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Romanticizing Brahms: Early Recordings and the [De]Construction of Brahmsian Identity

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Citation

Scott, A. M. (2014, December 11). *Romanticizing Brahms: Early Recordings and the [De]Construction of Brahmsian Identity*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29987>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Issue Date: 2014-12-11

Introduction

I first encountered Johannes Brahms's solo piano music at the age of sixteen. Having begun serious piano lessons at what I was told was the hopelessly late age of thirteen, here I was just three years later tackling a repertoire that pianists usually encounter later in life: after they had flexed their expressive and technical muscles in the canon's more virtuosic warhorses and quixotic rhapsodies, and most importantly, after they had understood that Brahms's music is meant to exist outside such categories.

My piano teacher however had studied with Adele Marcus, who had in turn been a student of Artur Schnabel: a pianist noted for his seriousness, his deference to the classics, his abstention from display, his intellectualism, and most of all, for his association with Brahms. Of his time as Schnabel's student, Leon Fleischer recalls that his teacher "was revered, but he wasn't popular or glamorous," and that "everyone called him an intellectual...[t]he implication was that he played with his brain."² These 'Brahmsian' traits were soon instilled in me, and when once asked by a competition jury to deliver a final deciding encore, I chose to play a selection from the *Well Tempered Clavier* and Brahms's *Intermezzo in E major* Op. 116 no. 4 while my rival delivered a rousing rendition of something fiendishly difficult. After winning, I remember thinking that there might be something to this Brahmsian thing after all.

Over the years, my teacher would often reach for the tattered, yellowing score she had used while studying Brahms's piano works with Marcus; its pages filled to the

² Susan Weiss Leon Fleisher, "An Interview with Leon Fleisher," *The Hopkins Review* 1, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 423, 431, accessed January 14, 2013, doi: 10.1353/thr.0.0017.

margins with annotations of her teacher's reminiscences of Schnabel, through whom we all felt a visceral connection to Brahms. In those lessons I learned that 'characteristic' Brahms style is serious, restrained, stoic, portentous and modestly powerful, among other things. It was years later however before I realized that this language had been passed to other pianists who could not boast of some imaginary link to Brahms: somehow we all knew *exactly* what was meant when our performances were described as 'a little too Schumann and not enough Brahms.' The authority with which this language was used and the unwavering compliance its associated performance norms commanded seemed informed by a deep sense of historical legitimacy; whereby literal, detailed, structural, and tonally-, temporally-, expressively- and technically-restrained renderings of Brahms's scores were understood to translate into performances that he himself might recognize, or that would at least preserve something of his original musical intentions. Even pianists whose artistic practices weren't consciously defined by ethical concerns like historical authenticity still invoked the descriptors of proper Brahms style as if they were gospel.

I had always suspected however, that the strictures of modern Brahms style were suppressing some intangible quality in performances of Brahms's piano works in general, and in his enigmatic late piano works Op. 116 - 119 in particular. This hunch seemed to be confirmed when I first heard Brahms's own 1889 cylinder recording and the recordings of those pupils he shared with Clara Schumann. I wondered how mainstream pianists could possibly believe in the historical validity of modern Brahms style, and why modern historically-informed (HIP) and even recordings-inspired performances (RIP) of Brahms's music sound nothing like Brahms as captured on these historical sounding traces. I set out to uncover what lay in the gaps between the loci of knowledge, ethics and

act in performances of Brahms's late piano music: in other words, why don't we do what we know and what we believe?

While scholarly dissections of the life and work of Johannes Brahms could fill libraries many times over, some impenetrable force seems to mediate how historical evidence of his musical contexts is collected, framed, and then translated into musical acts. In the field of Brahms performance studies therefore, perhaps the question isn't what don't we know, but rather how do we *do* this knowledge, and why? The stylistic gaps between Brahms as he was recorded by those who knew him, and modern Brahms style of all ethical denominations from mainstream to HIP and RIP, suggest that there is an unseen process of selection being carried out with regards to what types of historical evidence are deemed authoritative, while some guiding framework is dictating how this evidence should come together to form a meaningful whole.

In period performance spheres that are fully reliant on non-sounding traces of historical style, modern tastes and standards tend to select for what pieces of historical evidence will be incorporated, like eighteenth-century embellishment practices as detailed in treatises for example; while dictating that these elements should come together within the lighter and sparser soundscapes currently viewed as historically authentic. In the absence of real sounds to copy, historical performance ventures seem to be more a function of the present than of the past. In the case of Brahms's music however, when in possession of actual sounding evidence of the composer's own performance contexts, and given their either tacit or explicit investment in notions regarding 'characteristic' Brahms style, why are so few pianists experimenting with, much less copying, the early

recordings of pianists in Brahms's inner circle? There must be a larger force at work here, beyond the hegemony of modern performance tastes and standards.

Kevin Korsyn argues that this mediating force is an aesthetic ideology of unity; whereby scholars are so fixated upon ideas related to Brahms's mastery of form that they ignore any evidence that contradicts their theory, particularly when that evidence reference themes of heterogeneity, ambiguity and complexity.³ Because Korsyn's critique ignores the performative implications of the aesthetic ideology of unity however, and focuses instead on the notational features of Brahms's music and on external labels like Modernism versus Classicism, a much more pervasive fixation goes unchallenged. As any musician can attest, both coherent *and* complex performances are those in which an artist has demonstrated mastery in the areas of knowledge and execution, or mental and physical control. Like all of the descriptors of characteristic Brahms style therefore, musical coherence and complexity are both predicated upon the control of one's mind and body and can thus be understood as having positive implications for musicians' artistic practices and identities.

It is thus argued throughout this volume that it is in fact an aesthetic ideology of control that mediates all activities in the spheres of Brahms scholarship and performance: one whose language and associated performance norms arose out of the "fashionable anathemas"⁴ that characterized nineteenth-century dialectics positing Brahms as the

³ Kevin Korsyn, "Brahms Research and Aesthetic Ideology," review of *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), *Music Analysis*, 12, no. 1 (March 1993): 101, accessed December 15, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/854077>.

⁴ Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic*, *Studies in Musicology*, no. 101 (London: UMI Research Press, 1998), 58, in Richard Taruskin, "Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology," *19th-Century*

conservative Classical antipode to his more overtly Romantic contemporaries in general, and to the 'progressive,' theatrical, virtuosic and coloristic composers of Wagner, Liszt and Berlioz's New German School in particular. Throughout these polemics, Brahms's detractors and supporters alike offered up his mental and physical control as an explanation for his evasion of the poetic inspirations and lovesick afflictions of his Romantic milieu. As a result, the documentary record is resplendent with explicit references to Brahms's restraint, thereby reinforcing modern beliefs in the historical veracity of his Classical canonic identity.

In a grandiose conflation of biography and aesthetic evaluation, these ideas have become irrevocably affixed to Brahms who, like Schnabel, remains representative of a certain *kind* of musical identity: one whose enduring symbolic appeal continues to resist destabilizing discourses, particularly with regards to the modes with which it is translated into musical acts. While the aesthetic ideology of control mediates what kinds of historical evidence of Brahms's musical contexts are deemed authoritative, its associated and seemingly historically-grounded performance norms ensure that they are applied in ways that do not threaten relativist constructions of his controlled canonic identity. All of this leads even the most ethically inclined pianists to shape the detail and structure of Brahms's works in temporally, tonally, expressively and technically controlled ways that likely never occurred to the composer, while still believing in the historical gravitas of their performances. And so the gaps between modern and early-recorded Brahms style persist.

This impulse to protect Brahms's identity and through it our own however, informs a fundamental absurdity in modern Brahmsian thought: namely, that if inner and outer restraint are the most essential indicators of historically-valid Brahms style, then the composer and his own pupils could be considered to be the most *unBrahmsian* pianists of all. Indeed, their early recordings evidence an approach to performance characterized by the emotional outbursts and physical conundrums more typically associated with their Romantic contemporaries. Perhaps then it is no wonder why Brahms as captured on early recordings continues to be kept at arm's length from the controlled anti-Romantic Brahms of our imaginations.

As a pianist who subscribes to the dual and often conflicting mantras of do no harm (an ethical stance) and do it creatively (an assertion of agency), hearing early-recorded Brahms style for the first time revealed that, like many pianists, I was vastly under-informed about what it might take to play Brahms's late piano music in ways reflective of his musical contexts, while significantly overestimating the creative affordances of contemporary Brahms style. While there's nothing wrong with selectively applying historical evidence of Brahms's performance contexts in ways that do not threaten relativist constructions of his canonic identity, it seemed important to at least see what happens to that identity, along with its underlying aesthetic ideology and associated performance norms, when this evidence is implemented in its entirety.

This thesis opens therefore with an investigation into the origins of the Brahmsian aesthetic ideology of control and the modes by which it continues to mediate both scholarly and performance-based Brahms activities. This is followed by an exploration of what Brahms's late piano pieces Op. 116 - 119 might 'tell of' beyond narratives designed

to reinforce understandings of his controlled canonic identity, and an examination of how such understandings continue to mediate assessments of the performance styles of pianists in his inner circle. This is followed by comprehensive analyses of the early Brahms recordings of two of these pianists, Adelina de Lara and Ilona Eibenschütz; and an account of my efforts to first copy their performances, and then to experiment with their styles in ways that are consciously unstructured by the Brahmsian aesthetic ideology of control. The sounding outcomes of these style copies and experiments are then used to reflect upon the historical validity of prevailing notions concerning Brahms's canonic identity, and are available in this volume's accompanying sound examples.

The hypothesis is that when documentary and sounding traces of Brahms's musical contexts are appraised in their entirety, and with a view to problematizing rather than reinforcing the aesthetic ideology of control, understandings of what it takes to perform Brahms in a historical way may have to be expanded to include the corporeal and psychological excesses, risks, tantrums and rhapsodies typically associated with Romantic pianism. It is also hypothesized that this expansion will afford a retelling of Brahms's identity; that this retelling will open up a palette of expressive and technical resources previously suppressed by the mores of modern Brahms style; that these resources, when applied experimentally, will further elucidate the gaps between modern Brahms style and Brahms as he was recorded; and that the resulting performance style may offer modern pianists a reconciliation of the Scylla and Charybdis of fidelity and creativity in their Brahms performances. With so very much to gain, perhaps the question is not what do we risk by Romanticizing Brahms, but rather what do we stand to lose by continuing to romanticize him?

Evidence for the pervasiveness of the aesthetic ideology of mental and physical control in modern Brahms discourse is everywhere, if one is looking for it. Take reviews of that elite group of pianists understood to be 'Brahmsians': pianists like Claudio Arrau for example, with his "control which comes, not from the fingers, but from the pianist's whole body and spirit, massively poised."⁵ Aesopian in tone, such reviews imply that like Brahms, so too should pianists stand fast against weaknesses and excesses of the mind and body: debilities represented by the more expressively overwrought and technically ostentatious practices of his contemporaries. We believe in the historical validity of this narrative as Brahms's sympathisers and critics alike have bequeathed to us a historical documentary record in which his anachronistically controlled mental and physical apparatus is explicitly posited as the root of his evasion of both the zeniths and abysses of Romanticism: a context in which artistic genius was conflated with the trope of health, if you were a Classicist; or that of disease, if you were a Romantic. As a result of verbal accounts in which it is observed that Brahms "knocks into the proverbial cocked hat the idea that genius inhabits an unsound brain and crazy body,"⁶ Brahms's healthy and controlled Classical identity seems laden with historical veracity.

Counter to such narratives however are traces of Brahms's and Robert Schumann's Kreislerian affinities. Letters reveal that the young Brahms often referred to himself as 'Joh. Kreisler Junior' and was captivated by the quintessentially Romantic themes of inner and outer torment that so permeate E. T. A. Hoffmann's writings. These early predilections and Robert Schumann's tragic mind-body disintegration link Brahms with

⁵ Edward Greenfield, "Brahms Piano Works," review of *Claudio Arrau; Concertgebouw Orchestra, Bernard Haitink*, Philips (1) 6768 356 (5 LPs), 1983, in *Gramophone* (July 1983): 140.

⁶ J. F. Rogers, "The Health of Musicians," *The Musical Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (October 1926): 619 - 20, accessed December 14, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/738343>.

characters like Joseph Joachim and Clara Schumann, and letters between the three lifelong friends further suggest that Brahms's late piano works reference extra-musical content beyond that which is currently emphasized in scholarly circles. Indeed, narratives concerning Brahms's feelings of alienation, solitude, authorial belatedness and resigned sadness later in life will be shown to be pre-structured by the aesthetic ideology of control as they buttress understandings of his lifelong inner and outer restraint; leading to portentous and serious performances of his late piano works.

Brahms's letters however, reveal him to have been both tormented and comforted by memories of his troubled childhood home in Hamburg, as well as by memories of twilight hours spent at Clara's Düsseldorf home in the years before and just after Robert's death. Around the time Brahms describes his late piano pieces as 'the lullabies of my sorrows' there is evidence to suggest that these reminiscences of domestic turmoil and bliss were very much on his mind; hinting at a kind of shifting, restless and unfolding nostalgia as opposed to the more static emotional content of sadness or resignation. Brahms's late letters also evidence his overindulgence in food, wine and tobacco; his love of games and jokes; his propensity for irritability, callousness and jealousy; his mindfulness of the mental and physical deteriorations of those closest to him; as well as his own ultimately fatal disease. It will be argued that while this extra-musical content is to a certain extent 'written in' to the fabric of Brahms's late piano works, it may only be accessible by expanding the precepts of modern Brahms style to include expressive and technical resources that do not sound and signify as controlled today. Indeed, recordings of Brahms's late piano works by those who knew him are not static and resigned, but are rather decidedly dynamic, restless, carefree and unreservedly impassioned.

The aesthetic ideology of control will also be shown to lurk behind palatable modern notions of a unified Schumann-Brahms school of pianism: one centred upon nineteenth-century descriptions of Clara Schumann's hyper-controlled performance ideology. Because verbal accounts of Clara's pianism are full of the language of mental and physical control as related to matters of expressive and technical restraint, and given Clara's and Brahms's lifelong private and professional association, it will be argued that the precepts of Clara's described approach are used today to appraise the Brahmsian historical authority of the described and recorded performance styles of many of the Schumann-Brahms circle pianists, Brahms included.

While Clara certainly did extoll the virtues of control, the recorded performance styles of even some of her most dedicated students will be shown to signify as anything but today. Adelina De Lara's early-recorded Brahms style for example, is only deemed historically authoritative relative to that of other pianists in the Schumann-Brahms circle; with those elements of her approach that are seemingly reflective of Clara's restraint being held up as essential stylistic content, while the less controlled qualities of her style are dismissed as evidence of her advanced age at the time of recording. Brahms, Ilona Eibenschütz, and a few other pianists whose recordings posit them as furthest from the Clara 'ideal' on the other hand, will be shown to have espoused an even more expressively and technically carefree approach. Coupled with reports of Clara's displeasure at her pianism, Eibenschütz's wild Brahms recordings are said to lack historical authority, while awkward conclusions regarding the 'uncharacteristic' Brahms playing heard on the composer's own recording are avoided in modern scholarly circles

through emphases of his transition from a young virtuoso who performed other composers' works to an aged composer whose works were performed by others.

While Clara indeed stressed the importance of playing musical detail and structure in highly literal and temporally, tonally, expressively and technically controlled ways, values that continue to inform the precepts of modern Brahms style, the early recordings of even the most restrained members of her circle evidence the use of expressive and technical resources such as the altering of, adding to and subtracting from notated musical details; the use of arpeggiation, dislocation, rhythmic alteration and tempo modification; and the blurring of structure and rhythmic regularity. The early-recorded performance styles of those on the opposite end of the spectrum of approaches represented by the Schumann-Brahms circle of pianists on the other hand, include all of these qualities but to a significantly more extreme degree.

While this language is informed by the aesthetic ideology of control and can sound rather disparaging, we will see that the performance styles it describes are characterized by qualities rarely heard in interpretations of Brahms's late piano works today: qualities suggestive of much less controlled internal and external states, like those of abandon, turmoil, passion, restlessness, fantasy and fury. Indeed, in verbal accounts often passed over in favour of those that seem to align his pianism with Clara's, Brahms is described as having played as if he was half drunk: with carefree gusto and abandon, with many missed and wrong notes, and as if he were performing improvised 'sketches' of his piano works. While these qualities are typically framed as symptomatic of his later deteriorated style, I will argue that they were part of the essential content of his lifelong approach to the piano; that this approach had always differed from Clara's; and as such,

that we may learn more about how Brahms actually played from those pianists in the Schumann-Brahms circle that are understood as having been furthest from the Clara 'ideal,' and thus whose Brahmsian historical authority is currently viewed as tenuous.

While modern pianists are often curious to see what happens to Brahms's piano music when applying the late-Romantic expressive and technical devices evidenced by the Schumann-Brahms circle of pianists' recordings, few are willing to imitate the extremity and frequency with which these resources were actually used. Instead, they prefer to incorporate only those elements of early-recorded Brahms style that are verifiable by descriptions and treatises, or that are reducible to modern preferences for the careful elucidation of notated detail and structure; while continuing to play in the tonally, temporally, expressively and technically restrained manner dictated by modern Brahms performance norms. As a result, the aesthetic ideology of control and the canonic identity it protects remain uncompromisingly upright, while the qualities heard to such great advantage on the early recordings of the Schumann-Brahms circle of pianists remain elusive.

When elements of early-recorded Brahms style are applied without worrying about what their outcomes might say about the historical accuracy of Brahms's controlled Classical identity however, it will be argued that sounds and meanings emerge that reference the unstable bodily and emotional states typically associated with Romantic pianism. These performances are as far from the precepts of modern Brahms style as they are reflective of the enigmatic spirit of their early-recorded models, thereby bridging the gaps between our ethical and creative beliefs, our musical acts, and documentary and recorded evidence of Brahms's musical context in its entirety. Most tellingly perhaps, and

much like their early-recorded models, these performances do not tell us reassuringly familiar stories about Brahmsian identity, but rather surprising and possibility-laden ones in which that identity and its associated performance norms are renegotiated and retold in real-time; revealing them to be highly malleable, context-specific, and perhaps even disposable.

The core question addressed by this thesis is thus: What happens to understandings of Brahms's identity when documentary and early-recorded evidence of his performance contexts is assembled and translated at the piano with a view to problematizing rather than reaffirming the aesthetic ideology of control? This question will be addressed in three stages. The first phase involves an excavation of the origins and vestiges of the aesthetic ideology of control. Of particular interest here will be how this ideology continues to mediate scholarly assessments and performative translations of both documentary and sounding evidence of Brahms's musical contexts. The second phase involves style-copying 'tests,' in which Adelina De Lara and Ilona Eibenschütz's Brahms recordings will be imitated based on the results of both 'naked ear' (close listening) and software-assisted analyses. The third and final phase involves an experimental extrapolation of the results of these style-copying tests across three works that were left unrecorded by the Schumann-Brahms pianists. The results of these tests and experiments will then be used to reflect upon modern notions of Brahmsian identity, and are available in accompanying sound examples and annotated scores.

As a brief note on the distinction between 'test' and 'experiment' here, the style-copying tests are named as such because while they do involve problem-solving (how is a chord being arpeggiated), decision-making (should I place beats at the bottom or at the

top of a rolled chord) and heaps of imagination (how would I have to position my hands on the keys in order to replicate a given sound), their methodology is less experimental and more akin to assembling a jigsaw puzzle in that their end results are known in advance. In other words, my style-copies aim only to be copies. While this process is as frustrating as it is revelatory, as William Brooks puts it, "as with any 'historically informed' performance, th[is] combination of scholarship, intuition, and judgment produce[s] unexpected variations and curious difficulties; but no new terrain [is] traversed, though the ground [is] somewhat cleared."⁷

In the experimental phase however, the stylistic dialects that were analysed and inhabited in the style-copying phase are then extrapolated across works for which I have no original sounding model. Newly learned ways of thinking, listening and doing are simply introduced into Brahms's late piano works *in situ*, and without any pre-structuring concern for what their outcomes might say about Brahms's identity. The only guiding criteria in this phase is that elements of De Lara and Eibenschütz's performance styles will be freely inserted and allowed to flourish in Brahms's music; unravelling sound, score and identity to ends inspired by documentary and sounding evidence of Brahms's musical context in its entirety. Necessarily open-ended, flexible and designed to generate more questions than answers, this process is experimental as it consciously seeks to problematize the very forces that would have it remain a fixed and closed process: forces like the aesthetic ideology of control.

As a practical note, perhaps it would be helpful to define terms that will be used throughout this discussion. Arpeggiation refers to the practice of rolling notes that are

⁷ William Brooks, "Historical Precedents for Artistic Research in Music: The Case of William Butler Yeats," in *Artistic Experimentation in Music: An Anthology*, edited by Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 193.

notated vertically. The order in which the notes of these chords are rolled can vary but is often related to voice leading, while the speeds at which they are rolled depend on whether one is looking to ground or propel temporal motion. Where left-hand octaves are rolled quickly from bottom to top, with associated right-hand materials sounding with rather than before or after the upper left-hand note, this too will be called arpeggiation.

Dislocation on the other hand thus refers to the playing of notes before or after their associated materials. This will include the practice of playing left- or right-hand material earlier or later than its notated counterparts; the early or late playing of inner notes; and the very slow and wide rolling of left-hand octaves, even when their upper note is played simultaneously with associated right-hand materials. When both notes of rolled left-hand octaves sound before or after their associated right-hand materials, this will naturally also be called dislocation. Rhythmic alteration is used here to describe the lengthening or shortening of notes and rests at the level of the beat; while tempo modification involves rushing or slowing over two or more beats. Truncation will be used to refer to the omission or reduction of materials, while elision refers to the linking of discretely notated materials, typically through arpeggiation.

As a final note, those with an interest in historical performance will notice that I have quite consciously avoided a discussion of period pianos here. While this omission is in no way an assertion that Brahms as played on historical keyboards has nothing to teach us about how this repertoire may have sounded at the time of its conception, I do however wish to tease the notion of style away from that of tool, at least within the context of the present research question. The recordings at the centre of this undertaking are resplendent with expressive and technical resources long thought to be evidentiary of

past pianists' negotiation of the affordances and limitations of pre-modern keyboards. Many of the pianists surveyed here however, continued to use these devices on live and studio recordings well into the mid-twentieth century, and on what was certainly a variety of instruments. While it could be argued that this is how they learned to play and that they retained this style long after the tools at their disposal had changed, this would be to argue that past pianists weren't as responsive to their instruments as modern pianists. This seems like a silly argument to make, especially when asserting that they used these devices in the first place in response to the instruments at hand.

Furthermore, while it is true that Brahms kept Robert Schumann's Graf fortepiano, he did so in remembrance of his old friend but otherwise seems to have thought the instrument was unsuitable for performance. In 1868 he called it a "precious but bulky souvenir,"⁸ and in 1873 he sent it to Vienna's International Exposition to be displayed alongside Mozart's and Beethoven's pianos. While some period pianists perform Brahms on the mightier 1890s-era Steinway and Bechstein pianos he is known to have favoured, while often including many of the late-Romantic expressive devices discussed thus far, their performances are otherwise just as controlled as those of pianists performing on modern instruments. Indeed, our access to all kinds of historical tools still has not produced Brahms performances that capture the beguiling spirit captured on the recordings of those pianists who knew him, despite pianists' continued belief in both their historical awareness and creative agency. This thesis simply intends to find out why.

⁸ Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 364.