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I

Frustrated efforts

After Haydn writing a symphony was no longer a joke but rather a matter of life and death.[1]

Brahms was forty-three years old when, in November 1876, his long-awaited First Symphony was finally given to the world. Widely recognized by then as one of the leading composers of the day, Brahms had demonstrated his mastery in virtually every significant genre apart from opera. Yet the symphony stood as a looming exception. For more than two decades he had grappled with the genre, but an appropriate realization had always eluded him. In 1854 he worked in vain on a Symphony in D Minor (parts of which survive in the First Piano Concerto and *German Requiem*), and five years later he made a reluctant (and unsuccessful) effort to transform the First Serenade into a Symphony in D Major. These early failed attempts had taught Brahms to fear the deep water, and, despite the continual encouragement of his friends and the ever growing expectations of the public, he simply could not be rushed into taking the plunge for a third time.

Indeed, the Symphony in C Minor represents an effort that was spread over many years. A draft of the opening Allegro was in hand by 1862, but the work then evidently was laid aside for more than a decade and did not attain its definitive form until 1877. Unfortunately, precious few musical sources by which to follow Brahms's compositional process have been preserved. No autograph of the first movement survives, and the complete Andante exists only in a fair copy that reflects significant changes that were made after a run of trial performances during the season of 1876–7.[2] The scherzo and finale do come down to us in revealing autographs that were used as the conductor's score in some of these early hearings, but they too document only later stages in the complicated delivery.[3]

The earlier stages of the compositional process are even less well documented. Suggestive clues, none the less, may be found within the symphony's typically dense web of allusions. The most obvious source was

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Beethoven, whose mark can be seen in the work's narrative of *per aspera ad astra*, tracing a path from stormy opening movement (whose tonality and "fateful" rhythmic motif come straight from Beethoven's Fifth) to triumphant finale (whose main theme echoes the *Freudenthema* of the Ninth). Yet, as I shall argue in later chapters, certain less obvious allusions to music by Robert Schumann and J. S. Bach, appearing likewise in the outer movements, may provide more crucial evidence bearing on the protracted genesis of the work. But if we are to make any sense of Brahms's great difficulties, we must begin with the circumstances of his extraordinary debut.

First attempts

In his famous essay "Neue Bahnen," published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* on 28 October 1853, Robert Schumann took pointed aim at the editorial stance of his successor at the journal, Franz Brendel. Since taking over the helm eight years earlier, Brendel had become increasingly vocal in his advocacy of Wagnerian opera and the new program music of Liszt and his followers in Weimar. To Schumann, however, the *Zukunftsmusiker* who drew so much attention from Brendel counted for nothing; he placed his hopes for the future instead on a number of more traditional composers in his own circle. In a promising body of works by artists such as Joseph Joachim, Albert Dietrich, and Woldemar Bargiel, Schumann had seen the announcement of an impending "new musical force," and now, he enthused, that force had suddenly arrived in the person of an obscure young musician named Johannes Brahms. Here was a veritable Messiah, who had been "called to articulate in an ideal way the highest expression of the time." Already Brahms had written "veiled symphonies" for piano, songs "whose poetry one could understand without knowing the words," and even a host of impressive chamber works, and surely, as Schumann prophesied, he would someday "lower his magic wand where the powers of the masses in the choir and orchestra can lend him their strength" and so present "still more wonderful glimpses into the mysteries of the spirit-world."[4]

This hope for a truly grand work from Brahms – for a worthy successor to Beethoven's Ninth, we might say – found even clearer expression in Schumann's letter to Joachim of 6 January 1854: "Now, where is Johannes? . . . Is he not yet allowing timpani and drums to resound? He should always recall the beginnings of Beethoven's symphonies; he should seek to make something similar. The beginning is the main thing; once one has begun, the end comes to him as if by itself."[5] And to judge from the opening Maestoso

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of the Piano Concerto in D Minor, Op. 15, which can be traced back to material that dates from this early period, Brahms did not at first back away from the challenge. With timpani resounding, the concerto begins with a reinterpretation of the first pages of Beethoven's Ninth – although in Brahms's hands the dramatic and suspenseful process of the model unfolds breathlessly in only a few measures' time. Whereas Beethoven gradually (and inexorably) develops from tonally ambiguous fifths a well-formed theme that arpeggiates the tonic, and only then, in a varied repetition, leads unexpectedly to an arpeggiation of B♭, Brahms, in a sudden dramatic burst, lets loose at once with his plunge through the submediant.

The Ninth Symphony did not stand alone in Brahms's thoughts, however. We have it on Joachim's word that the opening measures of the concerto originated "in the visualization of Schumann's suicide attempt" on 27 February 1854,[6] and echoes of the outer movements of Schumann's own D Minor Symphony, Op. 121, surely can be heard, too. From its first movement comes the very timpani roll that calls Brahms's piece into life as well as a model for the unusual "gapped" structure of his arpeggiated main theme; from the slow introduction to Schumann's finale comes a similar odd combination of pedal point on D, first-inversion harmony on B♭, and tonally ambiguous arpeggiated theme.

Although these allusions to the last published symphonies of both his revered hero and beloved benefactor are suggestive of Brahms's high ambitions for the piece, his ideas originally took shape, not in a concerto or in any other orchestral dress, but in a Sonata for Two Pianos. The first three movements, which, significantly, were written at around the time when Brahms heard the Ninth Symphony for the first time, came easily and were finished by early April 1854.[7] Brahms was far from satisfied with the music, however, and on 19 June 1854 he announced to Joachim: "I wish I could leave my D Minor Sonata alone for a long while. I've often played the first three movements with Frau Schumann. (Improved.) To tell the truth, I require even more than two pianos."[8] Indeed, with the aid of his friend Julius Otto Grimm, Brahms soon produced a symphonic transcription of the first movement, which he sent for Joachim's inspection on 27 July.[9]

The example of Schubert's Duo Sonata for Piano in C Major, D. 812, could not have been far from his mind. This *Grand Duo*, after all, was the work that Schumann had long suspected of being a piano arrangement of a symphony and about which he had written, in words echoing those cited above, that "one hears string and wind instruments, tuttis, solo passages, timpani-rolls; the broad symphonic form, even echoes of ... Beethoven's

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symphonies." And it was to Joseph Joachim's orchestration of this work that Brahms was referring when in the following year he mentioned a certain "Schubertsche Sinfonie" to Clara Schumann. It is hard, then, to resist concluding that in his own Duo Sonata the composer had planned from the start to make a "Brahms'sche Sinfonie."[10]

At all events, it is not surprising, in view of the probable role played by Beethoven's Ninth in the conception of the work, that Brahms progressed slowly, if at all, on the finale. Thus no mention was made of any last movement when on 30 January 1855 the young composer finally mustered the courage to announce the piece to Schumann: "By the way, I spent all last summer trying to write a symphony; the first movement was even orchestrated, and the second and third composed. (In D minor $\frac{6}{4}$ slow)." Borrowing gestures from Beethoven's tragic opening movement was one thing, but emulating his choral finale – and, as Christopher Reynolds has argued, Brahms might well have intended to do just that – was something else again.[11] The Beethovenian model – with its great length and complex form, its thematic recollections, recitatives, and choral setting of the "Ode to Joy" – was in every respect daunting. Yet only a few days after reporting to Schumann about the piece Brahms saw a way out of his dilemma. He dreamt that he had used two parts of his "hapless symphony," as he described the piece to Clara Schumann on 7 February 1855, in a piano concerto, consisting of "the first movement and scherzo with a finale, terribly difficult and grand." Thus was the symphony abandoned and its first movement, indeed, eventually revised as the opening Maestoso of the First Piano Concerto.[12]

If "Neue Bahnen" forms an indispensable part of the context in which to understand the aborted Symphony in D Minor, then Brahms's next orchestral work, the Serenade in D, Op. 11, must finally be seen against the backdrop formed by Franz Brendel's belated rejoinder to Schumann's essay. On 10 June 1859 the *Neue Zeitschrift* led with the editor's inaugural address to the first *Tonkünstlerversammlung* of what later became the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein*. Here Brendel proposed replacing the expression "Music of the Future" with "New German School," which he held was led by Wagner, Liszt, and Berlioz, and which represented, in a kind of synthesis of historical periods, the "entire post-Beethoven development."[13] Brahms, who knew at first hand the problem of following in the steps of Beethoven, and who had by then come to very different terms with the Baroque and Classical past, responded angrily. In August 1859 he reported to Joachim that "his fingers often itched to start a fight, to write something anti-Liszt."

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Significantly, it was the recent orchestral works of the Weimar master – the *Dante* Symphony and newly published symphonic poems – that Brahms singled out for scorn, likening them to so many contagions in a spreading "plague." And for that reason it is scarcely surprising that his contemporaneous First Serenade plays like something "anti-Liszt."[14]

This stylistic orientation is apparent from the very beginning. Brahms not only ignores Brendel's "post-Beethoven development" but, so to speak, retreats to a "pre-Beethoven" era. Here, as many early reviewers were quick to observe, the composer virtually quotes the beginning of the finale to Haydn's "London" Symphony. He begins, that is, at the point in history at which Beethoven himself had begun, with the last movement of Haydn's final essay in the genre. As the piece unfolds, references to other "healthy" models follow in abundance, ranging from Beethoven's Septet to Schumann's Second Symphony. And echoes of Beethoven symphonies are to be heard, too; but these are of the Second and Sixth Symphonies, not, tellingly, the Ninth.[15]

In view of the larger context in which the serenade was written – considering both Brahms's struggle (and desire) to compose a symphony and his horror at the evident advance of Liszt's new orchestral paradigms – it is understandable that he finally reworked the piece. In its first incarnation, which was shared with friends in the summer of 1858, the piece consisted of four movements only and was scored for a chamber ensemble consisting of flute, clarinet, horn, bassoon, and strings. From the start, there was talk that the piece should be converted into a symphony, as we can infer from Joachim's letter of October 1858: "Without hearing it I shouldn't like to help in deciding whether you really should set the serenade for orchestra, or perhaps only add another horn and oboe. In any case, the piece has 'symphony' written all over it" (*ist . . . sehr Sinfonie-verkündend*). Yet Brahms refused to "break with the original instrumentation," as Joachim explained to Clara Schumann, and at the end of the year actually made the work seem less like a symphony by adding two scherzi. In this six-movement form the piece was first played publicly, on 28 March 1859, by a "small orchestra" of Hamburg musicians led by Joachim.[16] Brahms remained dissatisfied, however, and on 8 December 1859 he asked his friend to return the score and to include with it some music paper in a large format. "I need the paper," he wrote with a certain sense of resignation, "in order finally to turn the First Serenade into a symphony. The work is a kind of mongrel, I see, nothing is right. I had such beautiful, great ideas for my first symphony, and now!"[17] Brahms was less candid to Karl Bargheer, the first violinist in the

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Detmold orchestra, who interrupted him one day at work. As Max Kalbeck related the story:

> Bargheer surprised him . . . at noon. Everything in his room, piano, bed, table and chair, was covered with leaves of full score [*Partiturbogen*], which Brahms, who was accustomed to rising very early, had filled with writing in the morning. "I am setting the Serenade for orchestra," he said; "it will be much better." When Bargheer asked him whether then it would be a symphony, Brahms expressed his opinion that "If one wants to write symphonies after Beethoven, then they will have to look very different!"[18]

Notwithstanding this disavowal, the orchestral score that Brahms produced originally was headed "Sinfonie-Serenade"; and it was this designation that Joachim used when he recorded his great happiness upon receiving the work at Christmas 1859 and again two months later, when requesting both score and parts for a forthcoming rehearsal of the new version. Yet when Brahms complied with this request he expressed his final view of the work in no uncertain terms: "Here come the score and parts to the D Major *Serenade*, if I may."[19] Again it had come to naught: if the abandoned D Minor Symphony had leaned too far toward Beethoven's Ninth, the erstwhile "Sinfonie-Serenade" must have seemed overly inclined in the opposite direction.

Contexts for the opening Allegro

It remains a mystery when Brahms set to work on what finally became the First Symphony. Evidently the first person to lay eyes on the music was the composer's friend Albert Dietrich, with whom Brahms passed a holiday in June 1862. In his memoirs Dietrich recalled that "in Münster am Stein Brahms . . . showed me the first movement of his C Minor Symphony, which however appeared only later and considerably revised." Elsewhere, addressing Max Kalbeck's question of whether Brahms had composed the movement during that summer, Dietrich gave critical evidence regarding both the comparatively early date of the piece and the nature of the composer's subsequent revisions: "The first movement of the C Minor Symphony *was already finished* in Münster am Stein, though it lacked the slow introduction." But as for when this opening Allegro might actually have been written, Dietrich was unable to provide any clues whatsoever.[20]

For his part, Kalbeck conjectured that the first movement originated in the emotionally troubled year of 1855. Just as Robert Schumann's suicide

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attempt in February 1854 and Brahms's first live experience of Beethoven's Ninth in the following month had, in his view, given rise to the ill-fated Symphony in D Minor, so he reasoned that the composer's hopeless love for Clara Schumann (which was in full bloom by early 1855) and his initial experience at that very time of Robert Schumann's incidental music to Byron's *Manfred* (whose protagonist is driven to guilt and despair over an incestuous love) form the soil in which the first movement of the C Minor Symphony "began ... to germinate." Indeed, encouraged by a similarity between the second theme of Brahms's opening Allegro and a passage from the development of the second theme in the *Manfred* Overture, Kalbeck suggested that the first movement could be understood autobiographically as depicting "the relations between Johannes, Robert, and Clara."[21]

Kalbeck's authority on this matter has often been challenged. But, to be fair, we should note that he in fact hedged on the question of whether Brahms actually wrote any music for the symphony in 1855, holding only that the work's "germ" (which I take to mean something like "source of inspiration") dated from that year.[22] And though the biographer did not choose the best musical example with which to carry the point, his speculation regarding the music's autobiographical basis – his provocative account of the work in terms of the intense Oedipal drama in which Brahms was entangled during the mid-1850s – does find support, as we shall discover in Chapter 3, in the existence of a network of salient allusions to a number of works by Schumann, including both *Manfred* and the Fourth Symphony.

But these same allusions may also point to a second, somewhat later stimulus to composition, one involving not only autobiography, but the continuing ideological struggle of the day concerning the historical roles played Beethoven and Schumann and the merits of the *Zukunftsmusik*. This struggle came to a head in the spring of 1860, when Brahms and Joachim decided finally to act on their desire to go public in opposition to Liszt and the New German School. In March of that year Brahms not only thanked Joachim for sending a draft of such a written protest but reported on his own efforts to enlist fellow musicians who might be expected to join their cause. Joachim, in turn, suggested that additional support might be found at the forthcoming Lower Rhine Music Festival ("this national meeting of praise-worthy musicians," as he put it), which was to be held in Düsseldorf on 27–9 May 1860.[23]

Soon thereafter, however, the violinist reported that Clara had been invited to a rather different gathering, to be held in Zwickau on 7–8 June 1860 in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of her late husband's

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birth. The widow had no interest in attending this "Erinnerungsfeier," Joachim explained, because "the participation of the Weimarites would have contradicted too much the wishes of her Robert."[24] (In the public announcement of the Zwickau festival, which appeared in Brendel's *Neue Zeitschrift* and appealed for the participation of all who "had personally stood near to the immortal Master," the matter was put more tactfully: "Frau Clara Schumann, whose participation had to be the Committee's first task to win, has shown her lively interest in the festival, to be sure, but has declined to participate."[25]) Meanwhile, even as Brahms and Joachim continued to revise their "Manifesto" and solicit the support of others, a copy fell into enemy hands. On 4 May an anonymous parody by Carl Friedrich Weitzmann ran in the *Neue Zeitschrift*; two days later, the text itself appeared in the *Berliner Musik-Zeitung Echo*, with the names of only Brahms, Joachim, Grimm, and Bernhard Scholz underneath.[26] News traveled slowly, however, and on 15 May Joachim reported in all innocence that Julius Rietz and several other musicians had agreed to join the protest, provided that "the blow" be deferred until after the Zwickau festival, at which, it was thought, a "provocation" would surely arise. And yet another week passed before Joachim learned of the premature publication and sent word of it to his colleague in Hamburg.[27]

Brahms, traveling with Frau Schumann, met Joachim in Düsseldorf to discuss this unwelcome development, and from there, bypassing Zwickau, the party continued on finally to Bonn.[28] In his report on the "Erinnerungsfeier," appearing on 15 June 1860, Brendel pointedly took note of the three conspicuous absences, while seizing the opportunity to escalate the recent war of words:

> If something of a shadow was cast on the otherwise unclouded festival, it was the observation that some of Schumann's special friends and admirers had not come ... [T]here is now a little circle of Schumann's admirers which seems to want to take his cult as its private possession ... The unquestionable one-sidedness that is implied by this, which is intensifying to the point of becoming pathological, is quite apparent, and no impartial person will agree with this faction if it maintains that the spaces in the temple of art are so limited that there is room only for itself and Schumann.[29]

In this heavy atmosphere both Joachim and Clara encouraged Brahms to work. Thus the violinist's next letter, written toward the end of June begins: "You too are completely silent! Hopefully you are speaking a lot to yourself [*viel monologisiert*], in tones." Even more suggestive is Clara's letter of 21 June: "I am being thoroughly lazy but feel that is having a bad effect on me

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and from now on want to be busy again. I hope very much that you are too and are working quietly in your little ground-floor room. People like you take in Nature's charms everywhere and thereby create nourishment for their spirit ... *A fine stormy sky can in this way pass into a symphony – who knows what already happened!?*"[30]

It is important in this context to recall that Brahms was a self-described *Wagnerianer*; his quarrel, as he had made clear to Joachim when the two were working out the final text of the Manifesto, was not with Wagner (or even Berlioz) but only with Liszt's music and the editorial policies of Brendel's *Neue Zeitschrift*. Thus it seems probable that Brahms would have sought out Wagner's much discussed, eagerly anticipated *Tristan und Isolde* when it was published in early 1860; with that in mind, Robert Fink has even suggested that the chromatic motto of Brahms's opening Allegro (mm. 38–42) can be related – whether as "a conscious allusion, unconscious influence, or just a fortuitous convergence of expressive resources" – to the chromatically charged opening of the *Tristan* Prelude.[31] Moreover, in view of the same experiences in Brahms's personal life that Kalbeck related to Schumann's *Manfred*, we can easily imagine that Brahms would have responded to the "message" of Wagner's prelude. As Richard Pohl put it, in a review that Brahms undoubtedly read of a concert in June 1859 that included both the *Manfred* Overture and the still unpublished Prelude to *Tristan*, here Wagner gives perfect expression to "the genuinely human struggling and atoning hero, who revels in the consuming passions of a forbidden love and perishes, yet who even in his moments of highest rapture is shudderingly consumed by the demonic proximity of an invisibly controlling nemesis."[32]

The genesis of the First Symphony, to be sure, remains shrouded in uncertainty. But if the seeds had been sown amid the traumatic events of the mid-1850s, they might well have sprouted during the troubled time surrounding the Manifesto and Schumann festival. For in the powerful opening Allegro of his First Symphony, as we shall see, Brahms not only addressed issues that had been raised in Wagner's latest score but staked his claim to precisely what Brendel would have denied him – to be the privileged executor of Schumann's musical estate.[33]

"Symphony by J. B.?"

Brahms showed the completed first movement to Dietrich, as we have seen, at Münster am Stein in June 1862. Clara Schumann, who was living nearby that summer and thus saw a good deal of both men, read through the score

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soon after Dietrich had examined it. This development she reported to Joachim in a letter of 1 July:

> Johannes recently sent me – think what a surprise – a symphonic first movement, with the following bold opening:
>
>
>
> That is rather audacious perhaps, but I have quickly become used to it. The movement is full of wonderful beauties, with a mastery in the treatment of the motifs which is indeed becoming more and more characteristic of him. Everything is so interestingly interwoven, yet as spirited as a first outburst; one enjoys [it] so completely to the full, without being reminded of the craft. In the transition from the second part back to the first he has once more succeeded splendidly.[34]

No sooner had Brahms revealed the promising piece, however, than did he shelve it and turn his attention to another project. As he explained to Dietrich at the beginning of September, just before departing on his momentous first visit to Vienna: "the symphony is not yet ready, unlike a string quintet . . . in F minor, which I would really like to send you and have you write about it to me, but I suppose I had better take it with me."[35] Later that month Joachim pressed the composer for information regarding the piece, which he hoped to perform in the following season. But it was his new chamber work, which some years later took shape as the Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34, that Brahms sent in response to his friend's letter of inquiry, not the orchestral movement, about which he laconically wrote, "after 'Symphony by J. B.' you may place a ?."[36]

As for the new quintet, its symphonic scope was unmistakable. Thus Clara Schumann noted in her reaction to Brahms's subsequent revision of the piece as a sonata for two pianos (which later appeared as Op. 34*bis*): "it is no sonata but rather a work whose ideas you could – you must – scatter over the entire orchestra as if from a horn of plenty! . . . Right from the first time I played it [as a string quintet] I had the feeling of its being an arrangement."[37] Indeed, if the final versions of the symphonic Allegro and quintet are any indication, the one must have echoed in Brahms's mind as he worked on the

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