Johannes Brahms

The following article by Heinrich Schenker originally appeared in Der Zukunft 19 (May 1897): 261–5, within a month after Brahms’s death. The translation is by William Pastille, a member of the faculty at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland, whose essay on “Schenker’s Brahms” was published in the Autumn 1987 issue of this Newsletter.

Johannes Brahms exemplified a natural law that characterizes the historical development of all the arts, including the art of music. In the second half of this century, the many different genres that comprise the art of music have been totally encompassed by just two great composers—Brahms and Wagner. In the same way, the simultaneous activity of Bach and Handel a century and a half ago, and of Mozart and Beethoven a century ago, embraced all that could be done in the field of music. Like all natural laws, this one is somewhat mysterious. Nevertheless, we recognize its existence, and we guess at its significance: Wagner brought all his powers to bear on the dramatic genres, while Brahms deliberately concentrated on the absolute genres; thus only the combined total of their achievements can fully represent the art of music in the second half of this century. I cannot resist taking this opportunity to point out that what is called program music—which, owing to the utter impotence of contemporary composers, is precisely the kind of music most widely cultivated today—appealed to neither of these masters; they probably would even have denied that it was an artistic pursuit at all. Anyone who intelligently studies Wagner’s music and writings and who carefully examines Brahms’s music will find that both of them intentionally rejected program music—or at least the strain that descends from Berlioz and Liszt. In no way, however, should their conscious rejection of program music be construed as evidence for the deplorable idea that a new art which will surpass theirs has begun with Richard Strauss’s Till Eulenspiegel or Also Sprach Zarathustra—a thought that could well occur to those who prefer to remain cloaked in the shadows of self-delusion rather than turn to the light that shines before their very eyes.

The lesson Brahms taught through his works can be summarized more or less as follows: above all, he proved that we must not think of absolute music as artistic territory that has been permanently abandoned. It is true, of course, that

Maria Fellinger’s last photograph of Brahms, 15 June 1896

Beethoven, who established the borders of this territory, ruled over it during a veritable golden age; such a time will never come again. But Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Schumann showed that freedom of expression was still possible in the land of Beethoven. All that is necessary for success in this field, as in every other, is a sense of one’s own individuality and the determination to make use of one’s freedom of expression. Despite the fears of the ingenious, who felt that the last vestige of expressive freedom had been used up in Schumann’s symphonic works and chamber music, Brahms’s recent works demonstrate that freedom has not yet vanished from the land of Beethoven, and that works of great beauty and significance can still be created if one only takes the trouble to make use of this freedom. Brahms’s chamber works, therefore, will always stand right alongside Beethoven’s. His quartets, quintets, and sextets, which first served to bring him great success, will soon have another, (continued on next page)
even nobler service to perform for their creator: they will change the public's perception of him. Brahms, like Haydn, Mozart, Schumann, and every other eminent practitioner of his art, will soon be counted among those composers whose works radiate sublime purity, unaffected simplicity, and glorious melody; the unkind image of Brahms as a "brooder," which has gained currency in the recent past, will soon be transformed into that of an astonishing wizard of melody—the Mozart of our time. It is now the task of his chamber music to initiate this change in perception on the part of the musical public, which, during Brahms's lifetime, simply refused to see how simple and melodic his music was. Now everyone will have to see.

Brahms's melodies, like those of all great masters, are filled with a nectar that is never found in tunes which are mere successions of tones. In the same way that oratory and literature possess both dull statements which have been frozen stiff by the icy wind of abstraction (that is, which refer primarily to abstract concepts instead of concrete visual or aural experiences) and vibrant statements which radiate the vital warmth of life—in this same way, music has both abstract statements and melodic statements. Of course, logic is intrinsic to both types of musical statements, or they would not be statements at all. But abstract musical statements rely entirely on cold logic, while statements of the other type—melodies—pulse with a vital humor that may be likened to lifeblood. The melodies of all great masters contain the warmth of living breath: they sound as if they had issued from the lips of a beautiful child growing into adulthood. And this impression is conveyed not only by songs and other kinds of vocal music. Even in absolute music, true melodies bear a close resemblance to song or speech; so much so that they often inspire us with a natural desire to invent words in order to give expression to the warm-blooded tones. The essence of melody lies in this resemblance to song and speech, and only a composer who has the power to create such a resemblance is entitled to the epithet "great." Master Brahms was blessed with the gift of being able to create melodies of a very personal character. It was merely the insensitivity of his contemporaries that led them to see his work not as a luxuriant garden of melody, but rather as a fallow field overgrown with dialectical weeds. As I have said, however, the situation will soon be different—and it is precisely the melodiousness of Brahms's chamber works that will open the eyes of the blind.

His symphonies are not as important as his chamber music. This is not because their melodic beauty is inferior, but rather because they lack the power of suggestion that ought to be both the grounds for and the effect of the large orchestral forces in a symphony. Whereas several of his major works—especially the German Requiem and the Four Serious Songs—arose out of very moving experiences in his life, his symphonies, in the main, do not seem to have come about in this way. Instead, Brahms seems to have drawn his inspiration for the symphonies almost completely from artistic principles: his understand penetrated so deeply into Beethoven's symphonic technique that it became possible for him to write symphonies that almost equal Beethoven's in the concentration and interplay of their themes, in the insistent dramatic urgency of their symphonic action, and especially in that which musicians call the organic process of thematic development. Despite all his efforts, the contents of his symphonies betray the fact that they did not arise, as was the case with Beethoven, out of life experience. But this notwithstanding, one could hardly find more dramatic music than the last movement of Brahms's fourth symphony, in which he purposefully renounces the use of suggestive effects on the listeners and does precisely the opposite of that which such considerations would have demanded: he places a gigantic passacaglia in this position, as if he were only concerned with his own artistic enjoyment. In doing so, he turned his back on the modern public and saluted the older masters of music, especially Sebastian Bach, who was always his great inspiration. What self-confidence, what artistic autonomy is expressed by that act! That was always Brahms's way: he never gave a thought to creating a favorable impression on the listener or to the music's psychological effect—not even in the symphony, a form which, by its very nature, requires consideration of such matters. He was interested only in the artistry of his task, and he delighted in resisting the public's lust for sensation.

Some will say: "He has also rejected modernity; for surely one should not be playing with old forms in a post-Beethoven symphony." And in a certain sense those who say this are correct. But nonetheless one must admire the master's intelligence and prudence in this regard: since he found no dramatic subject in his life experience to present in symphonic garb, and since he knew that he did not have Beethoven's power to create symphonic peripeteia and catastrophe, he instinctively and rightly preferred to create convincing modernizations of older forms instead of allowing embarrassment and pathological ambition to force him into improvising or counterfeiting enormous symphonic structures—like, for instance, Bruckner.

His character was full of manful self-control, and so he never abused his genius by bringing work to a close while still under the influence of his initial inspiration; for he knew that his rational judgment might later find a prematurely completed piece to be unsatisfactory in some respect. There was in him, on the one hand, a unique admixture of sobriety, intelligence, and caution (which, on occasion, could intensify into distrust) and, on the other hand, a strong inclination toward the romantic. It was this combination of personal characteristics that shaped his life and his work. It was this happy combination of qualities that gave him the strength to overcome his childhood adversities, which were caused in equal measure by poverty and by his own father. And during his youth it was again this combination of qualities that delivered him from the romantic delirium of his early works. Even as a young man he had the inspired level-headedness to say to himself: "You must always know what it is you want to do, and you may want to do whatever lies within your
ability. Skills you have mastered perfectly will always stand you in good stead, so do not be afraid to apprentice yourself to the old masters and to accept from their hands those stylistic principles that remain invariable; for when, through emulating your predecessors, your desire to create new things is joined with the ability to shape your new creations in exact accordance with your will—only then will you achieve lasting fame.” With this aim in mind he laid aside his early forays into composition; he began to examine the music of all the old masters, and he allowed these studies to influence freely his own artistic sensibilities. And the same insight that moved him to study the old masters also prompted him to adopt their best traits—composure in the midst of passion and profound conscious expression in the midst of the most tempestuous torrents of melody. This is why he always kept his melodies within confined limits, and did not let them lose their melodic character by wandering off indefinitely. Whoever understands this about Brahms will have to admit that he stands closer to Beethoven than any other successor of Beethoven. Consequently, Max Klinger’s Brahms—Phantasie treats Brahms unfairly when it overemphasizes his romanticism and transports him magically into remote regions which he would rather have surveyed from a more secure vantage point. [For an article on Klinger’s work, see this Newsletter IV/2 (autumn 1986).]

In his personal life he was guided by the same wisdom that led him to seek out the artistic virtues of the old masters. A lattice of utterly devoted friends surrounded him throughout the course of his life, and yet he never surrendered himself to any sentimentality that would have discreditted his masculinity. Although he was disposed toward close friendship and fervent love, he chose to forego this disposition, even though he did not consider it unseemly for a man to be so disposed. He placed a very high value on friendship and love—indeed, he showed it in his works—but apparently he did not think he was able to reconcile them with the demands made on him by his art. Or was it just that no satisfactory opportunity for such a reconciliation ever occurred? Even in this regard he was thoroughly manly: he steered clear of all dangers to his art, and never bemoaned his lonely state. And yet his compassion for his fellow man was so impassioned and his sensitivity so elevated that they infused his craftsmanship with the power to give birth to such immortal works as the German Requiem, the Four Serious Songs, the Schicksalslied, and the Triumphlied, among others. In these works his humanity expressed itself in a truly original manner. Here the influence of his life on his art was clearly visible—more clearly than in his purely instrumental works (although it must be admitted that glimmers of his experience filter into even these pieces quite often), and even more distinctly than in his songs, which really were fragments of his life experience.

During his lifetime, some called him an epigone. At times they sought to contrast him with Wagner, at times with someone like Bruckner; in any case, they delighted in such comparisons, which they used to insult him, and to provide fuel for their accusations that he was an epigone, an antique, a protegé of Hanslick. He himself did not care a jot for the gossip and prattle of the different factions. In fact, I recall a strikingly apposite and ironic remark of his that illustrates very well his attitude toward the currently fashionable and capricious practice of classifying composers. On one occasion I happened to be talking to him about Bruckner, and in my account I was repeatedly linking Bruckner with Hugo Wolf by way of comparison. Suddenly he interrupted me with an ironic reproach: “Really? But aren’t people saying that Hugo Wolf is a summit unto himself?” Indeed, all these “summits unto themselves” we have nowadays!

In regard to Brahms’s epigonism—in a recent ill-conceived obituary, Ludwig Speidel [Signale für die musikalische Welt 45 (1897): 385–8] attempted to represent it as something utterly despicable—this conception of him can be explained chiefly in the following way: short-sighted critics interpreted his music’s lack of flagrantly suggestive effects and colorful hummingbird-melodies as a complete lack of new elements. Now in literature, no one would understand it if someone wanted to write a sonnet in the form of a ghazal or a ballad in the form of a sonnet. But in music (where, as many dim-wits believe, any kind of nonsense can be elevated to the level of pure art), people would gladly see it as a change of pace if someone wanted to turn a symphony into an overblown concerto for winds with plenty of solos for each individual instrument; or a chamber music piece into an orchestral work; or a song into an opera; or an opera into a continuous orchestral medley of constantly changing themes. This is what people take for “new elements” in today’s music: anything that seems “non-epigonic.” And in this sense of the word Brahms really did fail to bring any “new elements” to music; ungrudgingly, as always, he granted this honor to others. He himself was content to reuse successful old techniques in an intelligent and innovative way. He was not ashamed to imitate the old masters to the best of his ability—but always in new ways. And having thus exercised his faculties, he could often produce works that were entirely new. Only when the force of his melody makes itself felt, and when, as a result of this influence, the scarcity of suggestive effects in the master’s music is offset by the listeners’ sincere and earnest openness to their own imaginative sensibilities; only then will people realize how many new elements this epigone has offered us—how many more than all those whose names are associated with the birth of a new music in our time!

Heinrich Schenker
Translated by William Pastille

Heinrich Schenker, born in 1868, studied music with Anton Bruckner at the Vienna Conservatory while working on a law degree; he encountered Brahms on a number of occasions during his early career as a pianist and composer (see this Newsletter V/2). Schenker later became a private teacher of theory and piano, developing and disseminating his theoretical ideas in a variety of publications that include the periodicals Der Tonwille and Das Meisterwerk in der Musik and the book Der freie Satz, published in 1935, the year of his death.
First Geiringer Scholarship
Awarded

The American Brahms Society is pleased to announce that Heather Platt, of the City University of New York, Graduate Center, has been named to receive the Society's first Karl Geiringer Scholarship in Brahms Studies. This award, in the amount of $1,000, will be used to support the completion of Ms. Platt's dissertation on "Text-Music Relationships in the Lieder of Johannes Brahms," about which she writes:

In the nineteenth-century Lied, more than in any other genre, the relationship between text and music is paramount. Although Gustav Jenner recalled that Brahms himself emphasized the importance of depicting the text, it is only recently that analysts have begun to examine the relationship between the texts and the tonal and motivic structures of his songs. Still, my study is the first to consider the extent to which the text penetrates to the deeper structural levels. Toward this end, I focus on three types of early middleground events: 1) the onset of the coda before the text has been completed; 2) the delay of the entrance of the tonic; and 3) the postponement of the arrival of the highest structural note until the end of the song. Through an analysis of tonal structure and its coordination with motivic and rhythmic events, I show that Brahms responded to both the structure and the meaning of his poems, often creating a profoundly sympathetic interpretation of the text's protagonist.

Ms. Platt, a native of Australia, took her master's degree at the University of Adelaide with a thesis on the orchestral suites of Johann Friedrich Fasch. She currently teaches at Baruch College in New York City.

The Geiringer Scholarship is awarded annually, as meritorious candidates present themselves. The competition is open to students who are in the final stages of preparing a doctoral dissertation on Brahms at a university in North America. Only those projects that demonstrate significant original thought and research will be considered competitive. The decision on awarding the scholarship will rest with the Board of Directors of the ABS.

Completed applications consist of 1) a cover letter, including the applicant's address, phone number, 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 Geiringer Scholarship, including travel plans, if appropriate. These materials should be submitted, in triplicate, to Professor David Brodbeck, Chairman of the Geiringer Scholarship Committee, Department of Music, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, and must be postmarked no later than 1 May. The application must be supported by two confidential letters of recommendation, including one from the dissertation advisor; these should be sent directly to the Chairman of the Geiringer Scholarship Committee and must also be postmarked by 1 May. Finalists in the competition will be notified by 15 June and asked to submit a sample chapter from their dissertation.

David Brodbeck

The Geiringer Scholarship Fund
A Progress Report

In the spring of 1989 the American Brahms Society established The Karl Geiringer Scholarship in Brahms Studies and launched a three-year campaign to raise $12,000 to endow an annual scholarship of $1,000. With government support for graduate studies on the wane, our Society deemed it important to assist the most promising graduate students working in our field. With the creation of this scholarship we seek to honor Professor Geiringer's dedication to graduate education and to build upon his rich legacy to Brahms research.

Declining interest rates have necessitated raising our goal to $15,000. To date, the members of our Society, together with the Geiringer family and their friends, have contributed $7,700, bringing us just past the halfway mark.

The first Geiringer Scholarship was awarded in 1990 directly from our treasury (see related article on this page); interest accumulated over the past two years will permit us to award the scholarship again this year. But to offer the award in 1992 we will need to have our endowment monies fully in place and earning interest by this coming autumn. While $7,300 is not a large sum, it is an ambitious amount for a small society like ours to raise in just six months.

If you have been thinking of making a contribution, now is the time to do so. If you have already contributed in an earlier tax year, you might consider making an additional donation for 1991. Contributions may be made in your own name or in memory of someone else. At the end of our campaign we will publish a listing of contributors and those in whose names donations have been made. We hope you will use this opportunity to assist us in our effort.

George S. Bozarth

Brahms Studies:
A Call for Papers

The American Brahms Society invites contributions to the next volume of its series of Brahms Studies, to be published early in 1993 by the University of Nebraska Press under the editorship of David Brodbeck. The intellectual scope of the series is broad: contributions are sought in criticism, analysis, theory, biography, archival and documentary studies, and interdisciplinary studies; translations of important writings that have appeared in foreign languages also will be considered. Each volume will consist of approximately six to eight full-length studies. Typescripts should be double-spaced throughout, with ample margins; three copies should be submitted. Prospective contributors should follow the practices of the Chicago Manual of Style, 13th edition. Submissions and queries should be sent to Professor David Brodbeck, Editor, Brahms Studies, Department of Music, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.

David Brodbeck
New Evidence on the 
Genesis of Brahms’s G major 
Violin Sonata, Op. 78

Clara Schumann’s important role in the inspiration of the Violin Sonata in G major, Op. 78, is often acknowledged in 
the Brahms literature. According to the summary in the 
McCorkle *Brahms Werkeverzeichnis*, Theodor Billroth and 
Clara Schumann, one shortly after the other, came to know 
the work early in the summer of 1879, before Brahms 
rehearsed it with Joseph Joachim in August and introduced 
it to the Herzogenbergen. According to Brahms’s handwriten 
register of his compositions (Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, 
Vienna), the sonata was composed during the summers of 1878 and 1879. The dotted rhythm is considered a 
germinating seed for the sonata; the origin of this rhythmic 
cell is commonly traced to the third movement, with its 
allusion to the two *Regentlieder*, Op. 59 Nos. 3 and 4, 
composed in 1873. Moreover, Max Kalbeck, employing a hermeneutical approach firmly oriented toward Brahms biograpy, viewed the funeral-march character of the dotted rhythm in the second movement as being related to 
Brahms’s feelings about the death of the composer Franz 
von Holstein in May 1878 and his “certainty about the immi 

ent demise of his godchild Felix Schumann” (3:192). This interpretation was deepened and refined in 1966 by Jürgen 
Beythien (“Die Violinsonata in G-Dur, op. 78, von Johannes 
Brahms—Ein Beitrag zum Verhältnis zwischen formaler und 
haltiicher Gestaltung,” in the Report of the 1966 
International Musicological Congress, Leipzig), who 
emaphatically and exclusively linked the origin and “human 
background” of the Violin Sonata, as well as the internal re 
relations in its compositional conception, to Clara Schum 
mann and the fatal illness of her youngest son. 

One may consider Beythien’s discourse problematic 
when it attempts to trace in such a concrete fashion the “re 
alization of an intellectual concern expressing itself in the 
musical dramaturgy.” However, a letter and musical manu 
script from Brahms to Clara Schumann, heretofore unstud 
iqned, unequivocally confirms as well as defines the impor 
tance which Brahms’s thoughts of Clara and Felix Schum 
mann had for the origins of the sonata. Indeed, whereas the 
final movement, with its direct relationship to the *Regen 
lieder*, has already received the most attention, this 
document assigns a special meaning to the slow movement. 

The musical manuscript is described in the *Brahms 
Werkeverzeichnis* according to the catalogue's usual criteria, 
yet neither there nor in earlier writings on Brahms has this 
source been evaluated. A photograph of this manuscript, 
whose current owner and location are unknown, is pre 
served in the Photogrammarchiv of the Österreichische 
Nationalbibliothek in Vienna (PhA 245). The manuscript 
consists of a single undated leaf of ornamental music paper, 
on one side of which Brahms wrote bars 1–24 of the slow 
movement of the Violin Sonata. Departing slightly from 
the published version, the fragment bears the designation 
*Adagio espressivo*. The document gains in importance from 
a letter to Clara Schumann written by Brahms on the reverse 
side of the leaf. (This letter is missing from the published 
correspondence, probably because the manuscript was kept 
with Clara Schumann’s musical documents, until it was 
offered at auction in Berlin in 1931 [Leo Liepmannssohn-
Verst.-Kat. 31]). The contents of the letter, with its clear 
reference to Clara Schumann’s previous letter of 2 February 
1879 (No. 379 in the published correspondence), permit a 
fairly accurate dating of the document: 

[Vienna, between 3 and ca. 18 February 1879] 

Dear Clara, 

If you play what is on the reverse side quite slowly, it will tell you, 
perhaps more clearly than I otherwise could myself, how sincerely 
I think of you, and Felix—even about his violin, which however 
surely is at rest. 

Thank you from my heart for your letter; I simply don’t want to 
or like to inquire, but I always feel a need to hear about Felix. 

I didn’t play here in Joachim’s concerts—because I just didn’t 
want to. In order to make up somewhat for this poor hospitality, 
I gave him my concerto [for violin, Op. 77], which otherwise I 
would probably have let lie for now. Yet it now pleases me and 
others quite well, and I only wish that...[notchach] would be invited 
to Frankfurt or Wiesbaden this spring so you could hear it. Perhaps 
you can give a hint to some princess? At the present J. is playing 
magnificently—so freshly and so exquisitely that you would have 
been beside yourself. If and when I make a piano arrangement, 
you will have it immediately. 

When you have a chance, give the enclosed newspaper clipping to 
Stockhausen. What are you thinking about for this summer and 
where? Or does Felix prevent you from thinking ahead? I greet you 
all from the heart. 

Your Johannes. 

If the enclosed little engraving doesn’t bring you much pleasure, 
then I ask that you send it back at your convenience or save it for 
me. 

The document demonstrates that at the very least 
Brahms made use of and possibly also understood the slow 
movement of the Violin Sonata as an explicit sign of his 
sympathy for Felix (who in earlier years had played the 
violin seriously) as well as for Clara Schumann. But even 
though it is now undisputed that the slow movement 
 existed, at least partially, in February 1879, shortly before 
Felix Schumann’s death, it remains open to question 
whether Brahms’s intellectual and emotional grappling 
with the anticipated death of Felix could have provided 
the stimulus that prompted him to compose the *Adagio 
espressivo*. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the funeral 

 march components and consequences, which are rooted 
in the germinal rhythm of the sonata, were already 
integrated into the conception of the movement at this 
time. In any case, even if it could be established that since 
the previous year the Violin Sonata had been referring 
“increasingly” to the *Regentlieder*, the last movement was not 
fully realized until spring–summer of 1879 (cf. Brahms’s letter to Otto Dessoff, September 1879; *Brahms Briefwechsel*, 
16:218). 

(continued on next page)
(G major Violin Sonata, continued)

It is completely out of character for Brahms, though in this case very telling with regard to the inspiration of the composition, that in February Clara Schumann received a fragment of a movement from the still incomplete work. Later on both she and Elisabet von Herzogenberg were deeply moved by the sonata, especially by the Regenlieder reminiscences, and Frau von Herzogenberg even seemed to have hopes that the work would be dedicated to her. It is perhaps significant, in light of this new document, that in the end Brahms avoided any official dedication. He did, however, donate his honorarium from the composition to a fund for Clara Schumann, so one can well speak of an implicit dedication.

The letter shows that Clara Schumann was apparently the first to come into contact with the new work, in whose inspiration she played an important role. Most likely this connection was not entirely clear to her. Her reaction to this excerpt of the work is not available; it could only have been contained in the missing letter by which she informed Brahms of the death of her son. (Brahms's reply is dated "second half of February 1879"; Schumann–Brahms Briefe, 2:166f.) Brahms could have told her more about the sonata during his visit to Frankfurt in March–April 1879. When he sent her the completed composition in manuscript at the end of June, he used language which indicates that she already knew of its existence ("...I am sending herewith in addition to the sonata..." and "the sonata—yes, it is also included, and look at it closely"; 2:174). Moreover, her lack of mention of the middle movement in her enthusiastic reaction to the work seems to indicate that the Adagio at least was already known to her (2:177ff.). However, before receiving the complete sonata she had no knowledge that the last movement would draw directly upon the Regenlieder; this sequence of events corresponds with Brahms's own remarks about the genesis of the work.

Michael Struck

Dr. Michael Struck is one of the two full-time researchers at work at the University of Kiel laying the groundwork for the new edition of Brahms's collected works (see Newsletter IV/2, Autumn 1986). His observations on the G major Violin Sonata are translated from a portion of an article entitled "Revisionsbedürftig: Zur gedruckten Korrespondenz von Johannes Brahms und Clara Schumann: Auswirkungen irrtümlicher oder lückenhafter Überlieferung auf werbogenetische Bestimmungen (mit einem unaußgewerteten Brahms-Brief zur Violinsonate op. 78)," Die Musikforschung 41/3 (1988). The English translation was prepared by Ben Kohn and George Bazarth.

First page of the autograph manuscript of the G major Violin Sonata, Op. 78 (Wiener Stadts- und Landesbibliothek)
Two New Brahms Biographies


It is a good measure of the widespread contemporary fascination with Brahms that recent years have seen not one but two new comprehensive studies of the man and his music. In truth, neither Ivor Keys nor Malcolm MacDonald has taken a fresh biographical approach; both rely on the standard sources—above all, Max Kalbeck’s monumental four-volume account (1904–14) and the various volumes of published correspondence—and both steer mostly clear of the murky waters of psychobiography. Nevertheless, these are timely and welcome books: in the light of much recent research, the late Karl Geiringer’s Brahms: His Life and Works (3rd. ed. [New York: Da Capo, 1982]), long recognized as the best biography in English, is now clearly showing its age.

Citing the example of Kalbeck, Keys proposes to discuss the life and works together in a single continuous “Narrative” (Chs. 1–6). Yet, inexplicably, he reserves what he calls “particular observations” on the compositions for a lengthy concluding “Catalogue” (Ch. 7). It is all very tedious. To be sure, one can proceed easily enough from the former to the latter; indeed upon encountering in the narrative such annoying and all-too-frequent locutions as “There is some detail of op. 18 in the catalogue, but here…” and “Perhaps something more can be done for the work in the catalogue, but this is perhaps the place…” the attentive reader will be virtually compelled to do so, even at the expense of considerable page turning back and forth. But it is maddeningly difficult to work the other way around, starting from the catalogue, since in numerous entries Keys writes merely “see the Narrative,” without citing any relevant page numbers.

Notwithstanding the starts and stops engendered by this unfortunate mode of organization, Keys’s writing is engaging enough (though perhaps not everyone will find the humor, presumably the result of the author’s struggle to enliven the rehearsal of dry facts, in such highly typical accounts as “Brahms left a night-shirt at the Herzogenbergs, and Elisabet sent it on to Utrecht, ‘launched a snowy white’. However, his first stop was Hamburg for the First Symphony on 18 January” [p. 90]). Occasionally the facts themselves are wrong. For example, the Brendel who succeeded Schumann as editor of the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik was named Franz, not Paul; and it was Nietzsche, not Hugo Wolf, who sneered that Brahms’s music was a celebration of impotence. Still, Keys does offer a number of useful insights. Consider this discussion of the snag in relations with Clara Schumann in 1868:

As early as 2 February he [Brahms] was unwise enough to suggest she [sic] herself out of her nomadic concert life, without thinking out the implication that she was no longer up to it—indeed that is what he almost said—and of course he got a dusty answer. However, what she wrote, returning to the fray on 15 October, rings very true, as a conclusive reason why they could not throw their lots together:

“You regard them [the tours] merely as a means of making money, I don’t! I feel I have a mission to reproduce beautiful works, and particularly those of Robert, so long as I have the strength to do so. . . . The practice of my art is an important part of my ego, it is the very breath of my nostrils.”

There could not be clearer evidence that one obsession was matched by another. Her ego was no more negotiable than his (pp. 61–62).

What is more, Keys sometimes finds an especially apt way to make a familiar point. The lengthy catalogue entry for the First Symphony, for example, begins with the observation that, though the work was composed in the age of Tristan, the opening pages of its first trumpet part “could have been played with ease on a C trumpet by Bach’s third trumpeter” (pp. 167–68). By contrast, as Keys informs us elsewhere, Webern used the last page of Numin in teaching advanced harmony.

MacDonald’s aims are more ambitious; his success, more substantial. The events of the composer’s life have never been recounted so elegantly, and the commentary on the music is, if necessarily brief, nonetheless trenchant and stimulating. More important, in these pages the often dramatic relation between the two really comes to life. To cite a particularly rich example, MacDonald perceives a broad range of musical ramifications stemming from Brahms’s decision to end his love affair with Agathe von Siebold, to whom he was briefly engaged to be married in the late 1850s. It is a commonplace to relate Brahms’s behavior in this matter to both his sense of loyalty to Clara Schumann and his own need as a creative artist for independence, and it is well known that Brahms quoted his erstwhile lover’s name (A–G–A–H–E) in the first movement of the G major String Sextet. But MacDonald pushes for additional autobiographical references in the composer’s works, suggesting that Brahms eventually translated these conflicts of loyalty into mythic patterns re-enacted in his Mageleone-Lieder (with its references to the givings of rings, and love-triangle story) and Rinaldo (with its enraptured knight rudely disentangled from the snares of love)” (p. 52).

And when he subsequently discusses these problematical works at greater length (pp. 184–89), he makes a strong case indeed for the interpretation.

MacDonald avoids Keys’s basic organizational flaw by interweaving biography and music in alternating chapters; moreover, in the most noteworthy chapters he works several additional strands into this basic fabric of life and works, reflecting important themes in recent scholarship that have remade the picture of Brahms the Conservative. In “The Romantic foreground,” for instance, he reminds us of what is still too often forgotten, that contemporary Romanticism constituted “the determining intellectual influence of [Brahms’s] impressionable years” (p. 24)—a judgment borne out, not only in the earliest music for piano, but in later works like the Vier Gesänge, Op. 17, for women’s chorus, two horns, and harp (1860), which, with its texts drawn from Ossian, Shakespeare, and Eichendorff, and its reveling in sheer instrumental color, fully justifies MacDonald’s assessment of it as “the fullest choral expression of Brahms’s innate Romanticism” (p. 119). In a subsequent chapter

(continued on next page)
(New Brahms Biographies, continued)

surveying the composer's keen "sense of the past," on the other hand, the author notes Brahms's "pioneering and prophetic" interest in early music, not only as a scholar and performer, but as a composer whose "absorption of early music techniques...had a wide range of continuing repercussions on his own musical language" (pp. 148-44). These repercussions, together with other elements of the composer's style, are summarized in "Music and Menschenbild," wherein, in addition, MacDonald explores Brahms's sense of identity and purpose: "Brahms's music binds itself into the fabric of tradition, referring to and drawing upon the examples of great predecessors, and proclaiming its individuality by its different use of related vocabulary, or different solutions to related problems. In his work, much of music history recapitulates itself—but is also transformed" (p. 384). Building on this idea in "A Music for the Future," MacDonald argues, finally, that the example set by this obsession with the past, this striving to make his own mark within a tradition, constitutes Brahms's greatest influence: "Too much time has passed for Brahms to seem 'conservative' any more; his music continues to have relevance because of the way he faced problems that all composers with a sense of history and stylistic awareness must face. It has become inescapable, interwoven into the very fabric of music history" (p. 417). It is of course satisfying that so well drawn a picture of the "New Brahms" can now be viewed in a book that will surely be read by many interested laymen. But MacDonald has accomplished much more. His brilliant study not only will admirably serve a general readership but promises to become the specialist's trusted companion as well.

David Brodbeck

Professor Brodbeck's critique is drawn from a review of recent Brahms books that will appear in a forthcoming issue of Notes.

A Comprehensive Bibliography for Brahms

Thomas Quigley's long-anticipated Johannes Brahms: An Annotated Bibliography of the Literature through 1982 has recently been published by The Scarecrow Press, Inc., of Metuchen, NJ. An impressive volume, running to over seven hundred pages, this reference work provides a comprehensive, systematic guide to the secondary literature on Brahms, his music, and his circle. The more than 4,700 references to biographies, monographs, articles from the popular and research presses, studies from Festschriften and other collections of articles, music criticism, and doctoral dissertations are organized by topics, thereby assembling for the user all the literature relevant to the various facets of Brahms's life and musical activities. A carefully executed system of numerical cross-referencing calls the user's attention to related titles appearing under other topics, and an index of writers, editors, translators, and illustrators permits access by name. (Placement of the name index at the very back of the volume, rather than two hundred pages from the end, would have facilitated use of this often-consulted section.) Other indices provide references to newspapers and magazines (both popular and scholarly), to the titles of publications and monographic series, and to the names of the degree-granting institutions for the dissertations cited.

Quigley has drawn upon earlier bibliographical accountings by Keller, Scidl, Loch, Lübke, Fellinger, Kross, and others, but in comprehensiveness and accuracy his effort surpasses all others. His meticulous attention to the relationship of original publications to their reprints, revised editions, translations, and excerpts will save users of his bibliography much time and energy, and his succinct annotations for the titles he has been able to examine in person (about two-thirds of the references) effectively inform the user about the nature of the publications.

One typically consults a bibliography when in need of specific information. But time spent generally perusing the Quigley bibliography will be richly rewarded, so full it is of intriguing references that have hitherto escaped even the dedicated Brahms scholar. For instance, Serge Koussevitzky's interesting essay "The Emotional Essence of Brahms," published in The Atlantic Monthly in 1942, was new to the present writer. Quigley's section on "Brahms's Relations to Other People" draws one's attention to relationships one might not otherwise contemplate (for example, Brahms and Fauré) and also provides handy reference to the birth and death dates of all the major and many of the minor figures in the Brahms circle. (In the section headings for individual works, full titles and dates of composition would have been useful.)

Minor infelicities in citations do occur. For example, the unidentified "Ker," of the review of Brahms's Lieder und Gesänge, Op. 7, in the Signale für die musikalische Welt in 1855 (Quigley's item 2111) is no doubt Louis Köhler, the critic that employed the same abbreviated pseudonym when assessing Brahms's first six operas the year before (cf. item 1350); and the title of Köhler's 1855 review should be added to the entry. The name of the author "Fox Strangeways, A. H." (item 2120) should be corrected and editorially expanded to Arthur Henry Fox Strangeways (no s; cf. Grove 6). The mislocation of the entry for the New York Public Library facsimile edition of the autograph of the Alto Rhapsody, Op. 58, amidst writings on the Schicksalslied, Op. 54, needs to be corrected. And umlauts should be consistently applied. But such errors in detail are inevitable in such an ambitious undertaking. One is pleased to detect so few.

The current volume chronicles Brahms bibliography up to the eve of the Brahms sesquicentennial year, a reasonable demarcation which yields a book that will not go out of date and which also fits well in the hand. A supplementary volume, covering the outpouring of writings on Brahms during and since the anniversary year, is planned for publication in 1997, the centenary of the death of Brahms.

George S. Bozarth

Thomas Quigley's Brahms bibliography is available to ABS members at a discounted price (see the listing on page 10 of this Newsletter).
Other Recent Brahms Publications

In addition to the two Brahms biographies and Thomas Quigley’s Brahms bibliography reviewed elsewhere in this Newsletter, and the twenty-two papers in the first volume of the ABS’s Brahms Studies (for titles of individual papers, see Newsletter VIII/1) and the selection of essays and translations collected in Brahms and His World (see Newsletter VIII/2), a large number of studies on Brahms, as well as a facsimile edition of the autograph manuscript of the Haydn Variations, have been published during the last year:

Journal Articles


Collections of Studies


Helmut Kowar, “Zum Klavierspiel Johannes Brahms’,” pp. 35–47.


Michael von Troschke, “Johannes Brahms’ Lied op. 96 Nr. 1 Der Tod, das ist die kühlende Nacht,” pp. 83–93.


George S. Bozarth, “Brahms’s First Piano Concerto op. 15: Genesis and Meaning,” pp. 211–47.

Carmen Debryn, “Kolorit und Struktur. Bachs Concerto O magi


Papers read at scholarly meetings


Music by Brahms, Joachim, and Clara Schumann


A black-and-white facsimile of the “fair-copy” autograph manuscript, with a preface that recounts Brahms’s stay in the town of Tutzing on the Starnberger See during the summer of 1873 and the composition of the Haydn Variations at that time, and describes the manuscript. Published in the preface are photographs of Tutzing in Brahms’s day and facsimiles of documentary and musical sources related to this work, including the beginning of the seventh variation in the autograph manuscript of the orchestral version, Op. 56a (Austrian National Library). In our review copy, facsimiles of the two pages in the manuscript left empty by Brahms (ll. 7v and 10v) were omitted without comment and five other pages (ll. 6v–8v) were printed out of order (pp. 11, 16, 13, 15, 12).


The first edition of this “sonat(in)a,” a work stemming from 1841–42.

(continued on next page)
(Recent Brahms Publications, continued)

Vol. 1, containing Opp. 12, 13, and 23 (EB 8558), with a facsimile of Clara Schumann’s autograph manuscript of Sie lieben sich beide, Op. 13 No. 2 (Zwickau, Robert-Schumann-Haus), was published in 1990. Vol. 2, containing songs left unpublished by Clara Schumann, is scheduled to appear later this year.

Other Publications of Interest

A collection of ten essays by as many authors, on the rise of urban musical life between 1789 and 1848 in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig, London, Moscow and St. Petersburg, Italy, the United States, and Latin America.

A collection of six essays in musical hermeneutics which draw upon musical analysis and literary-critical theory to offer provocative re-interpretations of a range of nineteenth-century compositions (though, regrettably, with only passing reference to the music of Brahms).

George S. Bozarth

Discounted Publications for ABS Members

The American Brahms Society is pleased to be able to offer to its members a discount on Thomas Quigley’s Johannes Brahms: An Annotated Bibliography of the Literature through 1982, published by the Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, NJ. Retailing at $79.50, this book may be purchased by ABS members for $63.60 (a discount of 20%). Since the Scarecrow Press has agreed to make a contribution to the Geiringer Scholarship Fund for each copy sold through our Society, members are encouraged to make their purchases through the ABS. (Payment by check, VISA, MC.)

The following publications continue to be available to ABS members at discounted prices:


Margit L. McCorkle. Brahms Thematisch-Bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis. Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1984. $269.00 (reg. $299.00), plus $3.00 shipping and handling per order, payable to Henle/USA (check, VISA, MC).

Johannes Brahms, Alto Rhapsody, Op. 53. Introduction by Walter Frisch. New York: The New York Public Library, 1983. $40.00 (reg. $50.00), plus $2.00 per book (up to $6.00) for shipping and handling, payable to the New York Public Library (check or money order only).

Johannes Brahms, “Feldweinamkeit,” Opus 56 No. 2: Faksimile nach dem in Privatbesitz befindlichen Autograph. Accompanying notes (German and English) by Ernst Hertrich. Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1983. $39.60 (reg. $44.00), payable to Henle/USA (check, VISA, MC).


Walter Frisch, Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. $36.00 (reg. $45.00), $10.36 paperback (reg. $12.95), plus $2.00 for first copy, $5.00 for each additional copy for shipping, payable to the Regents of the University of California (check, VISA, MC).


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The American Brahms Society is a non-profit organization. The IRS has determined that donations in excess of dues may be considered as charitable contributions.

I wish to order the following publications now available with member's discounts (see article earlier in this issue):
News and Comment

"There are half a dozen or so great sonatas for violin and piano; Brahms wrote three of them." Thus proclaimed TIME in announcing as one of its choices for the Ten Best Recordings of 1990 the performances of the Brahms violin sonatas by Itzhak Perlman and Daniel Barenboim released by Sony Classical. "Perlman and Barenboim... give [the sonatas] robust yet sensitive readings." It was good to see J. Br. right up there, sharing top honors with Paul Simon's The Rhythm of the Saints, retrospective collections of the vocal art of Frank Sinatra and Enrico Caruso, and Alfred Brendel's interpretation of the Diabelli Variations.

In June 1990 the auction house J. A. Stargardt in Marburg, Germany, offered for sale a hitherto unknown manuscript of Brahms's canon for voice and viola In dieser Welt des Trugs, WoO posthum 27. The manuscript, which bears the dedication "Emma Grädener zu freundlichem Gedenken" and is signed "Johs. Brahms," is part of an autograph album that apparently dates from early in the year 1858. Fräulein Grädener was the daughter of the Hamburg composer and conductor Karl Grädener (1812-83), whose entry in the album is dated 14 April 1858. The selling price of DM 18,000 fell shy of Stargardt's suggested price of DM 20,000. A facsimile of the manuscript was published in the auction catalogue (Katalog 647, p. 257). Also on the block were several Brahms letters, postcards, and short notes to Fritz Simrock (all published in the Brahms Briefwechsel), Max Bruch (unpublished, from March 1875), and Bernhard Scholz (unpublished, postmarked 12 November 1887).

Brahms materials also figured in Stargardt's auction on 4-5 April 1991. The only musical manuscript was an album leaf bearing the initial four bars of "Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras," from the German Requiem, and signed "Herrn Landau zu frdl. Erinnerung J. Brahms. I Wien. Febr. 71." In addition to a published letter to Carl Reinecke (Brahms Briefwechsel 3:136f.), Stargardt offered three hitherto unpublished letters: to Arnold Wehner (1810-80), music director in Göttingen, on 3 September 1853, providing a detailed account of Brahms's travels during the summer before he met the Schumanns; to Hans von Bülow, in mid-October 1884; and to his stepmother, Caroline Brahms, on 21 July 1886. Excerpts from the letters and facsimiles of the Landau album leaf and of the first pages of the letters to Wehner and Caroline Brahms were published in the auction catalogue (Katalog 649, pp. 357-61).

In a circular of 26 February 1991, the Viennese dealer Christian M. Nebehay offered for sale another Brahms album leaf, this one containing the canon Wenn Kammer hätte zu töten, Op. 113 No. 12. The dedication reads "Herrn J. S. Tauber zu freundlicher Erinnerung J. Brahms" and the leaf, which is not listed in the McCorkle Brahms catalogue, is dated "Wien, Mai 67." Tauber (1822-79) was a Jewish poet, author, and journalist who took an active part in the 1848 revolution and later became a stockbroker in Vienna.

George S. Bozarth

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