

John Eliot Gardiner

in conversation with Hugh Wood

Hugh Wood Looking back over the years, Brahms once suggested that in his music he seemed always to be 'milking the same udder'. Do you feel that is true of the Third Symphony in relation to its predecessors?

John Eliot Gardiner No. If the First is seminal and epic – his coming to terms with the legacy of Beethoven and his complicated relationship with the two Schumanns – and the Second is (as you describe it) more relaxed and amenable, the Third is a symphony of protest and acquiescence. I don't mean this in a Tchaikovskian, self-displaying manner, but in the way that in this symphony Brahms, at the age of fifty, shakes his fist at the march of time and then resigns himself to its inevitability. Behind the portly, bearded, professorial exterior is still the 'young eagle... the true apostle who will inscribe revelations that many Pharisees... will not decipher for centuries to come' that Robert Schumann described to Joachim in 1853. Thirty years on Brahms is still young at heart, '*frei, aber einsam*', as he described himself, still bent on fulfilling his artistic aims and ambitions on the symphonic stage, however much he might try to conceal them from even his closest friends. You only have to listen to the opening bars of the Third Symphony to be blown away by the grandeur and heroism of the main theme, with its striding cross-rhythms strongly influenced by the opening to Schumann's '*Rhenish*' symphony. There it's perhaps more noble in its dalliance with the Viennese waltz, but here it's more dashing and defiant.

HW Would that explain why in the past it has sometimes been performed in an exaggeratedly emotional manner, resulting in an overuse of *ritardandi* and exaggerated *rubati*?

JEG Very possibly. It's interesting that Brahms, having indicated an initial *Allegro con brio*, leaves you without subsequent directions until late on in the development when there is a 'poco rit.' at bar 109 (track 6, 6'51"), then 'un poco sostenuto' (bar 112) before a return to *Tempo primo* at bar 120 (7'22"). This is in line with his overall policy of dispensing with metronome marks: 'I indicate (without figures) my tempi, modestly, to be sure, but with the greatest care and clearness.' Subtle variations of momentum are of course well documented in descriptions of Brahms' own piano playing ('a certain elasticity of tempo' according to Florence May, who studied with him in 1871), and I can see no reason why they shouldn't apply here, but it's all a matter of degree. What Brahms indicates, if truth be told, is more clarity of feeling and disposition than of specific objective measurement. Keeping a steady main tempo, with only the slightest of *ritardandi* to ease into the second subject (bars 34-5: track 6, 1'10") and for its return at bar 147 (8'21"), seems to me helpful in making the piece cohere and towards giving it a light-footed grace (this, despite the characteristic, rhetorical 'protest' of those two upbeat crotchets in bars 4, 6 and 8). Mind you, Brahms tells us nothing about what to do at the fifth bar of the coda (bar 187: 9'55"), where he seems to have a sudden rush of blood to the head, the combination of main theme and its companion motto-phrase erupting in a riot of fiery counterpoint. I find it impossible to resist an eight-bar *più mosso* here – isn't this one of the clearest examples of his invigorating musical portrayal of the struggle between youth and age? It also helps to prepare for that narrowing of focus he achieves in the abbreviated exchanges between woodwinds and lower strings just before he ratchets up the tension one last time in a gentle, non-protesting re-statement of the opening theme. Another example of a traditional slowing-up, unsignalled by Brahms, occurs in the last movement around letter C (bars 52-70: track 9, 1'10"–1'33"), so that the triplets of the

second theme, played by first horn and celli in unison, instead of being kept on the move tend to congeal, thus weakening the approach to the angry C minor restatement of the theme at letter E (bar 75: 1'40"). But however deep we dig with our research into performance practice, aided perhaps by descriptive snippets of how Brahms himself made music or what he thought about a particular conductor's stylistic approach, it's not as though we will ever come up with the composer's imprimatur. In the end it's all a matter of taste, instinct, spur-of-the-moment adjustments and decisions that, quite naturally, will vary from day to day, hall to hall and audience to audience. Brahms was a pragmatist. As an educated German he bought into Goethe's aesthetic of musicality as described in *Faust*: 'Unless you feel it, vain will be your chase; / unless it pour from the soul / and with powerful primeval joy / compel the hearts of all who hearken.'

HW What other features of the Third Symphony strike you as being materially different from the earlier two?

JEG One of them has to be the incredibly fertile but unobtrusive way Brahms uses his mottos and themes across the divide of movements and insinuates them in a self-referring way. The most celebrated instance occurs in the closing bars of the Finale, where he brings back the first theme of the first movement quietly and tenderly, with all protest and defiance bleached from it. Earlier on in the Finale the subdued, innocuous-seeming second theme of the *Andante* (given in octaves by clarinet and bassoon, like a fragment of a chorale: track 7, 2'18") reappears shrouded in mystery with added *pianissimo* strings, then reasserts itself as a punchy canon between winds and brass, now as the passionate climax of the development (bars 149-171: track 9, 3'13"–3'43"). Another feature would be the way the two middle movements seem to flow from one to another (just as they do in Schumann's fourth

symphony), and are woven together as part of the overall symphonic fabric in ways that perhaps eluded Brahms in the first two symphonies. Here you sense him meeting contemporary criticism head on: that despite the scale of the forces used, this is essentially chamber music. Why should there be a perceived dichotomy between symphonic and chamber styles, he seems to be saying. On the contrary, the intimacy of the discourse between individual instruments or groupings can play a creative and expressive role in the delineation of the symphonic structure. Take the second subject of the first movement, that liltingly seductive clarinet theme which gives the impression of being made up on the spot, in constant danger of curling in on itself and leading nowhere in particular (track 6, 1'14"), and what he then does with it, first by inverting it in the strings (bars 47-8: 1'27") and later by assigning it to the whole orchestra as it steams ahead in agitated emotional turmoil, a role for which it seemed initially so unsuited.

HW What about his penchant for rhythmic dislocation or displacement – isn't it still more in evidence in this symphony?

JEG Oh yes – and it's hypnotising! There is that marvellous, totally mad passage in the Finale where he places accents not merely on the off beats, but on the *second half* of those off beats (bars 91-5 and 233-7: track 9, 2'00" and 5'00"). When I heard it for the first time I couldn't imagine how he had notated it (you feel suddenly catapulted into the world of Bartók or Stravinsky), and too often in performance it can sound confused, or as if the orchestral wheels had come off. His beguiling way of varying metrical emphases within a single bar we've met with before, of course, but perhaps it is still more in evidence in the first movement of this symphony due to its 6/4 metre – not just because it re-apportions itself so easily into 3/2, but as a result of Brahms' characteristic way of beginning a phrase on a displaced down beat – on

the last beat of the bar, in other words. Take the three-note phrase slurred across the bar-line that ushers in the last part of the first movement exposition at bars 50-58 (track 6, 2'03"–2'20"): you hear it as a sequence of 3/4 bars, then intensified as a hemiola – two units of three regrouped as three units of two. Initially it 'rights' itself as a conventional 3/2 (bars 59-60), then the sixth beat accents return and start to draw one's ear into hearing them as down beats, a transformation that is complete when they are slurred over the bar-line, eclipsing any sense of where the notated down beat really is.

HW That leads directly to a passage in the slow movement that has always intrigued me (bars 57–62, reappearing at 116–121: track 7, 3'20" and 6'51"), where for the first time single notes seem very important for Brahms, even when they turn into upward-resolving appoggiaturas of an intensely *Tristan*-esque kind. But this short passage – in which the sense of key is momentarily uncertain – seemed to point into a more remote future. Then I became aware of a possible source. Schubert's 'Great' C major Symphony has a similar passage in the slow movement (bars 148-159), and it has a similar formal function in the movement, in this case to delay (breathtakingly) the return. High horns have a repeated G like an upper pedal: upper and lower strings alternate in providing different harmonisations of the G. Firstly the G is a member of a dominant seventh chord on C which never reaches F major. Then it becomes the seventh of a dominant seventh chord on A which never reaches D min./maj. The B flat in the first harmonisation give the clue: it finds its eventual meaning as the defining component of a Neapolitan chord (bar 157) for the forthcoming cadence in A minor. The function of the preceding passage is to provide delay before the moment of return. What does this reveal about Brahms' undoubted debt to Schubert – which of course you were at pains to emphasise in your earlier concert programmes and CDs?

JEG I totally agree on the kinship of the two passages you've analysed. These chords with their almost disconnected harmonies need such meticulous weighting and tuning, and again it's a choir-based technique, the sort of challenge one faces (and which Brahms must have faced) when conducting Gabrieli and Schütz. It was Schumann who ran the manuscript of Schubert's 'Great' C major to earth in 1839 and Mendelssohn who conducted its premiere in Leipzig later that year. The symphony hit both these composers like a stroke of lightning; yet Brahms was perhaps the one best equipped to learn its lessons. He wrote: 'My love of Schubert is a very serious one, probably because it is no passing fancy', and he worked assiduously, collecting, editing, arranging and performing a variety of Schubert's works, helping to banish the popular image of Schubert as a gifted drawing-room dilettante and contributing to the slow acceptance of the immensity of his genius. To me the most touching of his tributes to Schubert comes in the crafty, irresistible little piece he wrote for women's voices, *Einförmig ist der Liebe Gram*. Brahms takes the final song from *Winterreise* – the one about the organ-grinder – and turns it into a haunting six-part canon by laying strands of Schubert's vocal melody and the right hand of the piano accompaniment over a decorated *ostinato* (also canonic). It's a lot more than just a clever display of strict counterpoint: it's his way of forging links with a revered predecessor and with a more distant, yet living, musical past.

HW Aren't we back at the starting point of your approach to the Brahms symphonies, the idea that choral thinking permeates his orchestral writing, and that it's by exploring the choral or vocal works of his chosen past masters, then his own *a cappella* works and finally his magnificent (and rarely performed) works for chorus and full orchestra, that we gain a fresh perspective on the symphonies?

JEG Well, yes – and that’s how I came to piece this sequence together, with his settings of Schiller’s dirge *Nänie* and Goethe’s dramatic ballad *Gesang der Parzen* as serious counterweights to the symphony, themselves preceded by a little group of choir pieces threaded together by an autumnal hunting-horn theme. I feel this sequence reveals a two-way traffic, for just as there is choral thinking evident in his symphonies, surely there are also signs of orchestral thinking embedded within his choral writing. In the first of the superb a cappella *Gesänge* Op.104 of 1888 we find him manipulating his six-part ensemble in two antiphonal choirs (high and low) just as he had done five years earlier in the *Gesang der Parzen*, with the same ear for contrasts of sonic texture and response that we find, for example, in the *Andante* of the Third Symphony – lower strings ‘ghosting’ the winds (bars 4-5 and 8-9 etc.), but also completing the thematic structural unit. But all that can go for nothing if there isn’t an acute sensitivity by the players to that underlying ‘vocality’ of Brahms’ orchestral writing I referred to in our earlier discussions. The need to cultivate a singing style here is every bit as important as asking the singers to reciprocate, both in terms of instrumental precision and clear articulation, to the lead given them by the orchestra. You come across instances of the same expressive, pathos-laden figures in both choral and orchestral genres, like the < > markings over the word ‘seufzend’ (‘sighing’) in *Nachtwache I* and the identically marked sighs for first winds and then strings in the closing bars of the Third Symphony’s third movement. Expressive means – interchangeable and reciprocal – come together in magnificent syntheses in the late works for choir and orchestra combined. Both *Nänie* and the *Gesang der Parzen* show fascinating links with the last two symphonies, in the case of *Parzen* sharing with the Third not just an adjacent opus number but an immensely powerful orchestral opening, with passing references to ‘early music’ styles next to passages of the

most advanced harmony. These are in no sense preliminary sketches but are colossal pieces in their own right, in total vindication of Schumann's prophecy that should Brahms 'direct his magic wand where the power of the masses in chorus and orchestra may lend him strength, we will experience wonderful glimpses into the secret world of spirits.'

HW Other than the slow movement of the Violin Concerto can you think of a more tender oboe melody than that which opens *Nänie* and the way this leads so poignantly into the graceful canonic entries of the choir to the words 'Behold, the gods weep, all the goddesses weep / that beauty fades, that perfection dies'?

JEG No, indeed. As Malcolm MacDonald says, it's possibly the most radiant thing he ever wrote. In *Parzen*, in stark contrast, the gods are not just indifferent to mankind but intervene arbitrarily in human affairs even towards '[him] whom they have exalted', blighting the prospects of the next generation. Who was Brahms thinking of here: Feuerbach (his recently deceased painter friend), Schumann (several of whose children were now in a mental asylum, broken or already dead), or is he pointing to himself in these final bars as the 'banished one... the old man... shaking his head'? A bleak chasm opens up between the high flutter of the piccolo, the muted strings, the unison mutterings of the choir, an unmistakable reference in the woodwinds to the opening of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, and by strange circular harmonies to a ghostly conclusion, a hollow bare fifth rooted by the contrabassoon and bass tuba. It reminds me of your description of 'Brahms's dark vision – of goodness impossibly far off, of the mortality and the transience of beauty, of the inevitability and omnipresence of personal misery.'