Brahms’s Last Whitsuntide
A Memoir by Karl Theodor Piecing
with a Modern Appreciation

In late May of 1896, Brahms spent the Whitsun holiday on a large estate near Bonn, in the company of some of his favorite musical friends. Invited there following the funeral of Clara Schumann, Brahms spent four days which are assuredly the most thoroughly documented weekend of his life, since five of the guests later wrote accounts of it. The memoir presented here, by Karl Theodor Piening, solo cellist of the Meiningen Court Orchestra, is the least known of them – “unknown” describes it more accurately – and it is published here in English for the first time. It appeared in the Westfälische Zeitung on 6 April 1933, and was rescued from total obscurity by Klaus Reinhardt, who included it as an appendix to his short biography of Pieing.1

Brahms’s trip to Bonn was made under stressful circumstances. He was in Ischl when the news of Clara’s death reached him; the telegram to Vienna had been forwarded by regular post, and by the time he received it Brahms could only throw some clothes into a suitcase and rush to the railway station. Various mishaps along the way – the details are not the same in all accounts – extended the trip to almost 40 hours, stretching over two nights. In an agitated state, Brahms arrived at Clara’s graveside barely in time.

It is by sheer coincidence that her funeral took place on that Whit Sunday, the seventh Sunday after Easter, a day that was and is celebrated as something of a national holiday in many parts of Europe. In the strictest sense, Whit Sunday is one of seven principal feasts of the Christian calendar, but by the time of Clara Schumann’s death, the religious component had yielded to a more secular spring festival, taking on the role of a modern bank holiday in England or the Memorial Day weekend in the United States. For Brahms’s musically gifted and accomplished Rhenish friends, the von der Leyen and von Beckeraths – related to each other by blood and marriage – Whitsun was the customary time of year for them to gather in one or other of their well appointed homes for a private chamber music festival that stretched over several days. Although Brahms had several times been invited to take part, he had never accepted, preferring at that time of year to be either in Italy or at one of his summer vacation hideaways.

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Other guests included a musical young lawyer, Gustav Ophüls, who would later compile and publish the complete texts of Brahms’s vocal music.2

The Hagerhof lay in a protected little valley just off the Rhine, with a view of the river and the famous hills, Godesberg and Siebengebirge, which Brahms knew well from excursions during his days in Düsseldorf. The estate was so near to Bonn that when news of Clara’s funeral reached the group, one day before it occurred, three of the musical participants quickly decided to attend: Rudolf von der Leyen, Barth, and Wolff. They assumed they would find Brahms there, and harbored hopes of bringing him back with them to the Hagerhof. Brahms, exhausted by the exertions of his 40-hour train trip to Bonn and deeply shaken by the funeral itself, eventually agreed, and spent the next four days in the company of people who honored and loved him and comforted him to the point that he could later write to Maria Fellinger how thankful he was that he had allowed himself to be talked into accepting their invitation.3

Of the five eyewitness accounts of the weekend, the earliest to be published is by Rudolf von der Leyen, included in his charming little book of 1905, Johannes Brahms als Mensch und Freund.4 The longest is by Gustav Ophüls, who set down his recollections of that weekend in 1917, also in the form of a little book.5 Richard Barth included his account of the weekend in the memoir he wrote for his children in 1916, but that was not published until 1979.6 A fourth account provides many details about the music played and reveals personal information about Brahms which is available nowhere else. That is the memoir by Heinz von Beckerath, “Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms: Brahms und seine Krefelder Freunde,” published in 1955 in Die Heimat, a local yearbook published in Krefeld. It is difficult to find and is known primarily by the occasional citations and references to it which have appeared in the writings of others. Heinz’s account is actually based on the writings of his father, Alwin von Beckerath, one of the talented family musicians present at the party. We cannot be certain when Alwin, who died in 1930, wrote his memoir, but we do know that Heinz, who put the memoir together before 1940, was a teenage boy in 1896, and some of the memoir is his at first-hand.7

Here is a veritable Rashomon, the same event seen in multiple views. Brahms, lover of the variation form, might well have been amused once he got over his annoyance at being the center of so much unwanted attention. This is not the place for an extended discussion of the variations, which mostly concerns details and the order in which events took place, but a few things can be noted in brief: the accounts agree with each other in essence; the weather was exceptionally beautiful; there was a lot of inspiring music-making, some of it performed with Brahms himself; Brahms was soothed and even in high spirits; and during those days he gave his friends first performances of the Four Serious Songs, Op. 121, and some of the Chorale Preludes, Op. 122.

These eyewitness accounts also offer us a rare chance to assess Max Kalbeck’s reliability, since he includes a report of the weekend in his biography.8 One has to marvel at his inventiveness. In his account, the gathering at the Hagerhof was an improvised musical memorial for Clara Schumann. In actual fact, the gathering had been planned, the guests invited, and the musical program decided upon, long before Clara’s death. When it was learned that Brahms would join the house party, the participants agreed among themselves not even to mention her name so as to protect Brahms’s feelings. In Kalbeck’s account, the “pillars” of the musical program were the works of Schumann and Brahms, but the reality is that only one of Schumann’s works was played, while a great variety of other composers were represented, including Handel, whose Sonata for Two Violins much interested Brahms. No changes to the prearranged program were made, aside from the addition of works performed with Brahms himself. Kalbeck describes a scene which is nowhere present in the five accounts, claiming that Brahms broke down as he was playing his G major violin sonata with Barth, and had to run outside to hide the emotional distress which had been aroused by thoughts of Felix Schumann. It is impossible to imagine a situation more at odds with the atmosphere described in all the eyewitness accounts. Kalbeck gives no source.

In contrast, Piening’s account, the fifth in the group, accords very well with those of his fellow writers. In addition it includes something unique, a hilarious scene absent in all the others—probably because of the exceedingly undignified nature of the moment. (Readers will recognize the incident immediately.) A point of interest in Piening’s report is the good health and vigor he attributes to Brahms. (Barth is the only one to have noticed the unusually tawny color of Brahms’s face, ascribing it to being in the sun, an interesting observation in view of claims by some that Brahms’s illness arose from the trauma of Clara’s death.)

Readers who have read Ophüls’s work, the most readily available of the memoirs, may recall a striking remark reported to have been made by Brahms. As he took his leave from the assembled company before going to bed on the night of his arrival, he proclaimed, “...der einzige Mensch, den ich wirklich geliebt habe, den habe ich heute begraben! Gute Nacht, meine Herrschaften!” (“Today I have buried the only person I really loved! Ladies and gentlemen, good night!”)9 Pieing reports the same incident, but the words differ and this time Brahms doesn’t proclaim, he mumbles. The setting is the same, his remarks before retiring for bed: “Nun habe ich den letzten Menschen auch noch begraben,” Brahms says as he leaves the room. (“Now I have buried the last person, as well.”) Beckerath, on the other hand, reports that on the afternoon of his arrival, as the two men walked in the park and reached the viewpoint overlooking the Rhine, Brahms said, “Jetzt hab ich nichts mehr zu verlieren.” (“Now I have nothing more to lose.”)10

The pitfalls and usefulness of memoirs are here apparent. Pieing’s memoir is vivid, intense, and personal. It provides validation of those other eyewitness accounts of Brahms’s last Whitsun which we already know. At the same time, the existence of five versions of the same events is a reminder of the quirks of human memory.

The Last Whitsun tide
of Johannes Brahms
by Karl Theodor Pieing

The great pianist Clara Schumann had died on 20 May 1896. On 24 May – Whitsunday – she was interred in Bonn’s old cemetery in the same vault where Robert had been at rest for
forty years. At the time of his death, the two young musicians, Brahms and Joachim, who had already drawn the world’s attention to themselves, had faithfully stood by the side of the distraught widow and had remained faithful to her throughout a long life. When the news of her condition sounded ever more perilous, Brahms wrote to Joachim:

“The thought of losing her can terrify us no more, not even this lonely one for whom all too little is still alive in this world. And when she will have gone from us, won’t our faces glow with delight whenever we recall her? That wonderful woman whom we were allowed to treasure throughout a long life — to love and admire her, more and more. Only thus do we mourn her.”

The news of Clara’s death had reached Brahms in Ischl and very belatedly. He left immediately, but missed his train connection and spent a long time in painful agitation, worrying if he would arrive too late for the funeral. Several of his friends later believed that it was this that gave the final push to the grave illness which soon appeared and led to Brahms’s death. But Brahms was feted to be present at the funeral. The old cemetery was in bright sunshine and it was bathed in enchanting scents and blossoming. The funeral hymn, led by Prof. Leonhard Wolff, blended with the Whitusontide bells and the twittering of songbirds, a last greeting of Life to the great artist who had spread so much endless beauty with her hands.

The “Four Serious Songs,” Brahms’s last work, were published after Clara’s death. What was more natural than the assumption that they were a last homage to the beloved woman, as the Requiem had been to Brahms’s cherished mother. The work, however, was composed early in May when the hopelessness of Clara’s illness reminded Brahms of the transience of all life. Others voiced the suggestion that the Master had sensed his own approaching death and had created his final work in that frame of mind. That, too, is an error: at Whitusontide in 1896, Brahms was the epitome of strength and vigor.

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Not far from the town of Honef, at the foot of the Siebengebirge, far from the highway and hidden deeply inside a nature park, lies a castle in the Gothic style, the Hagerhof. Swans populate the ponds whose water mirrors the castle’s image and in the spring, countless nightingales sing joyfully throughout the night.

To this earthly paradise Herr and Frau Weyermann invited their musical friends for a private musical festival, in celebration of Whitusontide. The pianists were Frau Weyermann’s profoundly musical siblings, Frau Alwin von Beckerath and Rudolph von der Leyen (Krefeld), whom Brahms esteemed especially highly. The string quartet consisted of: Prof. Richard Barth, the splendid left-handed violinist who was then Music Director at Marburg University, and afterwards, conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic concerts; Prof. Bram Eldering, the magnificent concertmaster of the Meiningen Hofkapelle, and later on, Germany’s most successful violin pedagogue; Leonard Wolff, the music director at Bonn University, played viola; and I myself played cello.

Among the few listeners were: Alwin von Beckerath (Krefeld), a good violinist, an amateur in the best sense of the word, in an exuberant mood and with breathtaking enthusiasm; Dr. Gustav Ophuls, the author of “Recollections of Johannes Brahms”; the painter Willy von Beckerath, creator of the widely known drawings “Brahms at the piano” and “Brahms as conductor of the Academic Festival Overture.” These drawings are so expressive that everyone who knew Brahms and knows the Overture recognizes immediately which place in the work the pencil drawing has preserved. To the painter’s mother, Frau Laura von Beckerath (Rüdesheim), our circle accorded exceptionally high esteem. She was the wife of a vineyard owner and years ago, a widely known little Brahms story [Brahmsgeschichten] took place in their estate. In their cellars Brahms was served the noblest wines and he savored them knowledgably and with high enjoyment. When it was the turn of the very noblest wine he was told: “This is the Brahms among our wines.” The master sipped it and mumbled very contentedly: “Ah, then I would really like to make the acquaintance of your Joh. Seb. Bach.”

The news of Clara Schumann’s death did dim the mood in our circle briefly, but then the joy in nature dressed in her radiant springtime splendor, in our companionship, and — last, not least — in the glorious music-making, broke through again. On Whitus Monday and Saturday there were morning and evening concerts, but on Whitusunday in the evening, the music fell silent. That was when our circle dispatched Prof. Barth, Prof. Wolff, and v. d. Leyen to Bonn to take part in the funeral of the great artist. We felt certain that our friends would encounter Master Brahms there, but whether he would accede to their plea to join us, that seemed more than doubtful to us. How great then was our joy when a telegram arrived: “A bed and a place setting for Brahms.”

And so the Master fled from himself and from loneliness into a circle of exuberant folk who were devoted to him with ardent love and admiration. To spare his feelings, it was agreed that no one was to mention the name “Schumann.” The younger generation quickly went into action, the boys in the woods, the girls in the garden, to provide festive decorations for the house and its rooms. When the coach with Brahms finally arrived, everyone, young and old, stood at the entrance to greet the Master who was visibly grateful for the love extended to him.

The evening was spent in liveliest conversation, with Brahms doing most of the talking. One sensed that he wanted to avoid even a moment’s reflection and that he was afraid of being alone. It was very late when Brahms finally rose and mumbled to himself as he took his leave: “Now I have buried the last person, as well.” Very early the next morning, Brahms, who was a nature lover and a vaunted early riser, wandered out into the delightful spring day, which restored his spirits once again. By the time we gathered at the breakfast table, he was merry along with the merrymakers. That same morning he played his F minor Quintet with us, and played it so gloriously that it has remained unforgettable for all. In a speech at the midday dinner table, Brahms was thanked for having come and the sad occasion for his journey to Bonn was touched on. That brought tears to the blue eyes of this man, who always tried so strenuously to conceal his deep, gentle feelings. After the meal it was customary to chat for a while over coffee, until one after another stole away to take his midday nap. But Brahms would

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pick up some recently published book, be it a novel or a volume of
goetry, and read while we were sleeping. The selection of his
song texts alone attests to his enormously wide reading and his
refined taste.

One day at noon, after our circle had already shrunk,
he produced a music paper roll with the words: “Here is
something that I placed on the birthday table for myself.” It
was the “Four Serious Songs” and the Chorale Preludes. This
was when Brahms’s last works rang out for the first time, from
the manuscript and before grateful and deeply moved listeners.
Our little music festival, however, continued according to the
program, although Brahms did play his C Minor Trio, one
movement of the G Major Violin Sonata, and the B-flat Major
Trio by Schubert. But the Master had come to us in order to
banish his gloomy thoughts, and everyone did his best to help
him do so. The prevailing mood was therefore very cheerful,
even exuberant. It was characteristic of the Krefeld circle to
improvise music, e.g., in the style of an oratorio, when each
soloist made up his text and the melody on the spur of the
moment. Late one evening, Rudolf Leyen improvised
a comical tenor solo accompanied by the humming of the
whole troupe, and with such a totally madcap text that one after
another choked up in uncontrollable laughter. Brahms, alone,
kept humming along diligently until the end.

Once, in the midst of a joyous gathering, Brahms jumped
up and fell on his knees before the hostess to declare his love
to her. One of the older boys had sufficient presence of mind to
capture this moment with his camera.24

On the evening before the general farewell, a particularly
comic scene took place. Frau v. d. Leyen, the mother of
our splendid pianist, always came from her estate high in
the mountains to the Hagerhof driving her own donkey cart.
Since the Queen of Sweden happened to be staying in Honnef
at that time and also drove her own donkey cart, we jokingly
interchanged the two ladies and addressed Frau v. d. Leyen as
Her Majesty. The lady submitted to this form of address with
Rhenish good humor. In the evening, when she was ready to
leave and was already seated on the donkey cart, she sent a
message: “Her Majesty commands Herr Brahms to the hand-
kiss.”

Brahms stormed to the scene with flowing mane and taking
great strides (to the extent that he fairly short legs permitted it).
He made a deep bow at some distance from the donkey, came a
step closer and bowed again, and once more, for the third time.
He then lifted the tail of the donkey, brought it near his mouth
and simulated – let us say – a hand-kiss. Only then did he dare
approach “Her Majesty” and kiss her hand. After that, he again
accorded the donkey his obeisance and, bowing constantly as
he retreated, Brahms remained bent so low that his long hair
fell over his face and almost touched the ground – until the little
carriage had driven away.

The hour of our departure came all too soon, but we felt
happy that we had been able to help assuage the grief of the
beloved Master for a while. We admired the tremendous self-
control that allowed him not to dampen our Whitsuntide joy,
but to transform our festival into a colossal adventure. We had
reason to hope that this would not be our last meeting with
Brahms, to hope that he would soon delight us again with his
wonderful piano playing, which in recent years had revealed its
highest expressivity and tonal beauty only in small circles; for
the Master’s vivacity and zest seemed well-nigh indestructible.
No one could have foretold, however, that death was already
extending his hand to him. For my part, I recall every meeting
with him with the deepest gratitude, and particularly each
occasion of making music with the great man, whether in
concerts or in the smallest of circles.

Notes: 1. Klaus Reinhardt, Ein Meininger Musiker an der
Seite von Brahms und Reberg: Das Wirken des Cellisten und
Dirigenten Karl Theodor Piening (1867-1942) (Hannover: Jan
Reinhardt, 1991). Piening’s memoir originally carried the title
“Johannes Brahms’ letztes Pfingstfest” in the Bremen Weser-
Vollständige Sammlung der von Johannes Brahms komponierten
und musikalisch bearbeiteten Dichtungen (Berlin: Simrock,
1898). 3. See the letter from Brahms to Maria Fellinger, dated
[Ischl, 4. (5.) 6. 96], in Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel
mit Hermann Levi, Friedrich Gernsheim sowie den Familien
Hecht und Fellinger, ed. Leopold Schmidt (Berlin: Deutsche
Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1910), 307–9. 4. Rudolf von der Leyen,
Johannes Brahms als Mensch und Freund: Nach persönlichen
Erinnerungen (Düsseldorf and Leipzig: Karl Robert
Langewiesche, 1905), 96–98. 5. Gustav Ophüls, Erinnerungen
an Johannes Brahms. Ein Beitrag aus dem Kreis seiner
rheinischen Freunde (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft,
Barth, „Mein Lebensgeschichte,” in Johannes Brahms in den
Erinnerungen von Richard Barth, ed. Kurt Hofmann (J.
Schuberth & Co., Hamburg, 1979), 7–84. For the weekend
at the Hagerhof, see pp. 62–65. 7. See Heinz von Beckerath,
„Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms. Brahms und seine
will appear in translation by Josef Eisinger with annotations by
the present writer in the forthcoming 2nd edition of Brahms
and His World, ed. Walter Frisch and Kevin Karnes (Princeton:
Princeton University Press). 8. Max Kalbeck, Johannes Brahms,
4 vols. (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1903-1914), IV,
1a. Brahms to Joachim, 10 April 1896. See Johannes Brahms
im Briefwechsel mit Joseph Joachim, ed. Andreas Moser, 2

Commentary by Styra Avins
Translation by Josef Eisinger

Brahms on the Web

Brahmsians will be pleased to find Max Kalbeck’s biography
of Brahms available on the web at http://www.zeno.org/
Musik/M/KalbeckMax/. Links for the full text are to individual
chapters. Pagination is indicated in the text. Illustrations are
provided through a separate link. A very helpful feature of this
site is that the full text is searchable by keyword, e.g., Orgel
or Krefeld, while the print version of Kalbeck’s biography
offers only an index of personal names and musical works.
The site also presents another early biography of Brahms: La
Mara, Johannes Brahms, in Musikalische Studienköpfe, Band 3
(Leipzig: Schmidt, 1883).
The American Brahms Society:  
25 Years of Accomplishment

Amidst the celebrations of Brahms’s 175th birthday this year, the American Brahms Society is marking its own 25th anniversary. The ABS was founded in May 1983, during the sesquicentennial international Brahms conference at the Library of Congress. As a non-profit, learned organization, it seeks to foster and disseminate research on the life, music, and historical position of Johannes Brahms. To this end, the Society has published a newsletter and several volumes of scholarly studies, established the Karl Geiringer Fund in Brahms Studies to further Brahms scholarship, and especially to assist doctoral students in their Brahms-related research, mounted several conferences and sessions at other scholarly gatherings, and maintained an archive of primary sources and secondary literature. Growing from a small band of founding members, the Society now numbers more than 250 individuals and institutions, its members not only coming from the ranks of Brahms scholars, but also including performing musicians, music critics and teachers, scientists, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and other lovers of the music of Brahms in North America, Europe, and Japan.

The Society is governed by a Board of Directors that meets annually in conjunction with the national meeting of the American Musicological Society. Corresponding Directors link the Society with scholars, archives, Brahms societies, and research projects overseas. The Society has been led by Presidents Walter Frisch (1983–94), David Brodbeck (1995–97), John Daverio (1998–2001), Daniel Beller–McKenna (2002–07), and Heather Platt (2008), and Executive Director George Bozarth (1983–present), who has also overseen the Society’s archive. The high standards of the ABS Newsletter, which has earned it a place on the periodicals lists of over seventy colleges and universities worldwide, has been maintained by Editors Virginia Hancock (1983–96), Margaret Notley (1996–2002), and William Horne (2003–present), who was joined in co-editorship by Valerie Goertzen in 2008.

The Society’s first volume of studies, Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives, edited by George Bozarth and issued by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, offered the full proceedings of the 1983 International Brahms Conference in Washington, DC. This book was followed by three volumes in the Society’s own series, Brahms Studies, each edited by David Brodbeck and published by the University of Nebraska Press (1994, 1998, and 2001), which contained documentary studies and essays on criticism, analysis, theory, and biography. The Society also supported the publication of On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies by Karl Geiringer, edited by George Bozarth and released by Harmonie Park Press in 2006, and the production of two CDs of Brahms’s piano music recorded on Welte-Mignon Piano Rolls in the early 1900s, available from the TACET label.

With the death of one of its founding Board members, the senior Brahms scholar Karl Geiringer, in 1989, the Society undertook to honor his dedication to graduate education and to build upon his legacy to Brahms research by establishing a scholarship in his name that would help to support students in the final stages of writing a doctoral dissertation significantly involving Brahms at a university in North America. Since its inception in 1990, the deliberations of the scholarship committees have been overseen by Walter Frisch. Twelve awards have been made:

1990 Heather Platt (Graduate Center, CUNY), for “Text-Music Relationships in the Lieder of Johannes Brahms”

1991 Margaret Notley (Yale University), for “Brahms’s Chamber Music—Summer of 1886: A Study of Opera 99, 100, 101, and 108”

1992 Daniel Beller-McKenna (Harvard University), for “Brahms’s Settings of Biblical Texts between 1877 and 1896”

1993 Dillon Parmar (Eastman School of Music), for “Brahms the Programmatic”

1997 Antonius Bittman (Eastman School of Music), for “Brahms, Wagner, and Competing Modernisms: Max Regé’s Tortuous Path”

2000 Kevin C. Karnes (Brandeis University), for “The Early Analytical, Aesthetic, and Critical Writings of Heinrich Schenker. With Special Consideration of His Understanding of Brahms, and of the Development of His Work through Harmony”

2002 Ryan Mark Minor (University of Chicago), for “National Memory, Public Music: Commemoration and Consecration in Nineteenth-Century Choral Works”

2003 George-Julius Papadopoulos (University of Washington), for “Johannes Brahms and Nineteenth-Century Comic Ideology”

2004 Brent Auerbach (Eastman School of Music), for “The Analytical Grundgestalt: A New Model and Methodology Based on the Music of Johannes Brahms”

2006 Paul E. Berry (Yale University), for “Memory, Inspiration, and Compositional Process in the Solo Songs of Johannes Brahms”

2007 Jacqueline Scholes (Brandeis University), for “Transcendence, ‘Loss,’ and ‘Reminiscence’: Brahms’s Early Finales in the Contexts of Form, Narrative, and Historicism”

2007 Daniel Stevens (University of Michigan), for “Brahms’s Song Collections: Rethinking a Genre”

In 1998 the Society made a special award to Thomas Quigley in recognition of his important service to our field, on the occasion of the publication of the second volume of his Brahms bibliography (Scarecrow Press).

The ABS has co-sponsored three conferences: Brahms the Contemporary at Harvard University, for the centenary of the composer’s death in 1997; Brahms: Perspectives of Performance at Boston University in 2001; and Brahms and Memory at the University of New Hampshire this past spring.

The ABS Archive at the University of Washington, which possesses on microfilm and in photocopy reproductions of many of Brahms’s manuscripts and early editions, a large number of books on Brahms and scores of his music, and most of his published correspondence, responds to queries from a broad range of individuals studying the life and music of Brahms.

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Last but not least, since 2003 the ABS has had a presence on the world wide web at brahms.unh.edu, with its site created and maintained by Daniel Beller-McKenna. In addition to information about the ABS and its activities, the site allows for the posting of queries about Brahms and provides links to Brahms-related websites worldwide, as well as to the websites of other American learned societies devoted to individual composers, among them Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart—company with whom Brahms would be delighted to find himself. The Society’s website also provides abstracts of the doctoral dissertations that have been supported by the Society’s Karl Geiringer Fund in Brahms Studies. In the future, the Society hopes to provide a list of Brahms dissertations and other research in progress through its website.

As the American Brahms Society enters its second quarter century, it plans to maintain its current projects, broaden its membership, and expand its activities in the service of the musical legacy of Johannes Brahms. We welcome all lovers of Brahms’s art to join us.

George S. Bozarth

Twentieth Annual Geiringer Scholarship

The American Brahms Society is seeking applicants for its Karl Geiringer Scholarship in Brahms Studies, which is awarded annually from the Society’s Karl Geiringer Fund in Brahms Studies, 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 Brahms’s circle, on musical life in later nineteenth-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 2009, 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 250 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 Prof. David Brodbeck, Chair, Geiringer Scholarship Committee, Department of Music, Claire Trevor School of Arts, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697, and must be postmarked no later than 1 May 2009. The application must be supported by two confidential letters of recommendation, including one from the dissertation advisor; these should be sent directly 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.

Brahms Recorded


Budget label Brilliant Classics has released a 61-CD recording of Brahms’s complete works, the first to appear since Deutsche Grammophon’s 1983 set, which was undertaken for the 150th anniversary of the composer’s birth.

Most of the symphonic, chamber, and choral works with orchestra in this collection are licensed from other recording companies. All the choral works with orchestra except the Requiem are represented by recordings made between 2000 and 2003 by the Danish National Choir and the Danish National Symphony, under Gerd Albrecht, previously released by Chandos. The Requiem is performed by the Rundfunk-Solistenverinigung und Rundfunkchor Berlin, with the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin conducted by Helmut Koch in a 2006 recording licensed from Edel Classics. The symphonies are given by the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra and the Radio Filharmonisch Orkest Holland, all conducted by Jaap van Zweden, and with all except the Second Symphony recorded by Arts Music Recording of Rotterdam. The symphonies receive very sonorous readings, except that the strings are somewhat underrecorded, so that one hears more of the brassy, reedy “middle” of the orchestra. Cellist Janos Starker joins violinist Emmy Verhey in the Double Concerto, with the Amsterdam Philharmonic under Arpad Joó. Both piano concertos are played by Karin Lechner with the Berliner Symphoniker under Eduardo Marturet, and the Violin Concerto is played by Borika van den Booren with the same orchestra and conductor. The two serenades, the overtures, and the Haydn Variations are provided by the London Philharmonic, the Ulster Orchestra, and the Radio Kamerorkest under various licensing agreements. The orchestral arrangements of the Hungarian Dances (only three of the arrangements are actually by Brahms) are played by the London Symphony, conducted by Neeme Järvi, under license from Chandos.

Brahms’s two string quintets are represented by a recording, licensed from Nimbus, featuring the Brandis Quartett and guest violist Brett Dean. The clarinet sonatas are given by Karl Leister and pianist Ferenc Bognáir in a recording previously released by Nimbus. Leister and the Brandis Quartett combine for the Clarinet Quintet, again from a previous Nimbus release. The Tokyo Quartet provides readings of the three string quartets under license from Vox USA. The Horn Trio and Piano Quartet are played by the Nash Ensemble on a CD licensed from London-based CRD Records. The violin sonatas are contributed by György Pauk with pianist Roger Vignoles in a recording licensed from Otto. The string sextets feature the Albeni Quartet joined by violinist Roger Best and cellist Moray Welsh in a CD licensed from CRD Records. The piano trios reproduce a Vox USA release with Joseph Kalichstein, Jaime Laredo and Sharon Robinson performing. The Clarinet Trio features clarinetist Karl Leister with pianist Ferenc Bognáir and cellist Wolfgang Boettcher, under license from Nimbus. The piano quartets (Derek Han piano, Isabelle Faust, violin, Bruno Giuranna, viola, and Alain Meunier, cello) and cello sonatas (cellist Herre-Jan Stegenga accompanied by Phillippe
Entremont) were recorded by independent contractors.

The chamber music raises the inevitable question of what indeed constitutes Brahms’s “complete works,” and how well the Brilliant Classics set manages to include them all. The collection includes the Piano Trio in A major that has been attributed to Brahms on the basis of, actually, not much evidence at all, and Brahms’s arrangements of the Op. 120 clarinet sonatas for viola and piano. Perhaps the most glaring omission from the set’s chamber works is a recording of the first version of Brahms’s Piano Trio, Op. 8. Also missing are recordings of the Horn Trio, Clarinet Trio, and Clarinet Quintet in the versions in which various stringed instruments replace the winds. All the standard works for two pianos and piano four hands are included in the chamber music section of the collection.

With a few exceptions, Brahms’s solo piano works have all been newly recorded for the Brilliant Classics set. The performers are mostly gifted European pianists who have distinguished themselves in international competitions: Kamerhan Turan (the Sonata, Op. 1 and the Op. 4 Scherzo), Alan Weiss (the Sonatas, Op. 2 and 3), Wolfram Schmitt-Leonardy (the variations), and Håkon Austbo (the shorter piano pieces). Some listeners may find the piano sound in the Op. 1 sonata brittle, but generally the recordings offer beautiful piano tone and thoughtful performances. The out-of-the-way works, such as Brahms’s studies after J.S. Bach, Chopin, and Weber, his 1855 suite movements, the Theme and Variations in D minor from the Op. 18 String Sextet, and the arrangements of the Hungarian Dances for piano solo, are played by Louis Demetrius Alvannis in performances licensed from Meridian Records. Among the organ works, the Eleven Chorale Preludes, Op. 122, are played by Nicholas Danby in performances licensed from CRD Records, while the early organ works without opus number were recorded by Christian Schmitt in 2007.

Eight CDs are devoted to new recordings of Brahms’s works for “choir a capella.” This is a bit of a misnomer, since what is really included in this group of CDs is virtually all of Brahms’s choral music except for that with full orchestra, including: genuinely a capella works, such as the Motets, Op. 29, 74, and 110; choral works accompanied by organ, such as the Ave Maria, Op. 12, or the Geistliches Lied, Op. 30; choral works accompanied by piano(s), such as the Vier Quartette, Op. 92, or the Liebeslieder Walzer, Op. 52 and 65. Regarding this last category, a decision evidently was made to have all the works that might have been recorded either by a quartet of soloists or by a choral ensemble performed by the latter. The readings by the Chamber Choir of Europe under conductor Nicol Matt are beautifully sung, but some listeners may miss the intimacy of hearing the vocal quartets performed with solo voices, which is certainly the medium Brahms had foremost in mind for them. The same ensemble provides two CDs of Brahms’s Volkslied settings for female chorus, WoO 19, 36, 37, and 38.

Last but not least, the collection devotes 13 newly recorded CDs to Brahms’s solo Lieder and duets. Any recording of Brahms’s complete songs raises certain issues unique to the genre. Should the songs be grouped in the opus collections in which Brahms published them? Should they be transposed out of the keys in which they were first published? (Brahms was notoriously averse to transposing his songs and allowed transposed versions to be published only as a matter of practical commercial necessity.) In the 1983 collection by Deutsche Grammophon, the songs were recorded in opus collections, but by only two singers—baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and soprano Jessye Norman, with pianist Daniel Barenboim accompanying. While it was delightful to hear the songs performed by world-class artists in opus collections, the range restrictions of the singers caused a great many songs to be transposed. In the Brilliant Classics set, no less than a dozen singers of different voice types are featured, so one would think that none of the songs would need to be transposed. But the songs appear to have been divided among the singers not according to their voice types but according to other criteria, since a great many of them are transposed, usually a second or third down, yielding the same subterranean piano colors that sometimes plagued the Deutsche Grammophon recordings.

Most of the songs are recorded individually or in small groups culled from opus collections on CDs that feature one or two vocal artists, like vocal recitals of Brahms Lieder. The song groups that have often been viewed as quasi-cyclic—Op. 33, 57, and 121—were recorded as opus collections (the Magelone Lieder have readings from Ludwig Tieck’s Diebesgeschichte der schönen Magelone interspersed between them), as were the songs in Opp. 7, 69, and 58. Certainly the texts in the latter three opera suggest unities of mood and subject matter that make them good candidates for performance as collections, yet this is no less true of other opera, the songs of which are recorded separately and spread out over several different CDs. All the duets were recorded as opus collections except for Op. 66 and Op. 75. The dialogue songs of Op. 84 are performed as duets in this collection, as is also “Vom verwundeten Knabe,” Op. 14, No. 2, which Brahms did not indicate to be a dialog song, although its text is capable of being treated in this way. A more unusual liberty is taken with the Op. 58 Lieder, the texts of which suggest they should be sung by a man. Here they are performed by mezzo-soprano Antonia Bourvé and soprano Rebekka Stöhr. But despite the collection’s idiosyncracies, the felicity of the singing and playing in this complete set of Brahms’s songs and duets is frequently gratifying, and the inclusion of Brahms’s folk song settings in WoO 31, 32, 33, 36, 37, and 38 is especially welcome. Texts are provided in the original languages only, and the liner notes, though adequate, do not aspire to scholarly value.

William Horne

Recent Brahms Publications

Books and Articles


(Continued on next page)


Contains the complete extant correspondence between George Henschel and Brahms in English translation, with some of the 49 items published for the first time; a new, amplified, critical edition of Henschel's Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms that takes into account all extant sources, including a manuscript prepared by Henschel in 1933 that has not previously been consulted as a source for the text; and essays tracing Henschel's youth and early career, his activities in England and America, and his later years. Appendices include: Henschel's memoirs of encounters with Wagner and Verdi; a short memoir of Brahms by Xaver Scharwenka; a list of Henschel's concerts with Brahms; a list of Brahms manuscripts owned by Henschel; a letter from George Grove to Henschel, along with Henschel's Preface to Grove's book about Beethoven's nine symphonies; the extant correspondence between Henschel and Brahms in the original German (44 items), annotated with sources and physical descriptions; and a list of Henschel's compositions, writings, and recordings. A CD of all known recordings by Henschel is included. (Unfortunately, Henschel did not record any songs by Brahms.)


Gernot Gruber, “Max Kalbeck – Über den hohen Wert des Dilettantismus.”

Renate Flich, “Zur Zeit- und Zeitungsgeschichte im Wien der Jahrhundertwende.”

Mortiz Csáky, “Gesellschaft und Kultur der Wiener Moderne um 1900.”


Sandra McColl, “The People around Max Kalbeck.”

Ingrid Fuchs, “Max Kalbeck und die Wiener Musikerdenkmäler.”


Clemens Höslinger, “Die Maienköngin. Ein Festspiel Max Kalbecks zur Zeit der Operndirektion Wilhelm Jahn.”

Roman Roček, “Übersetzer für die Weltsprache Musik. Zu den Opernbüchern Max Kalbecks.”

Johann Holzner, “Luftschlösser hinter Nebelwänden.” Gedichte und Denkzettel von Max Kalbeck.”


Round Table I: Der Musikkritiker (Moderation: Theophil Antonieck)

Elisabeth Th. Fritz-Hilscher, “Max Kalbeck und die Alte Musik.”

Andrea Harrandt, “Max Kalbeck und Richard Wagner.”

Elisabeth Maier, “Max Kalbeck als Brahms- und Bruckner-Rezensent.”

Herta Blaukopf, “Max Kalbeck, Richard Strauss und Gustav Mahler.”

Isabella Sommer, “Max Kalbeck und Johann Strauß.”

Elisabeth Grossgäger, “Max Kalbeck und das Burgtheater.”

Ulrice Tanzer, “Unter dem Strich” Zum Feuilleton im Wien der liberalen Ära.”

Round Table II: Max Kalbeck und die Kritiker-Kollegen (Moderation: Wilhelm Sinkovicz)

Clemens Höslinger, “Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904).”

Emmerich Kolovic, “Ludwig Speidel (1830-1906) und Max Kalbeck.”

Michael Krebs, “Die Musikanschauung von Theodor Helm (1843-1920).”

Leopold Spitzer, “Hugo Wolf (1860-1903) als Musikkritiker im Wiener Salonblatt.”

Kurt Arger, “Julius Korngold (1860-1945).”


The Österreichische Musikzeitchrift 62/6 (June 2007) is a Brahms issue containing the following contributions:


Stinson explores a bound volume of eleven Bach organ works once owned by Robert and Clara Schumann that has long been housed at the Riemenschneider Bach Institute, but not hitherto examined in detail. The appendix includes facsimiles of Bach’s Toccata in F major, BWV 540, and Fantasia in G major, BWV 572, with annotations by Robert and Clara Schumann and by Brahms. Brahms played his own piano arrangements of these works in public concerts to considerable effect, and his annotations in these scores provide the only evidence in his hand of how he may have arranged these pieces for piano.


The catalogue contains 159 images of visiting cards depicting members of the Schumann family and musicians that belonged to the circle around the Schumanns and Brahms. Each image is accompanied by a brief biographical notice.


In this conference report on the life and work of Brahms’s principal early biographer, both Polish and German versions of each article are presented. A chronology of Kalbeck’s life is appended.


“Soufflerbuch” des Burgtheatermysthos: Max Kalbecks Feuilletons im *Neuen Wiener Tagblatt,* 87–98.


(Continued on next page)


Papers Presented at Conferences

Paper read at the symposium: “Das Schaffen Antonín Dvořák’s aus der Perspektive der heutigen Musikphilologie – Werk, Aufführung, Rezeption, Überlieferung” (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur), Mainz, 26–28 June 2008:

Michael Struck, “Kindheit und Pubertät – philosophisch, Prämisse, Chancen und editorische Diskussionen der jungen Brahms-Gesamtausgabe.”

Papers read at the conference: “Johannes Brahms’ Werke der 1880 and 1890er Jahre,” Meiningen, 24–26 September 2008:

Peter Jost (Buchloe), “Brahms’ Klarinettentrio op. 114 – ein ‘markanter Wendepunkt in seinem Schaffen’?”
Fabian Bergener (Kiel/Lübeck), “OUvertüren zur spät Sinfonik? Brahms’ Ouvertüren im Kontext der Sinfonien op. 90 und 98.”
Jürgen Heidrich (Münster), “Zu den Fest- und Gedenkstümpren op. 109.”
Michael Struck (Kiel), “Gewinn und Verlust – Abrechnung mit den Klaviertrios op. 8.”

Robert Ebbach (Durham), “Brahms in ‘das Land ohne Musik’: The visit of the Meiningen Orchestra to England in 1902.”
Daniel Beller-McKenna (Durham), “The Construction of Nostalgia in Brahms’ Late Instrumental Music.”
Ulrich Krämer (Berlin), “Schönberg’s Bach or Latenter Kontrapunkt in Brahms’ Spätwerk.”
Margaret Notley (Denton), “Brahms and Questions of Lateness.”

Music


This is a reproduction of the full score of the Double Concerto that was issued in 2000 by G. Henle Verlag as Serie I, Band 10 of the Johannes Brahms. Neue Ausgabe sämtliche Werke series. Intended for performance use, the large-format score can be easily read and annotated by conductors. It incorporates the revisions to the musical text found in the scholarly edition, but without its extended introductory essay, detailed discussion of the sources, and exhaustive revision report. In place of these, editor Michael Struck has provided a short Preface, which is given in English as well as German, and an appendix identifying the most important sources for the critical edition, along with remarks about the most important revisions incorporated into the critical edition, provided in German only. Orchestral and solo parts that comply with the new, critical edition are also available from Breitkopf und Härtel.

Recordings of Interest


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The American Brahms Society is a non-profit organization. The IRS has determined that donations in excess of dues may considered as charitable contributions.
The Mandelring Quartet has completed its series pairing each of Brahms’s string quartets with a quartet composed by a member of his circle. The Quartet takes every bit as much care on the music of Brahms’s friends as on his own.


Powerful performances rendered on an 1851 Johann Baptist Streicher piano.

Editor’s Notes

The Editors would like to thank the contributors to this issue. Styra Avins is Adjunct Professor of Music History at Drew University, and, as a cellist, a member of the Queens Symphony and a regular Guest Artist at the Chamber Music Conference at Bennington College. She is the author of Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters (Oxford University Press, 1997), as well as numerous articles concerning Brahms’s life, his correspondence with members of his circle, and the performance of his music. Josef Eisinger is a Professor Emeritus of Biophysics, with research publications in fields ranging from atomic physics and molecular biology to the history of environmental medicine. His lifelong work with music and musicians led to his activity as transcriber and translator of Brahms’s correspondence. George S. Bozarth is Professor of Music History at the University of Washington in Seattle and has been the Executive Director of the American Brahms Society since its inception in 1983. He has published numerous articles about Brahms and his music, is co-author of the article on Brahms for the second edition of the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, and is the editor of The Brahms-Keller Correspondence (University of Nebraska Press), Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives (Oxford University Press), On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies by Karl Geiringer (Harmonie Park Press), and, most recently, Johannes Brahms – George Henschel: An Enduring Friendship (Harmonie Park Press). His research interests also include musical life in 19th-century Boston, the musical self-education of Amy Beach, and the Irish fortepiano maker William Southwell. As a performer, Dr. Bozarth is a fortepianist who owns a collection of early pianos and specializes in accompanying German art song. He also founded the ensemble The Classical Consort and serves as Artistic Director of the Seattle early music series Gallery Concerts.

Dr. Bozarth also provides welcome editorial assistance and help in tracking recent Brahms publications for this Newsletter, for which we wish to express our appreciation. We are also grateful to Jessica Roma, who assists with the layout of the Newsletter at Loyola University New Orleans, and Douglas Niemala, who manages its distribution from the Society’s office at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Correspondence, ideas, and submissions for the Newsletter are always welcome, and email communication is especially encouraged. Materials for the spring issue should be sent to the Editors by 1 February 2009.

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