PART I

Stages of creative development and reception
1 Brahms the Hamburg musician 1833–1862

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Family background

Brahms’s family associations with North Germany were long and deep. His forebears on his mother’s side came from Schleswig-Holstein. They can be traced to Itzehoe, Tondem, Leck and Flensburg, and included school teachers, pastors and aldermen, several of whom belonged to the Schleswig-Holstein minor nobility: one of the most famous of them, the engraver Melchior Lorch (1527–86, the creator of the so-called ‘Elbekarte’ which bears his name), was also a prominent portrait painter. Research on the mother’s side reveals a line traceable to connections with the Swedish king Gustav Wasa (1496–1560). Brahms’s maternal grandfather, Peter Radeloff Nissen, migrated from Itzehoe to Hamburg, where, on 4 July 1789, Brahms’s mother, Johanna Henrica Christiane Brahms, was born. The forebears on the paternal side led from Heide in Holstein, the birthplace of Brahms’s father, Johann Jacob, to Brunsbüttel and further over the Elbe back to Lower Saxony, to the area between the Elbe and the Weser. It was from there that Peter Brahms, Brahms’s great-grandfather, migrated to Holstein around 1750. His son Johann came from Brunsbüttel via Meldorf to Wöhrden, a suburb of Heide. His first-born son, Peter Hinrich, Brahms’s uncle, later occupied the house that still exists today as the Heide Brahmshaus, (now in the possession of the Schleswig-Holstein Brahms Gesellschaft). In another, strongly built house in the market place in Heide, Brahms’s father, Johann Jacob, was born. The paternal forebears were chiefly craftsmen and minor tradesmen.

The family name Brahms or Brahmsst is fairly well disseminated in North Germany. The variants Bramst, Braamst, Brahm, even Bramst and Brambst are to be found in the seventeenth century in church registers in the vicinity of Cuxhaven (Lower Saxony). These variants are dialect forms, reflecting the spelling given to the officiating minister at the time of a birth or death: personal documentation did not then exist. There is therefore no conclusive identity to the family name; it is a question of ancient versions copied down at the time of christening, a practice which has still not completely disappeared from North Germany and especially Ostfriesland: an interpretation of the name as derived from Bram, the
golden-yellow gorse bush of the area, as suggested by Max Kalbeck, is one possibility. The name ‘Brahmst’ stood on Brahms’s father’s nameplate. The young Johannes often deleted the ‘t’ at the end, explaining to Richard Heuberger as late as 1893 that ‘gradually I got my father to give up the “t”? In Hamburg, Johann Jacob had had ‘a description of the coat of arms and lineage of the name Brahms’ drawn up by Kettich’s ‘Wappen-Comptoir’ (‘Heraldic Depository’) in Berlin. The four-sided large-format documentation – which Brahms himself carefully preserved – relates the noble descent of the ‘von Brahms’ family to the middle of the seventeenth century, its origins supposedly in the ‘Brahmins of India’, who had travelled to Holland. The ‘genealogical coat of arms’ belonging to it hung in the living room of the Brahms family.

Johann Jacob Brahms devoted five years to the study of music in Meldorf, Heide and Wesselburen. He mastered the violin, viola, cello, flute and flügelhorn, but later his main instrument was the double bass. Thus equipped, he came to Hamburg with his letter of apprenticeship at the beginning of 1826. He first played as a wind and string player in places of entertainment in the Hamburger Berg district, in what was known from 1833 as the ‘Vorstadt St Pauli’ (St Pauli Suburb), and as a street musician in the city’s little alleys and courtyards. These offered the only possibilities for such music-making within the Hamburg city limits. After he had become acquainted with Johanna Henrica Christiane Nissen, later to be his wife, in 1829 and had found lodgings in her home, Ulricusstrasse 37, this solid, vigorous and industrious man looked out for his best prospects. Upon swearing the civic oath (‘Bürgereid’) in Low German on 21 May 1830, he was made a citizen of Hamburg. This was a requirement for marriage and any professional activity, and might even lead to the acquisition of landed property.

In order to categorise the social position of the Brahms family, it must be related to issues of cost and income in the so-called Hamburg ‘lower class’. Rental costs for accommodation make a good starting point. The average annual rental for a ‘modest’ worker’s dwelling – possessing a kitchen-cum-living room with a fireplace and a bedroom, the so-called ‘alcove’, in which a double bed was customary – amounted in 1842 (that is, before the great fire of Hamburg), to around 60 Hamburg marks; ‘better’ accommodation, with stoves and a living-room and two alcoves cost at that time around 84 marks annually. Half of the apartments of Hamburg in the Old and New Towns cost less than 100 marks annually. As a result of the Hamburg fire, which destroyed 1,749 houses, not only did the supply of accommodation for the lower classes decrease, but the cost of rent rose, especially for newly built houses, which now were mostly built with only four storeys. However, housing supply diminished not only because of the
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Hamburg fire, but also owing to the steady increase in the existing population. A glance at the population statistics indicates this unequivocally. For example, though Hamburg already had 115,862 inhabitants in 1848, this number had risen in four years to 123,299, an increase of just under 6½ per cent that almost amounted to a population explosion.

In 1848, the annual income of a bricklayer was 498 marks for an eleven-hour day, six days a week, that of a carpenter (a joiner) 518 marks — to take only the highest earners among the lower classes. In 1848, a family of five had to pay 218 marks to cover the barest necessities of life, according to the calculations of the Hamburg poorhouse. If one adds to these essentials heating, lighting, clothing and schooling, at least 500 marks were required to cover the necessary commitments. And a quarter of the income had to be set aside for the rental. Rising rental costs meant less money for the essentials. This left child labour as the only possibility for improving income: the 13–14-year-olds earned 2–3 marks a week as drudges, that is, between 104 and 156 marks a year. If essential expenses exceeded income, cheaper accommodation had to be found; and this meant coming down in the world. The average family lived, therefore, from hand to mouth, and could be classed as the ‘potentially poor’.

To return to the Hamburg Bürger Johann Jacob, however, one must distinguish between the lower middle class, which was qualified for the most general trades, and the middle class proper, whose members were required to have a considerable business. Since Brahms’s father had applied to the Hamburg civil militia (‘Bürgerwehr’) as a ‘musician’ (‘Musicus’), acquiring the rights of a free citizen was a costly affair. Johann Jacob had to show that he was in possession of uniform, weapon and movable property. On top of this, he had to pay at least 74 marks, a sum which approximated to a year’s rent. It is already clear from this that Johann Jacob’s social position at this time was on the borderline between the middle class and lower class, in the so-called ‘Stand der kleinen Leute’.

On 26 May 1830 he became a ‘Musicus’ (musician) and a member of the 2nd Infantry Battalion of the Hamburg Bürgerwehr. Later, from 1837 until the Bürgerwehr’s subsequent dissolution in 1867, he was a flügelhornist in the 2nd Jäger company. His monthly pay in 1867 amounted to 24 Hamburg marks. On his discharge he received the ‘silver medal for good service’ and a two-thirds pension as ‘Oberjäger’ (lit. ‘leading hunter’) for the rest of his life. The ‘Instructions for the Members of the Music Corps of the Bürger Militär’ dated 3 June 1839, which Johann Jacob was given, were carefully preserved by his son. On 9 June 1830, Johann Jacob married Johanna Henrica Christiane Nissen, seventeen years his senior. His social rise can be dated from this point. On 31 May
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1831 he became one of the founder members of the Hamburger Musikverein by the 1840s he was considered to be one of the best double bass players in Hamburg). Beginning – from 1831 – as a deputy for the second violinist, he was from 1840 a regular member of the sextet of the Hamburg Alsterpavillon, which well-to-do Hamburgers liked to frequent. The earnings for each individual engagement were between 3 and 5 marks. His annual income in 1840 was somewhere between 804 and 1,002 marks. This total came jointly from his pay as a member of the civil militia and the earnings as double bassist of the Alsterpavillon sextet. Later we also have to add the income from his activity as a member of the Stadttheater, as a member of the orchestra of the Philharmonic concerts, and as organiser and active participant in chamber music evenings. Altogether, therefore, Johann Jacob had a very healthy annual income, as is indirectly to be confirmed from the last letter of Brahms's mother to her son (between 26 and 30 January 1865), which reports quite astonishing outgoings and income: for example, that the father's income in 1864 was 1,800 marks. That the money sometimes did not suffice had less to do with the father's income than with his bursts of spending, in which he could only have indulged, however, if sufficient money were left over after the covering of all expenses. Accordingly, one cannot properly speak of poor circumstances in the parental home. If the statistics of the year 1867 testify that 20 per cent of Hamburgers lived in 'good' economic circumstances, we may conclude that Johann Jacob Brahms had already lived for around twenty years in this way. As for his social position, we can align it with that of Brahms's first teacher Otto Cossell.

One might compare him with the fathers of several other important composers, such as the father (and grandfather) of Beethoven, and the fathers of Carl Maria von Weber, Cherubini and Richard Strauss. Enterprising, calculating (except where his own finances were concerned), free-spirited and with an earthy sense of humour, this musician (who always spoke Low German) pursued no higher goal in life than to live it to the full and with the greatest enjoyment. He still enjoyed dancing in later years, and still played in the convivial Lokals, many of which later – though not, it should be noted, in the period of the son’s youth – fell into disrepute. The achievement of his father, who had risen from the rank of rural petit bourgeois to that of a respected Bürger, a music teacher even, was always admired by the son: this was his role model.

The young married couple lived from Martinmas 1830 (11 November) in the Cordes Hof building, Bäckerbreitergang, where, on 11 February 1831, Brahms's elder sister Wilhelmine Louise Elisabeth (known as Elise) was born. In autumn 1831, again at Martinmas, the family of three took rooms on the first floor, left, in the back courtyard of
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Schlüters Hof, Speckgang 24 (later Speckstrasse 60). Here, in a small room, Johannes Brahms was born on Tuesday 7 May 1833. Since the publication of Kalbeck’s biography, the Brahms literature has made the seemingly ineradicable mistake of describing the living conditions of the Brahms family as poor and as determined by the worsening of their finances. The portrayal of the birthplace as being in ‘one of the most disreputable, narrow and darkest alleys in the notorious Gängeviertel’, and as ‘harbouring rabble of all kinds in its murkiest shadows’ in the Brahms literature rests on the impressions first received by Kalbeck during his stay in Hamburg (though Alfred von Ehrmann still describes it so in 1933). But this was the period around 1901. These were impressions of that time, which had nothing to do with Brahms’s early years in the era of sailing ships. In Brahms’s youth Hamburg was still a small city: parts of it belonged to Denmark or to the Kingdom of Hannover. Hamburg was still outside the German customs zone. At that time, in the epoch before the industrial revolution, the Hamburg Neustadt was not yet threatened by the extension of the harbour and the redevelopment of the city. The Gängeviertel arose through the disposition of smaller paths (Gänge) which had been laid out between the single small gardens inside the Hamburg city walls. In the seventeenth century, half-timbered houses were built on these little plots of land, which could only be reached through the prescribed Gänge. These houses were as a rule clean, indeed partly tended in the Dutch manner (with clean white curtains and flowering plants), and interspersed with trees and gardens. The inhabitants of the Neustadt (‘New Town’, so called since 1626) were predominantly middle-class people, minor tradesmen and respected artisans. Accommodation in the environs of the Stadttheater in the Dammthorstrasse and of the many other cultural establishments, was in great demand by musicians, singers, actors and other theatre people. The social classes were very mixed. Brahms’s second teacher Eduard Marxsen, the most famous music pedagogue of his time in Hamburg, lived in the so-called ‘Caffamacherreihe’ near the Stadttheater, after the Hamburg fire of May 1842. He actually lived next to a widow who placed her rooms at the disposal of ‘girls’ in order to improve her income. This was also the case in the Dammthorwall, where, at No. 29, stood the house we can properly designate the ‘Brahms House’. For it was here that young Johannes grew up and lived from his ninth until his seventeenth full year. From this house he went out for the first time into the public world of music, and it was here, as he later famously told Joseph Viktor Widmann, that ‘the most beautiful Lieder came to me before dawn when I was cleaning my boots’. The fact that the Brahms family changed their accommodation a total of eight times between 1830 and 1864 has nothing to do with their suppos-
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dly poor circumstances. An examination of each separate address in the census report drawn up at that time by the Hamburg civil militia results in a quite different conclusion: the apartments became bigger and more expensive.

The following list of the Brahms family homes between 1830 and 1864 differs from that to be drawn from Kalbeck’s account and underlines the social rise of the father and the family.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Annual rent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M 1830 – M 1831</td>
<td>Bäckerbreitergang 78 II, Cordes Hof</td>
<td>70 Hamburg marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 1831 – M 1833</td>
<td>Speckgang 24, Schlüters Hof</td>
<td>72 Hamburg marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 1833 – M 1836</td>
<td>Ulricusstrasse 15</td>
<td>108 Hamburg marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 1836 – M 1838</td>
<td>1. Erichstrasse above No. 7, Hamburger Berg, St Paul Vorstadt</td>
<td>not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838? (according to Brahms’s mother)</td>
<td>Schaarmarkt (hitherto never noted)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 1838 – M 1841</td>
<td>Ulricusstrasse above No. 38</td>
<td>90 Hamburg marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 1841 – S 1850</td>
<td>Dammthorwall 29</td>
<td>250 Hamburg marks up to May 1842; 300 marks after the city fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S 1850 – S 1852</td>
<td>Kurze Mühren 13 I (new building after the fire)</td>
<td>225 Hamburg marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S 1852 – S 1857</td>
<td>Lilienstrasse 7 I (where Clara Schumann lived in April 1855 with the Brahms family)</td>
<td>156 Hamburg marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S 1857 – June 1864</td>
<td>Neustädter Hohe Fuhlentwiete 74 II</td>
<td>400 Hamburg marks</td>
</tr>
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(M = Martinmas/November; S = Spring)

Contrary to general custom, the father had published a birth announcement in the Wöchentlichen Nachrichten on 8 May, so overjoyed was he at the birth of a son. The baptism was celebrated on 26 May in the great St Michaeliskirche. The two godfathers were his grandfather Johann Brahms from Heide and his uncle Philip Detmering (whose marriage to Brahms’s aunt Christina Friederica (née Nissen) produced two sons, Heinrich and Christian). The third godparent was a Katharina Margaretha Stäcker (of whom we know no more). The family lived in the house of Brahms’s birth for only six months before they moved to a bigger apartment at Ulricusstrasse 15, where the third son Friedrich, called Fritz, was born on 26 March 1835. At that time and even beyond the turn of the century, it was customary in Hamburg to move house regularly, because the landlord had to cover the cost of renovation.

The little flaxen-haired, blue-eyed ‘Jehann’ or ‘Hannes’, as he was called, was a small, delicate, pallid, dreamy but also playful boy. Like his
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sister, he suffered until puberty from nervous headaches. The father soon noticed that the child, whilst playing with his lead soldiers or with beans, immediately took notice when he practised his instrument. The genius manifested itself when the father realised that Brahms could effortlessly repeat correctly all the melodies that he heard: the child had absolute pitch. He discovered for himself a system of notation even before his father gave him music lessons. Brahms learnt to play the violin, was instructed in the fundamentals of cello playing, and the natural horn became one of his favourite instruments. At an early stage he received piano lessons from a colleague of his father. Kalbeck’s assertion that there was no piano in the family home because of their meagre circumstances is not true. Elise Giesemann, a youthful friend from his time at Winsen (1847 and 1851), later wrote to Brahms, specifically recalling a piano ‘which [stood] in your room’ – obviously the family living room.10 From 1839 Brahms went to an elementary school, and from 1842 to 1848 attended a good ‘Bürgerschule’. Here he even learnt foreign languages. ‘I read French quite well’, he vouchsafed to his publisher Fritz Simrock as late as 1893.11 There exists one Christmas greeting to his parents written in French, as well as an autograph two-sided letter composed in French to the French pianist Caroline de Serres of April 1889.12 Nothing comparable is known of his skills in English. He could certainly read English but he never mastered the spoken language. School attendance was at that time voluntary and must obviously have been regarded as essential by the parents; the cost was in the region of 15 to 20 marks quarterly. That this expense was considered feasible for all three children is further indication of the secure social position of the Brahms family.

At the end of 1840 Brahms started piano lessons with Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel (1813–65).

Cossel, taught by Eduard Marxsen, was considered an excellent teacher. Brahms placed great faith in him and continued to respect his memory in later years, commenting even in June 1896 to Richard Heuberger, ‘you would hardly get a better grounding today than I received from my first teacher Cossel’.13 Cossel had introduced Brahms to the essentials of the piano literature. His thesis that the pianist should be able to express through his fingers what he felt in his heart was absorbed by Brahms, as friends could see for themselves when he played for his intimate circle. Thus Joseph Joachim, in his first description of the young Brahms, wrote to his friend Gisela von Arnim on 20 October 1854 that he ‘already makes music quite divinely, I have never heard piano playing (apart from that of Liszt) that satisfied me so completely’.14 Among Cossel’s papers (many of which were destroyed in the Second World War) are to be found several manuscripts and printed editions which bear
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witness to the young musician’s hours of study. These are (1) a page with a Study ‘Allegro’ written out by Cossel with the comment ‘when passing the thumb under, the elbow must remain quite still’; (2) fugue No. 4 from J. S. Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier BWV 849 written out by Cossel, with fingerings in his hand and also that of Brahms; in addition, Cossel has written out another study, of sixteen bars in 3/4, on the empty verso (3) the ‘Gavotte by J. C. von Gluck’ (sic) in a single printed sheet by the Hamburg publisher Johann August Böhme (c. 1842); (4) ‘Momens musi-
cals’ by Franz Schubert (D. 780, Nos. 4–6), published by the Vienna pub-
lisher Diabelli in a reprint of c. 1830; (5) ‘Deutsche Tänze und Ecossaisen’ by Franz Schubert in a reprint by Böhme.15 The fugue by Bach provides the most certain indication of when Brahms first became involved with his music, though in a largely technical way, as the numerous fingerings confirm. The Schubert publication confirms that the young Brahms was already drawing near to the art of the Viennese masters, and the ‘Gavotte of Gluck’ certainly became one of his favourite pieces; this publication was doubtless the starting point for his own later arrangement of the piece ‘for Frau Clara Schumann’ (McCorkle, Werkverzeichnis, Anhang 1 N. 2), and the preoccupation with this dance form may also have contributed to the origins of his own Gavottes (McCorkle WoO 3). Though Cossel first gave instruction in finger exercises and studies, Brahms later took on works by Czerny, Clementi, Cramer, Hummel and Kalkbrenner. This and other piano music he also practised in the family house on the Dammthorwall. Brahms must have immediately made quick progress in piano playing, since one can reasonably conclude that regular practice was not possible in the family home owing to the cramped living conditions, and out of consideration for his mother and sister, who had to work there.16

Study with Marxsen and first public appearances

In 1843 the ten-year-old Wunderkind had his first public success before an invited audience. He played an Etude by Henri Herz and also the piano part in Beethoven’s Wind Quintet Op. 16, and in a Mozart piano quartet. As a result of this appearance, an offer was made by an impresario to let the young Brahms appear in America. Otto Cossel could only restrain the eager father by ensuring that Brahms would study wholly with Eduard Marxsen, Hamburg’s leading teacher, who had previously resisted taking sole responsibility. After a long period of reflection, Marxsen took over the instruction around 1845. Brahms’s brother Fritz was likewise taught by Cossel and later by Marxsen. Through Marxsen, Brahms came to know the works of Beethoven, and, thirsty for knowledge, studied in Marxsen’s
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extensive library. There still survives a copy of Schindler’s Beethoven biography of 1840 with the autograph signature of Eduard Marxsen and the visible evidence of the young Brahms’s extensive reading; numerous turned-down page corners and distinctive markings can be identified in the volume, which Brahms probably borrowed from the teacher.\(^{17}\) Marxsen’s instruction was devoted to the classics; Brahms did not get to know either Chopin or Schumann, let alone Liszt’s transcriptions. Instruction in theory and composition only followed later when Marxsen recognised the youth’s creative strength. Marxsen often spoke of this period on later occasions, as when he wrote to Hermann Levi in 1873:

restless eagerness and application awakened my interest more and more, and the manifestly rapid progress strengthened my opinion that an extraordinary God-given talent was here to be developed. I even taught him without any financial return for the necessary period. From the beginning of the studies, a clear- and deep-thinking spirit was apparent, and yet later on original creation became difficult for him and required a real amount of encouragement on my side. We also busied ourselves with the study of form. None the less the talent quickly developed, in my opinion more beautifully and significantly, even though at that time he had not yet produced a great work. When Mendelssohn’s death was announced [in 1847] I observed to a friend from the deepest conviction ‘a master of art is departed, a greater blooms in Brahms.’\(^{18}\) Consequently he progressed with even greater speed to create outstanding songs and instrumental music, which later appeared in print.

In placing Marxsen’s comments in perspective, however, one should note that this letter was written at a time when Brahms’s renown as a composer was already established.

Marxsen’s piano lessons lasted until 1847, the composition and theory lessons until 1848. Otto Cosel had already complained of Brahms in 1842 that ‘it is a pity about him, he could be such a good player, but he will not stop his never-ending composing.’\(^{19}\) Brahms later elaborated on this himself to J. V. Widmann: ‘I composed, but only in secret and very early in the morning. All day I arranged marches for wind music and at night I sat at the keyboard in pubs.’\(^{20}\) The twelve-year-old played a piano sonata in G minor to his youthful friend Luise Japha (later Langhans-Japha). This lost work must be his first known composition. In addition, Kalbeck notes that Brahms had composed at Christmas 1845 some ‘Zwischenaktmusik’ for the ‘Theater Pittoresque’, now lost, at the instigation of a Hamburg puppeteer in the Deichstrasse. That Brahms in later years was extremely disdainful of Marxsen’s instruction, which he had at first praised to Louise Japha, can be explained by the reservations of his mother which emerge in her letters from the years 1854 and 1855. The parental home