllner, who some years later admitted that it was “lucky” Brahms “came too late” for the competition, as he [Wüllner] needed the money.)

Rinaldo is arguably Brahms’s most operatic composition and it contains features Brahms considered to be important in a dramatic composition: *Rinaldo* is portrayed as a realistic hero; the characters interact dramatically and naturally; and the work consists of self-contained musical numbers (ariosos, arias, and choruses) that delineate mood. Orchestral and vocal bridging passages, including recitatives and ariosos, connect these numbers and allow for a continuous progression of the action until the final chorus, which stands alone. The independence of the *Schlusschor* is a faithful response to Goethe’s sectionalization of the text, but it also serves a dramatic purpose, suggesting the short lapse of time that allows *Rinaldo* and his comrades to put out to sea.

The reception history of *Rinaldo* arguably begins in 1863, several years before its completion and premiere, when Brahms characteristically circulated parts of the work in manuscript to friends, requesting their comments. In a letter written to Joachim in June of that year Brahms enclosed a section of the new work, writing that he intended “to make 300 [sic] Thaler” from it (*Brief*. 6:12). Joachim replied favorably, noting particularly Brahms’s melodic contrasting of the characters and the dramatic effect of the music. However, he suggested that some of the harmonic shifts in the music were “a little ‘ungoetheische’” (*Brief*. 6:13–14). Brahms replied that he was very busy with choral rehearsals with the Singakademie in Vienna and because of this he had “even less mood than desire” to implement the changes Joachim suggested (*Brief*. 6:15–16). “The whole first part is now being copied,” Brahms continued; “it is a question of whether I would then send it back [to be recopied]?” Yet, Brahms mused in closing that he ought to send *Rinaldo* to Joachim again “for further consideration.” It is clear from this letter that Brahms at least considered Joachim’s comments, but the final score of *Rinaldo* appeared without any of the suggested alterations.

Clara Schumann also received excerpts from the cantata in the summer of 1863. In October, she wrote enthusiastically to Brahms: “[*Rinaldo*] is a magnificent, vital piece, [full of] extraordinary dramatic fire, so interesting throughout

[and] always compelling. It must make a great effect, provided that, of course, you have strong tenors; this make me somewhat anxious, as they often lie enormously high” (*Litzmann1*, 1:430). There is little evidence that *Rinaldo* was actually finished at this point, despite Brahms’s letter to the Aachener Liedertafel competition organizer (coincidentally, Franz Wüllner!) dated October 1, 1863, requesting an extension of the deadline for “finishing touches” (*Brief*. 15:41–43).

Five years later, in August 1868, Brahms returned to *Rinaldo*, noting in a letter to Karl Rheinthal that he had just finished “a large new final chorus...so that through this winter I will be rid of it.” (*Brief*. 3:21.) This comment, along with the entry for *Rinaldo* in Brahms’s handwritten catalogue of compositions—“Sommer 1863 (einen 2ten Schlusschor Sommer 68)” —indicates that a “first” final chorus has been lost or destroyed.

After writing the new final chorus, Brahms quickly prepared a piano reduction of *Rinaldo* in September, and sent the vocal and orchestral parts to Simrock for publication in October. In the accompanying letter, Brahms requested that the premiere (Vienna, 28 February 1869) serve as a “test” performance. Gustav Walter would sing the title role, with Brahms conducting the Akademischer Gesangverein Wien and Wiener Hofopernorchester. (Walter, a Bohemian lyric tenor who performed at the Vienna State Opera House from 1857, was well known for performances of Mozart’s operas and Schubert’s Lieder.) After slight revisions and corrections, the first edition of the full score appeared from Simrock’s firm in August of 1869.

Brahms’s quick publication of *Rinaldo* after finishing the second *Schlusschor* went against Clara Schumann’s advice. “Do you intend to publish your *Rinaldo* now?” she wrote in late 1868. “Forgive me for appearing to question the advisability of this so soon after the publication of the [German] Requiem. Is it [*Rinaldo*] important enough to follow the Requiem?” (*Litzmann2*, p. 233.) Brahms replied somewhat glibly that “it wouldn’t have been as worthwhile to sell it [*Rinaldo*] before the Requiem, now it will bring in 100 L[ouis]” (*Avins*, p. 369). Brahms probably hoped the popularity of the *Requiem* would make *Rinaldo* more attractive to Simrock, bringing in a larger “up-front” honorarium and/or that Simrock would be more interested in *Rinaldo* because the *Requiem* had been published by a rival firm. Moreover, it is clear that, after five years, Brahms simply wanted to see the cantata finished, as indicated by his letters to Rheinthal and Simrock. He obviously felt *Rinaldo* was worthy of publication, and thus also worthy to be available to the public—to find its own level in the music world.

During rehearsals for the premiere in 1869, Brahms wrote to Simrock that “the Akademiker are singing delightfully, and the rehearsals with the young, fresh people are most enjoyable” (*Brief*. 9:64–65). After the performance, Brahms reported to his publisher that he “had a lot of fun and [had] no regrets. But then it was as good as I shall live to see again.” He described Walter’s singing as “exceptionally beautiful” and the chorus of 300 young singers as “excellent.” But he added that although *Rinaldo* was not “energetically hissed, as my Requiem was last year...I can hardly speak of a success, either...I cannot use the fact that

I was recalled more than three times to think in terms of a success. That, incidentally, is why I ask you to think the matter over some more! It is an extensive work, after all, and that it gave me and some enthusiasts pleasure isn't saying much" (*Avins*, p. 389).

After the premiere, Brahms added tempo indications and inserted Goethe's text at the beginning, preceded by two stanzas from Tasso's original *Gerusalemme Liberata* (translated into German by Friedrich Koppen). The preliminary text from Tasso, Brahms later observed to the Bach scholar Philipp Spitta, provided a suitable introduction to Goethe's poem and would familiarize audiences with Rinaldo's situation at the opening of the cantata.

The most significant post-publication musical revision was a ten-bar deletion near the end of the first movement. In these measures (which were retained in all copies of the score in Brahms's lifetime and are still present in the published piano score), the tenor melody rises to a high B-flat and a new accompaniment motive is introduced. Brahms may have deleted these measures because of their difficulty, perhaps thinking of Clara Schumann's comments, his own experience at the premiere, or apprehensions about finding a suitable soloist beside Gustav Walter. Clara continued to be concerned about the difficulty of the work, observing after the Leipzig premiere in 1874 that *Rinaldo* was still "very much spoiled by the tenors." Given his comments to Simrock prior to and just after the Vienna premiere, Brahms obviously did not initially share her concern.

A large new work by Brahms was an important event, and the Vienna premiere was reviewed in Leipzig and Berlin as well as in Vienna. The first review to appear was by the Wagner enthusiast Leopold Zellner in his Viennese organ, *Blätter für Theater, Musik und bildende Kunst*. Zellner called *Rinaldo* a "failed creation," criticizing Brahms for using old-fashioned forms, distorted melodic invention, and a general lack of musical clarity. The "baroque" quality that permeated the choral writing and the "banality" of the expression—including what Zellner referred to as the "yodeling motive in the finale"—left him to conclude that *Rinaldo* was a "total musical waste."

A week later, Theodor Billroth reported on the Vienna premiere for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. Billroth found Brahms's portrayal of the hero very realistic and human. He praised Brahms for not giving in to the emotional excesses of Wagnerian heroes. "Everything is imbued with artistic solemnity," Billroth wrote; "the musically elegant proportion is interesting, without making the listener restless." Billroth's only concern was the reference to a "second" appearance of Armida in the text, when in fact she is never seen on stage. (Brahms followed Goethe's poem exactly, resulting in a total silencing of the female character; her presence is only described by others.)

Approximately two months later a review of the Vienna premiere by Hermann Starcke was printed in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, the venerable and widely-circulated journal, founded by Robert Schumann, that assiduously promoted the music of the New German School under the editorial tenure of Franz Brendel [1845–1868] and his successor, C.F. Kahnt. Starcke's comments were similar to

Zellner's, but he augmented them with new (and possibly inaccurate) information. Starcke claimed, for example, that most of the audience left the theatre during the performance. Whether Starcke was at the performance is not known, but the fact that Brahms reported taking three curtain calls in his letter to Simrock suggests at least an exaggerated, if not inaccurate, report. The similarity of Starcke's review to Zellner's invites comparison: Zellner writes of the "unproductiveness" of Brahms's melodic invention and the "excessive repetition," while Starcke notes the "lack of clarity of musical phrase" due to "copious repetitions;" Zellner railed against Brahms's "Baroque" tendencies, and Starcke criticizes the frequent use of polyphony. Zellner concluded by calling the work a "waste," Starcke by branding it "unsuccessful."

In the reviews of the Viennese premiere evaluated here, a Brahms-contra-Wagner undercurrent in the press cannot be ignored. Zellner was known to favor Wagner and Starcke's review may have been intended to unbalance public opinion after Billroth's more positive comments.

In an unusually candid sequence of letters with Spitta, Brahms revealed his own perspective on some of the issues that surfaced in reviews of *Rinaldo*'s premiere. In a letter to Brahms of 1 March 1869, Spitta described *Rinaldo* as "full of the truest musical beauty and ingenious details" (*Brief*, 16:31–32). But he had some questions about the abrupt opening of the drama. Replying in February of 1870, Brahms indicated that Spitta was "the first one who [...] seeks the basis for my concept. Since I do not normally open my mouth of my own accord to speak for my things, you are also the first one to whom I am making my thoughts known" (*Avins*, p. 387). Brahms agreed with Spitta that *Rinaldo*'s plot was not widely known and might confuse audiences at the opening, indicating that this was why he had included a translated verse from Tasso's original text in the printed program. "A descriptive introduction," Brahms wrote, "followed by a brisk chorus of knights who show themselves to be quite unmoved by the beautiful enchantress, didn't appeal to me for a variety of reasons" (*Avins*, p. 387).

Like Billroth, Spitta was concerned about Armida's "second" appearance. He queried Brahms about following Goethe's text literally by retaining Armida's silence. If Armida's power over Rinaldo was so strong as to threaten his return to duty, Spitta felt that she must at least say something in the drama. Brahms, in a remarkably revealing response, admitted that he "actually thought of none of this when I first took up the poem. I simply found myself on the island with the knights, and to this day still don't find that so silly" (*Avins*, p. 388).

In the first fifteen years after its completion, only eight complete performances of *Rinaldo* are known to have occurred: premieres in Vienna in 1869, Jena in 1870, Leipzig and Cologne in 1874, Darmstadt in 1878, Pressburg in 1882, Dresden in 1884, and a second performance in Vienna, also in 1884. Performances of just the final chorus took place in Coblenz in 1872 and in Vienna in 1884, and one of just the solo tenor part in Munich in 1873. In the same interval, two major *Werkkritiken* appeared in widely read music periodi-

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(*Rinaldo*, continued)

cals, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*. The resulting body of criticism, somewhat distanced geographically and philosophically from the heated musico-political environment of the Vienna premiere, appeared to be more objective about the work itself.

Following the Jena premiere in 1870, the organist and Liszt pupil Alexander Gottschalg described *Rinaldo* in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* as “one of the most worthwhile new works from Johannes Brahms,” a striking statement from a Wagner supporter in a journal not known for its support of Brahms. Two years later, an anonymous critic praised the Coblenz performance in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* as “wonderfully poetic, steeped in romantic magic, [its] form and content outstanding.”

In his 1870 *Werkkritik* of *Rinaldo* for the same journal Hermann Deiters analyzed Goethe’s poem insightfully, describing the psychological progression of the hero, comparing Tasso’s and Goethe’s texts, and praising Goethe’s characterization of Rinaldo as a young lover, “imbued with passion.” He also suggested that Brahms had succeeded in setting Goethe’s words “in their depth and succinctness,” true to the poet’s intentions. Deiters believed Brahms had succeeded in this. Deiters’s musical analysis focused on recurring melodic ideas, to which he gave leitmotiv-type names such as “Motiv der Bitte Rinaldo’s,” and on general melodic similarities found throughout the cantata. Deiters also praised Brahms’s orchestration: “in every relationship, expression, feeling, structure of the whole, gradual development and finally also instrumentation is this [first] movement a masterpiece.”

In a rather daring move in 1873, Hermann Levi presented solo arias from *Rinaldo* at his debut concert as Hofkapellmeister in Munich. Reviews were mixed. An anonymous critic for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* praised the singing of the great Wagnerian tenor, Heinrich Vogl, but criticized the music as “ordinary” and “not to be counted amongst the best.” On the other hand, Friedrich von Stetter wrote in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* that the music presented “a genuine, true feeling,” making von Stetter want to hear more of the work. Both reviewers noted the difficulty of the solo part and that Vogl had sung his role “masterfully.”

Philipp Spitta, hoping to forestall criticism of *Rinaldo* in advance of the Leipzig performance in 1874, passed on Brahms’s rationale for the work’s opening to Dr. Hermann Kretzschmar, who was preparing a *Werkkritik* for the *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*. Kretzschmar’s *Werkkritik* echoed Billroth’s 1869 review of *Rinaldo*’s Viennese premiere and reflected the information he received from Spitta. He began by providing some textual background, describing Goethe’s poem as “a model text for a dramatic cantata.” Not surprisingly, he supported Brahms’s handling of the opening of the work, writing that with a few “strange calls in the wind instruments [...] a magical quivering sound in the violins [...] and we are on the Magic Island.” Kretzschmar acknowledged that the tenor part was difficult, but concluded that *Rinaldo* was nonetheless a very valuable composition.

By this time, *Rinaldo* was mentioned less frequently in the

press. Comments in Brahms’s correspondence were mostly initiated by colleagues and generally concerned practical arrangements for upcoming performances. Carl Reinecke was interested in mounting a performance of *Rinaldo* in Leipzig in 1874 and asked Brahms to conduct it, but Brahms replied that he thought performing *Rinaldo* would be “useless” (*Brief*, 3:134). Probably recalling the hostile reception he had received in Leipzig in January of 1859 following the premiere of his first piano concerto, Brahms added, “The Leipzigers will understand [*Rinaldo*] all the less on account of my arriving.” In this context, Brahms’s comment that the cantata was “useless” can be understood to indicate his belief that this was not a work that would improve his reception in Leipzig. And while it is tempting to suggest that Brahms may have had a change of heart with respect to the cantata, the fact that he had recently completed and premiered several other large-scale choral works—including the *Alto Rhapsody*, *Song of Destiny*, and the *Song of Triumph*—may suggest that he had simply “moved on” from *Rinaldo* and was no longer willing to “look back” to this earlier work.

Fifteen years after its premiere, *Rinaldo* was performed again in Vienna, and was reviewed by Eduard Hanslick, who expressed concern about Armida’s “second” appearance, but unlike Billroth, thought the music was “not vivid enough.” Hanslick went further, suggesting that the shield scene might have been more effective had Brahms used more orchestral “colors,” “like Mendelssohn [had]...in *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*,” and more successful if he had added “a few drops of Tannhäuserblut” to the hero.

On balance, most of the documented critiques predicted success for *Rinaldo*. Many negative comments can be attributed to media tension between Wagner and Brahms supporters. Unfortunately, cancellations of performances due to difficulties with soloists or complications of programming plagued *Rinaldo* as well. Changing attitudes toward classical-based texts and the decreasing interest in men’s and women’s same-voice choirs also contributed to a decline in interest in works such as *Rinaldo* at the end of the 19th century. But it is also true that subsequent scholarly discussion in the 20th century, which ideally *could* have provided a re-evaluation of *Rinaldo*’s value, did not revive interest in the cantata. This will be discussed in Part II of this article.

Mary Ingraham

Citations in this article use the following abbreviations: *Avins* = Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters. Selected and Annotated by Styra Avins. Translations by Josef Eisinger and Styra Avins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). *Brief*. = *Johannes Brahms Briefwechsel*, 19 vol. to date (Vol. I–XVI Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1907–1922; vol. XVII–XIX, Tutzing: Hans Schneider Verlag, 1991–1995). *Litzmann1* = *Clara Schumann, Johannes Brahms. Briefe aus den Jahren 1853–1896*, ed. Berthold Litzmann, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1927). *Litzmann2* = *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms, 1853–1896*, ed. Berthold Litzmann, anon. tr., 2 vols. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1927, repr. New York: Vienna House, 1973). For further information on reviews of Brahms’s *Rinaldo*, see Angelika Horstmann, *Untersuchungen zur Brahms-Rezeption der Jahre 1860–1880* (Hamburg: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1986) and Katharina Hofmann, “Die Kantate ‘Rinaldo’ von Johannes Brahms. Genese—Rezeption—Struktur,” M.A. Thesis, Christian-Albrechts Universität Kiel, 1992.

American Brahms Society News

Geiringer Scholarship Awarded

The recipient of the 2006 Karl Geiringer Scholarship in Brahms Studies is Paul Berry, who is completing a doctoral dissertation at Yale University entitled *Memory, Inspiration, and Compositional Process in the Solo Songs of Johannes Brahms*.

This study offers a new perspective on Brahms's process of composition that takes into account not only the words and notes, but also the extra-musical motivations that might have inspired those compositional choices and informed their initial reception. The dissertation interprets six clusters of songs as products of inextricably linked musical decision-making and personal deliberation, recreating plausible paths for Brahms's compositional thought and its connections to his interpersonal relationships based on the music and documents he left behind.

Mr. Berry emphasizes the relationship between the composer's memory and his conscious musical decision-making, seeking evidence of Brahms's recollections by considering the incorporation into a new song of a complete polyphonic complex unique to earlier works and by examining correspondence, diaries, published recollections, autograph manuscripts, and surviving materials from Brahms's library that reveal how the earlier works acquired their own private connotations for certain members of Brahms's circle.

Mr. Berry's \$1,500 stipend will assist him in his final year of dissertation writing.

Eighteenth Annual Geiringer Scholarship

The American Brahms Society is seeking applicants for its Karl Geiringer Scholarship in Brahms Studies, which is awarded annually, as meritorious candidates present themselves. The competition is open to students in the final stages of preparing a doctoral dissertation at a university in North America. Work relating to Brahms should form a significant thread within the dissertation, but it need not be the only one. The Selection Committee welcomes applications from students whose research might be concentrated instead on music by members of the Brahms circle, questions concerning musical life in later 19th-century Vienna, and so forth. Only projects that demonstrate significant original thought and research will be deemed competitive. The decision to award the scholarship rests with the Board of Directors; the winner will be announced in November 2006, following the regular annual meeting of the Board.

Completed applications will consist of 1) a cover letter, including the applicant's address, phone number, e-mail address, and institutional affiliation; 2) a concise description of the project (no more than 500 words), in which the applicant's methods and conclusions are stated clearly; and 3) a brief account (no more than 250 words) detailing the aspect of the project to be completed with assistance from the Karl Geiringer Scholarship, including travel plans, if appropriate. These materials should be submitted, in triplicate, to Walter Frisch, Chair, Geiringer Scholarship Com-

mittee, Department of Music, Columbia University, MC 1820, 2960 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, and must be postmarked no later than 1 May 2007. The application must be supported by two confidential letters of recommendation, including one from the dissertation advisor; these should be sent directly to the Chair of the Geiringer Scholarship Committee and must also be postmarked by 1 May. Finalists in the competition will be notified by 15 May and asked to submit a sample chapter from their dissertation.

New Volume of Brahms Studies

In association with the American Brahms Society, Harmonie Park Press of Sterling Heights, Michigan, has published *On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies by Karl Geiringer*, revised and edited by George S. Bozarth and with a foreword by Walter Frisch. This 400-page book collects together the essays and articles on Brahms that Professor Geiringer produced over a period of more than sixty years. Intended as a companion volume to Geiringer's classic Brahms biography, the book includes chapters on Brahms as a reader and collector of books and music; Brahms and Schumann's last years; the Ettlinger sisters' amusing picture and verse book of Brahms, Hermann Levi, and Julius Allgeyer; Brahms as a composer of symphonies and string concertos; Brahms's final days; and Brahms's correspondence with his family, C. F. Pohl, George Grove, Eusebius Mandyczewski, Friedrich Chrysander, George Henschel, Dvorak, and Wagner.

Harmonie Park Press is offering a 30% discount to ABS members for a limited time. To receive this discount, please send a personal check for \$49 plus \$6.00 for shipping for each copy (payable to the American Brahms Society) to: American Brahms Society, School of Music, Box 353450, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195. (If you send this with your dues, please write separate checks.) This offer is good through 1 February 2007.

Brahms on Welte-Mignon Piano Rolls

The Augustinermuseum in Freiburg, with support from the American Brahms Society and the University of Washington, has released on the Tacet label (TACET 990) the first of two CDs of the piano music of Johannes Brahms as recorded on Welte-Mignon piano rolls. Made between 1905 and 1925, these rolls preserve not only pitch and rhythm, but also much of the performers' dynamics, offering the earliest sound documentation of nearly all of Brahms's compositions for solo piano. Among the pianists represented are two of Clara Schumann's students—Fanny Davies and Carl Friedberg—as well as Brahms's friend Arthur Nikisch (playing Hungarian Dances), the conductor Emil Paur, and the pianists Rudolf Ganz, Ossip Gabrilovich, and Walter Gieseking. Each of the performances reveals an interpretative freedom expected in the nineteenth century, but seldom exercised by performers today.

George Bozarth, who directed this recording project, is currently seeking to establish an ABS members's discount. Those interested in purchasing this recording should contact him via email at brahms@u.washington.edu.

Duo Pianists Record Brahms

Pianists Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn are in the final stages of a landmark project that has spanned more than a decade: the recording of Brahms's entire output for piano, four hands, and for two pianos, including both original compositions and arrangements, in a series of CDs being released by NAXOS (1995 to the present). Many of the arrangements are recorded here for the first time. The following interview was carried out in email installments between April and October 2005. Christian Köhn spoke on behalf of the duo.

Christian Köhn, let me start by asking you about the decision to take on this unprecedented project. How did you and Silke-Thora Matthies come to know this repertoire and to envision the project?

The fact that as a duo we feel an especially close connection with Brahms has a very simple basis: In our very first joint performance, on October 31, 1988 in Detmold, we played the Waltzes, Op. 39, for piano, four hands. The idea of establishing a permanent ensemble grew out of this experience. When we made an initial offer of various programs to the HNH Company (Naxos and Marco Polo labels) for a CD recording twelve years ago, these included a Brahms program with selected original works for piano, four hands. The founder of the company, Klaus Heymann, surprised us with a response that consisted more or less of "if Brahms, then everything." At that time, neither we nor Heymann knew what this actually would mean. Our subsequent research produced a list of 38 works, enough music to fill eighteen CDs. To our astonishment, Klaus Heymann was undaunted by this, and thus we began with the first recordings in 1994.

Brahms was particularly fond of music for piano, four hands. How would you describe the experience of playing his arrangements, as compared with his original works for piano duet?

The differences are amazingly few. In the arrangements, Brahms does not duplicate the compositional texture of the originals as much as he writes a satisfying and variously differentiated piano sound, just as he does in his original piano, four-hand works. That is very clear in the arrangements of the string quartets, where he does not try to transfer the four parts to the piano in a linear fashion, but rather takes advantage of the particular qualities of the piano sound from the outset—by doubling voices in octaves and filling out chords, for example. Without knowing the original, then, one can hear or play long stretches of the arrangements as independent works rather than as transcriptions. Of course, there are passages that are somewhat inconvenient or not pianistic, passages that presumably would have been composed differently in a true piano piece.

I imagine that you knew many, perhaps all of Brahms's works in their standard versions before you began playing the arrangements. How has your experience of bringing these arrangements to a concert level and recording them changed your perception of these compositions?

The piano transcriptions have distinct principal advan-

tages and disadvantages in comparison with the originals. A decrease in variety of color is countered, as a rule, by an increase in transparency and rhythmical precision. If one plays the transcriptions repeatedly, one misses these qualities in the original; many things seem somewhat unclear, not well enough articulated rhythmically, and at times insufficiently virtuosic. On the other hand, we are motivated by the sound of the original to take full advantage of the tone color palette of the piano, which is enhanced considerably when four hands are playing.

Brahms's arrangements were performed very rarely in his day. Yet because these versions were played in the home they became familiar to the public, often more familiar than the standard versions. How have modern audiences and pianists reacted to your concerts and CDs?

Most listeners say that through this new cloak of sound they discover new aspects of the works or hear the very familiar in new ways. The role of the arrangements, then, has been inverted over time: They were created mainly to disseminate that which was unfamiliar, but today they can provide a service to what has become all too familiar.

Going back to a point you made earlier, I agree that one can hear long stretches of the string quartet arrangements as independent works for piano duo rather than as transcriptions. In these passages, Brahms is able to present the work anew in pianistic terms. In the chamber music arrangements, there are passages that undergo a marked transformation in character. One is the opening of the String Quintet in G Major, which is triumphant but also has a quality of athleticism, even recklessness, as the cello melody catapults over two and a half octaves while the upper strings pulsate at forte.¹ In the four-hand version (see facsimile), this passage is completely different—joyful, but essentially stable and secure. Would you like to comment on this passage or others?

In this passage I see an instance of an expressive change resulting mainly from the removal of technical difficulty. The original cello line is extremely precarious and demanding, and thus produces an "expression in itself." The sheer difficulty of this passage, the breakneck work involved in mastering it, the obvious courage required of the cellist, and the underlying risk contribute substantially to the character of this opening. In the four-hand arrangement, these qualities are absent because the same passage can be rendered on the piano without any difficulty. Without a doubt, then, there is a loss of expression here in comparison with the original. Certainly one could imagine the reverse being true, that an arranged passage might convey the desired expression more clearly precisely because of the ease with which it can be played on the piano (e.g., through the lack of intonation problems).

Would you also talk about your choice of tempos? What tempo adjustments are needed to make these ensemble works effective for the keyboard? In the first movement of the Fourth Symphony, it seems that you slow the tempo for the F-sharp major theme (m. 53). Is this to reinforce the change of mood and color, a change that in the symphony is accomplished partly through orchestration?

In playing arrangements there is often the temptation to take a faster tempo than is actually appropriate to the

