

Introduction

John Eliot Gardiner

To me Brahms' large-scale music is brimful of vigour, drama and a driving passion. 'Fuego y cristal' was how Jorge Luis Borges once described it. How best to release all that fire and crystal, then? One way is to set his symphonies in the context of his own superb and often neglected choral music, and that of the old masters he particularly cherished (Schütz and Bach especially) and of recent heroes of his (Mendelssohn, Schubert and Schumann). This way we are able to gain a new perspective on his symphonic compositions, drawing attention to the intrinsic vocality at the heart of his writing for orchestra. Composing such substantial choral works as the *Schicksalslied*, the *Alto Rhapsody*, *Nänie* and the *German Requiem* gave Brahms invaluable experience of orchestral writing years before he brought his first symphony to fruition: they were the vessels for some of his most profound thoughts, revealing at times an almost desperate urge to communicate things of import. Solemnity, pathos, terror and jubilation are all experienced and encapsulated before they come to a head in the finale of Op.68.

To prepare for this project of performing five of his major and most popular works – the *German Requiem* and the four symphonies – within this context, we have needed to hunt out and experiment with the instruments favoured by Brahms (the natural horns, for example, which he favoured), to reconfigure the size and layout of his orchestral forces and to search for all available hints at recovering forgotten playing styles. Brahms veered between despair and joy at the way his symphonies were interpreted by conductors of his day – 'truly awful' (Hans Richter), 'always calculated for effect' (Hans von Bülow), but 'so lively' (Hermann Levi), 'exceptionally sensitive and scholarly' (Otto Dessoff) and 'spirited and elegant' (Fritz Steinbach)'. He disliked 'metronomic rigidity and lack of inflection on the one hand, and fussy

over-determined expressivity on the other' (Walter Frisch). A rich fund of annotations to the symphonies was dictated by Steinbach to his former pupil, Walter Blume. These reveal the kind of elasticity of tempo and the flexible, nuanced yet disciplined readings favoured by Brahms.

Alexander Berrische, a famous Munich critic, called Steinbach's interpretations 'classical', by which he probably meant authoritative and authentic. To us twenty-first century musicians approaching Brahms, Steinbach's articulations and phrasings seem classical in a more historical sense – the kind we associate with composers such as Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – before these features were subsumed in the growing emphasis on uninflected and continuous legato (or what Wagner called 'endless melos').

Brahms's orchestral music works at so many levels at once. It is a huge challenge to the interpreter to make sure that his multi-layered way with an orchestra (the many allusions and ambiguities he introduces) do not smudge or cloud the tension between the highly crafted surface of his music and the subtle ebb and flow of the feelings buried just beneath. The idea that we can somehow reconstruct the 'real' and 'original' Brahms is, of course, a chimera. When all is said and done, our main interest is in what Brahms can sound like in *our* day: what his music has to say to us *now*.

John Eliot Gardiner

in conversation with Hugh Wood

Hugh Wood I'd like to start by quoting a rather serious observation by Charles Rosen. And I don't know how far you agree with it:

'The sense of an irrecoverable past is omnipresent in the music of Brahms, resignedly eclectic, ambiguous without irony. The depth of his feeling of loss gave an intensity to Brahms's work that no other imitator of the classical tradition ever reached. He may be said to have made music out of his openly-expressed regret that he was born too late.'

John Eliot Gardiner Brahms' sense of history was probably more pronounced than that of any other nineteenth-century composer. The thing is how he put his knowledge to such wonderfully creative use: you can feel its presence filtering through into his own music. Yet for all his nostalgia, Brahms' attitude towards the music of his forbears strikes me as actually much more dynamic and positive than that. You yourself once said, 'Brahms was oppressed by and in love with (the two conditions are similar) the past, but not defeated by it'. I so agree. There's a moment in the finale to his First Symphony [bars 118-130] that seems to capture that condition perfectly: the way a 'second theme' emerges as a miniature set of variations over a descending 4-note ground bass – obviously an archaic allusion, which is then given a decidedly modern twist as Brahms ingeniously guides us towards hearing the implied dominant as a (local) tonic. It's a perfect example of his tendency to use the past as a means to roll forward the threshold of the future. In essence that's what this project of revisiting Brahms' four symphonies, his *German Requiem* and his major choral works is all about: tracing the roots from which he drew his creative imagination, savouring his way of pouring new wine into old bottles at one level, and at another, of evolving a new, progressive musical language while never

abandoning his allegiance to the past. You tell the wonderful story of the young Zemlinsky going to Brahms for a consultation, string quintet in hand, and of being directed to the score of Mozart's quintets with the added observation, 'That's how it's done from Bach to me!' – such a superb remark, and a rare glimpse of Brahms (who was normally so self-deprecating) showing awareness of his own true worth and of his place in history.

HW The fascinating thing with Brahms was that scholarship was a second profession. Usually someone who is so professional in his attitude to scholarship is not also a composer, and the two don't fertilise each other. But in his case they did.

JEG Both Mendelssohn and Schumann pointed him in the right direction, but Brahms was a lot more scholarly than either in his study of German folksong, Italian Renaissance polyphony and counterpoint, and this had an enormously fruitful impact on both his practical and creative music-making. Schumann, too, may have been the catalyst in establishing that kinship Brahms so clearly felt to Bach – one is constantly reminded of it in all his more serious vocal compositions and sometimes in passages of his symphonies. In contrapuntal terms Brahms seems to emulate Bach in the way he uses the cross as a symbol of two intercepting planes of music-making: the one horizontal, made up of melodic and rhythmic activity, the other vertical, concerned with harmony. I don't know how you were first taught harmony, but I remember rebelling against the drab way keyboard harmony was taught at school. It only began to make sense to me when I became a pupil of Nadia Boulanger. She made us write our harmony exercises on four different staves, using four different clefs, insisting that each of the middle voices had to be phrased and achieve a convincing melodic shape. What she was testing was whether you were capable of thinking

on two or more planes at once. That, of course, is something that Brahms does supremely well. He is at pains to conceal his immense skill and artistry, so that the listener is aware not of his erudition but, on the contrary, of lyrical flow and of expressive counterpoint. In a similar way he covers his tracks so that you are not immediately aware of the way he builds the finales of both his first two symphonies out of such tiny motivic cells.

HW Absolutely, and what you say about these arising from a single motive is even more true of the *German Requiem*, which reveals an amazing transformation of themes far beyond anything Liszt ever dreamt of. And all done absolutely naturally.

JEG Well that's the thing: that this huge erudition, skill, and mastery of all the structural components of music is done with such lightness and ease and sleight of hand – something Bach, at his best, also achieves in his Passions and cantatas: engaged discourse and passionate counterpoint. You put it from a composer's viewpoint by asking, 'What makes Brahms not only a very great but also a very good composer? His preoccupation with the *materia musicae* absolute and total; his supreme skill in handling it; his assumption, like Bach, that counterpoint is the child of passion not calculation – that there is no conflict between technique and expressiveness, but rather that one feeds the other, and that both are mutually dependent.'

HW But we know even less about how Bach came by all this, and it all seems to have happened with such colossal speed.

JEG And with the ability, like some chess grand master, to think four or five moves ahead, and to retain all the conceivable permutations of his material in his head! I love the way Brahms shares several of these

features with Bach – the quest to exhaust the potential of his material, to maximise the lyricism of the middle voices. Part of one's job as a conductor is to tease out those inner lines and to make sure they are audible but not given undue emphasis, something that can easily become lost if the sonority becomes too thick or too sustained, and the approach too solemn or pompous.

HW I know that you're against this sort of uninflected Wagnerian continuity.

JEG I am, because with Brahms it seems to me absolutely alien to his aesthetic ideals. Just beneath the surface of his music, however complex and even dense at times, more often than not there is an undercurrent of dance-derived music, of lightness and a delight in rhythmic cross-accentuation, as well as in the dislocation those cross-rhythms can cause. Think of that wild passage in the Finale [bars 279-285] when he requires the whole orchestra to bounce off a silent first and third beat or, almost as thrilling, a moment in the first movement when he doubles the speed of those two-note exchanges between winds and strings [bars 470-473] before swerving to B flat minor. Cover his 'meat' in a thick sauce and you lose half the flavour!

HW Isn't all this hidden rhythmic counterpoint that we both obviously delight in, including hemiolas and irregular phrase-lengths, a result of Brahms having been soaked in folksong from an early age?

JEG More than likely. But I also think he took inordinate pleasure in teasing his listeners' expectations, as for example in the third movement – beginning a Scherzo-replacement with two *five*-bar phrases, then repeating them a little later as *seven*-bar units. Or the frisson he sets up between melody and text in the marvellous *Begräbnisgesang*, in many

respects a miniature prototype for the *German Requiem*, which at the time of its composition was in an embryonic state. Here Brahms chose to combine the first line of the melody of one of Luther's most popular hymns ('Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort' – one that Bach also set in his Cantata 6) with the words of a different funeral hymn by Michael Weisse: hardly a natural fit. Viewed one way it involved a completely arbitrary distortion of the chorale melody's metrical structure. Brahms inverts the order of the strong and weak beats, establishes the tramp of a solemn funeral march in the listener's mind, then sets up an intriguing clash between the natural word-accent, the contours of the melody, and the normal hierarchy of the bar-line. Brilliant!

HW Do you see a direct connection between Brahms' choral works and his symphonies? Are they structurally affiliated in some way?

JEG Well, yes, in the sense that aspects of Brahms' symphonic writing strike me as unusually 'vocal' – firstly, in the way individual melodic phrases are constructed and punctuated (a key example of this occurs in the first movement's development at bars 273-293), and secondly in the way that he creates sonic exchanges between separate 'choirs' of woodwinds-with-horns and strings in invertible counterpoint (first movement, bars 121-130). You sense that behind this lies his attraction to the double-choir motets of Gabrieli and Schütz, whose music he regularly conducted, and, in a more recent example, to Mendelssohn's superb motet *Mitten wir in Leben sind*. Lurking behind Brahms' orchestral discourse is the poetic ideal he recognised in Schumann's Lieder-based approach to the symphony: the conviction that abstract music could be used just as eloquently as a lyrical poem or a romantic novel as a vehicle for expressing powerful emotions. Saying that does not contradict the notion that the Finale of his first symphony is in one sense a riposte and counterpart to the finale of Beethoven's choral

symphony – Brahms’ way of asserting that *his* orchestra does not need a choir to bolster it in creating overwhelming effects of an equivalent intensity. Ironically, of course, Brahms is far more of a choral man than Beethoven, both in terms of his love for the choral repertoire from the sixteenth century on, and his experience of transcribing and conducting it. All this rich choral experience fed into his *German Requiem* and, in its wake, the chain of accomplished choral works with orchestra (1869/72) – *Rinaldo*, the *Alto Rhapsody*, the *Schicksalslied* and the *Triumphlied* – on which he lavished immense care, adjusting subtle effects of orchestral colouration to complement his chorus – works that one can hear as the essential harbingers of his first two symphonies (1877/78). There’s a clear pointer to this in the coda to the magnificent *Schicksalslied*. Brahms is not content merely to replicate Hölderlin’s starkly polarised worlds (the blissful serenity of the gods above and the hurlyburly of human life below). Sensing the need for an impressive summing up, he rejects the idea of a (sung) restatement of the opening verse and instead transposes the orchestral introit up a fourth (into C major) and onto a still more ethereal, purified plane – literally beyond the reach of words. ‘I even say something that the poet does not say’, Brahms remarked.

HW We shouldn’t forget that it was Schumann who rediscovered Schubert’s ‘Great’ C major symphony, who brought it to Mendelssohn’s attention and had it performed in Leipzig in 1845 – the trigger that fired Schumann’s symphonic gun as it were, just as, later on, it was hearing Schumann’s symphonies that galvanised Brahms (eventually) into symphonic activity.

JEG Exactly. The kinship with Schumann is audible throughout the first symphony – in the middle movements which, beginning with Wagner, people have criticised as being ‘misplaced’ chamber music, but more

especially in the tense, brooding emotions of the first movement, with its close resemblance to Schumann's *Manfred* overture, where the second theme matches Brahms' own second theme (bars 130-134). Brahms' initial idea was even to begin his first symphony abruptly with the Allegro. Just imagine what an explosive entry into the symphonic arena that would have been! Perhaps the affinity with the Allegro of Schumann's fourth symphony, both thematically and structurally, was just too close. Anyway, the bonus for us is the marvellous introduction – a musical prelude, inserted as Ivor Keys says, as a mental postscript. The long gestation of the first symphony could be due in part to Brahms' need to come to terms with and process his complicated relationship to both Schumanns in a wordless, symphonic discourse – something that his first biographer Max Kalbeck was the first to recognise (in 'the heavy burden of his experiences', 1915): the idea that he encodes not just his own name in the music, but that of Clara, and by quoting Robert's *Melodram* for Manfred and Astarte, his internal wrestling and sense of guilt and need for forgiveness – his own 'Tristan' moment, as it were – seems to me pretty convincing. But there is no gain in looking to Brahms himself for elucidation here. When Clara mentioned the Manfred resemblance to him one day, he replied irritably, 'Yes, I know, of course, that I have no individuality'. It is interesting that Clara never seems to have 'got' the Finale – the way it combines a Bach-derived head motive and the great alhorn theme that Brahms quoted to her in a letter ('high up on the mountain, deep in the vale, I send you many thousand greetings') and the magnificent transformation of the one into the other in the coda. She criticised this as being 'added on' and 'dropping off' in inspiration; but in performance, when it is well paced, I find it overwhelming.