Review: Brahmsiana

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THE INDEX OF THE MUSICAL TIMES—enlarged, re-arranged, and greatly improved—for the past year (1899) is now ready, and may be obtained gratis upon application to Messrs. Novello, the publishers.

DR. PHILIP ARMES, Professor of Music in the University of Durham, and organist of Durham Cathedral, will form the subject of our biographical sketch in the February issue.

BRAHMSIANA.*

SIDELIGHTS are of the greatest possible value in biography. Next to letters written by the person biographised, the trustworthy recollections of his friends take first rank as personalia. Whoever writes the "Life" of Brahms will find much in this delightful volume to rejoice his heart. These "Recollections"—which, as the fair translator truly says, "are the nearest approach to a biography as yet in existence"—are by two of the composer's intimate friends, Professor Dietrich and Dr. J. V. Widmann. Let us see what they have to tell us about Johannes Brahms.

Professor Dietrich was a member of the group of young musicians who gathered round Schumann at Düsseldorf. His "Recollections" of Brahms cover a period of twenty-one years, 1853 to 1874. At a rehearsal of the Düsseldorf Choral Society Schumann came up to Dietrich and said, with an air of mystery and a happy smile: "One has come of whom we shall all hear great things: his name is Johannes Brahms," thus forecasting the famous *Neue Bahnen* article. Thereupon ensued an introduction to the youthful, almost boyish-looking musician (*ætat* 20), with his high-pitched voice, long, fair hair, and deep blue eyes. At an evening party Brahms played with wonderful power and mastery Bach's F major Toccata and his own Scherzo in E flat minor, "bending his head down over the keys, and, as was his wont, in his excitement humming the melody aloud as he played." Shortly afterwards, during an excursion to Grafenburg, and while walking across the fields, the skittish young composer pulled up some turnips, and, after carefully cleaning them, offered them to the ladies of the party as refreshment!

Dietrich knew the "dear old mother" of Brahms, who told him that, as a boy, her Johannes was passionately fond of tin soldiers! Even when he had reached the age of twenty-eight he kept the different boxes of soldiers locked up in his desk, as "he could not bring himself to part with such dear mementoes of his childhood." Although Brahms led a very simple life money was "very necessary" to him, and therefore he would not play at concerts or at Court without remuneration. During one of his visits to Dietrich he was much attracted by "a very nice girl." One evening, after an exceedingly lively party, he remarked with quiet decision: "I like her, I should like to marry her; such a girl could also make me happy." But Brahms remained a life-long bachelor. "It is my misfortune still to be unmarried, thank God!" he facetiously observed later in life. Asked why he had "missed his chance," he replied that he could not have borne "to meet the anxious, questioning eyes of a wife with the words 'another failure.'" Anything in the nature of a fuss was distasteful to him. Once after he had given a masterly rendering of Beethoven's G major Pianoforte Concerto, when

he roused both orchestra and audience to great enthusiasm, he removed a laurel wreath that hung over his chair and modestly laid it under the pianoforte! This is not unlike a similar incident in the career of Hans von Bülow; but his treatment of the wreath was less subtle. The redoubtable Hans remarked: "I am much obliged, but I am not a vegetarian!"

There are several interesting references to his compositions. In the autumn of 1866 Brahms brought to Dietrich, then living at Oldenburg, the manuscript of his Hungarian Dances for four hands. "He and Madame Schumann played them at sight with such fire and brilliancy that it was followed by a general burst of enthusiasm." The original sketch of his Pianoforte Concerto in D minor (Op. 15) was in the form of a sonata for two pianofortes. Here is an interesting reference to the "Song of Destiny," one of Brahms's most beautiful works. One morning in the summer of 1868 an excursion was made, at his desire, to the great naval port of Wilhelmshafen. "On the way thither," says Dietrich, "our friend, usually so lively, was quiet and serious. He told us that early that morning (he always rose betimes) he had found Holderlin's Poems in the bookcase, and had been most deeply moved by the 'Song of Destiny.' When later in the day, after having wandered about and seen everything of interest, we sat down by the sea to rest, we discovered Brahms at a great distance, sitting alone on the beach and writing. These were the first sketches for the 'Song of Destiny,' which soon after appeared. A trip to the woods was given up, and Brahms hurried back to Hamburg to devote himself entirely to work." In regard to the "German Requiem," the beautiful soprano solo, "I will comfort you," did not form a part of the work at its first complete performance on Good Friday, April 10, 1868. "Instead of it, Madame Joachim sang the air, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' from 'The Messiah,' and was followed by Joachim, who played Schumann's 'Abendlied.'"

Brahms's disposition, we are told, was "as amiable and cheerful as it was full of depths of seriousness." He used frequently to tease the ladies by "making joking assertions in such a grave manner that Madame Schumann, in particular, took them quite seriously." Dietrich had to step in as mediator, but Brahms liked to increase the misunderstanding that he might end up with a hearty laugh at the expense of the ladies. He was a great lover of children. He referred to Dietrich's little girl and boy (aged *two* and *three*) as "my bride and my brother-in-law." He had a special regard for poor children; he would frequently stop in the streets to speak to these little folks and give them sweets. He was particularly charming in congenial company and was quite *au fait* in the making and guessing of riddles. There was a good deal of little suspected fun in his nature. In one of his letters to Dietrich he says, in referring to his friend's wife: "Mrs. Clara! I look like your Albert to a hair! you may take that fairly literally! How can that be?" The fact is that Brahms, clean shaven in his youth, had, in the meantime, grown a beard—a fair beard, to speak "fairly literally." When questioned as to the reason of this metamorphosis, he replied, complacently stroking his mighty beard: "A clean-shaven man is taken either for an actor or a priest." There are several very interesting references to the Schumanns in this section of the book, to which we must refer the reader.

We must now pass on to the "Recollections" of Dr. J. V. Widmann, an eminent Swiss *littérateur*, who, by the way, is the author of the libretto of Goetz's "Taming of the Shrew." Widmann's reminiscences

* "Recollections of Johannes Brahms." By Albert Dietrich and J. V. Widmann. Translated by Dora E. Hecht. London: Seeley and Co., Ltd. 1899.

extend from the year 1886, when Brahms was fifty-three, to the time of his death in 1897. One day when Widmann was showing him a sketch he had made twenty years before of the composer seated at the pianoforte, Brahms said: "Well, yes; I suppose I *did* look somewhat like a doubtful candidate for the ministry in those days. But the difference is: *you* were one and I was not. Ah! those were happy times." Here is a characteristic Brahms story:—

"A pedantic musician, from a very small Swiss town, obsequiously assured him that he knew all that he (Brahms) had ever written. Brahms motioned him to be silent and listen, as the band was just then playing something of his. I still seem to see that good man before me, as he stood there gaping and listening with upturned eyes to the rather common music (it was a military march by Gung'l), which he really took for a composition of Brahms; whilst Brahms himself, in great glee at the success of his ruse, whispered to us, 'Well fooled!'"

Widmann tells us that Brahms was an eager controversialist, and that he never knew anyone who took such an ever fresh and constant interest in the phenomena of life, whether of nature, art, or even technical industry, as did Brahms. "Every trifling invention, every improvement in any household utensil, in short, every trace of human thought, if only of practical use, gave him true pleasure. And nothing escaped his observation; no advertisement on a tram ticket, no well-made toy, nor any other insignificant object, if only there were something new, some progress to be discovered." Brahms was a great reader on a variety of subjects. Amongst new books he was greatly interested in those upon travel and voyages of discovery, such as Stanley's "Africa," &c. His dislike to the autograph-hunter soon became known, and many subterfuges were resorted to by these people to gain their signatory ends. One day he received a letter from Solingen in these terms: "Your order for ten dozen rapiers, Solingen make, will be despatched in a day or two. We take the liberty of obtaining payment through the Post Office." Brahms paid them out by not replying to the letter. Again, a German lady in Capetown, wrote year by year with great perseverance to him ordering "one of his far-famed Viennese pianofortes"! It was very difficult to get him to sit for the painting of his portrait. Widmann once laid a trap thuswise. While staying at Kandersteg, where Simrock and Brahms were his guests, Widmann invited an artist to visit him, "who," he says, "had expressed a desire to paint my (Widmann's) youngest daughter." Brahms was inveigled into sitting near the young lady during the painting process, "so that the artist, while busy with his pastels, could look beyond her at the musician. But after a few minutes, perceiving the ruse, Brahms rose, and remarking that he could no longer inflict the smoke of his cigarettes (he was already at his fifth or sixth) upon 'the ladies and tender children,' went out on to a wooden balcony with a view of the Gemmi Pass," whither Widmann followed him. All attempts to induce him to return were fruitless, and the wished-for portrait of Brahms was not painted.

Brahms detested the conventionalities of dress. He was most at ease in a striped flannel shirt, without either tie or stiff collar; even his soft felt hat was oftener carried in his hand than worn on his head. On one occasion in Northern Italy he was "mighty proud of his good idea of wearing three pairs of

trousers, one on the top of the other, on a bitterly cold night journey over the mountain from Mori to Riva." He gave as the chief reason why he had declined pressing invitations to visit England that "one has almost to live in a dress coat and white tie." He was a very lazy correspondent, and, like Mr. Gladstone, had a penchant for post cards. He disliked going to the opera because of the late hours it involved, as, even when travelling, he usually rose before five o'clock in the morning. He was fully aware of his occasional bluntness, but was always ready to apologise if he had reason to fear that in an unguarded moment his rough and violent manner had given offence. He was invariably silent as to his own works, and only spoke of them with a touching modesty; but he showed "the deepest veneration for the great heroes of the past in every field of Art." He once told Dietrich that "when composing, he liked to think of the words of folk-songs, these seeming to suggest musical themes to his mind."

Brahms was not ashamed to refer to his early struggles for existence. And in this connection Dr. Widmann must be quoted at length:—

"Going on to speak of his own youth, Brahms said emphatically that he could not wish it to have been less beset with difficulties and privations. It is true that he had had at first to earn his bread by arranging Marches and Dances for open-air bands, or some similar means; but even now it gave him pleasure, when he accidentally came across one of these youthful efforts still circulating anonymously in the world, to find that he had done even such quill-driving with all his might and according to the knowledge that he then possessed. He even did not consider it a useless discipline of life that he had sometimes had to accompany the singers at a *café chantant*, or to play dance-music, whilst all the time longing for the quiet morning hour when he could put his own thoughts on paper. 'The best songs came into my head whilst brushing my boots before dawn!' he said. And, delighting to recall the days of his youth, he went on to describe his bliss when he, a little boy of hardly six years, for the first time discovered the possibility of making a melody visible to the eye by placing black dots on lines at different intervals. He said: 'I invented a system of notation before I knew that one had already long been in existence!'"

Passing over references to Wagner, Verdi, Joachim, and others, we must quote an instance of Brahms's tribute to Rossini, during one of his tours in Italy. "As we passed through Pesaro," says Widmann, "he insisted that, even if we did not make a halt, we should at least do honour to the memory of Rossini by each of us singing some air from 'Il Barbiere'; and, as we chanced to be alone in the railway carriage, his proposal was duly carried out."

In conclusion, it is some time since we have read a musical book that has given us so much pleasure and satisfaction, which, in justice should it be said, is in no slight degree due to the excellent and easy-flowing translation furnished by Miss Dora E. Hecht. The extracts we have made will, we trust, induce our readers to get these unaffected "Recollections" for themselves. In the probable event of a second edition, an index, the omission of which is perhaps the only defect in the book, should be supplied. Two portraits of Brahms—one in his clean-shaven period, the other showing his "mighty beard"—add to the attractiveness of this interesting volume upon the life and character of one of the great masters of music.