

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00479-4 - Johannes Brahms: A Biographical Sketch

Hermann Deiters

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JOHANNES BRAHMS.



IT was in the middle of the fifties—if we are not mistaken, in the summer of 1856—that we first met in Bonn a young musician whose whole demeanour at once distinguished him from the rest of his youthful companions. Not that he was remarkable for that external freedom of manner common among artists, which, however, seldom arouses our sympathy. He seemed, on the contrary, unconcerned by the world around him, filled with an artistic ideal, absorbed in striving after some conscious aim, yet ready to share freely and amiably with

others the treasures of his artistic convictions. A common interest had guided us both to the spot where the great master, so heartily honoured by all the young school—Robert Schumann—was then living, overshadowed by his heavy affliction. The young artist was eager to see the master whom he, too, so highly revered. If his natural enthusiastic manner pleased at first sight, much more did one learn to like him on hearing him speak with sincere veneration of the great master's ideas, and of their relations towards each other. This young artist was *Johannes Brahms*. Although at that time he was little known to the general public, those who were truly interested in the history of music had shortly before had their attention drawn to him by the glowing prophetic words with which Schumann himself had introduced him into the ranks of creative artists. These words,

JOHANNES BRAHMS.

3

gladly acquiesced in by some, called forth criticism and contradiction from others — even from earnest men of artistic culture—who could not at once reconcile themselves to the peculiar style of Brahms' earliest compositions.

As in all such cases, a considerable time must elapse before the public could be convinced that it had now to deal with an original, important, and entirely novel figure. From that time forward, however, we find Brahms, himself unmoved by these diverse criticisms, pursuing with sure and steady steps the aim he had so clearly in view.

The outward life of the artist has been a somewhat uneventful one.

Johannes Brahms was born at Hamburg on May 7, 1833. His father, a contrabassist in the orchestra of the town theatre, was also an able performer on several other instruments. Growing up in a musical family and among musical

4 JOHANNES BRAHMS.

surroundings, Brahms early displayed his remarkable talent as a pianist; and thus we see in his case a repetition of an occurrence so often observed in the history of music. His first master, for the piano, was D. Cossel of Hamburg. He also began early with theoretical studies, and even in his boyhood felt the necessity of penetrating the organic structure of musical works. We recollect his telling us that before he really knew how to score thoroughly, he used to practise putting long pieces from single parts into full score. He carried on his theoretical studies systematically under Ed. Marxsen of Altona (also celebrated through Schumann), to whose direction was due his great improvement as a pianist. Assisted by his already mature and astonishing memory, he made rapid progress, and early in life entered deeply into the spirit of the classical masters, among whom he

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00479-4 - Johannes Brahms: A Biographical Sketch

Hermann Deiters

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JOHANNES BRAHMS.

5

decidedly adopted Bach and Beethoven as his models. At the age of fourteen he played for the first time in public, and met with great applause. The programme included his own "Variations on a Volkslied," and its appearance at that important moment of his career shows us clearly that a predilection for the national element in music was, even in those early days, deeply rooted in his heart.

In 1853 he left home to accompany the Hungarian violinist Remenyi on a concert tour. During his tour he visited, among other places, Hanover, Göttingen, and Weimar; and by his playing and compositions attracted the attention of Joachim and Liszt. The former was especially struck when, in Göttingen, on account of the low pitch of the piano, Brahms transposed Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata, without having the notes before him, from A into B flat. This success

resulted in his severing his connection with Remenyi, and going to Düsseldorf in October, 1853, with an introduction from Joachim to Robert Schumann. He had then composed several grand sonatas for piano, a scherzo for piano (which had especially gained Liszt's approbation), and a considerable number of songs. Schumann's enthusiasm at the first chords Brahms struck on the piano, an enthusiasm which increased with every fresh hearing, has been repeatedly described; he believed most confidently that he saw in this young man the ideal whose advent he had so long awaited. In an article in the "Neue Zeitschrift für Musik," entitled "New Paths," he announced this new apparition to the musical world. His words have been frequently quoted before, but we must repeat their substance once again. "Ten years have passed away," he writes—"almost as

JOHANNES BRAHMS.

7

many as I formerly devoted to the publication of this paper—since I have allowed myself to commit my opinions to this soil, so rich in memories. Often, in spite of an overstrained productive activity, I have felt moved to do so ; many new and remarkable talents made their appearance, and a fresh musical power seemed about to reveal itself among the many aspiring artists of the day, even if their compositions were only known to the few. I thought to follow with interest the pathways of these elect ; there would—there must —after such promise, suddenly appear one who should utter the highest ideal expression of the times, who should claim the mastership by no gradual development, but burst upon us fully equipped, as Minerva sprang from the brain of Jupiter. And he has come, this chosen youth, over whose cradle the Graces and Heroes seem to have

kept watch. His name is *Johannes Brahms*; he comes from Hamburg, where he has been working in quiet obscurity, instructed by an excellent, enthusiastic teacher in the most difficult principles of his art, and lately introduced to me by an honoured and well-known master. His mere outward appearance assures us that he is one of the elect. Seated at the piano, he disclosed wondrous regions. We were drawn into an enchanted circle. Then came a moment of inspiration which transformed the piano into an orchestra of wailing and jubilant voices. There were sonatas, or rather veiled symphonies, songs whose poetry revealed itself without the aid of words, while throughout them all ran a vein of deep song-melody, several pieces of a half-demoniacal character, but of charming form, then sonatas for piano and violin, string-quartets, and each one of these

JOHANNES BRAHMS.

9

creations so different from the last, that they appeared to flow from so many separate sources. Then, like an impetuous torrent, he seemed to unite these streams into a foaming waterfall ; over the tossing waves the rainbow presently stretches its peaceful arch, while on the banks butterflies flit to and fro, and the nightingale warbles her song. Whenever he bends his magic wand towards great works, and the powers of orchestra and chorus lend him their aid, still more wonderful glimpses of the ideal world will be revealed to us. May the Highest Genius help him onward ! Meanwhile another genius — that of modesty — seems to dwell within him. His comrades greet him at his first step in the world, where wounds may perhaps await him, but the bay and the laurel also ; we welcome this valiant warrior.”

The moment seems now to have come when we may judge the truth

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00479-4 - Johannes Brahms: A Biographical Sketch

Hermann Deiters

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 JOHANNES BRAHMS.

of these prophetic words, which at the time of their utterance no one but an artist of Schumann's own standing was in a position to do. It is easy to understand how they helped to determine the young artist's resolution and future development, so that he ever remained a devoted friend to the great master, and after his death kept an equally warm affection for his widow and family.

In the winter of the same year Brahms went to Leipzig and played there in public on December 17th. About this time the publishing firms of Breitkopf and Härtel and B. Senff resolved to bring out his first works: three grand sonatas for piano (op. 1, 2, and 5), a scherzo for piano (op. 4), several collections of songs and Lieder (op. 3, 6, 7), and a trio for piano, violin, and violoncello (op. 8), followed shortly by variations on a theme of