Brahms and the Return of the Symphony

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Symphony in the mid 19 cent. ("The Symphonic Crisis")

▶ Wagner, in Artwork of the Future: Beethoven’s 9 th has made all purely instrumental music (including the symphony) obsolete.

▶ Opera and Drama: the fact that Beethoven resorted to vocal music proves that ‘absolute music’ must be ‘redeemed’ in music drama.

▶ With the rise of conservatories, the symphony becomes a “classical” genre, i.e. an academic one.

▶ Decline in total number of symphonies (in Austro-German world):
  ▶ 1800-1809 – 50
  ▶ 1830-1839 – 20
  ▶ 1830-1839 – 20
  ▶ 1850-1859 - 19

(Source: “The Symphony in Brahms’s World,” in Brahms: The Four Symphonies (Walter Frisch), p. 3)
The Symphonic Style

- Themes suitable to symphonic form
- Themes that are unrealizable except in symphonies
- *Thematische Arbeit* (thematic working).
- Coherence/organicism.
- Taruskin: “‘The result was a kind of stranglehold on symphonic composers.’”
Symphony and the Public

- Beethoven (and Schubert) had no permanent symphony to play his music. Every occasion was ad-hoc.
- But in the mid-19th century, that has changed (bourgeois music consuming class with disposable income).
- 1831 Vienna Society of Friends Music Hall erected
- 1858 London St. James Hall – 2127 people!
- 1860 Vienna Philharmonic
- 1870 Grosser Saal (or, “Goldener Saal”) – 2000 people!
- 1870 Dresden Chamber of Commerce Hall
- 1891 Music Hall in New York – Carnegie Hall
- Music culture comes to emphasize mechanical facility over “musical” training, for the reproduction of canonized classics.
- **Increased public demand for symphonies alongside decrease in symphonic output** – “museum culture”.
Classical music as “mass culture” I

  - Growth of publishing industry
  - large scale concerts driven by standing professional orchestras.
  - “classical” taste engenders the polarity of “popular” and classical.
  - “With the simultaneous collapse of the patronal tradition and the rise of the printing industry, musical taste suddenly went to extremes of levity and seriousness.” (186)
  - The cultivation of “classical” music connoisseurship — and the attendant idea that there exists a difference between serious and “vernacular” music — can thus be shown to have an essentially economic root.
This “classicizing” impulse clashes with the historicist sensibility:

No wonder, then, that symphonic production had fallen off. On the one hand, it had been declared obsolete by the lofty arbiters of musical “progress,” and on the other it had to vie in the real world (the world of expenses, promotions, and remunerations) with works that had been declared timelessly enduring—hence unsurpassable—achievements.

(Taruskin)
A strange but durable amalgam of esthetic idealism and crass commercialism had equated repertoire and canon, at least for the present, and thereby frozen both. Music of easy audience appeal was excluded and had to find other outlets, other venues. Thus not only was “classical” or “art” music born at that crucial nineteenth-century midpoint; so was “popular” or “entertainment” music (commercially purveyed music not meant for permanent display but for instantaneous, ephemeral success). The simultaneous origin of both these categories, eternally antithetical though they may appear to us by now, was only inevitable, since each was defined by the other’s exclusion.
Brahms and the Crisis

What is most radical about Brahms’s music is that he faced head on the problems of writing for a concert audience familiar with the music of the past, the problem that has been the principal concern of serious composers since his time.

(Peter Burkholder, “Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music”)

Musical modernity = relationship to the past – precisely the opposite of the criterion relevant to the New German School (Zukunftsmusik).
Early life in Hamburg probably not as poor as has been believed.

Father Johann was a musician. Mother, Johanna Henrika Christiane Nissen, was a seamstress from a bourgeois family.

Gifted: Eduard Marxen teaches him piano for free.

Kurt Hoffman shows that anecdotes about Brahms playing piano at strip clubs were most likely the composer’s own fabrications.

In 1848, hears the music of Hungarian refugees fleeing for the USA. Especially violinist Ede Remenyi.
Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897) II

1853 goes on tour with Remenyi; meets Liszt, Joseph Joachim and the Schumanns. Schumann loves his music; proclaims the arrival of a musician
called to give expression to his times in ideal fashion: a musician who would reveal his mastery not in gradual stages but like Minerva would spring fully armed from Kronos’s head. And he has come; a young man over whose cradle Graces and Heroes have stood watch. His name is Johannes Brahms

(Schumann, ”Neue Bahnen” (New Paths), in NZM 1853)
Hermann Helmholtz, Science, Pianos I

- 1862 On the Sensations of Tone – Physics of sound, physiology and psychology of perception, and, crucially, the (debatable) relationship of aesthetics
- Divergent legacy: Schenker (natural basis for tonality) and Schoenberg (consonance is historically contingent)
- CF Theodor Steinway worked for Helmholtz!
- Duplex scaling, patented in 1870s.
- Double stringing
- Metal in the soundboard to nature
- Vis a vis Wagner, the anti-Wagnerians justify themselves in scientific terms:
  - Science appears to validate instrumental music itself
  - They postulate that music operates according to a natural logic – which seems to go better with Brahms’s aesthetic. “Music is the algebra of the arts.” (R Wallascheck, quoted in Botstein, “Time and Memory in Brahms’s Vienna,” p. 14)
Empirical consideration of the physiology of hearing reveals that we’re all basically equally endowed: this points to a valuation of musical cultivation, which intelligent hearing of Brahms demands.

“The historicism of Brahms’s formal models and procedures – in sonata form and variation – was justified as an act of building on the truth, much as a scientist of Brahms’s generation might build on proven hypotheses and then modify, elaborate and revise that truth.” (Botstein)
Brahms, music I

- 1853 Piano Sonata no. 3 in F minor
- 1861 Piano Quartet no. 1 op. 25
- Insignificance of materials vs. significance of development
- **Developing Variation**
- **Ein Deutsches Requiem**
- Taruskin: “Liberal “uniter or the religiously divided German speaking peoples.”
- Taruskin: “The archaism is not so much stylistic (or “epigonal”) as “procedural”—not an imitation or even an emulation (since there is no sense that Brahms was competing with Schein) but rather a reference or allusion, the rhetorical device of which Brahms is emerging as the supreme nineteenth-century musical master.”
“From the mid 1870s on, Brahms and the Viennese contemporaries with who he associated were primarily preoccupied with the anxious perception that a precipious decline in the standards of musical culture was underway.” (Leon Botstein, in Cambridge Companion to Brahms, p. 54)

1871 8 Klavierstucke, Op. 76, no. 5, Capriccio

Rhythmic displacement, 3/4 and 6/8 simultaneously.

Melody suggesting 3/4, bass in 6/8 and tenor line that could be either one.

1874 Nietzsche publishes “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.”

Our age is “over saturated” with history. Too much history, he argues, “implanted the belief...that one is a latecomer and an epigone; it leads an age into a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism.”
Brahms, music III

- 1892 3 intermezzi, no. 2
- 1893 8 Klavierstücke, op. 118, no. 6 Intermezzo
Struggle with Wagnerism

going public with symphonic and orchestral music constituted a public statement in response to a perceived need to challenge the Wagnerian appropriation of Beethoven and put forward a competitive example – in music – of how history could be respected...and yet serve as a source of contemporary inspiration.