John Eliot Gardiner

in conversation with Hugh Wood

Hugh Wood Of his labour on the First Symphony, Brahms said: 'You haven't the faintest idea what it feels like for us lot always to hear such a giant marching along behind one.' Before we go back to Brahms' relations with the more remote past, let's consider Beethoven.

John Eliot Gardiner We could very well start with the overture to *Coriolan*. The concentrated sonata form, the way he makes two such opposed subjects work so fruitfully, the second actually growing out of the first to embody the horns of Coriolanus' dilemma – to exact legitimate revenge or to spare his innocent family: these are all features that Brahms could have felt drawn to. Take those grisly unison Cs and the way they are hacked off by abrupt dissonant chords. Where else do we find equivalent or similar gestures? Surely in the first variation of the chaconne of the Finale of Brahms' Fourth (bars 9-16: track 13, 0'18"). The symphony's scherzo, the movement that Max Kalbeck once suggested he should throw into the wastepaper basket, is possibly the most Beethovenian of all Brahms' symphonic movements in its energy and ebullience, even down to those frozen blocks of chords (bars 93-105) that recall the first movement of the first 'Razumovsky' quartet (bars 85-92: track 12, 1'24").

HW Of course, Beethoven provoked strongly ambivalent feelings among many nineteenth-century musicians, and the turbulence that his work threw up may in the end lie behind much of the abuse thrown at Brahms. One thinks of Hugo Wolf saying, 'Everything [Brahms] has done is just one gigantic variation on the works of Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Schumann'.

JEG Yes, but Wolf went much further than that when he singled Brahms out to illustrate what he called 'the art of composing without ideas', and attacked the Fourth Symphony as 'running the gauntlet between "can't do" and "wish I could" through all its four movements'. Isn't the (not very subtle) implication that more (or even some) sexual activity might have led to better music rather a cheap shot coming from someone who didn't complete a single symphony himself and who seems never to have forgiven Brahms for suggesting to him as a young composer that a study of counterpoint might be helpful? Either way, it displays a rudimentary lack of ear.

HW You need only see where sexual activity got Wolf. But there were other contemporaries who at least learned to like the Fourth Symphony.

JEG The young Richard Strauss for one. At the time of the Fourth's appearance, he was Hans von Bülow's assistant at Meiningen. At first Strauss considered it obscure – 'so unclear and wretched in its instrumentation'; then he 'liked it better each time' until, finally, having sat in on Brahms' rehearsals in Meiningen and the first performance on 25 October 1885, he declared the symphony a 'giant work, great in concept and invention, masterful in its form, and yet from A to Z genuine Brahms, in a word, an enrichment of our art.'

HW An orgy of praise – in which, presumably, the self-deprecating Brahms did not join?

JEG No – Brahms himself had been braced for failure, disparaging the work to his friends, claiming to them that he had 'completed a series of polkas and waltzes' and describing it to Bülow as 'a few entr'actes... lying here ready, the thing that one usually calls a symphony.' But then he goes on to muse 'how nicely and cosily' it might go with Bülow's

Meiningen orchestra, while ‘at the same time pondering whether the symphony will find more of a public! I fear it smacks of the climate of this country – the cherries are not sweet here; you would certainly not eat them.’ He was ready to withdraw the symphony if it failed to pass muster with his more discriminating friends and orchestral musicians in the course of the rehearsal process and the initial run of performances. Going so visibly public seems to have been nerve-wracking for Brahms, if only because he felt himself to be under siege, as though the whole development of German music, of which he considered himself a part, had been distorted by Wagner’s appropriation of it. On top of that he was genuinely worried that the daring complexity of the Fourth Symphony, and especially its experimental last movement, might displease, baffle or tire even favourably disposed listeners.

HW Self-deprecation falls away here, and we catch a glimpse not only of the ‘problematic’ Brahms but of someone conscious of his place in history. We’ve already seen how the ‘problematic’ aspect is tied up in his attitude to his immediate predecessors. But what about his much deeper debt to the more remote past? Isn’t this especially important in considering the Fourth Symphony, the last movement in particular?

JEG Of all his symphonies it’s the one most impregnated with baroque techniques and practices: *sequence* as the basis of all the themes and their treatment in the first movement, *canon* built into the repeat of the opening theme, *imitation by inversion* in the development section, the *chaconne* basis of the Finale and its use of a *sarabande* for the middle variations. Philipp Spitta had given a manuscript score of Bach’s *Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich* (BWV 150) to Brahms and he played the chaconne of its last movement to his friend Siegfried Ochs saying, ‘What would you think of a symphonic movement written on this theme some day? But it is too heavy, too straightforward. It would have to be

chromatically altered in some way.'

HW And so it was, and what a difference that inserted A sharp makes to the whole piece. But of course it's the use of the chaconne form itself which is the true act of a conservative revolutionary.

JEG Another piece that follows baroque practice is the ravishing *Geistliches Lied*, Op.30, for choir and organ, with its *tour de force* double canon at the ninth. It cried out to be included in the sequence of works leading up to the Fourth Symphony. With no organ in the Salle Pleyel in Paris, I arranged it for string orchestra using Brahms' *Ave Maria* Op.12 as a model.

HW A criticism levelled at Brahms suggests that his habit of drawing on past forms and styles was really an attempt to escape the problems inherent in the current state of nineteenth-century music dominated by Wagner. These hostile critics would condemn this attitude as what you've splendidly described as 'antiquarian hibernation or refuge'. It's even possible to detect in it a pre-echo of Stravinskian Neo-Classicism.

JEG Actually I don't think there's much in all that. Brahms set himself a noble task: to forge (in his own and the public's mind) the music of Schütz, Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert into a single, evolving tradition, one with local differences but in the last analysis unequivocally *gesamtdeutsch*. Hence his aspiration to meet what he saw to be the obligations of the ideal German artist: 'to absorb the entire tradition of earlier times, to breathe with its spirit new life into withered forms, to transfer rigid regulations, by using its innate individualising power, into a law of liberty, a law right for all conditions, every place, every nationality.'

HW Quite a manifesto!

JEG The words are those of the historian Wilhelm von Giesebrecht, and were quoted by Philipp Spitta in a letter to Brahms in 1873. They were intended by Spitta to apply to Brahms (as well as to Bach), but they reflect equally well Brahms' view of his own artistic mission.

HW They are certainly a long way from the diffident Brahms we have already encountered.

JEG Well, not so far, in fact. From the outset Brahms seems to have been plagued by a sense of his own inadequacy in his schooling as a composer and thus (for him) the shallow basis of music as a means of self-expression. In conversation with Richard Heuberger in 1896 he said, 'Not Schumann, nor Wagner, nor I learned properly. Talent was the decisive factor. Schumann went one way, Wagner another, I a third. Yet nobody actually learned anything special.' This alone would explain why, like Bach, he set such a premium on hard work, on the elaboration of a musical idea, and why he was at such pains to train himself in strict counterpoint, canon, fugue, musical form and texture. We are back to the self-doubting here.

HW But beyond all this he had a genuine love of selected composers of the more remote past who were little known or performed at that time.

JEG Hence the inclusion of Giovanni Gabrieli's 12-voice *Sanctus-Benedictus*, Schütz' *Saul, Saul* and several Bach cantata movements in the trail-blazing *Singakademie* concerts he conducted in Vienna in 1864. I find it incredibly moving to examine his conducting scores of these and other works in the library of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna and to follow his astute dynamic markings

pencilled in to ensure clarity of voice-leading – designed to give maximum shaping of individual phrases so as to highlight key words and verbal inflections. Mind you, one sees why Brahms, once he had examined the gift containing these two works by Schütz and Gabrieli in 1858, would have been thunderstruck. The Schütz piece in particular is an extraordinarily compelling miniature psycho-drama: it is confined to just sixteen words – the reproachful voice of conscience ringing in Saul's ears on the road to Damascus – compressed into eighty bars of music. Besides its exploration of the psychological turmoil caused by the *deus ex machina* and the personal transformation from Saul to Paul, what presumably impressed Brahms most was Schütz' imaginative handling of his polychoral forces: two violins, six solo voices and two four-part choirs with optional doubling by brass instruments.

HW You believe, don't you, that the transference of this polychoralism to instrumental forces is perhaps the biggest debt that Brahms owed to the past?

JEG This technique of sharing out the material between families or 'choirs' of instruments and creating a whole host of subtle antiphonies, internal conversations and harmonic tensions between these separate choirs is so prevalent, so much a part of Brahms' way of handling his orchestra, that there are almost too many instances to mention, though one that is particularly 'vocal', with a beautiful inbuilt plangency, is the exchange between woodwind and strings in the eleventh variation of the Finale (bars 81-88: track 13, 2'19"). Brahms' long study of Gabrieli and Schütz in their expressive and sometimes really dramatic handling of polychoral forces culminated in the mid-1880s and coincided with the publication of Spitta's first two volumes of Schütz' complete works, from which Brahms copied out and annotated numerous excerpts. So that what may have started out purely as a text-painting device has now

developed, by the late 1880s when he is writing sacred *a cappella* works back to back (the *Fest- und Gedenksprüche* Op.109 and the Three Motets Op.110), into his chosen means of conveying the different voices of the social community.

HW These two sets of pieces are obviously notable pieces of public music. But I think you would go further than that, and see in them a certain political significance.

JEG I think you could legitimately compare the way Schütz treated his double and triple choirs in the *Psalmen Davids*, written at a time of great political uncertainty in the year the Thirty Years' War broke out (1618), with their emphasis on a fragmented, God-abandoned community, with the way that Brahms now reacted to the political turmoil of 1888, the *Dreikaiserjahr*, in his *Fest- und Gedenksprüche*. In these three linked movements for double choir *a cappella* Brahms set solemn words he had selected from the Psalms, from Luke's Gospel and from Deuteronomy, sometimes ominous, sometimes comforting. He addresses them to a national community united, though not so closely as that of Schütz, by its common Lutheran heritage. You could call them patriotic certainly, but not in a spirit of jingoism (nothing to do with the recent German victory in the Franco-Prussian war), more as a kind of prophetic warning against an unimaginable future. Brahms always stood firm against right-wing *Volk*-dominated religious German nationalism, and although he described the motets to Bülow as 'specially intended for national festival and commemorative days' he quickly retracted this suggestion – '*Doch besser nicht!*' ('then again better not!') – a clear sign of his misgivings about attending or supporting national celebrations. In fact the only mention of the troubled *Reich* in these works carries a negative connotation: 'Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth.'

In his book *Brahms and the German Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), Daniel Beller-McKenna rightly draws attention to the many sophisticated techniques Brahms uses when interleaving his two choirs in the first two motets, initially allotting them simple (choir 2) versus elaborated (choir 1) treatment, then shifting to a combined *Männerchor* (No.1, bars 29-36: track 7, 0'59") and then to a more varied deployment involving intense rhythmic fragmentation and overlapping hemiolas (No.2, bars 15-17 and 51-62: track 8, 0'23" and 1'36"). But whether one goes along with Beller-McKenna in seeing these as socio-political allegorical devices to demonstrate 'the unity in the face of diversity Brahms hoped would hold the *Reich* together' is another matter. Similarly he is correct in drawing our attention to the different strategies Brahms uses in the third motet – a kind of spiritual *Liebeslieder Walzer* – in cross-combining voices from the two choirs to blur the distinction of separate groups, though again it may be stretching a point to see this as a musical metaphor for social integration and political unification. Do you go along with this interpretation?

HW Only up to a point. Like you, I have reservations and doubts. I don't see Brahms as a particularly political animal, but merely as a man holding strong but conventional views for his time and position.

But let's get back to a purely musical problem. Over the years the muddy nature of many Brahms performances has given a misleading and unsatisfactory impression of the music. I know you disapprove of such distortions.

JEG It's a dissatisfaction and disappointment voiced by Brahms himself! Even performances by such devoted advocates as Bülow and Hans Richter could leave him grumpy and frustrated. This may account for his

fastidious (over-) use of dynamic shapings, expressive hairpins (on individual notes as well as over whole phrases), such as in the continuation of the first theme of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony. We can extrapolate these features from Fritz Steinbach's testimony of how Brahms conducted the symphonies. He wanted to counteract dull, metric and over-literal readings on the one hand, or exaggeratedly free, rhythmically contorted interpretations on the other.

HW So Brahms ended up over-marking his scores?

JEG Sometimes, yes – and incidentally causing the same sort of irritation some performing musicians feel in response to Bach's unusually detailed writing out of ornaments instead of leaving it to them to interpret and embellish.

HW And your own ideals of performance?

JEG Top of the list for me is the need to keep things moving, to keep the internal conversations we've referred to alive, and to keep the vertical and linear planes of sound, just as with Bach, in the right alignment one to the other. Ultimately the decision-making process of orchestral interpretation – part historically informed, part instinctive and spontaneous – needs to be subservient in its response to the music's grandeur, its emotional richness and spirituality. This implies total avoidance of the turgid, the bombastic and the sentimental. Brahms never lost his youthful capacity for wonder; nor, despite his protestations to the contrary, what Leon Botstein calls his religious-based optimism. The epic Finale of the Fourth leads into the domain 'where the human bends its knee to the eternal', as Brahms' friend Hermann Kretzschmar remarked. The same, I feel, could be said of the neglected *Fest- und Gedenksprüche.*