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

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## 2) 'The Lullabies of my Sorrows': Brahms's Late Piano Works Op. 116 - 119.

At times even a simple telling phrase, even an indirect one, will do to kindle an interpretation.<sup>186</sup>

### 2.1) Introduction

On December 11, 1890 Brahms rather unceremoniously announced his plans for retirement to publisher, confidant and financial manager Fritz Simrock with a brief letter and a few pages of his *Second String Quintet in G Major* Op. 111, writing: "With that scrap of paper you can take your farewell from my music – because quite literally, it is time to stop."<sup>187</sup> That Brahms would make such a weighty pronouncement to someone with whom he was so close in the form of a letter (in which he also chastises Simrock for overpricing his scores), perhaps hints at the composer's growing solitude towards the last seven years of his life. Just six months later Simrock received Brahms's last will and testament, followed by an equally nonchalant request for the publisher to let Brahms know what he thought of the will, but that "if the business [was] not agreeable to...*quite simply* send it back."<sup>188</sup> Simrock was blindsided.

Brahms would later return to composition, but the premature death of so many members of his inner circle around this time seems to have remained very much on his mind, perhaps prompting him to refer to the four sets of piano miniatures he completed in

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<sup>186</sup> Lawrence Kramer, "Music, Metaphor and Metaphysics," *The Musical Times* 145, no. 1888 (Autumn 2004): 9, accessed May 31, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4149019>.

<sup>187</sup> Simrock, *Briefwechsel 11 - 12*, in Avins, *BLL*, 674.

<sup>188</sup> Simrock, *Briefwechsel 11 - 12*, in *Ibid.*, 682. Emphasis is Brahms's.

1892-3 as the "lullabies of my sorrows."<sup>189</sup> Statements such as this have given rise to the general belief in scholarly and performance spheres that the late piano works Op. 116 - 119 are informed by deep melancholy: an impression only compounded by contemporaneous accounts of Brahms's uneventful and even hermitic lifestyle, many of which we have already examined in the previous chapter. While Brahms's supporters were eager to proclaim that he had little patience with the 'absurdities of hero worship,' his detractors saw his eschewal of the limelight as proof of his 'lack of charm, soul and personality.' Regardless of the particular agendas behind such accounts however, on the occasion of Brahms's death it is reported that, "the simple story of Brahms's life, apart from his compositions, could be easily condensed into a paragraph."<sup>190</sup> It is not difficult to see how narratives of personal loss and reclusiveness have coalesced into a metanarrative of profound sorrow where Brahms's late works are concerned.

As ever however, Brahms's control is understood to have saved him from hysterical outpourings of grief and the inner and outer torment of outright depression. Instead, this sadness is understood to have been quiet, reflective and resigned, and perhaps reminiscent of Richard Binns's observation that with Brahms one always sensed "something brooding, obscure, tremulous, as he meditates over man, nature and destiny."<sup>191</sup> In 1899 Ernest Walker delivered a paper to The Royal Musical Association in which he invokes the well-worn tropes of Brahmsian health and Classical lineage to bemoan the emergence of a certain misguided pessimism in the perception and performance of the composer's late oeuvres:

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<sup>189</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 693.

<sup>190</sup> "Johannes Brahms," *TMTASCC* 38, no. 651 (May 1, 1897): 297, accessed May 26, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3366944>.

<sup>191</sup> Binns, "Some Thoughts," 601.

Some indeed have spoken of [Brahms's] attitude in this respect as implying pessimism: I should prefer to call it the acceptance of the facts of things, and certainly he is never for a single moment pessimistic in the sense of morbid - every note he wrote from the first to the last is healthy to the core. He never raves or shrieks: like his two great spiritual parents, Bach and Beethoven, he knows that there is such a thing as reticence in art. Not one of the three 'wears his heart upon his sleeve.'<sup>192</sup>

While Joseph Straus asserts that late styles often represent "impaired bodies or minds and their failure to function in a normal way,"<sup>193</sup> Brahms's canonic identity seems to have been specifically constructed to repel such narratives. Drawing on Straus's fascinating table of prevalent themes in scholarly discussions of musical lateness,<sup>194</sup> while themes such as concision, authorial belatedness, anachronism, alienation, reclusiveness, introversion, complexity, spirituality and even nostalgia are indeed common features of dissections of Brahms's late works and his life in general, they are generally used to reinforce understandings of his control.

Referring to qualities of anachronism in Brahms's late style for example, Straus points to the "sense of having outlived [his] era, of being old-fashioned, left behind by changes in musical style to which [he was] unable or unwilling to adapt"; while elsewhere he cites Margaret Notley who notes that lateness in Brahms is related to the twilight of Viennese liberalism. On the quality of nostalgia heard in the composer's late works, Straus asserts that, "Brahms...felt that his works were written in the shadow of Beethoven's achievement, and certainly a sense of anxious belatedness is bound up with

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<sup>192</sup> Walker, "Brahms," 128.

<sup>193</sup> Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style,'" 12.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 8 - 11.

the nostalgic, autumnal qualities so often noted in his music."<sup>195</sup> Roger Moseley also suggests that Brahms's scholarly study, synthesis and translation of past music anticipates our own fascination with historical performance and musicology, resulting in "the historical mode [with] which we listen to Brahms: his music is remembered rather than experienced afresh, and thus we identify our nostalgia with his."<sup>196</sup> If there are indeed autumnal, melancholic, alienated or nostalgic qualities to be found in Brahms's late piano music therefore, they are a consequence of his deference to the music of the past, his Classical lineage, his commitment to his principles, his historicism, his modesty and his cultured open-mindedness, and certainly not his experience of anything that cannot be reduced to or tamed by his mental and physical fitness.

While I agree that many of the above-mentioned signifiers of late style are indeed to be found in Brahms's late piano pieces Op. 116 - 119, as are moments of resigned sadness, it is difficult to believe that they are all merely a consequence of things like Beethoven's shadow for example, or that Brahms's experience of loss and loneliness was really so dispassionate. Furthermore, these enigmatic works also seem to contain moments of levity, joy, ambiguity, restlessness and even anger: qualities less easily reconciled with understandings of Brahms's canonic identity, and as such suppressed by the aesthetic ideology of control and its protective performance norms.

As opposed to the piano music of Liszt, Chopin and Schumann for example, where performers are encouraged to exercise their expressive and technical apparatuses in order to communicate and even impose what they perceive as emotional content, in

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<sup>195</sup> Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style,'" 5. Straus refers here to Margaret Notley, *Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>196</sup> Moseley, "Is There Only Juan Brahms?" 167.

Brahms's music emotional content is understood to emerge unassisted when performers maintain a clear-eyed and deferent approach to expression, tone production, tempo, detail and structure in Brahms's music. In other words, if emotion is there at all it is somehow 'locked' inside the music. Unfortunately however, the extreme restraint so prized by contemporary Brahms style tends to soften the edges of those emotional qualities understood to be rooted in control, like nostalgia, alienation, stoicism, and resigned sadness, for example; while it neutralizes anything hinting at less controlled states of body and mind.

Later in this volume we will examine how the less controlled qualities of Brahms's late piano works can be heard to great advantage on the restless and impassioned recordings of the pianists in his inner circle. For now however, these qualities also seem to lurk between the lines of the composer's personal correspondence. In order to begin narrowing the gaps between contemporary Brahms performances and the experience of listening to the historical evidence both sonic and literary, perhaps a re-evaluation of what Brahms's late piano works *mean* or what they "tell of"<sup>197</sup> is in order; the hypothesis being that pianists with access to Brahms played his music differently both because it *meant* something different to them and because their understanding of how that meaning should sound was different as well.

What follows here therefore is a re-examination of the historical, biographical and metaphorical contexts of Brahms' late piano works: one based in large part on Styravins's brilliantly collected and edited English translation of the composer's letters, without which an English-based study such as this would be impossible. It is my belief that the 'simple telling phrases' contained in these letters illustrate that the emotional

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<sup>197</sup> Kramer, "Music, Metaphor and Metaphysics," 6.

content pervading Brahms' late piano music may not be easily reconciled with modern understandings of his controlled canonic identity, but that once elucidated it may afford a dramatic rethink of the range of expressive and technical means used when performing his piano works Op. 116 - 119.



## 2.2) Early Loss

Long before sickness and death would grip most of those to whom Brahms would grow close later in life, the tragic death of Robert Schumann in 1856 and that of his mother Christiane nine years later were losses that may have precipitated his early inclination to see himself as a lonely outsider. Immediately after Robert had attempted suicide by jumping into the Rhine River on February 27, 1854, just weeks after Brahms had prophetically written to Clara, “How I long for spring to arrive, which I hope will bring us all together again on the Rhine,”<sup>198</sup> Brahms rushed to Düsseldorf to be at Clara’s side. With the unfailing support of his close friends Otto Grimm, Albert Hermann Dietrich and Joseph Joachim, the twenty-one year old Brahms launched himself into assisting with the everyday practicalities of Clara’s new reality: seven young children (with one on the way), the matter of Robert’s treatment and institutionalization, and the running of the Schumann household while Clara continued to teach and concertize in order to support her large family.

As evidenced by Eugenie Schumann's account of the *Kinderszene* in which a young, blond and athletic Brahms is reported to have performed daring acrobatics for the gathered Schumann children, he not only aided in the family’s finances, but took charge of the children’s care, education and entertainment as well; providing them with a certain domestic stability and some much-needed distraction while Clara was abroad on tour. In spite of Brahms’ valiant efforts to maintain a sense of order and normalcy however, correspondence from the time hints at the devastating impact of Robert’s suicide attempt

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<sup>198</sup> *Clara Schumann - Brahms Briefe*, in Avins, *BLL*, 36.

on the Schumann household as a whole, as well as the attentive protectiveness with which everyone now observed its matriarch. In April 1854, Grimm reports to Joachim:

Frau Schumann is as crushed as in the beginning; - often, when she speaks of [Robert], or after playing some of his things, she breaks into sobs. The only good thing is that she is now not importuned as frequently by personal or written expressions of sympathy.<sup>199</sup>

For all his friends' concern, it seems as though Brahms was every bit as terrified, despondent and confused in the weeks and months immediately following Robert's suicide attempt as Clara. The total mind-body disintegration and institutionalization of his greatest mentor and champion with whom he shared his early Kreisler affinities, his oft-documented infatuation with Clara, and the weightiness of his new (albeit self-imposed) familial responsibilities, all seem to have shaken young Johannes to the core. Though he continued to compose and teach whilst in Düsseldorf he would not publish a single work for nearly six years, leading friends and family to fret that he had become listless, distracted and melancholy.

It appears however that his parents' concern was rooted primarily in financial matters, as so often seems to have been the case. In June 1854 Brahms's mother wrote to him anxiously regarding his decision to go to Clara: "You cannot live by just composing...For the moment, you have done right to go there. But to stay there? That way you loose [sic] much time and money."<sup>200</sup> Brahms had however clearly been drawn to Düsseldorf for reasons beyond loyalty to his mentor. Later that same month, and in a letter asking Joachim if he should entitle a new set of works *Leaves from the Diary of a*

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<sup>199</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel* 5, in *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>200</sup> Stephenson, *Familie*, in *Ibid.*, 37 - 38.

*Musician Published by the Young Kreisler*, Brahms describes how desperately "confused and indecisive" he feels, writing:

I love and am in love with [Clara]. I often have to restrain myself forcibly just from quietly embracing her and even -: I don't know, it seems to me so natural, as though she could not take it at all amiss.<sup>201</sup>

It cannot be overstated how absolutely vital both Robert and Clara Schumann had been to the young composer's newfound critical and popular success. Brahms was, and remained, ever grateful for all they had done and risked bringing him into the elite musical circles in which they moved. Indeed, that he felt an intensely dutiful need to be at Clara's side during this difficult time is wholly understandable. And while much has been made of the romantic motivations for Brahms' speedy arrival and lengthy stay in Düsseldorf, there is no evidence that Clara ever gave Brahms any reason to believe that the void left by Robert's breakdown would be filled by either the young Brahms or anyone else for that matter. His belief that Clara would not reject his advances may have been nothing more than a combination of naïve youthful fantasy and macho display for Joachim's benefit; or it could evidence an early predilection for the inner and outer poetic tumult that so pervades E. T. A. Hoffman's tales. Indeed, Brahms's desperate indecisiveness and confusion here recalls Hoffman's description of the figure of Kreisler in *Kater Murr* as one who is "buzzing wildly around in vague, endless spaces."<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel* 5, in *Ibid.*, 47 - 48. Avins notes that this passage was left out of the Brahms *Briefwechsel* (as were most direct references to the exact nature of Brahms and Clara's relationship), but she has restored it here from the autograph.

<sup>202</sup> Hoffman, *Kater Murr*, 216, in Kross, "Brahms," 199.

In any case, every member of the Schumann circle seemed certain of Robert's imminent recovery and eventual reinstatement as rightful head of the household. In letters to Joachim, Grimm and Clara at this time, even Brahms seems to revel in each miniscule sign from Robert's doctors of the patient's improving health, though it could be argued that this was either an attempt to conceal his true feelings toward Frau Schumann or to shed an optimistic spin on a hopelessly desperate situation, or both. In the same letter quoted just above, Brahms reports to Joachim: "[Robert] also asked in which direction Godesberg lay, and said that he had spent a summer there! Are those not marvellous signs of a returning memory?"<sup>203</sup> In August 1854, Brahms travels to Bonn to check on Herr Schumann's condition himself, later describing the encounter to Clara in a cautiously hopeful as well as painfully truthful tone:

Your dear husband has not changed in the least, he has only gained a little weight. His glance is friendly and bright...his gait and his greeting were freer and firmer...hope, as I do, more and more firmly, for the complete, if slow, recovery of the cherished man...I also must not withhold from you that your husband has had auditory hallucinations these last days. Their recurrence from time to time won't be enough to unsettle you too much, will they?<sup>204</sup>

For all the trepidation and confusion surrounding Robert's hospitalization, the most striking feature of the correspondence that survives from this period is Brahms's ability to revel the joy, comfort and knowledge that sorrow can bring. His inclusion in

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<sup>203</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel* 5, in *Ibid.*, 46. The Schumanns often vacationed together in the Rhenish castle-dotted mountains near Bad Godesberg.

<sup>204</sup> *Clara Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 55 - 56. From this letter it appears that at least on this occasion Brahms was unable to visit with Robert in private and one-on-one. Brahms was instead permitted to observe him drinking a cup of coffee and speaking with his doctors, though Brahms could not make out the nature of their discussion.

the Schumann household both before and after Robert's breakdown seems to have been an immense source both of domestic comfort and professional pride for the young Brahms. Once the initial shock of Robert's attempt on his own life had passed, life seems to have carried on for Brahms much as before: with long candlelit evenings of eating, drinking and music-making amongst friends; with the incessant teasing of Clara's rambunctious young children; with endless hours spent rummaging through the Schumann's extensive library of rare books and scores; all the while surrounded by the warmth the adulation of their wide circle of powerful friends.

In the years preceding Robert's death in July 1856, letters between Brahms, Clara, Joachim and Grimm are littered with references to moments of pure levity and bliss; usually in reference to intimate evenings of casual music-making at Clara's, or the many private jokes the group shared, or sporadic scraps of good news from Bonn regarding Robert's condition. In one such letter Brahms writes to Joachim: "[Clara] was dancing around the room for joy. I have never before seen her so cheerful, happy and calm."<sup>205</sup> In another, Brahms writes to Clara after he, Grimm and Joachim accompanied her on the Düsseldorf - Hanover leg of a concert tour: "I only left Hanover at Thursday noon; we spent a few more fine days there, J[oa]chim and Gr[im]m lying on the sofa at dusk, and I playing in the next room."<sup>206</sup> And finally, in a letter to Grimm, Brahms writes:

If only you had been here and had spent the glorious, jolly day with us...we think of you often, especially while making music, drinking, reading, and out walking, and what else do we do, anyway?<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel* 5 - 6, in *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>206</sup> Clara Schumann - Brahms *Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>207</sup> Grimm, *Briefwechsel* 4, in *Ibid.*, 102.

Indeed, the Schumann's Düsseldorf home already seems to have become a potent and lasting source of nostalgia for Brahms; with its shifting echoes of light and shadow, domestic bliss and turmoil, infatuation and unrequited love, opportunity and tragedy, leisure and responsibility, comfort and regret. Furthermore, and perhaps just as importantly for issues of interpretation in performance, Brahms seems to have not only taken immense comfort in the sorrowful memories themselves, but he seemed to grasp their musical potential as well. As Brahms writes to Clara in August 1854, desperate at having briefly left her side to go on a walking tour of the Black Forest, "If the great longing which I have felt in these days has an effect on my playing, etc., I really ought soon to be able to work magic with it"<sup>208</sup>; while in January 1855 he writes to Joachim: "How dear to me are all the works which came into being this winter...they remind me so much of twilight hours at Clara's."<sup>209</sup> After Schumann's death came inevitable and more permanent upheavals in Brahms's domestic and professional arrangements, and while he would form many lasting friendships upon striking out on his own in Vienna, in April 1864 he laments:

My real friends are the old friends; unfortunately, my heart can take pleasure in them more and more only in my imagination. There is no one here to replace any one of them.<sup>210</sup>

Later in the same letter however, Brahms mentions that he longs to return home "to Hamburg and sit in [his] old room for a few evenings"<sup>211</sup> in the company of his father

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<sup>208</sup> *Clara Schumann - Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>209</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel 5 - 6*, in *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>210</sup> *Clara Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 293 - 94.

<sup>211</sup> *Clara Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 294.

Johann Jakob, mother Christiane, and sister Elise. Ill-matched both in age and temperament,<sup>212</sup> Brahms's parents moved their young family around Hamburg several times while he was still a boy, and though they led a middle class lifestyle it seems that their financial standing was tenuous at best. By the age of fourteen, the young Brahms was already contributing to the household finances as a piano player in some of the more respectable social establishments of Hamburg's lower classes.<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless, Brahms's letters to his parents indicate that he was a loving and grateful son. In one of his earliest letters dated Christmas Eve 1846, his deep sense of filial duty is revealed when he writes:

When I count all the good deeds and cares you have continuously heaped upon me[!], I do feel that I am still too weak to thank you sufficiently, but at least I will strive always to conduct myself so as to earn your love and to provide the joy of your old age.<sup>214</sup>

Nearly eighteen years later, as his thoughts turned to his old room in Hamburg and those irreplaceable 'old friends' whose company he could enjoy only in his imagination, Brahms continued to worry about the advancing age and ill-health of his mother Christiane. Sadly, he was altogether ill prepared for what he would find upon his return to Hamburg in 1864: namely, his family in utter ruins. To his dismay, Brahms discovered that Johann Jakob had brusquely thrown both his sister and mother out of the family home claiming, "he could no longer live with an aged wife and the ailing daughter he viewed as a malingeringer."<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Christiane was seventeen years Johann Jakob's senior and had always been sickly. While she was calm, modest and well respected, Johann had a reputation for being an ill-tempered spend thrift.

<sup>213</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 4.

<sup>214</sup> Kalbeck, *Brahms 4*, 534, in *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>215</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 298.

Though Brahms and his family exchanged letters regularly, at great length, and in lively detail throughout their lives, there is however a marked absence of direct references to the 1864 dissolution of the Hamburg home as Brahms had most of the letters pertaining to the matter burned at a later date. Still, there are sporadic and cryptic clues in Brahms's earlier letters that suggest something was indeed amiss, and that the reality of his familial situation differed greatly from the nostalgic images in the recesses of his memory. In 1854 he wrote to Clara while visiting his family in Hamburg:

I can no longer find myself in my former life; I can no longer dwell four people in two rooms...I have become so accustomed to being alone that I have to ask my parents, etc., to leave me alone.

Shortly thereafter he again wrote to Clara: "Don't worry about my 'taking a trip to Hamburg'; I have continual foreboding which drives me on, you know what it is."<sup>216</sup>

While Brahms's attitude towards his old life in Hamburg seems to have been part nostalgia and part grumpy annoyance, his outlook would soon erupt into full-fledged concern upon learning of his father's ejection of his mother and siblings and his subsequent refusal to support them financially. In January 1865, Christiane penned a lengthy and heart-breaking letter detailing, among many other things, the true nature of her tumultuous relationship with Johann Jakob, who seems to have been a cruel man. According to Avins, this letter must have arrived at Brahms's door just days before he received news of Christiane's death.<sup>217</sup> Through this letter one begins to grasp just how

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<sup>216</sup> *Clara Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 67, 99.

<sup>217</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 311.



difficult Brahms's family life in Hamburg must truly have been, making the nostalgia he later felt for that life all the more telling.

Ever the optimist and dutiful son however, Brahms not only began to support his family at this juncture - a commitment that took a heavy toll on his personal finances - but he began to act as mediator in the matter as well. Over the course of several letters he pleads with his father to assist with the relocation and living expenses incurred by his mother and sister. Judging from the pitiful condition in which Clara found them some months later however, Brahms's efforts seem to have been in vain.<sup>218</sup> Based on their letters, Brahms does seem to eventually forgive his father, and the two men even correspond warmly on the subject of Johann Jakob's later remarriage. While it is difficult to fully comprehend how the catastrophic impact of losing two family units in such quick succession might have affected Brahms, in a letter to Clara from Vienna in April 1872 he writes: "Holidays I always spend all alone, quite by myself, with a few dear ones up in my room, and very quietly - given that my own people are dead or far away."<sup>219</sup>

What does seem clear however, is that Brahms's persistent nostalgia for both the Schumann's household and that of his childhood was neither simple longing for the comfort of happier times, nor static sadness – nor was it both. Brahms's yearning for two domestic situations associated with devastating personal loss and disappointment suggests that his nostalgia was not a simple juxtaposition of joy and sadness. Nostalgia for Brahms, as Roger Moseley puts it, was the "fleeting beauty of a moment where past and present...confront each other with memories and with things forgotten before taking

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>219</sup> *Clara Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, in Ibid., 439.

resigned leave of each other.”<sup>220</sup> Indeed, still grieving the loss of his mother, in February 1865 Brahms writes to Clara: “Time changes everything for better or for worse, no, not changes, but shapes and unfolds.”<sup>221</sup> Far from controlled, the shifting, fleeting, restless and unfolding nature of Brahms's early experience of nostalgia will become key to understanding how this emotional content might be communicated in performances of his late piano works.

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<sup>220</sup> Moseley, “Reforming Johannes,” 304.

<sup>221</sup> *Clara Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, in Avins, *BLL*, 319.

### 2.3) Brahms the ‘Poor Outsider’

Toward the end of the 1860s, and perhaps inspired by the opening lines of his *Alto Rhapsody* as excerpted from Goethe’s *Harzreise im Winter*,<sup>222</sup> Brahms began referring to himself as a ‘lonely outsider’ after the poem’s discontented wanderer who is fated to a life of solitude due to his inability to live peacefully in the world. In a February 1870 letter to Karl Reinthaler who had just conducted the first major public performance of Brahms’s *German Requiem* with the Singakademie<sup>223</sup> Brahms lamented, “Ah, poor outsider that I am!”<sup>224</sup> Two years later, he betrays a certain complicity in his growing solitude, and writes to Clara:

The turmoil in which one lives – I don’t laugh at it, I don’t join in the lies – but it is as if the best part of one could lock itself up, leaving merely half the person walking away in a dream.<sup>225</sup>

Apart from the loss of both Robert Schumann and his mother Christiane, one new reason for this gloomy outlook has already been discussed at length here: the intensely polarizing tone of the debate over both Brahms’s place in German musical life as well as the nature of musical meaning and progress in general. Indeed, the polemics had begun many years earlier with the publication of Robert Schumann’s laudatory 1853 “Neue

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<sup>222</sup> The excerpt of Goethe’s 1777 poem “Winter Journey in the Harz” used in Brahms’s *Alto Rhapsody* Op. 53 reads, ‘Aber abseits, wer ist’s? In’s Gebüsch verliert sich sein Pfad...’ which is roughly translated as, ‘But who is that standing apart? In the underbrush he loses his path.’

<sup>223</sup> Franz Gehring and Bernd Wiechert, “Karl Reinthaler,” in *Oxford Music Online*, accessed May 31, 2012, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/23157>.

<sup>224</sup> Reinthaler, *Briefwechsel* 3, in Avins, *BLL*, 406.

<sup>225</sup> From *Clara Schumann - Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 439.

Bahnen” 1853 article, but they later intensified with a series of editorials published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* by supporters of the Liszt circle in defence of the literary-oriented ideals of the New German School’s ‘Music of the Future.’ The debate finally exploded into a full-scale turf war after Brahms’s own manifesto of 1860 in which he attacked the ideals of the New Germans, asserting that music should progress according to its inner spirit and logic, and not by way of theatre or tone painting.<sup>226</sup>

However, the embarrassment and resounding ridicule Brahms suffered at the hands of Leipzig’s artistic elite after the manifesto’s bungled release,<sup>227</sup> his subsequent alienation from adherents of the New German School, and his recent personal losses including the death of his father in 1872, all seem to have been but sad backdrop for the composer’s deepening feelings of loneliness and alienation. While some must have taken Brahms’s repeated references to this solitude with a measure of doubt, as he was well known for the wide and varied circle of acquaintances with whom he kept in regular contact, those who knew him best knew that he could be incredibly awkward and gruff in his personal and professional dealings. Over the years, those forced to bear the brunt of his less congenial side only seemed to grow in number, thereby deepening his growing identification with Goethe’s discontented wanderer.

In the years following Brahms’s appointment as music director elect of Vienna’s Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in 1871 (a widely coveted position that was recaptured in 1875 by his old rival Johann Franz von Herbeck), Brahms’s “unyielding artistic

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<sup>226</sup> George S. Bozarth and Walter Frisch, "Brahms, Johannes," in *Oxford Music Online*, accessed May 31, 2012, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/51879pg2>.

<sup>227</sup> While Brahms’s 1860 manifesto was being circulated amongst other eminent musicians, it was leaked to the press before many could attach their signatures. The document subsequently went to print bearing only the names of Brahms, Joseph Joachim and two others. Brahms was mortified.

incorruptibility and independence”<sup>228</sup> added fuel not only to his rising fame as a conductor-composer-pianist, but to the polemics over the future of music and his many fiery feuds as well. While we have seen how Brahms's dogged commitment to his ideals was framed as evidence of his deep mental control in public spheres, there is evidence that many of these skirmishes unravelled to less dignified ends in private. In early April 1875, Brahms discussed recent developments at the Gesellschaft in a letter to his dear friend Hermann Levi: a German conductor whom he had met through Clara:

Of course it can all be said in one word: Herbeck! Nothing has happened but the prospects are not pleasing and so I prefer to go. I do not wish either to quarrel with him nor wait until he has got rid of me. To relate details in writing is too long-winded and boring for me. But perhaps it could be done in person...<sup>229</sup>

Sadly, a letter only weeks later hints that whatever transpired in that meeting between Brahms and Levi irreparably damaged their relationship forever. As Levi writes to Brahms:

I would consider it a misfortune if I confronted as stranger and foe the material which, as an opera director, I am expected to replicate and represent. One who is staunchly self-reliant, like you...need not deal with the external world and can avoid everything which is disagreeable to his nature, is free to go his way, untouched by his own time – and to rise above it...For me there was initially the satisfaction which the conductor derives from having overcome the technical difficulties, then the genuine interest of a theatre person...To my mind this has nothing at all to do with ‘transformations’...The fact that I shy away from any conceivable association with the future gang, and am thoroughly

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<sup>228</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 420.

<sup>229</sup> Levi, *Briefwechsel* 7, in *Ibid.*, 473.

hated by it, might also give you cause to ponder whether I had actually deserved – your really cruel words.<sup>230</sup>

Though Levi had always been a champion of Brahms's music, he had developed a passion for opera, and especially that of Richard Wagner. While it is hardly surprising that an opera-loving conductor might take an interest in Wagner's music, opposing factions in the debate over the future of German music had long pitted Brahms and the operatic juggernaut against one another, leading many in Brahms's camp to interpret Levi's new passion as traitorous. And while Brahms never publicly expressed anything but admiration of Wagner's music, the respect was most certainly not mutual. Wagner would go on to write at length about Brahms and his music with both nastiness and contempt.<sup>231</sup>

Nevertheless, Hermann Levi and Wagner met in 1871, and the former was “won over as much by Wagner's music as by his artistic message, even defending the aesthetic underlying *Das Judenthum in der Musik*,”<sup>232</sup> in which Wagner attacked Jewish composers Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn. Levi's defence of the paper is notable given that he was Jewish but not completely out of the ordinary, as Wagner enjoyed (and profited from) the support of many eminent Jewish artists. I'm inclined to agree with Laurence Dreyfus's assertion that modern discussions of the Jewish response to nineteenth century German anti-Semitism are oversimplified and tend to gloss over the

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<sup>230</sup> Levi, *Briefwechsel* 7, in *Ibid.*, 473 - 74.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 370. It is entirely possible that Brahms exercised the same caution with regards to his opinions on Wagner as he did with his relationship with Clara or the dissolution of his family, thereby destroying and incriminating letters. Whatever he missed may also have been either destroyed by friends, or omitted by early biographers and compilers of his correspondence.

<sup>232</sup> Laurence Dreyfus, "Hermann Levi," in *Oxford Music Online*, accessed May 31, 2012, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/16515>.

fact that like Levi, many of the best and brightest Jewish artists of the time sought acceptance and success within the elite national culture that Wagner represented.<sup>233</sup>

Indeed, Hermann Levi went on to become one of the leading Wagnerian interpreters of the 1870s and 80s, in spite of simmering religio-racial tensions between the two men and the undoubtedly numerous difficulties he faced as a Jew in German high art circles.

Just because Levi knew what he was doing however, doesn't mean Brahms did as well. It isn't hard to imagine that Brahms's 'cruel words' pertained to what he may have perceived as Levi's foolish association with a well-known anti-Semite, and his conversion or 'transformation' to Wagnerism - though there's little evidence to support such a theory. While Dreyfus astutely argues that even "people like Brahms...never suggested that Levi was in danger of cavorting with a dangerous anti-Semite,"<sup>234</sup> it is possible that Brahms indeed voiced this very concern, either at that fateful meeting or on some other occasion. Indeed, perhaps Levi felt the need to bring up how 'thoroughly hated' he was by the Wagnerians because the topic had already been discussed between these two old friends.

Other possible explanations for the eventual dissolution of Levi and Brahms's friendship include Eugenie Schumann's report that Brahms was incensed over Levi's firing of a butler suspected of stealing cigars, and Brahms's professional jealousy over Levi's infatuation with Wagner's music. Though much more plausible, this latter theory is even less supported by the surviving evidence. Besides, Clara and Levi's friendship thrived despite the fact that she was much more virulently opposed to Wagner than

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<sup>233</sup> Laurence Dreyfus, "Hermann Levi's Shame and Parsifal's Guilt: A Critique of Essentialism in Biography and Criticism," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6, no. 2 (1994): 132, accessed June 24, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/823821>.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 135

Brahms is ever reported to have been.<sup>235</sup> Whatever the precise catalyst for this falling out may have been however, it is likely that Brahms and Levi had been experiencing a rift not evidenced by their correspondence, and that the arguments of that fateful meeting were the final straw in a long-standing opposition of musical tastes and allegiances.<sup>236</sup>

More importantly however, this incident suggests that Brahms's feelings of alienation and solitude were not merely a consequence of some heroic intellectual pig-headedness, like Hermann Deiters's 1888 polemical assertion of his "enthusiasm for the true aims of art" thereby "keep[ing] it from utter degeneracy,"<sup>237</sup> for example. Brahms's 'cruel words' to Levi were clearly meant to hurt, and as a result of this growing prickliness his coterie of dedicated allies was indeed dwindling in numbers. Indeed, despite some perfunctory communication between the two men afterward, their relationship would never recover. In March 1876 a mutual Düsseldorf friend of Levi and Brahms's, the engraver Julius Allgeyer, even pleads with Brahms to reconcile with his old friend, writing: "It almost appears that you, 'outsider,' want to push through the undergrowth alone."<sup>238</sup> Apparently Brahms was not alone in his fear of losing valuable allies because of his ill-tempered ways. In any case, it seems that any discussion of the qualities of alienation and solitude in Brahms's music should necessarily include the less controlled emotional states of anger, callousness and irritability.

Brahms's letters evidence that he was keenly aware of his propensity for such antisocial behaviour. In June 1871 he wrote to the singer Ottilie Ebner, "I may already

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<sup>235</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 474 - 75.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 791. After accepting a post as conductor in Munich in 1872, Hermann Levi became embroiled in a feud with another of Brahms's dearest friends, Franz Wüllner. It is possible that this latest squabble only added to a growing feeling of conflicting personal and professional loyalties between Brahms and Levi.

<sup>237</sup> Deiters, "Johannes Brahms," 11.

<sup>238</sup> Orel, *Brahms & Allgeyer*, in Avins, *BLL*, 489.



have lost what scant reputation I had as a ‘kind and obliging person.’”<sup>239</sup> Sadly, this gaucheness almost led to the dissolution of his friendships with Clara and Joachim as well. The whole row began when Brahms was invited to both compose a new work and deliver a prologue for a music festival in Bonn memorializing Robert Schumann, with Joachim as music director and conductor. While some might point to the tropes of Brahms’s modesty and hyperawareness of his place in history as a possible reason for his refusal of the invitation,<sup>240</sup> it is far more likely that the timeframe under which he was expected to produce a new work was simply too constrained, and that the memory of Robert’s tragic passing was still too fresh in his mind. In January 1873, Brahms politely declined to the festival’s organizer, Friedrich Heimsoeth, stating:

I see no possibility of participating in your celebration in the desired spirit. My reasons are so profoundly my concern alone that I would like to state ...[that] if I were now to write a piece expressly for that day, the same qualms would return more powerfully, be my business, and deter me...I will probably never be allowed to love a better person – and will also, I hope, never witness the progress of such a dreadful fate from such ghastly proximity.

In that same letter, Brahms goes on to insinuate that he might agree to a performance of his *Requiem*, as it is “a text which could let [him] forget [his] scruples,”<sup>241</sup> but strangely Brahms received no reply from Heimsoeth. Brahms, perhaps offended by the festival organizer’s silence, urged Joachim to adopt a few of his less

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<sup>239</sup> Von Balassa, *Brahmsfreundin*, in *Ibid.*, 426.

<sup>240</sup> On the occasion of the unveiling of the memorial monument seven years later, the funds for which were raised by the Bonn festival, Brahms wrote to Clara that, “it’s an all too peculiar idea that a great musician should have his praises sung by a lesser one.” *Clara Schumann - Brahms Briefe*, in Avins, *BLL*, 452.

<sup>241</sup> Heimsoeth, *Briefwechsel 3*, in *Ibid.*, 450.

desirable traits, writing jokingly: “Be careful in dealing with your committee and according to circumstance be rude, at any rate obstinate; by that method I have managed to get through the winter quite well.”<sup>242</sup> Joachim and Clara however took personal issue both with Brahms’s hesitation to contribute to the festival, and his undiplomatic and lackadaisical approach to having the matter resolved as well.

By the summer of 1873 Brahms was surprised to learn that not even his *Requiem* would be performed at the event and, perhaps more disturbingly, that Joachim and Clara’s displeasure with him was in fact due to long-simmering tensions that neither had previously expressed. In July 1873, Joachim wrote to Brahms:

A very intimate friend of ours heard me say that your letter, your whole manner, unfortunately, gives me the impression that you did not truly support the matter with heart and soul...But let us be quite open: I sensed quite generally, in recent years, that whenever we got together you were unable to recapture your former tone towards me.<sup>243</sup>

Strangely enough, it was actually Hermann Levi who managed to resolve this rift between the three old friends. According to Avins, correspondence found amongst Joachim’s personal letters show that Levi had asked Clara and Joachim to “take Brahms as he was: that either he had been worth their friendship all these years, or they were mistaken all these years.”<sup>244</sup> The three soon reconciled.

But Brahms would soon find other reasons to retreat from professional engagements. By the mid-1870s he was becoming increasingly self-conscious about what he perceived as his shortcomings as a concert pianist. Perhaps his growing

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<sup>242</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel* 5 - 6, in *Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>243</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel* 5 - 6, in *Ibid.*, 454. The intimate friend is probably Clara.

<sup>244</sup> *Joachim Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 448.

reluctance to perform was motivated by a desire to distance himself from the more flashy composer-pianists of the New German School like Liszt for example, or it's possible that the rise of competitive virtuosic pianism in general laid bare certain technical deficiencies that were no longer accepted by audiences. Nevertheless, in early 1874 Brahms was invited to play and conduct an all-Brahms program at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig.

Brahms wrote to the hall's music director Carl Reinecke:

I suppose I may direct this reply to you, as well...How often have I forsworn playing in public!...I do not play, and now I am supposed to do so in your town. On the other hand, it seems to me childish to refuse...I am something of a hermit and inept in my outside dealings. Commend me to your fellow directors and tell them that I am grateful for their invitation and – resigned to my fate.<sup>245</sup>

Though he continued to perform his own works in private and on occasion in public, Brahms would soon all but abandon solo recital playing as “his technical inconsistencies became more troublesome to listeners not prepared for them, or not sympathetic towards him.”<sup>246</sup> Brahms must surely have been aware of the less than glowing reviews of his pianism that circulated at the time. In 1880, the English composer Charles Stanford heard Brahms's performance of his own *Piano Concerto in B Flat Major*, and referred to the composer's “piano playing [as] not so much that of a finished pianist, as of a composer who despised virtuosity. The skips...were accomplished regardless of accuracy, and it is no exaggeration to say there were handfuls of wrong

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<sup>245</sup> Reinecke. *Briefwechsel* 3, in *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>246</sup> Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, 124.

notes.”<sup>247</sup> We will return to this review in the context of a more in-depth discussion of the particular nature of Brahms’s pianism in the following chapter.

For now, Brahms’s reluctance to perform publicly seems further evidenced by the fact that many of his letters to music directors and concert organizers before major performances contain earnest promises to practice. Perhaps he worried that they too had read the negative reviews and sought to pre-emptively assuage their fears. Indeed, in the same letter to Reinecke quoted above, Brahms goes on to write: “As far as I am concerned you may put a piano performance on the list. I’ll practice.”<sup>248</sup> In 1877 Brahms writes to his good friends Heinrich and Elisabet von Herzogenberg informing them of his intention to perform in Leipzig, to which they hospitably replied that he could stay with them and practice on their piano. Even practicing amongst friends however seems to have been a source of worry for Brahms, as he responds: “I would find it very agreeable to have to stay in a hotel for a few days. For I am embarrassed to practice in the house of friends, and that has to happen!” Elisabet, who was all too familiar with Brahms’s aversion to practicing, replies:

You only have a few meagre hours to practice, and without proper supervision you are sure not to put them to proper use – but I’ll make sure, sit you down at the piano and then leave, so you won’t be ‘embarrassed.’<sup>249</sup>

Technical imperfections and general malaise aside, perhaps Brahms’s instincts were right in preferring to perform only his own works. It seems that at least for a while, audiences were prepared to hear wrong notes on the concert stage provided that the one producing

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<sup>247</sup> Stanford, *Pages*, 200, in *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>248</sup> Reinecke, *Briefwechsel 3*, in Avins, *BLL*, 464.

<sup>249</sup> Von Herzogenberg, *Briefwechsel 1 - 2*, in *Ibid.*, 531.

them was he who penned them, thereby evidencing a chasm between a newer generation of professional performers and an older class of composer-pianists. As C. V. Stanford goes on to write about the composer's performance:

The wrong notes did not really matter, they did not disturb his hearers any more than himself. He took it for granted that the public knew that he had written the right notes, and did not worry himself over such little trifles as hitting the wrong ones.<sup>250</sup>

Clara however seems to have been much less confident that Brahms's audiences would forgive him a few wrong notes. As Ferdinand Schumann recalls, his grandmother often expressed her displeasure at Brahms's decision not to engage local pianists in the performance of his works. On the eve of an 1895 Frankfurt performance of Brahms's clarinet sonatas featuring the composer at the piano and clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, Clara is reported to have remarked that, "she did not approve of Brahms's taking the piano part...[and] that he should have engaged a Frankfort [sic] pianist, for his by no means technically perfect playing only lessened the effect produced by his compositions."<sup>251</sup> It is noteworthy that throughout their lengthy friendship, Clara often seemed much more worried about Brahms's reputation than even the composer himself: an issue to which we will return at great length in the following chapter. Perhaps for now it is enough to remark that discussions of Brahms's late style might benefit from including this element of playing 'as if the wrong notes did not really matter.'

From the 1880s onward, one begins to notice an increase in the frequency and severity of the many rifts between Brahms and those closest to him. Some gaffes, such as

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<sup>250</sup> Stanford, *Pages*, 200, in Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, 125.

<sup>251</sup> Ferdinand Schumann, "Brahms and Clara Schumann," *The Musical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (October 1916): 512, accessed August 23, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/737934>.

his difficulty in remembering names, were cause for amusement. Brahms loved to act as a go-between and establish connections amongst his widely scattered friends and colleagues throughout Europe. In the spring of 1880 he attempted to set up his friend, the great anti-Wagnerian music critic Eduard Hanslick, with a number of his musical contacts in Holland: a country whose praises Brahms sung often and warmly. After experiencing some difficulty in recalling their exact names and faces, Brahms light-heartedly wrote to Hanslick:

I have a deplorably poor memory for persons and names. That is my least shortcoming, but the most highly perfected. How many friendly, dear people now appear more or less distinctly before my mind's eye. I feel deeply ashamed, uncouth, and ungrateful – I search for their names in vain.<sup>252</sup>

Other blunders were much more serious however, like the 1880 rift involving Brahms, Joachim and now Fritz Simrock as well. When Joachim came to suspect that his wife Amalie was committing adultery with Simrock, Brahms (who doesn't seem to have entertained the notion that Joachim's suspicions were legitimate) travelled to Berlin where he stayed a few days with the troubled couple. Brahms seems to have grasped the gravity of the situation from the beginning, as well as the many personal and professional relationships that hung in the balance. In July 1880 he wrote to Joachim:

Your letter...has made me profoundly sad and comes to mind often and gloomily enough. So much there was that united you that one envisaged a long and happy life together. And now - ! A tangible, serious cause is hard to imagine; nor is it likely to exist...And

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<sup>252</sup> From letters published in the *Neue Freie Presse* (July 1, 1897), in Avins, *BLL*, 562. See <http://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?apm=0&aid=nfp&datum=18970701&zoom=2> for the full issue.

now the dissonance of a friendship torn apart has been added, as well! I don't suppose that you could have much interest in my work or in yours now.<sup>253</sup>

With thoughts of his long-suffering mother Christiane perhaps foremost in his mind, Brahms must have had only the best of intentions when he proceeded to pen a long letter to Amalie in which he rather explicitly painted her as a kind and honest wife at the mercy of a cruel and unreasonably jealous husband. As he would later unrepentantly explain to Joachim, "It was for me a solace, a liberation, to be able to tell your tormented wife – the same things I had told you often enough." Evidently, Brahms had broached the subject before. Regardless, when Amalie decides to use the letter as evidence in her divorce case against Joachim, the whole matter temporarily dissolves Brahms and Joachim's friendship, as well as a number of their mutual relationships. Correspondence between the two men ceases completely until 1883, when Brahms extends an olive branch by offering Joachim the Berlin premiere of his *Third Symphony*.<sup>254</sup>

Amidst his many rifts and reconciliations however, Brahms does seem to have been able to acknowledge the positive or to exercise his wry humour. Very rarely does one find exclusively dark and dejected tones in his correspondence, even whilst he was at his most ornery. In a letter itemizing a number of pressing editorial concerns to Hanslick in 1884, Brahms writes:

But these are far-ranging themes and I don't want to dream up any more variations on them for you; they are too exclusively in minor, and I know very well that some in major are also possible and necessary.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel 5 - 6*, in *Ibid.*, 571.

<sup>254</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel 5 - 6*, in *Ibid.*, 570, 604 - 5.

<sup>255</sup> Hanslick, *Am Ende*, in *Ibid.*, 614.

It is possible that Brahms's awareness of his own propensity for gloominess was related to how closely he monitored that of his closest friends. After receiving a series of dejected letters from Theodor Billroth, the aging composer became increasingly worried that the surgeon was falling into a solitary abyss. In July 1886, Brahms writes:

It always sounds a bit melancholy when you write of feeling increasingly lonely. I have a sympathetic understanding for it, and wish you would be wary in time. I am the same way, after all – for I have long been and continue to be a terrible loner!

Brahms seems not to have noticed enough improvement in his friend's outlook, as nearly four years later and after receiving a particularly "serious and agitated" letter from Billroth, he again found reason to caution: "Gloomy contemplations are the ones we ought to guard against with care; others, and the most serious ones, we'll be able to cope with."<sup>256</sup>

Thus while Brahms had every reason to dub himself 'lonely outsider,' he did not seem to equate the label with dejected depression. In fact, around this time he increasingly felt the need to impose a modicum of solitude upon himself: both to avoid the sticky social situations in which he frequently found himself, and to carry on with his work uninterrupted as well. In a letter to his friend the Baroness Freifrau von Heldberg, he delicately declines her invitation to join her at her residence, writing:

For I believe that you must often consider me ungrateful and dishonest, and in a certain sense then you may also be right...I dislike speaking of myself and my peculiarities...I

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<sup>256</sup> *Billroth - Brahms*, in *Ibid.*, 639, 674.



need absolute solitude, not only in order to accomplish what I am capable of, but also, quite generally, to think about my vocation.

Most tellingly perhaps, Brahms explains further:

This is rooted in my temperament, but it may also be readily explained otherwise... Well, someone like me, who finds enjoyment in life and in art beyond himself, is only too much inclined to savour both – and to neglect other matters.<sup>257</sup>

Given the personal and professional trials of the years leading up to the composition of Brahms's late piano works Op. 116 - 119, it is hardly surprising that scholars and performers alike have often distilled the reigning affect of these enigmatic works down to that of resigned sadness, solitude and nostalgia. As we have seen however, Brahms's love for his troubled Hamburg family home and for the turmoil of the Schumann household evidences a much more dynamic, shifting, fleeting, restless and unfolding brand of nostalgia. His growing feelings of alienation and solitude were primarily self-inflicted, and often precipitated by his quick tongue, his meddling in others' affairs, and his ill-tempered and occasionally cruel manner. Throughout however, we have seen that he was equally quick to engage his famously wry sense of humour, to play games and tell jokes, to help his friends, and to take part in all manner of schemes and intrigues.

During the final years of Brahms's life one does however witness an escalation in the gravity and frequency of the quarrels in which he often found himself embroiled, as well as in the loss of those dearest to him. But this only seems to amplify the dynamism

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<sup>257</sup> Von Heldburg, *Briefwechsel* 17, in *Ibid.*, 645.

of his deepening feelings of nostalgia, while perhaps also encouraging him to continue to seek out the company of those he loved. Indeed, in the years to come Brahms would carry on as before: composing, maintaining contact with his closest friends, travelling widely, and revelling in the long evenings of food, drink and music that gave him so much pleasure and reminded him of those whose company he could no longer enjoy.

## 2.4) The Op. 116 - 119 Years

In October 1891 Brahms was thoroughly caught off guard by Clara's indignant reaction to the publication of his first edition of Robert Schumann's *Fourth Symphony*: an endeavour that had occupied him for some time, and of which Clara had been fully informed. Brahms writes:

It was always my express view that the work should appear in this form; you knew about it, and also – in any case, you didn't say No to it, of that I am certain...I don't want to cite evidence and names, above all, but – how dearly I should have liked to let you too thoroughly examine that beautiful double score, if you hadn't viewed it with such a doubtful expression from the start.

Clara naturally had every right to be protective of her late husband's legacy, but with uncharacteristic hostility she replied that the whole matter had left her "richer by one more sad experience."<sup>258</sup> Whether or not Clara's rage had in fact been precipitated by an irritable ear ailment as suggested by Avins, Brahms was deeply hurt and was left with the overwhelming impression that Clara had long been quietly critical of his editions of Robert's music and his gaucheness in personal dealings. The ensuing rift in their friendship lasted for nearly a year before Brahms finally reached out in September 1892:

Grant a poor outsider the pleasure of telling you today that he thinks of you with never changing veneration ...I am unfortunately an outsider to you more than any other...I am aware of just one fault vis-à-vis my friends: awkwardness in my relations. You have treated this with great forbearance for a long time. Had you only done so for a few years more.

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<sup>258</sup> *Clara Schumann - Brahms Briefe*, in Ibid., 688 - 89.

In the same letter however, Brahms does confess that he had long suspected Clara of opposing his editions of her late husband's music: an insecurity that had only deepened upon discovering that she had left his editions out of the *Complete Schumann Edition*. In desperation he attempts to win her over her with flattery:

I am used to loneliness and ought to be, at the thought of this great emptiness. But I can repeat to you today that you and your husband are for me the most beautiful experience of my life, and represent its greatest treasure and its noblest content.<sup>259</sup>

Clara seems to have been genuinely touched by this reaffirmation of Brahms's commitment to both her and the legacy of her husband, and promises in her reply to include Brahms's Schumann editions in a forthcoming supplement to the *Complete Edition*. Clara's response also reveals the possibility that the disagreement may have temporarily suspended their lively working relationship as well, whereby Brahms would send her newly completed works for her perusal and commentary:

Let us strike up a more friendly tone towards each other, to which end your beautiful new piano pieces, which Ilona wrote to me about, offer the best opportunity if you want it!<sup>260</sup>

Because the 'beautiful new piano pieces' to which Clara refers are in fact those of Op. 116 - 119, it seems as though they came into being at a time when the potential loss of his greatest personal and professional ally weighed heavily on Brahms's mind. It isn't

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<sup>259</sup> *Clara Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 696.

<sup>260</sup> *Clara Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 697. Ilona Eibenschütz was both Clara's and Brahms's pupil and will be discussed at length in the following chapters.

surprising that he evokes Robert's memory in his plea for mercy from Clara's wrath, as the prospect of losing one of his last living connections to his memories of the couple and their Düsseldorf home must have terrified him. It seems likely therefore that nostalgic reminiscences of those beautiful and tragic days of his youth were as much on Brahms's mind during the composition of his last four sets of piano works, as was his fear of losing Clara in his old age. These pieces might therefore be seen as already capturing the dynamism of Brahms's unique brand of nostalgia, as they evoke past love and sadness, they anticipate future loss, while also serving as a therapeutic elixir for the renewal of Brahms and Clara's friendship in the present.

Before Clara and Brahms's dispute over his edition of Schumann's *Fourth Symphony* was finally resolved however, the composer lost both Elisabet von Herzogenberg and his sister Elise within the space of just six months. Elise Brahms had always been rather sickly (as alluded to on the occasion of Johann Jakob's desertion of his family), but her condition had deteriorated significantly over the last few years of her life. In light of her long-suffering illness, Brahms reassuringly wrote to his stepmother Karoline that, "the final respite has been granted to her and was to be hoped for – life *like that* is no longer a life."<sup>261</sup>

While Brahms seems to have taken his sister's passing with a certain amount of stoicism, Elisabet's death was devastating. *Née* Elisabet Stockhausen, she had been Brahms's pupil in Vienna during the 1860s before the two became reacquainted in Leipzig after her marriage to Heinrich von Herzogenberg. Far from being simply a gracious hostess and an influential patron of the arts, Elisabet was also a gifted musician whose opinion on musical matters was highly prized by the composer. Brahms would

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<sup>261</sup> Stephenson, *Familie*, in *Ibid.*, 692. Emphasis is Brahms's.

frequently share his newest works with her, and Elisabet's highly intuitive responses were a key factor in Brahms's compositional process.<sup>262</sup> Remembering Elisabet to her husband Heinrich in January 1892, Brahms writes:

To try to express to you what possesses me so completely and deeply is a futile endeavour... You know how inexpressibly much I have lost in your dear wife... what a comfort it would be for me if I could only sit with you in silence and press your hand and recall with you the dear, magnificent person!<sup>263</sup>

Though Brahms surely mourned Elisabet's premature death for her integral role in his creative processes, for her devotion to his music, and for her inclusion of the composer in the cultured and influential circles in which she moved, it is possible that he harboured some romantic feelings for her as well. Indeed, while she was still his piano student in Vienna, he is known to have "confessed a fear of his feelings for her to male friends and entrusted her instruction on piano to Julius Epstein,"<sup>264</sup> Brahms's friend and colleague at the Vienna Conservatory. While their relationship would resume after her marriage on much more platonic grounds, their flirtatiously coy correspondence and Brahms's frequent annoyance with her husband Heinrich perhaps hints that Brahms's earlier infatuation may not have completely dissipated. In any case, in the years surrounding the composition of the late piano works, Op. 116 - 119, valuable personal and artistic allies were commodities Brahms could ill-afford to lose. Unfortunately, he would lose three such personalities within as many months.

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<sup>262</sup> Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, xv.

<sup>263</sup> Von Herzogenberg, *Briefwechsel 1 - 2*, in Avins, *BLL*, 690 - 91.

<sup>264</sup> Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, 55.

By the 1890s, Brahms, Theodor Billroth and Eduard Hanslick, once referred to as ‘The Triumvirate’ by Austrian critic Richard Specht,<sup>265</sup> were not as tightly knit as they had once been. In the trio’s heyday, both Billroth and Hanslick had steadfastly remained at Brahms’s side throughout all of the line drawing and finger pointing incited by the composer’s 1860 manifesto. And though Brahms never publicly shared his friends’ mutual opposition to Wagner’s music, the surviving correspondence between the three men evidences their once closely aligned musical tastes and shared love for history, literature, drama and art.

In 1892 however, Brahms discovered that Billroth was gravely ill. In the six years since Brahms had cautioned him against melancholy thoughts, it seems that Billroth’s deteriorating condition had rendered him less able to tolerate Brahms’s pricklier side: a facet of the composer’s personality that he seems to have quietly suffered for some time. Irritated and depleted of energy, Billroth wrote a letter to their mutual friend Hanslick in which he attributed Brahms’s poor manners to deficiencies of upbringing: a letter that mistakenly ends up in Brahms’s own hands. In a letter to Hanslick immediately afterwards, Brahms reveals that he too had grown weary of defending himself to his acquaintances:

You need not concern yourself in the least! I scarcely read Billroth’s letter, returned it immediately to its envelope and merely shook my head softly... That one is also taken by all friends and acquaintances for something other than what he is (or indeed, to their mind, what he pretends to be), that’s an old experience for me. [In] Goethe’s words: Blest is he who, without hatred, shuts himself off from the world.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Specht, *Leben und Werk*, in Ibid., 193.

<sup>266</sup> Hanslick, *Am Ende*, in Avins, *BLL*, 700.

Tragically, Hanslick never worked up the courage to tell Billroth about the errant letter, and as a result the latter had no idea why, at a musical soirée some weeks later, Brahms openly treated him with boorish rudeness. Their relationship would never recover. When Billroth eventually succumbs to his illness in February 1894, Brahms writes to his friend the Swiss scholar Joseph Viktor Widmann, again evidencing his propensity for monitoring his friends' moods and for anticipating future losses:

But I have sensed that loss for years and will do so again in later years...Just now, however, I felt, probably along with many of his acquaintances, a sense of deliverance. In the last few years I was never together with Billroth without leaving quite gloomy and sad. His serious illness and his ailing heart had simply made an old man of him...like a shadow of [his] former energy and joie de vivre, embarrassing and uncomfortable.<sup>267</sup>

The second loss of 1894 was that of Hans von Bülow: a converted Wagner enthusiast, conductor and pianist who had become a devout Brahmsian later in life. The final chapter of Brahms and Bülow's friendship follows a painfully similar script as that of the former and Billroth's: advancing age, a lessening of tolerance for one another's eccentricities, simmering tensions and crippling illness, all seems to have left the two men easily offended. While the Op. 116 - 119 piano pieces would play a conciliatory role in the mending of Brahms's relationship with Clara months later, they were involved in the breakdown of that of Brahms and Bülow in 1892.

That summer, Hans von Bülow was invited to christen a new concert hall in Berlin with a performance that was to include some music by his friend, Johannes Brahms. Bülow was also busy with plans for an album of compositions whose release

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<sup>267</sup> Widmann, *Briefwechsel* 8, in *Ibid.*, 712 - 13.



was set to coincide with the unveiling of a monument in honour of Heinrich Heine.<sup>268</sup>

Brahms obligingly sent Bülow the manuscript of his *Fantasien* Op. 116 “for yr. kind consideration and selection,” which the latter accepted warmly. Unfortunately however, Bülow returned the pieces and made a rather uncouth request: for Brahms to send some additional, lighter fare for his Heine compilation. Brahms, offended by Bülow’s “dagger-words,” writes:

I always hoped and believed that nothing could ever seduce me to do anything of the sort. Only this summer I have had to fight off a ½ dozen exhibition and master albums, and how often with a more serious, better justification: and now – you too, Brutus!... You have only your own objective in view – I, on the other hand, always see only what emerges artistically... I don’t consider your poet the seducer even now, but only you and your wish to which, for now, I reply only with this sigh.<sup>269</sup>

While Brahms’s weariness, frustration and perhaps even vanity are clear, it seems as though he took most offence at what he perceived as Bülow’s misunderstanding or underestimation of his artistic principles, though it could be argued that Brahms was entirely justified in expecting one of his closest friends to know how he would respond to such a request. In the same letter Brahms couldn’t resist slinging one last handful of dirt, writing: “With regard to that poet, I must confess that at home he is very far in the rear of a cupboard and is rarely fetched out for pleasure.” To make matters worse, Bülow acknowledged receipt of the manuscript by way of telegram only, and played no Brahms on the occasion of his concert.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 693.

<sup>269</sup> Von Bülow, *Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 694.

<sup>270</sup> Von Bülow, *Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 693 - 94.

Given the bluntness of his letter to Bülow, it is curious that Brahms seems to have been genuinely confused and surprised by what he understandably interpreted as Bülow's snub of both him and his music. It is possible he was pushed by Clara to assume the worse, as she and Bülow shared a profound and public dislike for one another. Bülow was also known for being "irascible...quarrelsome, nervous, passionate and given to extremes of mood"<sup>271</sup>: a reputation that may have led Brahms to believe he was just another innocent victim of Bülow's irrational, tactless nature. In any case, frustrated and confused, Brahms writes to publisher Simrock, while also managing to make a wry joke about the title of his *Fantasien* Op. 116:

I don't know how I stand with Bülow...I don't know whether you are on visiting terms with [him]. In case you would or could pay him a visit (he is there already), you might discover what various fantasies are occupying him. I will definitely not play along; I am heartily fed up with dealing with acquaintances and friends other than in the most straightforward fashion.<sup>272</sup>

As with Hanslick and Billroth, illness and misunderstanding played a prominent role in this newest drama. Unbeknownst to Brahms, Bülow didn't perform the new Op. 116 pieces because he was in fact seriously ill. Brahms's understandable impression that he and his new pieces had been snubbed was then further compounded by the fact that Bülow also refused to meet with him at the hall's opening even though Brahms was in attendance. Again however, it appears that Bülow was simply too unwell to receive visitors after the concert. Sadly, the health of Brahms's great friend and champion would

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<sup>271</sup> Christopher Fifield, "Hans Freiherr von Bülow," in *Oxford Music Online*, accessed May 31, 2012, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/04307>.

<sup>272</sup> Simrock, *Briefwechsel 11 - 12*, in Avins, *BLL*, 695.

deteriorate rapidly, and the two men never met nor directly communicated again. Bülow would also die in February 1894, just six days after Billroth.<sup>273</sup>

Even more tragically, Brahms sent a letter to Bülow in late October 1892 describing how he had accidentally discovered, “with astonishment and deep emotion” that his old friend had actually made a copy of the Op. 116 pieces for himself before sending the original back to the composer, most likely with the intention of learning them once his health improved. What Brahms had interpreted as rejection was in fact an attempt on Bülow’s part to both respectfully return the original manuscript to the composer on one hand, while keeping a copy of the pieces for himself to learn on the other. The next year, Brahms sends Marie Bülow a letter that reportedly moves her husband to tears:

I feel a most powerful and earnest desire to hear about your dear husband...As I greet you and him right from the heart, I repeat my urgent request for news. You won’t believe how gratefully each little word will be read by your deeply and sincerely devoted J. Brahms.<sup>274</sup>

The third artistic and personal ally Brahms lost in the early spring of 1894 was the German musicologist, theologian, philologist and biographer of Robert Schumann, Philipp Spitta. Spitta was the leading German music scholar of the time, and the two men frequently consulted each other on matters of music history, the authenticity of manuscripts, and regarding historical stylistic critique. Spitta was also a devoted

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<sup>273</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 693

<sup>274</sup> Von Bülow, *Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 695, 707.

Brahmsian, and invokes many of the tropes examined in the previous chapter as he extolls the composer's virtues in 1892:

Brahms demonstrates practically...that in these [that is classical] forms something new can 'still' be said. Not 'still', but always...Even those composers who think that they have broken them, and thereby have accomplished an act of liberation...only do it much worse than does he who enters into the inheritance from the past with full awareness and with the intention of employing it in the service of the beautiful.<sup>275</sup>

For all their mutual affection and historical affinities however, Brahms and Spitta didn't always agree. An argument over the function of church music threatened their friendship in the late 1870s, and nearly caused Brahms to withdraw his dedication of the *Motets* Op. 74 as a result.<sup>276</sup> Brahms and Spitta also disagreed over the authenticity of a setting of the Passion According to St. Luke that had been attributed to J.S. Bach. As the leading Bach authority of the time, Spitta asserted that the setting was unquestionably authentic, while Brahms claimed it was not. For all of Spitta's authority however, it seems that the opinion and reputation of the composer carried more musical weight, as thereafter the work was considered to be spurious, and remains outside of the Bach canon to this day.<sup>277</sup>

Perhaps it is fitting therefore that Spitta would die suddenly at his desk amidst a new drama over the function and artistic value of folk song. He and Brahms had exchanged a series of letters in early 1894 discussing the artistic failings of a recently released collection of folk songs by Ludwig Erk, as well as Brahms's new seven-volume

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<sup>275</sup> Spitta, *Zur Musik*, 416 - 17, in Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, 236 - 37.

<sup>276</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 158

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

collection *49 German Folksongs* WoO 33. While Brahms's songs referenced the older, more unusual and challenging melodies of rural Germany, Ludwig Erk's collection favoured clear, unsophisticated melodies in major modes: something to which Brahms took great exception.<sup>278</sup> Brahms was so irked in fact, that he wrote a public denunciation of Erk's collection and sent it for Spitta to peruse in April 1894. Brahms's propensity for starting conflicts, his high opinion of Spitta, and his doubt that he would have the scholar's full support, are all clear when he writes:

Motivated initially by that book, which has annoyed me outrageously, but then against...Erk and all of these types who have a monopoly on folk-song...I want to ask whether I might perhaps be permitted to send you the above-mentioned 'polemic' and whether you would say a few words as to how it appears to you...Well – looking forward amiably to your declining amiably, with warm greetings.

Though decidedly less hot headed than Brahms, Spitta agreed with the composer on the lack of musical and historical integrity shown by the creator of the Erk compilation. For his part however, Brahms seems to have quickly backed down from his earlier intention to write a public polemic against Erk. Just three days after his first letter to Spitta on the matter, Brahms writes: "I now feel inclined to let the quarrel be, and to present this kind of a collection as a *cheerful polemic!*"<sup>279</sup> Perhaps Brahms felt that his folksongs would make his point all on their own, and retracted his written polemic to avoid becoming embroiled in yet another bitter and public quarrel. Unfortunately, Spitta would die the day after receiving Brahms's more coolly worded letter and the accompanying set of new folksongs. All of this however evidences not only the fervour

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 714

<sup>279</sup> Spitta, *Briefwechsel* 16, in Ibid., 715.

and changeability of Brahms's moods, but his competitiveness as well. Narratives concerning his self-abnegating hyperawareness of Beethoven's shadow seem miles away from the bravura of his readiness to smite perceived rivals or pretenders to his craft.

Amongst the many other personal losses Brahms suffered in the years surrounding the composition and publication of the Op. 116 - 119 pieces, three other notable deaths were that of Otto Dessooff, Christian Detmering, and Hermine Spies. While Dessooff's conducting abilities as director of the Vienna Philharmonic Concerts once prompted Brahms to complain to Hermann Levi that the "orchestra ha[d] really gone to pot because of him," the two men nonetheless enjoyed a long and rewarding friendship. Brahms even entrusted Dessooff with the premiere of his *First Symphony*. During the fifteen years of Dessooff's directorship in Vienna, Brahms became a mainstay at the Dessooff family dinner table, where he revelled in Frau Frederike's excellent cooking and her husband's "energy and sense of purpose."<sup>280</sup>

Christian Detmering was Brahms's maternal cousin as well as a musician and the proprietor of an instrument shop in Hamburg. Throughout all of the upheavals and tragedies surrounding Brahms's immediate family in Hamburg, including Johann Jakob's abandonment of his family and the deaths of both his mother Christiane and sister Elise, the sheer volume of correspondence between Brahms and Detmering suggests that the latter was deeply involved in and committed to familial matters. After Elise's death in June 1892, Brahms writes to Christian:

I wrote to you and to her only yesterday...Now – for the last time – you have some very disagreeable and sad chores because of us, and on my account. I have no particular

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<sup>280</sup> Levi, *Briefwechsel* 7, and Kalbeck, *Brahms* 2, in *Ibid.*, 393, 778.

wishes and anything you arrange and any way you arrange it suits me...I don't know what else remains for me to say, only that I owe you my greatest, most solemn thanks!<sup>281</sup>

Sadly, it would indeed be 'the last time' Brahms would rely on Detmering to settle affairs in Hamburg on his behalf, as his cousin succumbed to the cholera outbreak that swept through Hamburg that same year.

Contralto Hermine Spies was reportedly a "gifted, quick-witted woman from the Rhineland [that] invigorated the 50-year-old composer with her merry nature and spirited renderings of his songs."<sup>282</sup> Having first met in 1883, the two shared a number of flirtatious letters and often performed the composer's newest vocal works together in private performances in the salons of their mutual friends. Though many members of Brahms's closest circle predicted a marriage between the singer and composer, Brahms, who was nearly twenty-five years Spies's senior, never formalized their relationship. Whatever the nature of their arrangement however, they remained close for many years and her premature death must have only added to his deepening feelings of isolation, sadness and nostalgia. His relationship with Spies perhaps also evidences that he was by no means immune to female charms in his later years. Nor was he above jealousy, for that matter. After learning of Spies's holiday at a North Sea resort where she cavorted on the beach with cellist Robert Hausmann and poet Klaus Groth, in 1887 Brahms writes to her:

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<sup>281</sup> From letters to Christian Detmering held in the Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek [I.N. 74489], in Avins, *BLL*, 691.

<sup>282</sup> George S. Bozarth and Walter Frisch, "Johannes Brahms: At the Summit," in *Oxford Music Online*, accessed May 31, 2012, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/51879pg4>.

Eight pages I wrote to you yesterday, but I cannot send them off, they are a pure and unadulterated E flat minor chord, so sad, and by the way, replete with poisonous envy of cellists and poets, and how well off they are!<sup>283</sup>

While Brahms seems to have survived the loss of four intimate female relationships in rapid succession (Elise and Christiane Brahms, Elisabet von Herzogenberg, and Hermine Spies), the most profound and painful of all would be that of Clara in 1896. When Clara had a small stroke earlier that year, Brahms appears to have been somewhat stoically resigned to her passing, though his strength may have been for the benefit of their close friends and family alone. In April 1896, Brahms writes to Joachim:

The thought of losing her can terrify us no longer, not even me, the lonely one, for whom there is all too little alive in the world. And when she will have gone from us, will our faces not glow with pleasure whenever we recollect her?

But for all his outward acceptance of the reality of Clara's condition, the aging composer was deeply worried. Shortly after his letter to Joachim, Brahms writes to Clara's daughter Marie:

I must express to you this earnest, heartfelt plea: If you believe that the worst is to be expected, grant me a word so I can come and still see open those dear eyes which, when they close – will close so much for me! Forgive me! I hope with all my soul that my concern may be unnecessary.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Spies, *Ein Gedenkbuch*, in Avins, *BLL*, 647.

<sup>284</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel 5 - 6, Clara Schumann - Brahms Briefe*, in *Ibid.*, 732.



Brahms was reportedly grief-stricken at Clara's funeral in May 1896. Photographs taken on the day "show him with a somewhat swarthy complexion, indicat[ing] that the disease which killed him had already advanced far enough to cause the first sign of jaundice." While we have already seen how rarely Brahms is mentioned in scholarly discussions of composers' illnesses, it seems that in his later years he was indeed wrestling with "impaired bodies...and their failure to function in a normal way"<sup>285</sup> - not just his own, but those of his dearest friends as well. Indeed, and as we will see in later chapters, Brahms's knowledge of Clara's physical ailments later in life may have prompted him not only to share his newest piano works with their many fine pupils, but to write physical puzzles into the fabric of his late piano works as well. In any case, and in spite of his poor condition, Brahms's distress at the loss of his oldest friend and the last living link to his mentor Robert Schumann was so acute that many contemporaneous observers attributed his rapidly deteriorating health to Clara's death alone.

Other than a few letters to Marie and Eugenie Schumann regarding the settlement of Clara's affairs and the security of her collection of personal diaries and letters (which Brahms worried might land in the wrong hands), there is surprisingly little surviving communication between Brahms and those closest to him on the subject of Clara's death. While this could be attributed to his increasingly poor health, or to the fact that his inner circle was quickly diminishing in numbers, the letters he penned in the last years of his life suggest that despite everything, he doggedly continued to indulge in copious amounts of wine, food and tobacco, while revelling in long evenings of intimate music-making with those friends he still had. Immediately after Clara's funeral, the Von Beckeraths

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<sup>285</sup> Avins, *BLL*, 679, and Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style,'" 12. Brahms died of liver cancer.

whisked Brahms away to their home on the Rhine for a diversionary musical party with a few close friends. He later describes the events of that day to another acquaintance:

Every year at Whitsuntide there is a large gathering of a fair number of particularly precious friends at the large estate of a mutual friend. This time I was less inclined than usual to attend. Fortunately, I let myself to be taken along. How empty and desolate my mood would doubtless have been on the way home, and how beautifully did the earnest funeral solemnities now fade away in that glorious region, amid excellent company and the loveliest music!<sup>286</sup>

Despite the many bitter quarrels and devastating personal losses Brahms suffered in the years surrounding the composition of his 'lullabies,' the Op. 116 - 119 piano pieces, he sought a kind of final refuge in his work and his friends. He downplays his fatal illness until nearly the very end, writing to one of his last surviving friends, Josef Widmann, in late 1896:

It is a quite commonplace jaundice...as is asserted following the most thorough examinations of every kind. Incidentally, I have not had one day of pain or anything - nor lost my appetite for even one meal.<sup>287</sup>

When Brahms does finally reveal the true severity of his condition he does so to Joachim and his stepmother Karoline: his closest living links to the two domestic environments he missed so deeply. To Joachim he writes:

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<sup>286</sup> Fellingner, *Briefwechsel* 7, in Avins, *BLL*, 736.

<sup>287</sup> Widmann, *Briefwechsel* 8, in *Ibid.*, 740.

I am definitely not any better; that makes me irritable and despondent. But when I feel like complaining, I need merely look around in my closest circle and no longer have any grounds.

A month later, he again writes to Joachim in order to report that he is “doing more and more miserably; [and that] each word, spoken or written, is torture.”<sup>288</sup> And then just days before his death, he writes to Karoline:

For the sake of a change I have lain down for a while and writing is therefore uncomfortable. Apart from that have no fear, nothing has changed and as usual, all I need is patience.<sup>289</sup>

While sadness, alienation, loneliness and ruminative nostalgia are typically seen as the prevailing and controlled emotional content of Brahms's 'lullabies of his sorrows' Op. 116 - 119, perhaps his use of the term *lullabies* (from ‘to lull’) hints at something decidedly familiar, domestic, comforting and most of all, dynamic. In other words, if one reads Brahms's statement as 'the reprieve from' or 'cure of' my sorrows, perhaps these works are informed by a shifting amalgam of memories and experiences past and present that were soothing distractions and remedies for the sorrow that might otherwise have overpowered him in his old age. In our examination of historical evidence typically viewed as ephemera, Brahms's letters reveal his lifelong yearning for two domestic environments that represented both love and pain: his family home in Hamburg and Clara's household in Düsseldorf. While Brahms often recalled both familial situations

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<sup>288</sup> Joachim, *Briefwechsel 5 - 6*, in *Ibid.*, 744 - 45.

<sup>289</sup> Stephenson, *Familie*, in *Ibid.*, 745.

with a mixture of sadness, loneliness, alienation and nostalgia, we have seen how his experience of these emotions was not resigned, stoic and therefore static and controlled, but rather shifting, restless, fragmentary, impassioned and unfolding.

We have also seen how in the years leading up to his composition of the late piano opuses Brahms experienced a wide range of emotional and physical states, not all of which are reconcilable with modern understandings of his control, including his propensity for irritability, callousness, competitiveness and jealousy; his love of food, drink, games, humour and women; the fervour and changeability of his moods; his tendency to play with abandon; his Kreislerian affinity for the inner and outer torment of love and loss, and his association of those affinities with people he recalled often and longingly; and his passion for long evenings of music-making *en petit comité* by twilight or at dusk, surrounded by friends, and with doors thrown open to the night breezes.<sup>290</sup>

Finally, we have examined how Brahms's final years were indeed characterized by the deterioration of the bodies and minds of those in his innermost circle, himself included. In transcripts of pianist Bruce Hungerford's lessons with Brahms's and Clara Schumann's pupil Carl Friedberg, Friedberg is explicit in his assertion that performances of Brahms's late piano works must take into account the composer's non-normative body. In the case of the *Intermezzo in E Minor* Op. 116 no. 5, to which we will return later in this volume, Friedberg's words suggest to me that narratives concerning Brahms's late mental and physical health are deeply pre-structured by an aesthetic ideology of control:

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<sup>290</sup> Mrs. Carl Derenburg (Ilona Eibenschütz), "My Recollections of Brahms," *The Musical Times* 67, no. 1001 (July 1926): 599, accessed August 23, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/911829>.

Brahms was in his last years...he was so fat, with such an awful... always waddled when he went. He ate too much, he drank too much cognac and everything, wine. So, he was a little bit short of breath. Now, look into his music. Look, I give you all the examples. Take Opus 116 (he sings from Op. 116, no. 5)...There is a kind of despair not known to him of course, nothing is conscious, it's subconscious, you know. Despair and snatching for air and for freedom, you know, get out of this horrible shell which begins through cancer to decline. He had jaundice already and you know he had cancer of the liver. But he wanted to get, his spirit wanted to leave that sick body, you know, because he didn't heed the warning he had that he shouldn't eat so much and shouldn't do this and shouldn't do that, he didn't. Alright, his flesh was weak, but his spirit as a musician was so strong, finally it said to him, 'I can't live with you anymore.' So he tried to break the chains and get rid of himself. It's documented...Even when he consoles himself after the excitement, no, no, no, no, keep quiet, also in gasps...We have to take those things as expression of personal feeling.<sup>291</sup>

In light of this evidence, ephemeral though it may be, discussions of 'lateness' in Brahms that only highlight themes such as anachronism, authorial belatedness, and historicism for example, or those that posit his emotional states as resigned and ruminative, do seem pre-structured by the Brahmsian aesthetic ideology of mental and physical control. In the next chapter, we will examine how this ideology has led to similarly mediated assessments of the described and recorded performance styles of the Schumann-Brahms circle of pianists.

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<sup>291</sup> Ann Riesbeck DiClemente, "Brahms Performance Practice in a New Context: The Bruce Hungerford Recorded Lessons with Carl Friedberg," (PhD Dissertation: University of Maryland, 2009), 59 - 60, from Transcript 368 - 70, accessed July 24, 2013, via ProQuest Dissertations.