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for Elisabeth and Katherine

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Preface

My first serious acquaintance with the subject of this book dates from the fall of 1971. I knew but a handful of “classical” works at that time, but I was friendly with a number of players in the local student orchestra, and, on their invitation, I found myself one day attending a rehearsal of Brahms’s C Minor Symphony. Twenty-five years later, I can still recall the powerful impression made on me then by two themes from the opening movement – the haunting oboe solo coming near the end of the slow introduction and the magnificent chorale-like theme that resounds so beautifully in the development. This music literally moved me and, in a very real sense, set into motion the long and deep engagement with the work out of which the present study has emerged.

In the pages that follow I offer an account of the genesis and compositional background of the symphony (Chapters 1 and 2), a detailed discussion of the music (Chapters 3–5), and a brief consideration of the work’s early reception (Chapter 6). If I have dwelt at greater length on matters of genesis than have most of the other authors in the series, that is only because Brahms himself struggled with the composition for an unusually long time. The critical reading of the music that forms the core of the book represents the current state of my continuing dialogue, not only with “the work itself,” but with its dense network of extra-compositional allusions, in which, as I hope to show, much meaning resides; my approach here, in other words, is more hermeneutic than analytic in nature. The final chapter provides a brief introduction to the issues that mattered most in the early reception-history of the symphony – above all that of the work’s relationship to the Beethovenian tradition and its controversial status as “successor” to Beethoven’s Ninth.

Serious scholarly attention has come late to Brahms’s symphonies, but now it comes in abundance. Reinhold Brinkmann’s wide-ranging study of the Second, first published in German in 1990, has recently appeared in a revised English-language version. Soon to follow are two monographic surveys of Brahms’s entire symphonic oeuvre, by Walter Frisch and

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Raymond Knapp, as well as Robert Pascall's critical edition of the First, prepared as the inaugural volume of the recently launched *Johannes Brahms Gesamtausgabe*.¹ The work of each of these authors has, in one way or another, figured into my own, and I am pleased to add a general word of acknowledgment here.

Research for this book has been supported by a Research Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung (Bonn), which permitted me two extensive stays in Germany, as well as by generous grants from the Central Research and Development Fund and the University Center for International Studies of the University of Pittsburgh. Grateful acknowledgment is due to the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz for permission to reproduce the postcard on which Brahms inscribed the earliest version of what later became the “alphorn theme” of the finale; to The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, for permission to reproduce the last page from the autograph of the symphony, as well as one of the two surviving sketch leaves for the middle movements; and to the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Hamburg, for permission to publish a transcription of the unpublished letter to Brahms from Adolf Schubring that is quoted in Chapters 5 and 6.

I wish to thank Julian Rushton and Penny Souster for their encouragement of this book (and for their forbearance in the face of unexpected delays in its completion). Walter Frisch kindly read the entire manuscript and offered a number of helpful comments, for which I am most grateful. Likewise deserving of thanks are a number of other individuals who have shown an interest in this project and helped in various ways: Styra Avins, Daniel Beller-McKenna, George Bozarth, Hermann Danuser, Kurt Hofmann, Alan Krueck, and Michael Struck.

To Gustav Abel, president of the Baden-Baden Brahmsgesellschaft, I am indebted for his kind invitation to spend two unforgettable weeks during the summer of 1995 at the *Brahmshaus* in Lichtental, where, living and working in the very space in which Brahms had completed his symphony, I was able nearly to finish my typescript. Finally, I wish to acknowledge here the loving encouragement and support of Leonora Saavedra, my companion in Lichtental and partner in so much else during our beautiful project together.

¹ Reinhold Brinkmann, *Johannes Brahms, Die Zweite Symphonie, Späte Idylle* (Munich, 1990); revised and translated as *Late Idyll: The Second Symphony of Johannes Brahms*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Walter Frisch, *Brahms: The Four Symphonies* (New York: Schirmer, in press); Raymond Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony* (New York: Pendragon, in press); Johannes Brahms, *Symphonie Nr. 1 c-Moll opus 68*, ed. Robert Pascall (Munich: G. Henle-Verlag, 1996).