

give themselves up utterly to glad feelings. It is a picture of a popular holiday festivity. [Here, in fact, Chaikovsky introduced a Russian folk song, "The Birch Tree."] But hardly have you succeeded in forgetting yourself and enjoying the spectacle of others' joys, when tireless *Fate* reappears and insinuates itself. But the others pay no heed. They do not even look around to see you standing there, lonely and depressed. Oh, how merry they are! And how fortunate, that all their feelings are direct and simple. Never say that all the world is sad. You have only yourself to blame. There are joys, strong though simple. Why not rejoice through the joys of others? One can live that way, after all.

And that, dear friend, is all I can tell you about the symphony. Of course it's neither a clear nor a complete explanation. But the nature of instrumental music is precisely this, that it resists detailed analysis. *Where words fail, music speaks*, as Heine put it.

Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy: Literaturniye proizvedeniya i perepiska*, VII (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye muzikal'noye izdatel'stvo [Muzgiz], 1962) 124–27. Trans. R. T.

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### Brahms on Composing

The normally tight-lipped Brahms did, on one occasion, reveal to his young friend, the singer and conductor Georg Henschel, how he went about composing. Fortunately, Henschel kept a diary at the time, and he translated and published extracts from it, together with some letters.

Wiesbaden, February 27, 1876

Yesterday Brahms and I left Coblenz [after appearing together at a concert there]. We were quite alone in our compartment, and I had the happiness of finding him, in regard to his own self and his way of working, more communicative than ever before. Commencing by speaking of the events of the past days, we soon drifted into talking about art in general and music in particular.

"There is no real *creating*," he said, "without hard work. That which you would call invention, that is to say, a thought, an idea, is simply an inspiration from above, for which I am not responsible, which is no merit of mine. Yea, it is a present, a gift, which I ought even to despise until I have made it my own by right of hard work. And there need be no hurry about that, either. It is as with the seed corn; it germinates unconsciously and in spite of ourselves. When I, for instance, have found the first phrase of a song, say,



When the sil - ver - y moon. . . .\*

\*The beginning of the beautiful song "Die Mainacht," op. 43 [Henschel's note].

I might shut the book there and then, go for a walk, do some other work, and perhaps not think of it again for months. Nothing, however, is lost. If afterward I approach the subject again, it is sure to have taken shape; I can now begin to really work at it. But there are composers who sit at the piano with a poem before them, putting music to it from A to Z until it is done. They write themselves into a state of enthusiasm which makes them see something finished, something important, in every bar."

George Henschel, *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1907), 22–23.

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### The "Brahmin" Point of View

For many, Brahms's chief significance was as upholder of a great tradition—that of German classical instrumental music—at a time when it, along with all classical traditions, was under attack by proponents of "Music of the Future" (see pp. 324–29). Eduard Hanslick's review of Brahms's First Symphony, first performed in Vienna on 17 December 1876, when the composer was forty-three years old, captures well the atmosphere of partisanship that surrounded the event. Hanslick (1825–1904), Vienna's very influential dean of critics for many years, was the first professor of music in the modern liberal-arts sense (he was appointed to Vienna University in 1856, becoming full professor in 1870). He had been notorious since 1854, when his aesthetic tract *On the Beautiful in Music* appeared in response to the writings of Wagner and Liszt. This was the first principled challenge to the late Romantic doctrines that music was to be valued for its emotional or symbolic content, and that the arts found their highest realization in merger. (Stung by Hanslick's polemics, Wagner retaliated by making him the thinly disguised prototype of the pedant Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*, who in the original draft of the libretto was named Hanslich.) The symphonies of Brahms were for Hanslick proof positive that absolute musical values could still thrive as before, and were his prime exhibit in opposing what he termed (in his review of the Third Symphony in 1878) the "nonsensical theory" that the symphony had "become superfluous since Wagner transplanted it into the opera." But Hanslick is no narrow formalist: he speaks of "Faustian conflicts" and Romantic nature imagery in his description of Brahms's First, and (along with countless others then and since) complains mildly of the supposed overelaboration of texture and learned contrapuntal artifice in Brahms's style. But his chief points—the continued validity and vitality of the great tradition, and the "ethical" value of pure instrumental music as established above all in the late works of Beethoven—are an excellent summation of Brahms's stature and significance in the eyes of his contemporaries. And in the composer's own eyes, we may confidently add, in view not only of his attitude toward the Neo-German school (see p. 328), but also in view of his famous near-quotation of the choral theme from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the finale of his First. Rather pointedly, that theme is brought back within the realm of instrumental music, as if to correct a wrong turn Beethoven had taken, with dire results in what it had suggested to his Romantic followers! (See Wagner, p. 322.)

Seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer's first symphony with such tense anticipation—testimony that the unusual was expected of Brahms in this supreme and ultimately difficult form. But the greater the public expectation and the more importunate the demand for a new symphony, the more deliberate and scrupulous was Brahms. Inexorable conscientiousness and stern self-criticism are among his most outstanding characteristics. He always demands the best of himself and dedicates his whole strength to its achievement. He cannot and will not take it easy.

He hesitated a long time over the composition of string quartets, and more than one symphony was consigned, as a study, to the oblivion of a desk drawer. To the urging of his friends he used to reply that he had too much respect for his forerunners, and that one cannot “fool around” these days with a symphony. This severity with himself, this care for detail, is evident in the admirable workmanship of the new symphony. The listener may, indeed, find it rather too evident. He may miss, in all the astonishing contrapuntal art, the immediate communicative effect. And he will not be wholly wrong. The new symphony is so earnest and complex, so utterly unconcerned with common effects, that it hardly lends itself to quick understanding. This circumstance, although not necessarily a fault, is a misfortune, at least for the first impression. Subsequent repetitions will make it good. The statement of [Franz] Grillparzer [1791–1872; Austrian poet and friend of Beethoven], “I strove for effect, not on the public but on myself,” could stand as motto for Brahms's symphony.

Even the layman will immediately recognize it as one of the most individual and magnificent works of the symphonic literature. In the first movement, the listener is held by fervent emotional expression, by Faustian conflicts, and by a contrapuntal art as rich as it is severe. The Andante softens this mood with a long-drawn-out, noble song, which experiences surprising interruptions in the course of the movement. The Scherzo strikes me as inferior to the other movements. The theme is wanting in melodic and rhythmic charm, the whole in animation. The abrupt close is utterly inappropriate. The fourth movement begins most significantly with an Adagio in C minor; from darkening clouds the song of the woodland horn rises clear and sweet above the tremolo of the violins. All hearts tremble with the fiddles in anticipation. The entrance of the Allegro with its simple, beautiful theme, reminiscent of the “Ode to Joy” in the Ninth Symphony, is overpowering as it rises onward and upward, right to the end.

If I say that no composer has come so close to the style of the late Beethoven as Brahms in this finale, I don't mean it as a paradoxical pronouncement but rather as a simple statement of indisputable fact. It is high praise, but it does not necessarily attribute to a composer every virtue, least of all every virtue in the highest degree. One-sided greatness is bought at the expense of other virtues. Mozart would not have been Mozart, and Weber would not have been Weber, had they possessed, in addition to their own peculiar charm, the exaltation and the profundity of Beethoven. The latter, on the other hand, lacked the tender fragrance, the melodic enchantment, the delicate intimacy by which Schumann and Mendelssohn are so directly and simply charming—and they are almost conspicuously lacking in his greatest last works. In Schumann's little Symphony in D minor, and in Mendelssohn's “Italian” Symphony, there is a sweet enchantment, an intoxicating floral fragrance rarely—and then almost surreptitiously—in evidence in Brahms's symphony. But neither Mendelssohn nor Schumann approaches the late Beethoven. Beethoven's third period is not a prerequisite for their symphonies. Mendelssohn and Schumann incline rather to the point of view of Haydn's and Mozart's musical philosophy—and carry it further. Brahms's quartets and the

symphony, on the other hand, could not have been were it not for Beethoven's last period.

This outlook is congenial to Brahms by nature, and he has made himself at home in it. He doesn't imitate, but what he creates from his innermost being is similarly felt. Thus, Brahms recalls Beethoven's symphonic style not only in his individually spiritual and suprasensual expression, the beautiful breadth of his melodies, the daring and originality of his modulations, and his sense of polyphonic structure, but also—and above all—in the manly and noble seriousness of the whole. It has been said of Beethoven's music that one of its chief characteristics is an ethical element that would rather convince than charm. This distinguishes it conspicuously from all "entertainment" music—which is not to say that the latter is artistically worthless. This strong ethical character of Beethoven's music, which is serious even in merriment, and betrays a soul dedicated to the eternal, is also decisively evident in Brahms. In the latter's newest works there is even a good deal of the late Beethoven's darker side. Beethoven's style, towards the end, was often unclear, confused, arbitrary, and his subjectivity frequently descended to mere querulous bad humor. The beautiful clarity, the melodic charm, the estimable popularity of his first and second periods vanished. One could reverse the Goethe motto and say: "What Beethoven wanted in his old age (or what one might have wished him) he had in abundance in his youth."

Brahms seems to favor too one-sidedly the great and the serious, the difficult and the complex, and at the expense of sensuous beauty. We would often give the finest contrapuntal device (and they lie bedded away in the symphony by the dozen) for a moment of warm, heart-quickening sunshine. There are three elements—they all play a great role in the most modern German music—for which Brahms has a conspicuous predilection: syncopation, *ritardando*, and simultaneous employment of counter-rhythms. In these three points, and particularly with regard to syncopation, he can hardly go further than he has recently gone.

And so, having relieved myself of these minor reservations, I can continue in the jubilant manner in which I began. The new symphony of Brahms is a possession of which the nation may be proud, an inexhaustible fountain of sincere pleasure and fruitful study.

Eduard Hanslick, *Music Criticisms 1846-1899*, trans. Henry Pleasants (Baltimore: Pelican Books, 1963), 126-28. Copyright © Henry Pleasants, 1963. Used by permission.

## Verdi at the Time of *Otello*

An interesting portrait of Verdi and a remarkably just estimate of his importance were presented in a long article in the London *Musical Times* of 1 February 1887 as the musical world was awaiting news of the first performance of *Otello* in Milan. The following issue (of March 1) gave a detailed account of the work and reported on the public reaction. Excerpts from both articles follow.