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978-0-521-65273-5 - Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style

Edited by Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman

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PERFORMING BRAHMS

A great deal of evidence survives about how Brahms and his contemporaries performed his music. But much of this evidence – found in letters, autograph scores, treatises, publications, recording, and more – has been hard to access, both for musicians and for scholars. This book brings the most important evidence together into one volume. It also includes discussions by leading Brahms scholars of the many issues raised by the evidence. The period spanned by the life of Brahms and the following generation saw a crucial transition in performance style. As a result, modern performance practices differ significantly from those of Brahms's time. By exploring the musical styles and habits of Brahms's era, this book will help musicians and scholars understand Brahms's music better and bring fresh ideas to present-day performance. The value of the book is greatly enhanced by the accompanying CD of historic recordings – including a performance by Brahms himself.

Michael Musgrave is Emeritus Professor of Music at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is the author of *The Musical Life of the Crystal Palace*, *The Music of Brahms*, *Brahms: A German Requiem*, *A Brahms Reader*, and the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*.

Bernard D. Sherman is the author of *Inside Early Music* (1997) and the essay 'Authenticity in music' in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (1998). He contributes regularly to *The New York Times*, and his work has appeared in *Early Music*, *Historical Performance*, *The American Brahms Society Newsletter*, and many other publications.

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Contributors

STYRA AVINS is Adjunct Professor of Music History at Drew University. She studied at the Juilliard School and the Manhattan School of Music, where she earned a Master's degree in Cello, and has been principal cellist of the Seoul Symphony in Korea, and a member of the New York City Opera Orchestra and the American Symphony Orchestra. Long active as a chamber musician, she has performed Brahms's chamber and orchestral works, and her research into the performance aspect of Brahms's letters led to her book *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (Oxford, 1997), in which she translated letters of Brahms jointly with Josef Eisinger.

JONATHAN BELLMAN is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Music History and Literature at the University of North Colorado. His books include *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe*, *The Exotic in Western Music*, and *A Short Guide to Writing about Music*, and he has recently published articles in the *Journal of Musicology*, *19th Century Music*, *Early Music* and the *Pendragon Review*. His research interests include performance practice and nineteenth-century musical style, and he is currently working on a book about Chopin's performance practices.

JONATHAN BERGER is a composer and researcher at Stanford University's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics, where he is an Associate Professor. Berger's work on the Brahms transcription and de-noising (in collaboration with Ronald Coifman, Maxim Goldberg, and Charles Nichols) has been published in *Leonardo*, the *Journal of the Audio Engineering Society*, and other scholarly journals. In addition to his work on de-noising and automatic transcription Berger's research includes analysis and modelling of musical performance and listening. He is the transcriber of the recording of Brahms reproduced at track 28 of the accompanying CD.

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GEORGE S. BOZARTH is Professor of Music and chair of the music history programme at the University of Washington. His articles on Brahms include studies on compositional process, problems in chronology, documents, performance practice, and editorial issues. He is the editor of a critical edition of Brahms organ works (Henle, 1990), of *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives* (Oxford, 1990) and of the correspondence between Brahms and Robert Keller (Lincoln NB, 1996), and co-author with Walter Frisch of the article on Brahms for the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 2001). Since 1983 he has served as Executive Director of the American Brahms Society. In Seattle he is active as a fortepianist and co-artistic director of the early-music series Gallery Concerts.

CLIVE BROWN is Professor of Applied Musicology at the University of Leeds. His principal areas of research are late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century performing practice, German music in the first half of the nineteenth century, and critical editing. Major publications include *Louis Spohr: a Critical Biography* (Cambridge, 1984) and *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750–1900* (Oxford, 1999), as well as other monographs, journal articles, contributions to dictionaries, and critical editions of music. He is currently editing both a *Mendelssohn Reader* for Yale University Press and Mendelssohn's opera *Die Hochzeit des Camacho* for the Leipziger Mendelssohn Ausgabe. As a violinist he conducts practice research into the performance of Classical and Romantic music.

WALTER FRISCH is Professor of Music at Columbia University, where he has taught since 1982. He has also been guest professor at the Albrecht Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg. He is author of *Brahms: the Four Symphonies* (Cambridge, 1966) and *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Berkeley, 1984), as well as *The Early Works of Arnold Schoenberg 1893–1908* (Berkeley, 1993). He has edited collections of writing on Brahms, Schubert, and Schoenberg, and has served as editor of the journal *19th Century Music*. His writings have been translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Japanese. Two of his books have been honoured with ASCAP – Deems Taylor Awards for distinguished writing on music. He recently was a Fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, working on a book to be entitled *Music and Early German Modernism*.

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MICHAEL MUSGRAVE is Emeritus Professor of Music at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and lives in New York City. First trained as pianist and organist at the Royal College of Music, of which he is Visiting Research Fellow, the focus of his scholarly work is German and English music of the nineteenth century. His recent Brahms books include *The Music of Brahms* (Oxford, 1994), *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms* (Cambridge, 1997) and *A Brahms Reader* (New Haven, 2000). He is editing the Brahms Serenades opp. 11 and 16 for the new *Johannes Brahms Gesamtausgabe* and writing a biography of Schumann in the Cambridge Lives series. In English music, his study *The Musical Life of the Crystal Palace* was published in 1995 (Cambridge) and he is currently editing a collection of essays on Sir George Grove based on the conference Grove's World held at the Royal College of Music in June 2000.

ROBERT PASCALL is Professor of Music at the University of Wales in Bangor and Professor Emeritus at the University of Nottingham. He studied at Oxford with John Caldwell, Egon Wellesz and Sir Jack Westrup. He has published historical and analytical studies of Brahms, and was one of the founders of the new *Johannes Brahms Gesamtausgabe*, inaugurated with his edition of the First Symphony in 1996. He is Corresponding Director of the American Brahms Society and Chair of the Editorial Board of the journal *Music Analysis*. He has collaborated on historically informed performances of Brahms by Elizabeth Wallfisch, Sir Roger Norrington and Sir Charles Mackerras, among others.

ROBERT PHILIP is a Lecturer in Music at the Open University. His work on historical recordings first became widely known through his many programmes for BBC Radio 3 and the World Service. In 1992 he published *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance 1900–1950* (Cambridge). His most recent writings are chapters for *The Cambridge Companion to the Piano* (1998) and *The Cambridge Companion to the Orchestra* (in press). He is currently writing a second book on twentieth-century performing trends, *A Hundred Years of Performance* (Yale University Press).

BERNARD D. SHERMAN is the author of *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (New York, 1997). He wrote the article on 'Authenticity in music' for *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York, 1998) and is writing the article on 'Conducting early music' for *The Cambridge Companion*

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to *Conducting* (forthcoming). His articles appear regularly in *The New York Times* and he has written for many other publications, such as *The Los Angeles Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Early Music*, *The American Brahms Society Newsletter*, and *Goldberg*. He is a producer with the NPR-affiliate stations KSUI/WSUI at the University of Iowa.

PHILIP WELLER is Lecturer in Music at the University of Nottingham. His academic studies began at the University of Cambridge, to be followed by further periods of study at Heidelberg, Paris and the Verdi Institute in Parma. His postgraduate work was undertaken at King's College, London, and The Warburg Institute. He has published on aspects of medieval and Renaissance music, on French opera of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and on Debussy. His long-standing interest in the musical and cultural dimensions of German Romanticism dates back to his days in Heidelberg, and has resulted in a number of collaborative projects with Robert Pascall.

ERIC WEN was educated at Columbia and Yale Universities, and at the University of Cambridge. His publications include a number of articles on Schenkerian analysis. After serving as Editor of *The Strad* from 1986 to 1989 and *The Musical Times* from 1988 to 1990, he was Director of Biddulph Recordings. He has previously taught theory and analysis at the Mannes College of Music in New York City, the University of London (King's and Goldsmiths Colleges) and the Guildhall School of Music, and currently teaches music history and theory at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. He is the producer of the accompanying CD.

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Preface

If Brahms (1833–1897) had lived as long as Verdi, he would have survived into the 1920s. Yet, despite his comparatively early death at age 63, Brahms seems in many ways much closer to us than any of that great generation born only twenty years or so before him, and not merely for reasons of chronology. Unlike, for example, his most direct forebears in the concert tradition, Mendelssohn and Schumann, Brahms's career coincides with the beginnings of modern concert life in the second half of the nineteenth century. This period saw an accelerating frequency of public performance for a growing musically educated audience. Musical standards rose and became more consistent, stimulated by greater contact and travel (symbolized by the emergence of the professional conductor). The musical press became increasingly active and comprehensive, and the era of recording dawned.

Brahms was deeply involved in the musical life of his time, not as a commentator but as a performer. He was a professional pianist and conductor until well into his thirties, and thereafter was closely involved in the preparation of his works, which he often conducted. His huge impact on the musical world meant that many of the musicians with whom he worked left records, which, in addition to extensive correspondence and press responses, throw considerable light on the practical aspects of performance. Gathered together, much exists to add significantly to our knowledge of nineteenth-century – and early twentieth-century – performance, and specifically that of the music of Brahms.

However, this evidence does not come in a balanced form. In an age before performance became a natural subject for detailed analysis or comparison, it was a matter of chance and circumstances which performances were closely described or which topics revealingly discussed. We do not have all the material we might like. This book aims to present a balanced outline of much of what we do have, including extended texts on technique as well as performance descriptions and commentaries, performance scores and recordings, and extracts from correspondence.

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Preface

It deals with most of Brahms's fields of composition – music for piano, chamber ensembles, orchestral and choral forces – and refers to some of the greatest performers of Brahms's time. Among them are such close associates of Brahms as the violinist Joseph Joachim, the pianist Clara Schumann, and the conductor Hans von Bülow, as well as their younger contemporaries and pupils, and other leading instrumentalists and conductors of their time and after, viewed with an eye to surviving traditions. Not least is Brahms himself in his one surviving recording as pianist, here reproduced through the latest digital process. The discussion covers major issues of technique, style, and interpretation, and includes focus on the two works that did most to establish Brahms's international renown: the *German Requiem* and the First Symphony.

But even when assembled, the documentary information is only a start. Brahms lived in a period of marked change in performance values: clearly, great variability of performance character and detail was acceptable as, indeed, were the varied physical settings in which music was still performed. Much of the character of performances before the age of recordings can never be known. We cannot travel in time. But equally, we know that much has changed. The challenge is to know why, and especially how historical knowledge might be of value to performance and understanding today. Many different interpretations can be drawn from the evidence; this book does not seek to hide the alternative views, but to expose them in the hope of opening a larger field of possibility. Issues of tempo claim particular attention in view of the bias of surviving evidence to this topic. Because of the central importance of context, the book has an introductory discussion of the key issue of stylistic difference between Brahms's time and our own, and a concluding survey of the issues explored in the book's main part, issues also opened up in a consideration of the riches of Brahms's correspondence for the performer in chapter 2, before the more narrowly focused chapters begin.

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Abbreviations

DKMZ: *Deutsche Kunst – und Musik-Zeitung*; MT: *The Musical Times*; GdM: Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna; RCM: Royal College of Music, London; SUBH: Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Hamburg. *Anhang* refers to the *Anhang* (Appendix) of Margit L. McCorkle, *Johannes Brahms. Thematisch-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis* (Munich, 1984), pp. 615–756.

WoO (*Werk ohne Opuszahl*) refers to the standard classification for works without Opus Number given in *ibid.*, pp. 495–614.

Metronome Marks are designated MM.

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