4 *A Photograph of Brahms*

There exists an early photograph – a shadowy person, a stretch of wall – which dates from 1824: three years before Beethoven's death. It sets the mind racing with the thought that just such a primitive apparatus might well have been turned on Beethoven himself. Just as the early gramophone captured the last castrato, so a spectral image could well have existed of this extraordinary little man, who even in his lifetime had become one of the great mythic figures of the civilization of the West. Only a few years were to pass, and the next generation – Schumann, Berlioz, Chopin (beautifully, in that nakedly revealing tragic late photograph by Bisson) – are all recorded. Musicians, and many others: the heroic age of photography produced, in the hands of Nadar, startlingly immediate images of Baudelaire, which make him peculiarly our contemporary. Such images lend to the historical existence of those depicted something which all the documentation in the world cannot: this immediacy, this contemporaneity, this sense of Now. The invention of the camera created a great dividing line in our experience of the past.

Such thoughts arise when one gazes at the many existing photographs of Brahms. They put him in a different category to Beethoven, whom the passing of time has cut off from us, has reduced to a history-book figure. Brahms, by the aid of the camera, can be imagined as tenuously alive, as a real person to be seen walking about the streets of Vienna. The arguments for the greater truth of character portrayal achieved by the art of the portrait painter are still occasionally rehearsed and (more rarely) justified. It is also true that the typical nineteenth-century photograph is a posed one; whereas we esteem in a photograph a touch of the arbitrary, the fortuitous: the 'snapshot'. There are certainly enough posed photographs of Brahms and his colleagues. Typically, one hand is placed on a doily-covered table or on the back of an ornamental chair; neither prop has any significance or real existence outside the photographer's studio: the subject is dressed up in his best clothes; there is a set expression on his face.

Nevertheless, even posing reveals. The earliest images of Brahms show a boy both exceptionally vulnerable and utterly determined: a youth already sure of his genius. There is no weakness in the chin; but both the fashion of the time and, perhaps, the sort of person he turned into dictated that by his mid-forties he should have grown a beard. To turn abruptly to the end of his life: the latest photographs have nothing of the studio about them, and were taken mostly in informal circumstances. Brahms at Ischl – looking strangely clerical, a Victorian parson in his floppy off-duty summer suit – beside his close friend Johann Strauss II, moustached, dapper in his check trousers. In other snapshots, Brahms is made much of by, and responds with heavy flirtatiousness to, a series of dashing young ladies of the 1890s – grand-daughters of the generation of young ladies

that their cosseted old bear fell so fruitlessly in love with when, many centuries ago, he was young. They all know that – in spite of his sharp tongue and his yokel-like lip-smacking salaciousness – he is quite harmless really. But the most compelling of these late photos, obviously taken by happy chance and on the spur of the moment, is of a tubby, elderly Brahms in his best clothes, a little black derby perched on his head, a happy-looking Alice Barbi at his side, walking in the Ringstrasse. In so far as one can detect an expression on his shadowed face, it is that of a gentleman surprised during a walk, conscious of an intrusion. In that year of 1891 when the photo was taken, Brahms had written the Clarinet Quintet and the Clarinet Trio: and no photograph can come to terms with the significance of that astonishing fact.

In between youth and age there are endless photographic portraits of varying degrees of formality. One characteristic they all have in common: he never looks happy. The vulnerability of his youth has settled into a naked helplessness in the face of a hostile, alien world. Who was it who said that the eyes were windows of the soul? Look at the eyes: the camera reveals them as bottomless pools of sadness and despair. The rarely recorded – and then always superficial – manic counterbalance to this deep and perennial depression is hardly caught on camera. Truly, Brahms was the most profoundly unhappy of all the great composers.

This fact is quite central and everything else flows from it. Schubert said: “Do you know any jolly music? *I* don’t”; and Brahms would have agreed. And

> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious…[1]

this quality of seriousness – springing, in Brahms’s case, from acute personal misery – is something that appeals, and will always appeal, to large numbers of people who feel that they can respond to it and who esteem it accordingly.

Brahms’s eyes can tell us a lot: more so, his choice of texts. Goethe’s *Harzreise im Winter* might have been written especially for him to set: the young man, bereft, wanders through a landscape as cold and barren as his own inner state. It is also the metaphor of *Winterreise*, which it anticipates by some forty years. Brahms seized on the texts when his personal affairs were at their usual particularly low ebb. A touch of ludicrous insult added to injury came when Clara Schumann’s good-looking daughter Julie took it into her head to marry an Italian nobleman named Vittorio Radicati di Marmorito. The unlikely consequence – Brahms offered it as his ‘bridal song’ – was the sombre masterpiece the *Alto Rhapsody*. We are more justified in suggesting a causal connection here than between, say, Mozart’s G minor Quintet and the untimely death of his friend Count von Hatzfeld: for, after all, this was the nineteenth century, and Art and Life had now got themselves much more thoroughly entangled.[2]

Brahms began with the words

Aber abseits, wer ist's?	*But who is this that has turned aside?*
Ins Gebüsch verliert sich sein Pfad,	*His path gets lost in the undergrowth,*
Hinter ihm schlagen	*Behind him*
Die Sträuche zusammen,	*The bushes close,*
Das Gras steht wieder auf,	*The grass stands up again,*
Die Öde verschlingt ihn.	*The wilderness swallows him up.*

The gesture of turning aside has already appeared in the Hölty text *Die Mainacht*, which Brahms set in 1866. This time the protagonist is wandering through a nocturnal landscape far from barren, full of blossoms and the sounds of nightingales and doves. But, as the music gathers itself to an almost Tristanesque moment,

… ich wende mich,	*… I turn away,*
Suche dunklere Schatten …	*Seeking deeper shadows …*

He was always, in fact, to be turning away, seeking the deeper darkness: it soon became the pattern of his personal life.

Of course, all this is driven by the engines of a vast self-pity, and this automatically repels some. So was the poetry of Housman, and the results are magnificent. There are some other resemblances: both embattled, vulnerable, 'difficult', they none the less possessed everyday aspects of their existences which remained virtually untouched by the inevitable erosion of spirits. Of the two, Brahms emerges the more richly endowed character. Housman, the precise, demanding scholar, his chosen field cramped and specialized to the point of pedantry, confined himself to adding footnotes to minor ancient authors like some obscure kinglet taking possession of marginal, infertile territory. Brahms's scholarship and his public performing life were wide-ranging and fruitful; at least in this aspect he was fulfilled.

There is another comparison to be drawn. Housman's self-pity and pessimism were not just those of the *Shropshire Lad* disguised as a university professor. It has a cosmic dimension: 'I, a stranger and afraid / In a world I never made'; and the world was to be met with a stoicism learnt directly from the ancient world. Brahms had similarly imbibed this sort of wisdom through German literature.

The overwhelming lesson was that good things were only to be surveyed from afar, a huge extension of the text:

Dort, wo du nicht bist,	*There, where you are not,*
Dort ist das Glück.	*That is where happiness lies.*

Alice Barbi and Johannes Brahms on the Ringstrasse (Vienna)

At the time of the premiere of the German Requiem in 1868 he came across (a happy chance in those days) the poetry of Hölderlin, in particular *Hyperions Schicksalslied*. It depicts the heavenly ones in tranquil blessedness above; mortals, destined to find no resting place, below – to be hurled from rock to rock into the unknown abyss. The music moves from one level to another with abruptness. That the opening stanza, with its own ethereal music, is then repeated at the end cannot be read as an amelioration of Hölderlin's bleak conclusion, or dismissed as a capitulation to the imperatives of formal balance. It is there for a Brahmsian reason: to rub home the point about the separation of those above from those below and the impossibility of bridging the gap.

Webern loved these works, and used to conduct them. The *Schicksalslied* haunted his imagination as an ideal model for *Das Augenlicht*.[3] But he also cherished and brought to performance two other choral pieces which are amongst Brahms's finest music but which are otherwise sadly neglected and unknown to the wider musical public today.[4] The *Gesang der Parzen*, also a Goethe text, presents another vision of the gods in their infinite distance, their indifference to the 'suffering Titans' who serve them, their neglect of humankind. Then there was *Nänie* – always the remote Uranus of the Brahmsian planetary system. A

memorial piece (literally 'Dirge') for the painter Feuerbach, it uses a text by Schiller in order to lament the transience of all things beautiful: 'See, even the gods and goddesses weep that beauty must fade, that perfection must die.' The evocation of the world of classical mythology is complete. And since music is the transient art *par excellence*, it is the perfect vehicle for the transmission of such sentiments. Yet the piece is far from being an example of what it represents: it is fashioned austerely to fulfill all the requirements of timelessness, of durability, that are the true hallmarks of classic art. It is also one of Brahms's greatest and most inspired works, as calm as a statue, with the same enigmatic eyes.

All of these four texts were set by Brahms between 1869 and 1882, between his thirty-sixth and forty-ninth years. It is as if, in these years of artistic maturity, he was staking out his psychological territory, proclaiming it with the clarity of a manifesto. But his concentration upon romantic and ancient classical themes did not preclude the setting of religious words. The theme of transience – to be returned to in *Nänie* – provide the link with his selection of texts for *Ein deutsches Requiem*, meditated upon since the death of his mother in 1865: 'all flesh is as grass'.

It has often been remarked, particularly by his contemporaries, that Brahms's work carefully skirts round any mention of the name of Christ or any recognition of his Incarnation; and that Brahms successfully parried attempts by conventional believers to modify such exclusions. Nor – in spite of the sixth movement's substantial overlap with Handel's *Messiah* texts ('the trumpet shall sound …', 1 *Corinthians* 15) – is there much affirmative joy shown in the possibility of Resurrection. Yet the whole discriminating choice from a wide range of scripture – the Psalms, Isaiah, the Apocrypha, but the Gospels not so prominent as the Epistles and the Book of Revelation – show an intimate and long-standing acquaintanceship with the Lutheran Bible, suggesting not only regular reading of it, but also that that reading was suffused with deep piety.

Those without religious sense may minimize this, pointing out that knowledge of the Lutheran scriptures was just as much and as conventional a part of the cultivated German's *Bildung* as a grounding in the classics of German literature: Brahms was one of many working within a Greco-Judaic tradition. The music itself gives the lie to any such superficial dismissal. It is difficult for late twentieth-century man to appreciate the religious sense; we are doing well even if we conjure up some sense of the numinous, of awe, of the impossibility of understanding the natural world, and the realization that there is something beyond it. We are far more familiar with the cocksure, noisy, media-hungry atheists of our own day, the heroes of the television chat show who know that no courage is required for their bold stand, backed as it is by the implicit acquiescence of a materialistic audience.

In comparison, how profoundly religious these nineteenth-century unbelievers were, how acute their sense of mortality and transience, how serious and troubled,

indeed anguished, they were in their awareness of something missing, something they could not find but much wished to. That quality is encountered at its most sympathetic in Brahms. It was inevitable that he should turn naturally to the Book of Job, as he did in the finest of his motets, Op. 74, No. 1.

He might have written the text (from Chapter III) himself:

> Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery,
> And life to the bitter in soul;
>
> Which long for death, but it cometh not;
> And dig for it more than for hidden treasures;
>
> Which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad,
> When they can find the grave?
>
> Why is light given to the man whose way is hid,
> And whom God hath hedged in?

Typical too that Brahms should have composed these words during the same summer holiday that produced the Second Symphony. But then I have always found reports of that work's jolliness and lightheartedness to be greatly exaggerated.

Brahms's dark vision – of goodness impossibly far off, of the mortality and the transience of beauty, of the inevitability and omnipresence of personal misery – is best expressed by a twentieth-century voice:

> They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams
> An instant, then it's night once more.

The resonances of Brahms's music are not unfamiliar to those who dwell in the age of Beckett.

The image which recurs is, of course, that of Philoctetes and his bow (now, there's a subject for a truly Brahmsian opera!). Philoctetes – left behind on an island in his cave, nursing the Amfortas-like wound which pains him every waking moment, but always aware that the wound is of a smelly repulsiveness that must exclude him from the sympathy or even the company of others, who would identify him only as the object of wary, horrified pity. However: he has the bow, and only he can wield it. The artist as a wounded creature, both subversive and *lebensunfähig* (unfit or inadequate for life), outside civil society yet living off it as a parasite – this is very much like a nineteenth-century notion. But the true Philoctetes is not the happy-go-lucky, tragic, irresponsible, scrounging inhabitant of *La bohème*, not the Dubedat of Shaw's *Doctor's Dilemma* (in the

value of whose pictures we can never, in any case, quite believe), but the lonely sublimated obsessive with the petit-bourgeois life-style, seeking neither wealth nor fame and disregarding them if they come, giving his money away in many a secret benevolence while living the life of a clerk. The stoicism of the bachelor apartment: that is truly Philoctetes in his cave, and that was Brahms's style.

But photographs do not always bring us closer to their subjects: in many ways they distance us from them. If you look at Victorian photographs of industrial subjects, you are aware that the railway tracks and signals are recognizably familiar (like the buildings on the Ringstrasse in the background of the Barbi/Brahms photograph): but the human beings, differently dressed, are obviously of a bygone age, have now perished and are no more. Photographs can also remind us that Brahms, too, is far away and long ago. Between him and us there is a great gulf fixed: in the hundred intervening years so much has happened. Brahms in many ways, large and small, is on the other side of this huge divide.

For instance, Brahms never learnt to ride a bicycle, and it is difficult to see him on one. But H. G. Wells was bicycling away well before Brahms died. Freud had published *Traumdeutung* just before Brahms's death, but it's difficult to imagine Brahms consulting or even meeting him. Mahler, however, was to consult Freud in 1910. German scientists were doubtless already making the experiments which led to the invention of poison gas before 1897: but Brahms did not live on into the world in which poison gas rolled across the fields of northern France. Brahms had friends amongst painters, and in particular seems to have reciprocated the admiration of Max Klinger (whose paintings I find exceptionally awful). But Brahms wouldn't have been able to make much of the later Klimt,[5] or anything of Kokoschka or Cubism.[6] A new and terrible world was lining up outside, ready to take over, at the moment of his death. The Habsburgs fell and Lenin rose; there was the Jazz Age and the Weimar Republic and the Bauhaus and the Wall Street Crash. Then came dictatorships all over Europe, another world war, the death camps and the holocaust; Sartre, abstract expressionism, the hydrogen bomb, the cold war; international terrorism; at last the fall of the Berlin Wall; the computer revolution. And here we are, standing on the further side of all this. In the far distance there is a beard, faintly waving.

But if Brahms would have found the political twentieth-century world nightmarishly strange, what would he have made of its even more alien musical aspect? Even to ask the question, we indulge in the parlour game of hypothesis. It's perhaps more honest to assume of most composers that the limits of their understanding coincide pretty closely with the ending of their natural lives. It's sentimental to opine that J. S. Bach 'might well have liked' Gershwin (really because you like Gershwin yourself). He wouldn't. He'd have found even Haydn and Mozart hard going; both offensively trivial and sometimes even incomprehensible. And Beethoven? – 'not music at all'.

The first half of our century was distinguished by what appears to us now to have been a gallant rearguard action to preserve creatively the values of the past and to continue, but along radical lines, a great tradition. At present it seems like a lost cause: the fact that the work of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern has now reached the nadir of its fortunes is more than adequately indicated by the number of university undergraduate courses on the subject – the real kiss of death – as well as their absence from the concert hall. The key figure from the immediate past upon whom Schoenberg relied – much more so than upon Wagner – was Brahms. But plonk Brahms down at a performance of *Pierrot lunaire* and do you honestly imagine the compliment would have been returned? He could have recognized neither the homage nor the continuity, nor the similarity of the ideas in spite of the different sounds: again it would be a case of 'not music at all'.

Stravinsky he would heartily have disliked not merely because he was smart, fashionable, *mondain* (though because of that too), but more basically because he was Russian. He would thoroughly have distrusted the '*bragadoccio*' of Stravinsky's attitude to the past, with its irresponsible eclecticism – that of the cultural pirate, offending the scholar in Brahms.

As for the rest of the century … what would he have said? That welter, that helter-skelter succession of revivals and renewals and betrayals; of re-assessments and re-creations and returns and completely new starts; that sequence of immediately trumped extremes and immediately discredited theories to support those extremes; all that ill-judged co-option of ill-digested mathematics and politics and drama and philosophy and sociology and technology; that retreat into a myriad of private worlds, at first that of the coterie and the true believer, but later, more ominously, into the infantile solipsism of the nursery; finally irresponsible, irrational pre-natal regression to the womb itself, with no past – therefore no future. Latterly we have experienced all the commercial horrors of cross-over, the voluntary espousal of all that is most ephemeral and idiotically mechanical in modern life; and (reaction against a reaction) the resort to a cut-price religiosity that will heal all wounds, a pocket mysticism breathing some divine muzak adjusted to the attention-span of the middle-brow purchaser of a compact disc: essential easy listening, feel-good religion without dogma, without tradition, without sense. Maybe we are passing through a bad patch: but every society gets the sort of music it deserves.

Why then do I today revere Brahms as much as any other composer? The negative part of the answer lies above.

So a great gulf is fixed, then, between us and Brahms? This must not imply that he was cosily ensconced in his Victorian garden. He was a stranger there too: if not afraid, then certainly in a world he never had made – and had (as we have seen) great difficulties in coming to terms with. If he is remote from us, then he was equally remote from his contemporaries.

And then, is that gulf so great? The atrocities that I have detailed above would be thought marginal by many practicing musicians, for whom the fabric of continuing musical society remains whole, if a bit tattered. It is only in fact my more right-on Brothers in Apollo who feel far away from this master musician (and needless to say from the idea of mastery). For some of us he has never gone away.

A story (which, like most stories, reveals my age) will illustrate both these points. I have always been enchanted by a remark of the distinguished art historian Sir Ernst Gombrich when he was introducing his choice of records on the BBC some years ago. It must be explained that his mother was a remarkable piano teacher who settled in Oxford and gave her last piano lesson a week before she died at the age of ninety-five. Sir Ernst chose like a cultivated Viennese – all the way through the classics to the 'Champagne Aria' from *Fledermaus*. "And modern music?" He then said, "With modern music I am in agreement with my mother. She used to say: 'I don't mind modern music *at all*. Why, I've even got *quite to like Brahms*.' And that is my position also."

The point of this story is not so much to highlight the continued existence of Brahmsian Old Incorrigibles, exhibiting a hyper-conservatism which is itself very Viennese. It is to remind ourselves that Brahms was himself modern, difficult and not accepted, found rebarbative and new-fangled and impossible, long before he became stuffy, backward-looking, old fashioned. In the last decade of his life he may well have been revered not only in Vienna and the rest of northern Europe but also widely in North America as the world's greatest living composer. But this did not necessarily reflect itself in any great readiness to perform his music, which continued to be regarded as problematical, austere and forbidding (and, for those with ears to hear, remains so to this present day), or once it was performed, in any great response to it on the part of critics or public alike. The 1894 *Grove*, which lists his works up to 1878, tempers its reverential praise with reservations along these lines.

The distinguished cultural historian Peter Gay has written an article entitled '*Aimez-vous Brahms*?', which is the most brilliant account of Brahms reception history that I have ever read.[7] His main theme is the malaise at the heart of modernism, of which he gives a very acute analysis. He paints a compelling portrait of Brahms's musical personality, and shows its curiously oblique relation to the polarities inherent in modernist thinking. He then goes on to demonstrate the surprising paucity of Brahms performances, even during the last twenty years of his life, the virtual absence of his main works from programmes in Germany and elsewhere, and the chilly reserve of the critical reaction to those which were performed. More surprisingly, even the informed inner circle – the young Richard Strauss or Max Bruch or Hans von Bülow – expressed their bewilderment. The refrain was always the same: repeated hearings were needed – a typical reaction of those well-disposed towards modern music but honestly

puzzled by it to the present day. The key critical phrase was 'strangely neglected' (a cliché used to the point of parody in the pages of *Lucky Jim*):

> Brahms was not just neglected, he was strangely neglected … It is apparent then, that difficulty did not preclude esteem. But with Brahms it was esteem chilled by a sense of duty. Most of his contemporaries ingested Brahms like some nutritious but unpalatable diet; he was good for one.[8]

Brahms himself realized that respect, rather than love, was the best that he could expect. Gay's section titles 'The Cerebral Sentimentalist' and 'The Alienated Conformist' summarize well the drift of his argument. He charts the change from the misleading nineteenth-century view of Brahms to the equally misleading twentieth-century view of him in a single telling sentence:[9]

> Brahms the frigid intellectual has become Brahms the sultry sentimentalist …

Sultry sentimentalist, or simply old bore: there certainly was a reaction. And it was natural enough: the oldest of generation games, that of the revolt against authority. In this country Parry and (with less individuality) Stanford had set themselves to produce surplus Brahms as a sign of allegiance. It would have been surprising if their pupils – nationalism and folk-song apart – had not stirred themselves to revolt: albeit in a very gentlemanly *English* way. The First World War gave all this reaction a political dimension; the Franco-Russian orientation was dominant here, and Brahms just another of the Old Gang, to be dismissed by those who enjoyed the scornful venom of 'Eminent Victorians'.

Those who have heard the gramophone record of Nadia Boulanger playing Brahms waltzes in duet with Dinu Lipatti will be hesitant to accuse her of a total lack of sympathy for Brahms: human beings, as every Proustian knows, are more complicated than that. At the same time, downgrading of Brahms did become a sort of unofficial academic orthodoxy amongst her pupils: I remember one of them, a lady composer of my own generation, for whom such doctrine was an article of faith.

Then there was the thirty-six-year-old Benjamin Britten (old enough to know better), who was proud in 1949 to declare that every other year or so he took down the works of Brahms to see if they were as bad as he remembered them to be – and discovered them to be worse. Even so, he had to confess a certain *tendresse* for the Clarinet Quintet (like having a single female friend).

But the Boulanger Influence (to use a shorthand for all this spinsterly lack of response) lingers on. Only a couple of years ago, in an interview on one of those endless old-music programmes on the radio that we now enjoy as a substitute

for culture, a middle-aged Scottish composeress was heard to say (she was enlarging upon a youthful infatuation with Stravinsky): 'I wanted to get away from all that nineteenth-century *Schmalz*.' The remark comes straight out of the 1920s. In this comprehensive anathema – pronounced on the century which gave us Beethoven's late quartets, Schubert's last piano sonatas, Chopin's Ballades, Verdi's richly Shakespearean world of operas, *Götterdämmerung*, *Parsifal* … all of them *Schmalz* – Brahms would certainly have been included. Such judgments, delivered without thought and without shame, illustrate in a small way our predicament *vis-à-vis* the past: a large subject, to which we must return. In this minor case the attitude is one of simple dislike fuelled by ignorance, and the uneasiness which springs from ignorance.

It is time for another photograph, and a poem to go with it. Brahms, bearded, magisterial, is reading alone in what seems to us an oppressively stuffy, over-furnished mid-Victorian room: a substantial volume is held up to his eyes. Brahms certainly studied Wagner; the poet Roy Fuller assumed (on what authority?) that this was a score of *Siegfried* and wrote a poem titled after the work.[10] Fuller's approach is oblique, beginning with an adroit and witty physical description of the room and its occupant. In the last three stanzas we reach the nub:

> The peering old man holds the little score so close
> His white beard sweeps the page: but gives no sign
> That he perceives – or smells –
> Anything untoward.
>
> He could not be expected to be thinking
> That the legend of courage, kiss and sword arose
> From those atrocious Huns
> Who ruined an empire's comfort.
>
> But how can he not be falling back aghast
> At the chromatic spectrum of decay,
> Starting to destroy already
> His classical universe?

It's a good question, as politicians like to say. We might answer it (another politician's trait) evasively – that is, in more general terms. Brahms's actual attitude to both Wagner in general and *The Ring* in particular has been very perceptively analyzed elsewhere by Michael Musgrave.[11] As for the wider issues – such as the end of civilization as we know it, as foreseen in the destruction of his classical universe – I think I've gone already about as far as one can into the thickets of hypothesis to explore Brahms's possible views about these.

But in any case, Brahms could on occasion himself wield a chromatic sword worthy of any atrocious Hun. How on earth, for instance, did he get into E♭ minor (if that is what it is) in the development of the first movement of the A minor Double Concerto? Elsewhere there are even more sensational attempts to embrace, in a small compass, the whole chromatic field: the virtual pan-tonality of the Trio belonging to the Scherzo of the C major Trio, Op. 87, or, more modestly, the same tendency in the entirely *terzverwandtschaftlich* last page of the C minor Trio, Op. 101. But most sophisticated of all (and predating all these examples by nearly twenty years) is the desolate – and because of this, disorientated – opening of the *Alto Rhapsody*. The initial bewildering augmented triad is soon followed by another a tone lower – taking us into remote, uncharted regions long before the tonic is at all decisively asserted. It all happens again when the voice comes in, but this time a substantial Neapolitan shelf is interposed ('*das Gras steht wieder auf*') before C minor is fully achieved. It matches anything in Wagner in its harmonic/tonal subtlety.[12] Brahms was here not so much falling back aghast at the chromatic spectrum of decay as enthusiastically contributing to it.

We cannot actually read the title on the spine of the book that Brahms is reading: it is equally likely that he might have had a volume of old music up to his nose. Once again, there is no need here to recapitulate the researches of Virginia Hancock,[13] which underline in a wealth of detail the now universally accepted truth that, for a man of the nineteenth century – itself a heroic age for the scholarly exploration of the past – Brahms was uniquely knowledgeable and put his knowledge, as we now increasingly realize, to wonderful creative use. So Mozart's van Swieten-led rediscovery of Bach and Handel, Beethoven's trumpetings in his letters about old Sebastian Bach's 'Crucifixus' (and knowledge of the *Goldberg Variations* displayed in the *Diabelli Variations*), even J. S. Bach's incessant copying of Frescobaldi amongst many others – all these now fall palely into the background. It was Brahms who re-lived the past more than any previous musician in history; who developed, quite on his own, a deeper understanding of it; who was a pioneer in the acquisition of a 'historical sense'.

'After such knowledge, what forgiveness?' For Brahms was not only the first composer fully to mine the past's riches, he was also the last to be able to bear on his shoulders – Atlas-like (and *unglückselig*, as always) – the enormous burden of what had been vouchsafed to him. That he felt this pressure is confirmed by endless utterances, always expressing his unworthiness, even in relation to the generation immediately before him. Strip off the layers of crawly self-deprecation to which he was prone – the new overtures which were unnecessary as long as those of Weber, Cherubini and Mendelssohn remained in print – and you still have to realize that Brahms's relation to his predecessors – to Beethoven in particular – was not a happy one. The best-known and most frequently quoted of all Brahms quotations is worth citing in the original German:[14]

> Du hast keinen Begriff davon, wie es unsereinem zu Mute ist, wenn er immer so einen Riesen hinter sich marschieren hört.
> (You haven't the faintest idea what it feels like, for people like of us, always to hear such a giant marching along behind one.)

The threatening violence of the imagery conjures up a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. His apprehension was shared, whether they were fully aware of it or not, by many another nineteenth-century composer. Nevertheless, he spoke from the heart there. But he might well have said the same thing about J. S. Bach.

Brahms felt the cold winds of history blowing – and had also leaning heavily on him a mass of personal inhibition and uncertainty. He went on creating none the less, and out of his predicament he built a style. Both its unique character and Brahms's acute self-awareness of his historical position are perfectly expressed in perhaps the two most eloquent and penetrating sentences ever written about this aspect of his music:

> The sense of an irrecoverable past … is omnipresent in the music of Brahms, resignedly eclectic, ambiguous without irony. The depth of his feeling of loss gave an intensity to Brahms's work that no other imitator of the classical tradition ever reached; he may be said to have made music out of his openly expressed regret that he was born too late.[15]

Brahms was oppressed by and in love with the past (the two conditions are similar), but not defeated by it. After his death, the position deteriorated, and the burden of the past became too much for twentieth-century man.[16] We cannot come to terms with the past; for a start, it offers too much of a challenge, and we have become thoroughly screwed up in our attitude towards it. The simplest reaction is that of hostility *à l'outrance*: the cavalier attitude of the Futurists ('flood the museums') or, equally silly, of Boulez ('blow up the opera houses'). Far more widespread is plain uneasiness, which shows itself up in ambivalence. The acute self-consciousness which has ruled since Freud, and which – together with ghastly ecumenical tolerance towards everything, however nugatory, and everybody, however horrible (the most characteristic of the late twentieth-century's Deadly Virtues) – is focused on how we behave towards those who came before us: what we call Tradition.

How often one has read in stupid books and articles: 'the shackles of tradition' – when one knows perfectly well that the writer has never seen a shackle, far less recognized a tradition. Ninety years ago tradition began to be taken for granted, as if it were one of the public services. Then it was despised, as another word for routine: *Tradition ist Schlamperei*. Now, because of this descent, we have only the *Schlamperei* left. So it has become perfectly possible simply to shut our eyes and ears, like the child in the nursery blocking out the unwelcome sight. Or – to look,

Johannes Brahms reading in the library of Viktor Miller zu Aicholz

to take it all in, to be appalled, to remain silent. These phenomena constitute the dilemma which is the root cause of all the strange twists and turns of twentieth-century artistic thought that I listed earlier – it may be thought a shade too excitedly. The figure of Brahms stands before all that. He was the last person to see the whole predicament and to be able to cope with it. That is his importance to the darkened world of today.

My favourite story – the account of an episode that has all the clarity of a snapshot – is of Brahms's meeting with the young Zemlinsky. I am haunted by it. Zemlinsky had written a string quintet; Brahms actually asked him whether he would come and see him: "Of course, only if you're interested in talking to me about it." Zemlinsky hesitated a long time before ringing the bell of Brahms's flat:

> … to talk to Brahms was no easy matter. Question and answer were short, sharp, seemingly cool and often very ironic. He took my quintet through with me at the piano. At first correcting gently, considering one part or another most carefully, never really praising or even encouraging me, and finally getting steadily more emphatic. And when timidly I tried to defend part of the development section which seemed to me to be rather successful in the Brahmsian manner, he opened the score of the Mozart quintets, explained to me the perfection of this "unsurpassed formal design" and it sounded quite to the point and inevitable when he added "That's how it's done from Bach to me!"[17]

'That's how it's done from Bach to me!' What a superb remark – and what an entirely justified one. At last Philoctetes flourishes his bow and extols its qualities and its heritage. Brahms – all that crawly, joky self-deprecation left far behind – shows his awareness of his own true worth: standing at full height, he lets slip to a twenty-three-year-old student his full self-knowledge and realization of his place in history (so natural for him as to be taken for granted). Only a truly great man possesses inside himself such an accurate estimate of his worth: and that, most of the time, has to stay locked up inside. It remains incomprehensible, indeed intangible, to the mean-minded mob of the world, and therefore the subject of their mockery.

One reflects that there is no one in the musical world today who could possibly make such a claim, or sustain it. Worse: there is no one who would wish to, who would have any interest in belonging to such a tradition or feel an honour to continue it. The only possibly candidate – or indeed, applicant – died some forty-eight years ago in Los Angeles. Since then, we have lived without such a figure of authority.

Indeed, the existence of such a person is frowned upon, because, together with tradition, authority itself has become suspect. In an age of tyrants and monsters, we have learnt to despise anyone who stands out from the rest, whose word is law. Because we have blunted our minds to the extent that we can no longer tell the difference between good authority and bad authority, we are ready to cry "fascist!" without even knowing what a fascist is. Because the Parisian literary critics have encouraged us not to draw any distinction between high and low art, between the lasting and the worthlessly ephemeral, we can only sigh: *Derrida-down-derry.* My Brothers-in-Apollo have not lagged behind the servants of the other muses in their dislike of the idea of one person being any better than another; but then it has long been obvious that the concept of anybody happening to write better music than the next practitioner of his art would have to be the next citadel to fall. Those of us who can recognize and then respect the exceptional achievement of exceptional people are told that we are suffering from some curious psychological condition to do with our fathers. The most boring ideal of the French Revolution has come home to roost: *Liberté*, *Egalité*, *Stupidité*.

The first way – and, when all is said and done, the only important way – in which Brahms exercises authority is over the notes themselves; and that to an extent and depth only inadequately revealed by analysis – though it helps. There is in Brahms's music a curious intensification of that air of authenticity that all great music possesses – that which impels one to realize that the notes themselves wield an authority, in the sense that they could in no way be different from what they are. Brahms's manuscript-burning sessions – those at the end of his life, particularly, but also the earlier destruction of (it is said) some twenty string quartets before three were allowed to remain – are often idly speculated upon. It is remarked with a sort of despairing condescension that maybe better quartets perished than the ones that survived. What impertinence! The unearthings of unauthorised juvenilia by composers as various as Webern and Britten have been complete disasters. A truer corollary to be drawn is that Brahms knew exactly what he was doing and that everything he allowed to stand he intended to stand by, to be judged by. Random fits of substandard composing, such as every young composer nowadays considers to be the limits of his responsibility, or the cult of the fragment in 'work in progress' and all its attendant aleatory-improvisatory-participatory-jiggery-pokery-fakery, such as their elders used to go in for, would have been to Brahms repulsively alien. The concept of a corpus of work – the product of a lifetime's meditation and activity – was axiomatic for him. With us it has virtually vanished.

The interview with Zemlinsky displays another aspect of authority, the authority of example: that which is exerted by the transmission of that tradition which Brahms loved with such a bitter love – that is, by teaching, by actively

demonstrating 'that's how it's done from Bach to me!' It is inconceivable to imagine Brahms as a member of any teaching institution: his multifarious musical activities luckily always brought him enough money never to have to sink that low. Nor did these activities ever embrace regular systematic instruction either of a class or of individuals: that onerous and somewhat self-abnegatory activity which nevertheless fed the creative careers of both Schoenberg and Messiaen. His one known pupil, Gustav Jenner, must surely have survived a good deal of putting-off noises when he first arrived, and even more subsequently.

Those who came to him for consultation were treated roughly: in the vast majority of cases, rightly so. Brahms couldn't be bothered with the second-rate, and, one may suspect, was concerned to preserve standards inside the profession. Whom could we call on to perform his function today? The two most frequently cited cases are those of Hugo Wolf and Hans Rott. It's interesting to compare Wagner's reception of the adolescent Wolf with that of Brahms. Wolf's fawning ways worked, of course, with that vain old monster Wagner: they didn't with Brahms. He told him to go away and study counterpoint – a good idea. He must have found Wolf already as insufferable as many others did later on. Wolf turned out to be the sort of composer who wrote regularly for the newspapers (like César Cui and Berlioz and, alas, Debussy – but then Debussy's journalism is embarrassingly bad). To Brahms it would have been inconceivable to write for the newspapers. Composers should not do so: you don't hunt with the fox and run with the hounds. As for Hans Rott – if you can't stand the heat, keep out of the kitchen. At least his delusion that Brahms had filled a railway train with dynamite allows a sparkle of black comedy to break through all this nineteenth-century worthiness.

If we return to the present day, we find the whole practice of composition teaching to have collapsed entirely. Even the mere interchange of information between teacher and taught is clogged up by the circumstance that the pupil is not interested in receiving it – it isn't 'relevant' to his or her needs. In most cases the student is not at all interested in music itself – not as much as the average music lover – but only in 'expressing' him- or herself (whatever that means). As for the transmission of experience – well, forget it. And as for any serious criticism of a student's piece, any suggestion that it could be done differently (or, well, *better*), or that it could, possibly, be junked altogether in favour of something else – the degree of lack of talent possessed determines the speed with which he or she will walk out of the room, never to come back.

And of course the student's outrage is only a justifiable reflection of what the greater, grown-up world has already told him or her. For it is now quite bereft of anything resembling artistic standards. There are commercial considerations and the dictates of market-driven fashion. Nothing thrives in this concrete wilderness but a thousand bad composers, who flourish through the cracks like weeds. I am not sure that Brahms could recognize much in our present-day

world that really demanded to be taken seriously; but I am convinced that most of it would earn his bark of disapproval.

There is one last photograph to be presented, but this one was never taken (and never can be taken of any composer). It portrays the scene always missing from Ken Russell films about composers – or, indeed, from any romantic novel about them. It is that of Brahms working, of the silent (or noisy) hours of solitude, stretching from the first strong coffee very early in the morning until about lunch-time: the hours of a composer's most active consciousness into which a commentator, even more so a psychologist, intrudes at his peril. Already we have surveyed the periphery of our subject: Brahms as a historical figure; his relations to his times and ours; his attitude to the past and (hypothetically) the future; his place as the last universally acceptable, and accepted, figure of authority. But what exactly resulted from these solitary hours on the Baltic coast, on the Wörthersee, in Switzerland, or at home near the Karlskirche? What about his music?

Indeed, what makes Brahms not only a very great but also a very good composer? His absolute and total preoccupation with the *materia musicae*, his supreme skill in handling it, and his assumption, like Bach, that counterpoint is the child of passion not calculation – that there is no conflict between technique and expressiveness, but rather that one feeds the other, and that both are mutually dependent. These are every composer's virtues, but writ very large with Brahms. To demonstrate all this in detail would be the task of a much more technical work, one that would mean little to the many to whom Brahms's music appeals and who are unaware of any of these factors. Once again, '*Seid umschlungen, Millionen*'.

A few months ago I found myself listening by chance to the closing pages of the slow movement of the First Piano Concerto. What music could better give a sense of the melancholy with which we wander through the world, dazed and questing, scarcely able to believe in the beautiful and terrible things that we encounter, that sometimes happen to us and that sometimes we make happen? Listening onwards into the finale, I experienced, as if it were for the first time, that leap for joy that starts with the B♭ arpeggio on the strings (directly after the first double bar (bar 181)): a moment that, by definition, can only happen once.

I remember listening to the Violin Concerto in a barrack-room some forty-five years ago. The tantalizing omission of the second subject proper from the orchestral exposition (you can hear the music turning aside from the spiralling upbeat figure) makes its eventual appearance in the hands of the soloist all the more ravishing. But this delayed satisfaction is outdone by the second subject's treatment in the recapitulation. It is presented in B major – which then pales into B minor, and is then overlaid by the high-register entry of violins in the home key.

The wonders of this movement are not over. After the cadenza the soloist restates the main theme in its highest register. But as the bass line falls from D to C♮, the soloist floats away higher and higher – a child's balloon ascending far, far away into the deep azure of a very Italian sky – until it reaches a high C♯. At that moment – whether the landscape be Alpine or Mediterranean – one is truly '*ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens*'.[18]

But at the moment my head is full of the Double Concerto – its drama and driving passion, those throbbing dissonant syncopated chords giving way to the orchestral strings which come storming in from on high: the heart-breaking, urgent tenderness of the second subject with the breathlessness imparted by dislocation of harmony and beat (one day I must look up the Viotti original). It is for me, in its vitality and virility, in the way that it holds nothing back, a deeply Schoenbergian work. Brahms's toughness, his stoic masculinity comes over superbly in this piece; the whole man is there.

It is not a bad idea to end with the heroic – beyond optimism or pessimism. '*Erst verachtet, nun ein Verächter*' – this line from *Harzreise im Winter* seems a good motto for Philoctetes,[19] his wound forgotten, his bow now performing miracles – though they are not recognized. I think about Brahms having behaved badly at some party, throwing over his departing shoulder the Parthian shot, "if there is anybody in this room that I have not insulted – I apologize". Another good motto from the Beard in the Middle Distance – and an admirable guide to behaviour.

As I sit in reflection in the late twentieth century, I think about Brahms.

Source: *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, edited by Michael Musgrave, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 268-87 and 305-06. The author wrote again on Brahms in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* (23 July 1999) of Leon Botstein's *The Compleat Brahms. A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms*.

The following notes are the author's.

1 Philip Larkin, 'Church Going' from *The Less Deceived*, *Collected Poems*, London, Marvell Press, Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 97-8.

2 One only regrets that Brahms cut such a small tranche from the middle of this superb poem, which ends with a magnificent peroration evoking the subject matter of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and begins with an arresting image:

Dem Geier gleich	*Just as the vulture*
Der auf schweren Morgenwolken	*Reposing on heavy clouds of morning*
Mit sanftem Fittich ruhend	*With a gentle wing*
Nach Beute schaut	*Looks out for prey,*
Schwebe mein Lied.	*[So too] may my song float.*

How could he have resisted the vulture hovering …? Brahms's own ending, the closing chorale, is, alas, the weakest section of the piece, attempting consolation and reconciliation but only achieving a certain sanctimoniousness.

3 Stated by Webern's pupil, Arnold Elston. See: Hans Moldenhauer, *Anton Webern, A Chronicle of His Life and Work*, London, 1978, p. 481.

4 Interest has, however, been increasing latterly, and the centennial year brought some welcome performances. Claudio Abbado has recorded *Nänie*, the Alto Rhapsody and *Gesang der Parzen* with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and the Berlin Radio Chorus, CD DG 435342-2 DDD.

5 The first Viennese performance of the Clarinet Quintet took place in the music room of the Palais Wittgenstein – much frequented by Brahms, who had his special chair near the door so he could slip in and out. The room had sculptures by Max Klinger but also panels by Gustav Klimt. Did Brahms avert his eyes? We shall never know. In any case, the room was destroyed during the Second World War. See also: Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, Oxford, 1997.

6 The visual tastes of the great composers are another matter entirely, perhaps better left to an article on Schoenberg's paintings (and Ingres's violin playing).

7 Peter Gay, 'Aimez-vous Brahms? On Polarities in Modernism', *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture*, Oxford, 1978, pp. 231-56.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

10 Roy Fuller, 'Brahms Perusing the Score of *Siegfried*' (from the collection *Buff* (Deutsch)), *Music and Sweet Poetry*, London, ed. John Bishop, John Baker, 1968, p. 147.

11 Michael Musgrave, 'The Cultural World of Brahms' in: *Brahms: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies*, ed. Robert Pascall, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 21-2.

12 If we are to pursue the comparison: Wagner said that composition was the art of transition. Yet some of Brahms's transitions are better – superior in subtlety and expedition – than the sometimes bumpy scene-shifting to which we are occasionally subjected in Wagner. Conversely, Brahms's subtlety would have gone for nothing in the theatre.

13 Virginia Hancock, articles in *Brahms: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies*, ed. Robert Pascall, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 27-40 and *Brahms 2: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies*, ed. Michael Musgrave, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 95-110.

14 Brahms's comment to Hermann Levi, quoted in Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 4 vols., Berlin, 1904-14; reprinted 1976, vol. I, p. 165.

15 Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, expanded edition, New York, 1997, p. 460.

16 Johannes Brahms died on 3 April 1897; he was born on 7 May 1833.

17 See: 'Alexander von Zemlinsky and Karl Weigl: Brahms and the Newer Generation: Personal Reminiscences', *Brahms and His World*, trans. and ed. Walter Frisch, Princeton, 1990, pp. 205-06.

18 'Exposed on the mountains of the heart' (Rainer Maria Rilke).

19 'Initially despised, now a despiser.'