

PART I

*Personality, People and Places*

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## CHAPTER I

*Childhood in Hamburg**Renate and Kurt Hofmann*

'Today, my dear wife, née Nissen, successfully delivered a healthy boy. 7th May 1833. J. J. Brahms.' Thus, on 8 May 1833, Johann Jakob Brahms announced the birth of his first son Johannes in the local paper, the *Privileged Weekly General News of and for Hamburg (Privilegierte wöchentliche gemeinnützige Nachrichten von und für Hamburg)*. At a time when such announcements were the exception, this was a clear sign of pride.<sup>1</sup> Johann Jakob Brahms or Brahmst, as he also spelled it, was born on 1 June 1806 in Heide in Holstein, the second son of the innkeeper and trader Johann Brahms, who had moved to Heide from Brunsbüttel via Meldorf. His ancestors were from Lower Saxony. Johann Jakob completed a five-year apprenticeship as a city wait in Heide and Wesselburen, during which he learned the flugelhorn, flute, violin, viola and cello, then standard instruments. In early 1826, the young journeyman began his travels with his certificate of apprenticeship, received in December 1825. He arrived almost immediately in Hamburg where he hoped to earn his keep more easily than in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Initially it seems he played brass or strings in places of public entertainment in the Hamburg Berg, and also worked as a street musician in the city lanes and courtyards. However, he soon joined the Hamburg voluntary police (essentially a citizens' militia) as a horn player, a precondition of attaining the freedom of the city of Hamburg. The first high point of his career was in 1830, when he was made a citizen of Hamburg by taking the citizen's oath (written in Low German dialect) on 21 May; he could now settle within the city walls. Later, he played the flugelhorn until the dissolution of the militia in 1868.<sup>3</sup> His monthly wage in 1867 was 24

<sup>1</sup> O. Biba, R. and K. Hofmann, J. Neubacher, 'in meinen Tönen spreche ich . . .' *Für Johannes Brahms 1833–1897* (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 1997), 74.

<sup>2</sup> S. Kross, *Johannes Brahms. Versuch einer kritischen Dokumentar-Biographie*, 2 vols. (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997), vol. 1, 11f.

<sup>3</sup> F. Ebrard, *Von Hamburger jungen Brahms. Sonderdruck aus der Schweizerischen Musikzeitung 75/11* (1 November 1946), 4.

Marks in Hamburg currency.<sup>4</sup> Upon his departure, he received the ‘Silver Medal for faithful service’ and a lifelong two-thirds pension as an ‘Oberjäger’.<sup>5</sup>

On 31 May 1831, Johann Jakob was among the founders of the Hamburg Musikverein. By now, he was playing second violin in the sextet of the Alsterpavillon; he graduated to double bass in 1840, having mastered this instrument.<sup>6</sup> Henceforth, he worked primarily as a double bassist, between 1853 and 1861 in the State Theatre Orchestra, and between 1863 and 1870 as a regular member of the orchestra of the Philharmonic Concerts, for which he was also a valued flautist. He was a Freemason, and a Master in the St. Johannis Lodge ‘Zum Pelikan’, where he recorded his profession as ‘music teacher’ in 1868/9.<sup>7</sup> Enterprising, free-spirited, and with an earthy sense of humour, Johann Jakob aspired to nothing more than to provide for his own, while also fulfilling his own pleasures. He loved dancing throughout his life, and as an old man occasionally still played in the taverns of Hamburg’s alleyway neighbourhood or ‘Gängeviertel’.

After taking his citizen’s oath, Johann Jakob was permitted to marry, so on 9 June 1830 he wedded Johanna Henrica Christiane Nissen. Seventeen years his senior, she lived with her sister and brother-in-law Christina Friderika and Diederich Philipp Detmering on Ulricusstrasse 37, in the Hamburg Neustadt ‘Gängeviertel’, and assisted in their haberdashery and laundry business. Johann Jakob was their lodger.<sup>8</sup> Christiane Nissen was born in Hamburg on 4 July 1789. Her ancestors were from Schleswig-Holstein. Among them were schoolmasters, pastors and aldermen, and some had been minor nobility in Schleswig-Holstein. Her father, Peter Radeloff Nissen, came from Tondern, her mother, Anna Margaretha von Bergen, from Itzehoe. When they moved to Hamburg, her father did an apprenticeship in tailoring.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Christiane Nissen was a seamstress. Accounts of her suggest that she was hard-working, devout, interested in literature although not educated and, subsequently, sensitive to her son’s burgeoning talent.

<sup>4</sup> K. Stephenson (ed.), *Johannes Brahms in seiner Familie. Der Briefwechsel* (Hamburg: Hauswedell, 1973), 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 148. <sup>6</sup> Kross, *Johannes Brahms*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Verzeichniss der Beamten und Mitglieder der Provinzial-Loge von Niedersachsen zu Hamburg, so in der zu ihrem Sprengel gehörende St. Andreas- und St. Johannis-Logen, unter Constitution der höchstleuchtenden und hochwürdigsten Grossen Landes-Loge der Freimaurer von Deutschland zu Berlin. Für das Jahr 1868–1869*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> See the final letter of Brahms’s mother in K. Hofmann, ‘*Sehnsucht habe ich immer nach Hamburg . . .*’ *Johannes Brahms und seine Vaterstadt. Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Reinbek: Dialog-Verlag, 2003), 23f.

<sup>9</sup> Stephenson, *Der Briefwechsel*, 11.

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The newly-weds moved on St Martin's Day, 11 November 1830, to the Haus Cordeshof, Bäckerbreitergang, where Brahms's older sister, Wilhelmine Louise Elisabeth (called Elise) was born (rather soon after) on 11 February 1831. The same year, again on St Martin's Day, the family moved to an apartment in Specksgang 24 (after the road was widened, it was renumbered as No. 60). In a small room at this address, Johannes Brahms was born on Tuesday 7 May 1833. That autumn, the family returned to Ulricusstrasse, this time to a larger apartment in No. 15, where Brahms's younger brother Friedrich (called Fritz) was born. Following three further moves, the family finally settled at Dammtorwall 29 in autumn 1841 until spring 1850, making this address the true 'Brahmshaus'.<sup>10</sup> The young Brahms lived there from his eighth to his seventeenth year.

All these apartments were in the 'Gängeviertel', an area which stretched from the Michaelis-Kirche to the Alster. From the seventeenth century onwards, the gardens and courtyards behind the substantial half-timbered buildings were gradually built up. The buildings were connected by narrow, crooked alleys ('Gänge') which one accessed through the main house fronting the street. Thanks to an explosion in the city's population, even smaller buildings were raised by several storeys, so that little light penetrated into the alleyways. For the most part, these homes were occupied by middle-class, small tradespeople and respectable artisans. Nearby there were various drinking or dancing houses. The apartments surrounding the City Theatre on the Dammtorstrasse and the numerous other artistic and entertainment establishments were much sought after by musicians, singers, actors, theatre employees and so forth. After the great fire of May 1842, the need for accommodation in Hamburg was so pressing that even wealthy citizens, such as Brahms's teacher Eduard Marxsen (1806–87), rented an apartment in a *Gängeviertel*. The mixture of social classes would have been normal for the young Brahms. Contrary to the well-established myth, it is virtually impossible that he played the piano in taverns, since at his age he was not allowed to enter them, and his father's sense of class consciousness would never have permitted it.<sup>11</sup>

From spring 1850 to mid-1864, the family occupied three other apartments which document Brahms's father's social ascent through their location and rent. Around this time, Brahms's parents separated, the tensions

<sup>10</sup> Drawn from the record of residents maintained by the Hamburg militia. Staatsarchiv der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg. See also Ebrard, *Von Hamburger jungen Brahms*, 2ff.

<sup>11</sup> Hofmann, *Sehnsucht*, 44ff.

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Figure 1.1. City Map of Hamburg, 1846.

arising from the age difference having become irreconcilable. The children suffered from this parental conflict, especially Johannes. This can be inferred from Christiane Brahms's final letter to him, which she wrote from 26 to 30 January 1865, shortly before her death on 2 February.<sup>12</sup> It is a devastating account of a demanding, patriarchal situation; she also revealed her suspicion that Brahms's father had long planned to leave the family and had siphoned off funds in order to do so. It also shows how little understanding Johann Jakob had of Johannes. For his father, Johannes's studies were too prolonged, and the seventeen-year-old should leave home: in his opinion, his son's musical training would not result in a sustainable career. When Johannes extended his stay with the Schumanns in Düsseldorf, his father declared: 'The boys [Johannes and Fritz] will come to nothing.'<sup>13</sup> These statements affected Johannes deeply, and it remained his secret goal to prove to his father that he could gain respect and status not only as a pianist but also as a composer.

The boy Johannes was a small, pale, dreamy youth, who liked playing with tin soldiers while listening to his father practise. He could easily and accurately repeat the melodies he heard. It was clear to Johann Jakob that the boy should follow in his father's footsteps, and he taught him his own instruments early on. But Johannes showed little inclination for the career his father intended for him, preferring the piano instead. His father finally capitulated and chose the best teacher that he could find in Hamburg, Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel (1813–65). From 1839, Johannes went to elementary school, then four years later to the so-called 'Bürgerschule', where he stayed until 1848, and where he also had English and French lessons. School attendance was not compulsory then, and the Brahms family paid significant fees to educate their three children.

Brahms's lessons with Cossel began in 1840. Cossel himself had studied with Eduard Marxsen, who in turn had studied in Vienna with the renowned musicians Ignaz von Seyfried, Simon Sechter and Carl Maria von Bocklet. Cossel started with finger exercises and etudes but progressed to works by Carl Czerny, Muzio Clementi, Johann Baptist Cramer, Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Friedrich Kalkbrenner. He also acquainted Brahms with music by Schubert and J. S. Bach.

In 1843, a 'private subscription concert for the benefit of the further musical education of Johannes Brahms' was organised in the public assembly room 'Zum Alten Raben' near the Dammthor. Brahms played a virtuosic piece by Henri Herz as well as the piano part in Beethoven's

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 21ff.    <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 27ff.

Quintet for Piano and Winds Op. 16, a piano quartet by Mozart and other solo pieces.<sup>14</sup> The concert was an artistic and financial success. One of its consequences was that an impresario suggested to Johann Jakob Brahms that the boy go on tour to the USA, where he would earn a fortune. This prospect tempted Brahms's father, but Cossel (whom both father and son greatly respected), protested vehemently and asked his former teacher Marxsen to take over the boy's lessons. Marxsen initially declined, but, when Cossel persisted, he agreed on condition that Cossel share the teaching. Soon afterwards, Marxsen took over Johannes's entire musical education for free.

Marxsen's lessons were aimed above all at a mastery of the Classical repertoire, and he also stressed the importance of transposition of substantial works at sight, a skill Brahms enjoyed exercising as a professional performer. The piano lessons with Marxsen lasted until 1847, the composition lessons with theory until 1848. Already in 1842, Cossel had complained that Brahms could be an excellent pianist if he would only leave aside his endless composing.<sup>15</sup> Brahms's childhood friend Louise Langhans-Japha also recalled that the twelve-year-old played her his own music, a piano sonata in G major.<sup>16</sup> But his teacher's goal was to make him a financially self-sufficient virtuoso pianist. On 20 November 1847, Brahms performed publicly for the first time as a pianist in another artist's concert, for which he was praised in the press; similar occasions followed. Alongside this he earned pocket money as a pianist in dance venues and pleasure gardens.

Brahms enjoyed his first countryside summer holiday in May 1847 in Winsen an der Luhe, on Lüneburg Heath between Hamburg and Lüneburg, and he returned there in 1848 and 1851. He stayed with an acquaintance of his father, the mill-owner Adolf Giesemann, and gave his daughter piano lessons. He also conducted a male-voice choir in the neighbouring village and composed several works for them – his first experience of working with an ensemble of this kind.

His formal schooling ended in 1848, and he was confirmed in the Michaelis-Kirche in Hamburg in the same year. On 21 September 1848, the fifteen-year-old gave his first concert alone, a programme dominated by virtuoso pieces but also including a Bach fugue. His second programme on 14 April included Beethoven's 'Waldstein' Sonata Op. 53 alongside some of his own works. From 1849, Brahms undertook work as an arranger for the

<sup>14</sup> *May I*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> J. Spengel, *Johannes Brahms. Charakterstudie* (Hamburg: Lütcke und Wulff, 1898), 11f.

<sup>16</sup> *Kalbeck I*, 35.



Hamburg publisher August Cranz. The only piece which can be firmly identified as his is the arrangement *Souvenir de la Russie*, which Cranz published as Op. 151 under the collective pseudonym 'G. W. Marks'.<sup>17</sup> Other fantasies for piano on operatic themes by Meyerbeer, which appeared as G. W. Marks's Opp. 158 and 161, may also be Brahms's work, although such claims must be made cautiously. Brahms was playing Sigismund Thalberg's *Lucia di Lammermoor* Variations at exactly the time that G. W. Marks's Op. 160, a Fantasy on *Lucia*, appeared, suggesting – if it was by Brahms – that his performance inspired his own creative work. He was also working as a pianist and song accompanist at the Hamburg Thalia Theatre.

Around 1850, his main occupation was piano teaching, which gave him a regular income. [See Ch. 8 'Finances' and Ch. 13 'As Teacher'.] However, his chief interest was now composition. Around this time, he wrote the first works which would be published under his name and which he entered in his catalogue of compositions for 1851. These include the Scherzo Op. 4 and the song 'Heimkehr' Op. 7 no. 6.

Following the turmoil of revolutions across Europe in 1848/9, the Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi (1828–98) had to flee his home and found himself in Hamburg in 1853. Waiting for passage to America, he hoped to fill the time with concerts and was seeking an accompanist for a small concert tour. He booked Brahms. They departed on 19 April 1853, going first to Reményi's acquaintance the violinist Joseph Joachim in Hanover in order to get letters of recommendation for the rest of the trip. They gave concerts in Celle, Lüneburg and Hildesheim and met Joachim again in Göttingen on 4 June. Upon his recommendation, they went to Weimar in mid-June to see Liszt, who received them warmly. They spent over a week in the company of Liszt and his pupils. Thereafter, Brahms and Reményi parted ways. The latter continued his tour, while Brahms returned to Joachim and spent the summer with him. In his view, he could only return to Hamburg when he had success to report – namely, a publisher for his compositions. To this end, Joachim urged him to visit Robert Schumann in Düsseldorf [see Ch. 2 'The Schumanns']. Initially, Brahms travelled to Mainz, and then on to Mehlem, where he visited the music-loving Deichmann family, and first studied Schumann's works. Deeply impressed, Brahms went to Düsseldorf and knocked on their

<sup>17</sup> *Souvenir de la Russie. Transcriptions en forme de Fantaisies sur des Airs russes et bohémiens composées pour le piano à quatre mains par G.W. Marks.* Op. 151. Hamburg chez A. Cranz. Reprint with preface by K. Hofmann (Hamburg: K. D. Wagner, 1971).

door on 30 September 1853 (fruitlessly, as they were not home). On 1 October he finally met them and played them some of his works. Schumann was completely enthralled by both the music and the personality of the young composer. In this spirit, he published his essay 'New Paths' in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, making Brahms's name famous at a single stroke but also inviting scepticism, since Brahms was unknown as both composer and pianist at this point [see Ch. 31 'Germany'].

Schumann also brokered the relationship between his young friend and the Leipzig music publishers Breitkopf & Härtel. Thus, Brahms's first works appeared as early as December 1853, and he could present them to his parents that Christmas. These early days were of life-changing significance. Schumann, as both the man and the musician, was henceforth infallible for him, possibly also because the older composer had an exemplary middle-class marriage and family which would have seemed impossible in Brahms's own home. Henceforth, Brahms belonged to Schumann's closest circle of friends.

In June 1859 Brahms began working with his so-called Hamburg Ladies' Choir, an association of young women from mutually friendly patrician families in Hamburg, for which Brahms composed and arranged sacred songs and folk-songs, performing them for their own pleasure and for invited guests. The small choir performed publicly only three times under Brahms's directorship, on which occasions his compositions were very positively received. And although Brahms did not settle in Hamburg, the musical and personal legacy of this informal group remained evident in his compositional work for the rest of his life.

In May 1861 Brahms stopped working with his Ladies' Choir and withdrew almost completely from Hamburg's concert life. He moved into an apartment outside the city limits, in Hamm, Schwarze Strasse 5 (now a suburb of the city). Here, he composed various early masterworks: both the First and Second Piano Quartets Opp. 25 and 26; the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel* Op. 24, the four-hand *Variations on a Theme of Schumann* Op. 23 and the first of the fifteen *Magelone Romances* Op. 33. He also began working on his Piano Quintet Op. 34, which was initially conceived as a string quintet. In early 1862 in Hamm, Brahms also worked on the opening movement of his First Symphony Op. 68, and he sketched his initial idea for the text of *A German Requiem* Op. 45.

In those years, the artistic and financial situation of Hamburg's Philharmonic Society was in decline. Friedrich Wilhelm Grund, co-founder and conductor of the institution, which had existed since 1828 and co-operated with the Hamburger Singakademie, was more than ready