MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Walter Frisch

Columbia University

W. W. NORTON AND COMPANY

NEW YORK • LONDON

CHAPTER TEN

Concert Culture and the "Great" Symphony

In the last half of the nineteenth century, instrumental genres thrived alongside the musical theater of Wagner, Verdi, and their contemporaries. The symphony, serenade, suite, concerto, chamber music, and piano sonata had their origin in the eighteenth century in some kind of private venue—courts or castles—but by the mid-nineteenth century all were essentially public genres. Their main locus of performance was the concert hall. We can speak of a "concert culture" for which this music was composed and in which it was heard. In this chapter, after examining the broader phenomenon of concert culture, we will focus on its most prestigious product, the "great" or large-scale symphony. We will see how the symphonic inheritance of Beethoven was transformed, according to the pressures and demands of concert culture in different regions, by several major composers of the period, including Johannes Brahms, Anton Bruckner, Camille Saint-Saëns, César Franck, and Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky.

CONCERT CULTURE

Concert culture was a creation of the educated middle classes, who, as we have seen earlier in this book, replaced the aristocracy as the primary consumers of music.

In large urban centers across the middle and later part of the century, new concert halls were built, or preexisting ones expanded. St. James's Hall, with an audience capacity of 2,000, opened in London in 1858 (Fig. 10.1); the Grosser Musikvereinsaal in Vienna, in 1870; and an enlarged Gewandhaus in Leipzig, in 1884. Concerts were no longer meant primarily as social occasions interrupted by occasional listening, but as educational, and even quasi-religious, experiences, as exemplified by the concept of art-religion discussed in Chapter 2.

To understand how these attitudes helped change concert programming between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, we can compare the circumstances of the Vienna premiere of Mozart's Symphony No. 35 (*Haffner*, K. 385) in 1783 with that of Brahms's Third Symphony in the same city 100 years later, in 1883. Mozart's work was performed during Lent at a private concert or "academy," as it was called at the time. This was a one-time event, not part of any regular series, and it had to be organized by Mozart himself. Unlike in a modern performance, Mozart's *Haffner* was broken up and spread across the program. The first three movements opened the concert; the last one appeared at the end.

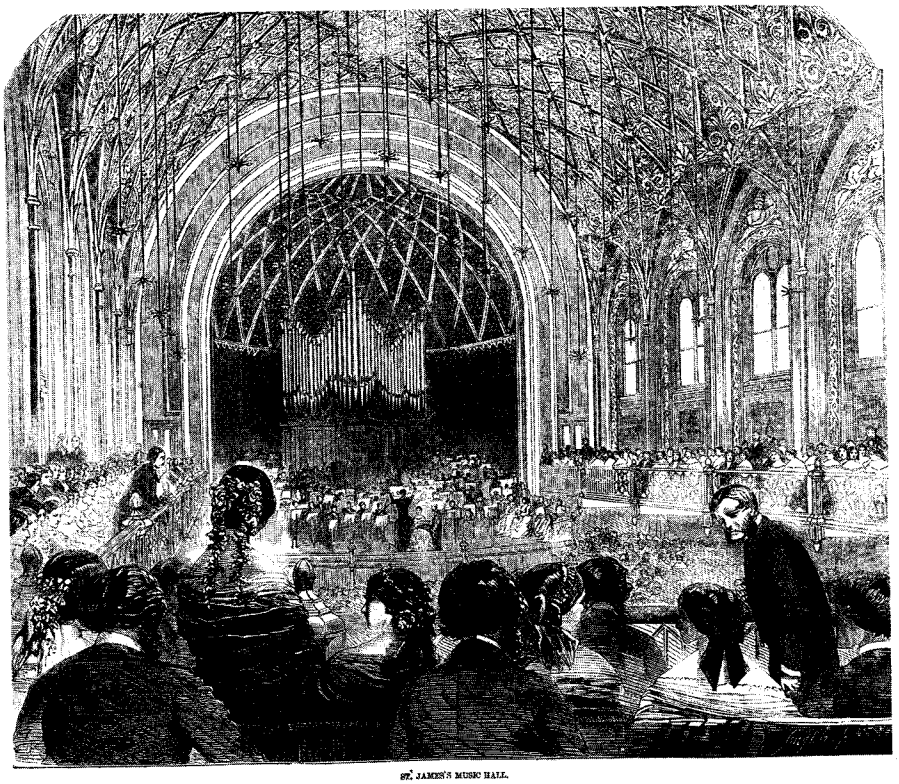

Figure 10.1: *St. James's Hall in London, which opened in 1858 and had an audience capacity of 2,000*

In between came a potpourri of Mozart's works, including two movements from another symphonic composition, opera and concert arias, two piano concertos, and keyboard improvisations. By contrast, Brahms's Third was the major attraction at a regular subscription concert of a fully professional orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic (which had been founded in 1842), and led by its music director, Hans Richter (Fig. 10.2). Where Mozart's concert was a long and motley affair, the length and shape of the Philharmonic concert of 1883 resemble what we would encounter today; it lasted about two hours and comprised an overture, a concerto, and a large-scale symphony.

Concert culture of the nineteenth century was fundamentally conservative and retrospective. The Philharmonic concert of 1883 was unusual in having two

Philharmonische Concerte.

Sonntag den 2. Dezember 1883,

Mittags präcise halb 1 Uhr,

im grossen Saale der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde:

2tes Abonnement-Concert

veranstaltet von den

Mitgliedern des k. k. Hofopern-Orchesters

unter der Leitung des Herrn

HANS RICHTER,

k. k. Hofopern-Kapellmeister.

PROGRAMM:

F. Mendelssohn . . **Ouverture zu „Die Hebriden".**

F. Dvorák . . . . . **Violin-Concert (NEU)** vorgetragen von Herrn **F. ONDRIČEK.**

J. Brahms . . . . . **Symphonie Nr. 3, F-dur (1. Aufführung).**

Streichinstrumente: Lemböck. — Programme unentgeltlich.

Das 3. Philharmonische Concert findet am 16. Dezember statt.

Figure 10.2: *Program for the premiere of Brahms's Third Symphony, Vienna, 1883. Dvořák's first initial is mistakenly given as "F." instead of "A."*

new works on the program—Brahms's Third Symphony and Antonín Dvořák's Violin Concerto. Normally, the Vienna Philharmonic played very little music by living composers. The works of Beethoven comprised over 60 percent of the orchestra's repertory from 1842 until 1850. As late as 1900, over 25 percent of the works played were still by Beethoven. In 1870, a German critic could complain that "most of our orchestras believe they have discharged their obligations entirely if they perform one new symphony in a season." Many French and English orchestras followed the same trend. During the season of 1883–84, when Brahms's Third premiered in Vienna, the nine different programs of the Parisian Société des Concerts du Conservatoire (Concert Society of the Conservatory) contained 44 musical selections; of these, only three were by living composers. Organizations like the Vienna Philharmonic and the orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire became essentially museums for preservation rather than engines for innovation.

In the realm of solo and chamber music as well, concert culture promoted the rise of professional pianists and ensembles who devoted themselves to classics of the remote and recent past. In November and December 1867, the prominent pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow (1830–1894) gave a series of recitals in Munich devoted solely to the piano music of Beethoven. This kind of focused programming was unknown before 1850, but it persists today, when cycles of the Beethoven sonatas by renowned pianists garner large audiences and extensive press coverage. Such recitals owe their origins to leading figures of late-nineteenth-century concert culture like Bülow and Clara Schumann (discussed in Chapter 5).

THE GREAT SYMPHONY IN THE LATER NINETEENTH CENTURY

To succeed in the concert culture of the later nineteenth century, composers had to write distinctive works that nonetheless conformed to the basic musical and institutional norms. Many sought to make their mark with the "great" symphony (in German, *grosse Sinfonie*). Descended primarily from Beethoven's works, the great symphony was a large-scale piece for orchestra, normally in four movements. As Gottfried Wilhelm Fink observed in 1838, just over a decade after Beethoven's death, the great symphony was aimed at a broad public; it was a work in which "everything must be cast more grandly, as if from the stage downward toward listeners." But all was not to be bold rhetoric: the symphony could also be like a novel, "a dramatically developed story that captures a particular state of mind shared by a large group."

In the Austro-German sphere, Mendelssohn and Schumann were the most prominent composers of the great symphony after Beethoven and Schubert. But

after Schumann's Third Symphony of 1850 (chronologically the last of his four works in the genre) the symphony fell into something of a decline. Fewer were written, and those that did emerge often had a hard time getting space on concert programs. Critics were often savage, comparing new symphonies unfavorably with the masterworks by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Schumann himself had made such a comparison in 1838, noting that "we find many too close imitations [of Beethoven], but very, very seldom, with few exceptions, any true maintenance or mastery of this sublime form." These words, echoed by critics for many decades thereafter, had a chilling effect on even the best younger composers. Brahms, Bruckner, and Dvořák each began to work on a symphony in the 1860s. But they delayed completing and unveiling their works until the 1870s, intimidated by Beethoven's long shadow and by attitudes like Schumann's. "I will never compose a symphony!" Brahms reportedly said in 1871. "You have no idea how it feels to one of us when he continually hears behind him such a giant [Beethoven]."

JOHANNES BRAHMS AND ANTON BRUCKNER IN VIENNA

From the 1870s to near the end of the century, the two dominant figures in Viennese symphonic life were Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) and Anton Bruckner (1824–1896). Both were bachelors living modestly in the large cosmopolitan city to which they had emigrated, but they were very different in background, outlook, and musical style. Each had ardent supporters who came from different ideological and social spheres, a situation that sheds light on the special relationship between cultural forces and musical works in Vienna of this period.

Brahms had been born and raised in the north German city of Hamburg, Bruckner in the Upper Austrian town of Ansfelden, near Linz. Brahms was a lifelong Lutheran Protestant, with a profound knowledge of the Bible, but he had a secular education and did not attend church regularly. By contrast, Bruckner was a devout Catholic who was educated as a choirboy at the monastery of St. Florian and later worked there for many years as a teacher.

Sacred vocal works were an important part of the compositional output of both Brahms and Bruckner. Brahms wrote in the Lutheran tradition of works with German texts. Among his sacred choral compositions were motets modeled on those of Heinrich Schütz and J. S. Bach; his largest choral work, and the one that made him a famous composer around Europe, was the *German Requiem* (1868), which, as discussed in Chapter 7, combined these historical influences in a work of great originality. Brahms's choral works are nonliturgical, that is, not intended to be a part of any religious service. They are part of the broader concert culture of the nineteenth century, meant to be performed in secular venues like the concert hall. Bruckner presents a very different picture.