

# Brahms and the Return of the Symphony

5/9/17

# Symphony in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> cent. ("The Symphonic Crisis")

- Wagner, in *Artwork of the Future*: Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> has made all purely instrumental music (including the symphony) obsolete.
- *Opera and Drama*: the fact that Beethoven resorted to vocal music proves that 'absolute music' must be '**redeemed**' in music drama.
- With the rise of conservatories, the symphony becomes a "classical" genre, i.e. an academic one.
  - Clash with "historicist" perspective.
- Decline in total number of symphonies (in Austro-German world):
  - 1800-1809 – 50
  - 1830-1839 – 20
  - 1840-1849 – 23
  - 1850-1859 - 19
  - ("The Symphony in Brahms's World," in *Brahms: The Four Symphonies* (Walter Frisch), p. 3)

# “The Symphonic Style”

- Themes suitable to symphonic form
- Themes that are unrealizable except in symphonies
  - “the medium that is drawn upon is made to appear as the function of an aesthetic idea.” (Dahlhaus)
- *Thematische Arbeit* (thematic working).
  - cf. Hoffman on Beethoven’s Fifth.
- Coherence/organicism.
  - “The result was a kind of stranglehold on symphonic composers.”

# Symphony and the Public

- Beethoven (and Schubert) had no permanent symphony to play his music. Every occasion was ad-hoc.
- But in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, that has changed (bourgeois music consuming class with disposable income).
  - 1831 Vienna Society of Friends Music Hall erected
  - 1858 London St. James Hall – 2127 people!
  - 1860 Vienna Philharmonic
  - 1870 Grosser Saal (or, “Goldener Saal”) – 2000 people!
  - 1870 Dresden Chamber of Commerce Hall
  - 1891 Music Hall in New York → Carnegie Hall
- Music culture comes to emphasize mechanical facility over “musical” training, for the reproduction of canonized classics.
- **Increased public demand for symphonies alongside decrease in symphonic output → “museum culture”.**

# Classical music as “mass culture”

- William Weber, “**Mass Culture and the Reshaping of European Musical Taste, 1770-1870**”, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 25, p. 175-200
  - 1: Growth of publishing industry
  - 2: large scale concerts driven by standing professional orchestras.
    - “impersonal”
  - 3: “classical” taste engenders the polarity of “popular” and classical.
    - “With the simultaneous collapse of the patronal tradition and the rise of the printing industry, musical taste suddenly went to extremes of levity and seriousness.” (186)
  - The cultivation of “classical” music connoisseurship – and the attendant idea that there exists a difference between serious and “vernacular” music -- can thus be shown to have an essentially economic root.
- This “classicizing” impulse clashes with the historicist sensibility:
  - “No wonder, then, that symphonic production had fallen off. On the one hand, it had been declared obsolete by the lofty arbiters of musical “progress,” and on the other it had to vie in the real world (the world of expenses, promotions, and remunerations) with works that had been declared timelessly enduring—hence unsurpassable—achievements.” (Taruskin)

# Some great Taruskin

- **A strange but durable amalgam of esthetic idealism and crass commercialism had equated repertoire and canon, at least for the present, and thereby frozen both. Music of easy audience appeal was excluded and had to find other outlets, other venues. Thus not only was “classical” or “art” music born at that crucial nineteenth-century midpoint; so was “popular” or “entertainment” music (commercially purveyed music not meant for permanent display but for instantaneous, ephemeral success). The simultaneous origin of both these categories, eternally antithetical though they may appear to us by now, was only inevitable, since each was defined by the other's exclusion.**

# Brahms and the familiar “crisis”

- “What is most radical about Brahms’s music is that he faced head on the problems of writing for a concert audience familiar with the music of the past, the problem that has been the principal concern of serious composers since his time.”
  - Peter Burkholder, “Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music”
- Musical modernity = relationship to the *past* – precisely the opposite of the criterion relevant to the New German School (*Zukunftsmusik*).
- “*The Anxiety of Influence.*” (Harold Bloom)

# Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

- Early life in Hamburg probably not as poor as has been believed.
- Father Johann was a musician. Mother, Johanna Henrika Christiane Nissen, was a seamstress from a bourgeois family.
- Gifted: Eduard Marxen teaches him piano for free.
- Kurt Hoffman shows that anecdotes about Brahms playing piano at strip clubs were most likely the composer's own fabrications.
- In 1848, hears the music of Hungarian refugees fleeing for the USA. Especially violinist Ede Remenyi.
- 1853 goes on tour with Remenyi; meets Liszt, Joseph Joachim and the Schumanns. Schumann loves his music; proclaims the arrival of a musician
  - “called to give expression to his times in ideal fashion: a musician who would reveal his mastery not in gradual stages but like Minerva would spring fully armed from Kronos's head. And he has come; a young man over whose cradle Graces and Heroes have stood watch. His name is Johannes Brahms” (“Neue Bahnen” (New Paths), published in NZM 1853)



# Hermann Helmholtz, Science, Pianos

- 1862 *On the Sensations of Tone*
  - Physics of sound, physiology and psychology of perception, and, crucially, the (debatable) relationship of aesthetics to nature
  - Divergent legacy: Schenker (natural basis for tonality) and Schoenberg (consonance is historically contingent)
- CF Theodor Steinway worked for Helmholtz!
  - Duplex scaling, patented in 1870s.
  - Double stringing
  - Metal in the soundboard
- Vis a vis Wagner, the anti-Wagnerians justify themselves in scientific terms:
  - Science appears to validate instrumental music itself
  - They postulate that music operates according to a natural logic – which seems to go better with Brahms's aesthetic. **"Music is the algebra of the arts."** (R Wallascheck, quoted in Botstein, "Time and Memory in Brahms's Vienna," p. 14)
  - Empirical consideration of the physiology of hearing reveals that we're all basically equally endowed: this points to a valuation of musical **cultivation**, which intelligent hearing of Brahms demands.
- **"The historicism of Brahms's formal models and procedures – in sonata form and variation – was justified as an act of building on the truth, much as a scientist of Brahms's generation might build on proven hypotheses and then modify, elaborate and revise that truth."** (Botstein)

# Brahms, con't

- 1853 Piano Sonata no. 3 in F minor
  - Andante (mov. 2) is linked to a poem of C.O. Sternau:

*Der Abend dämmert, das Mondlicht scheint*

The evening falls, the moonlight shines

*Da sind zwei Herzen in Liebe vereint*

Two hearts are united in love

*Und halten sich selig umfassen*

And keep themselves in bliss enclosed

# Brahms con't

- 1860 Polemical document contra *Zukunftsmusik* is leaked prematurely to the press; embarrasses Brahms.
- 1861 Piano Quartet no. 1 op. 25
  - Dahlhaus: insignificance of materials vs. significance of the development. **Developing Variation** (Schoenberg)
- 1868 Ein Deutsches Requiem
  - Liberal “uniter or the religiously divided German speaking peoples.” (Taruskin)
- “From the mid 1870s on, Brahms and the Viennese contemporaries with who he associated were primarily preoccupied with the anxious perception that a precipitous decline in the standards of musical culture was underway.” (Leon Botstein, in *Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, p. 54)
- 1871 8 Klavierstücke, Op. 76
  - no. 5: Capriccio
    - Rhythmic displacement,  $\frac{3}{4}$  and  $\frac{6}{8}$  simultaneously.
    - Melody suggesting  $\frac{3}{4}$ , bass in  $\frac{6}{8}$  and tenor line that could be either one.
- 1872 *Triumphlied* – pan-German nationalism – companion to German Requiem.
- 1874 Nietzsche publishes “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.”
  - Our age is “over saturated” with history. Too much history, he argues, “implanted the belief...that one is a latecomer and an **epigone**; it leads an age into a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism.”
- 1892 3 intermezzi, no. 2
- 1893 8 Klavierstücke, op. 118
  - no. 6, Intermezzo
    - Restrained? Contemplative?
    - **Developing Variation** – see Schoenberg, “brahms the progressive” (on thursday!)

# Struggle with Wagnerism

- Botstein: “going public with symphonic and orchestral music constituted a public statement in response to a perceived need to challenge the Wagnerian appropriation of Beethoven and put forward a competitive example – in music – of how history could be respected...and yet serve as a source of contemporary inspiration.”
- “Contemporary musical culture needed great, lush, and imposing large-scale music that was not Wagnerian.”
- 1873 *Variations for Orchestra on a Theme by Haydn*
  - Bach and Haydn: alternative models to Beethoven?
- 1875 Brahms performs *Max Bruch's Odysseus*.
  - Drama without crass illusions of theater
  - Odysseus, like Wotan, is a non-judeo-christian mythical figure.
- Still, Brahms was not exactly anti-Wagner – more anti Wagnerian influence, especially on instrumental music, where narrative strategies of the theater don't hold up.
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# Debate at the *Gesellschaft*

- The *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* (Society of the Friends of Music, founded 1812) at 1860, when Brahms arrives, is transforming from a public institution “dedicated to the dissemination of musical culture.”
- (almost) no more amateur musicians.
- 1870 *Musikverein* seats 1400. Brahms is director of the Society.
- Pianos! Bosendorfer vs. Steinway
  - 1867 Steinway presentation at the Paris Expo:
    - Metal plate
    - Overstringing
  - Pianos generally much more popular; cheaper, hold a tune better, louder, manufactured, etc.
- Brahms and Bosendorfer resist these American innovations.
  - “The more ‘user-friendly’ the modern keyboard instrument seemed, the more pessimists worried about the disappearance of a high grade of musical literacy.” (Botstein)
  - “The modern piano sounded more like a device for the reproduction of the sound of the large ensembles of public music making.”
- Thus, Brahms’s turn to large scale works can be seen as a “concession to the changing realities of musical life.”
- What was the nature of that concession?
  - To make music that, like Wagner’s, appealed to the expert and the layman, but which did so by reference to tradition rather than future.

# Debates in Brahms's Vienna

- Growth of “second society” – i.e. cultural leadership not drawn from the traditional aristocracy.
- Population explosion in Vienna 1860 – 1890
  - 1850: 500,000
  - 1890: 1,400,000 – only 35% of whom are native Viennese.
  - Jews, Moravians, Bohemians, Slovenes, Poles.
- “Christian Social” movement; appeals to nativist community, led by Karl Leuger. Anti semitic and anti cosmopolitan.
- 1873 Economic crash in Vienna and cholera epidemic.
- Good news for Leuger and Christian Socialism
  - The rage for Wagner in Vienna was closely tied to German chauvinism and political anti-semitism.
  - See, e.g. the fact that Herzl cites *Tannhauser* as part of the reason for founding a Jewish nationalistic movement in 1897.
- Brahms, an outsider (not Viennese), friends with Jews, a Protestant in a Catholic city, rival to Wagner, clearly aligned with the liberal politics which were increasingly beleaguered in Vienna.
  - Opposition to Bruckner cf. Support for Dvorak.

# Liebesliederwalzer, Op. 52 and op. 65

- *Liebesliederwalzer*
  - Eclectic textual sources; many ethnicities represented.
  - Distinctly viennese form (Viennese Waltz).
  - “With characteristic irony, Brahms poked fun at this species of local pride and nostalgia.”
  - Makes “an implicit mockery of claims to uniqueness based on language, nationality and place of birth.” (Botstein)

# Four symphonies, 1875 - 1885

- **No 1 – 1876 – mov 1**, op. 68
  - C minor – significant --- Beethoven 5
  - Broadly, it's in sonata form, but tensions between classic-romantic convention and Brahms's "gritty" (Walter Frisch) density animates the movement.
  - Motivic-thematic coherence: entire movement is built out of three basic motives:
    - 1: stepwise chromatic motion, usually in equal rhythmic values, usually syncopated
    - 2: Longer note, with 16<sup>th</sup> notes approaching a downbeat
    - 3: triadic figurations
  - "off balance" character; "one does not come away humming the first theme of the first movement of Brahms's first symphony." (frisch, p. 49)
- **No. 1, mov 4**
  - Instrumental re-writing of Beethoven 9?
  - **Extreme resemblance** — surely deliberate.
- **No 2 – 1877, op 73, mov. 1**
  - Cheerful!
  - Lyricism (Schubert) + Motivic-Thematic working (Beethoven) = distinctly Brahmsian flavor
  - Again, three primary motives – or "configurations"
  - Conflicting phrase structures  
(violin concerto, second piano concerto, 1878 and 1881)
- **No 3, op. 90 – 1883, mov 1**
  - Shortest symphony (30 minutes or less)
  - "motto" of F-Ab-F
  - 6/4 or 3/2? Metrical and harmonic ambiguity.
- **No 4 – 1884 mov 3**
  - Fragmentation, caesura, weird jingling triangle
  - "the aura of a mosaic rather than a linearly charged atmosphere." (Kofi Agawu)



# Layers of Dvorak the American

- Brahms helps Dvorak get the commission from Simrock for the **Slavonic Dances**
  - These mark Dvorak as a “nationalist” in a way that Brahms’s was never marked; double standard.
- Invited by Jeannette Thurber to National Conservatory; **New World Symphony** (Symphony No. 9 in E minor)
- Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, American National Epic
- **William Arms Fisher, Goin Home**
- **Art Tatum, Goin Home**

# Beach

- 3 songs, op. 11, no. 1 (dark is the night)
- Symphony in E minor, op. 32, I