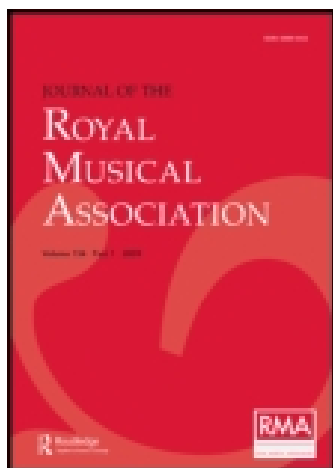


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### Brahms

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APRIL 11, 1899.

CHARLES MACLEAN, Esq., M.A., Mus. Doc., Oxon.,  
VICE-PRESIDENT,  
IN THE CHAIR.

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*BRAHMS.*

By ERNEST WALKER, M.A., Mus. Doc., Oxon.

WHEN, on the 5th of April, 1897, Joseph Joachim made his appearance on the platform of St. James's Hall to lead the A minor Quartet of Johannes Brahms, who had died two days before, I think there can have been few persons present who did not feel that in these two names was summed up a particular aspect of music which, whether we like it or not, we cannot disregard. Brahms on the creative, and Joachim on the interpretative side, stand as the representatives of very definite—we might almost say, categorical—musical ideals, and the school of which they in their separate lines have been the leaders is that which, for want of a better name (and indeed the term is but a vague one), has been generally called the classical. If I interpret the signs of the times aright, the great majority of living composers have more or less definitely turned their energies into channels in which there is not much room for the active working of the principles which sufficed for Brahms, and it seems to me that, at the opening of what I personally regard as emphatically an era of decadence, it may not be without interest to try and formulate the ideas which formed the basis of the work of the last, so far as we can see at present, of the great composers.

It will be said, no doubt, that however much Brahms may have been misunderstood and neglected in the past, he is one of the most popular composers at the present time, and

perhaps more so in England than anywhere else. I know of course that one or two of his chamber compositions always draw full houses at the Popular Concerts, and that a performance of the "Requiem" is a fairly safe business in the view of a concert agent, and, what is no doubt much more important, that few chamber works are more often played in private than his. But in the realm of composition we see, I think, a good deal of imitation of Brahms, but very little of the working of his spirit on individual, original minds; and that is how the great traditions have always been carried on. Popularity in the democratic sense means absolutely nothing: there is a considerable amount of hypocrisy in musical fashions, and Brahms has had to endure, if not so much as Wagner, still quite a sufficient share.

I shall endeavour accordingly, in what must, I fear, be necessarily a more or less incomplete manner, to lay down what seem to me the vital elements in Brahms' work and the principles of what may now be called the Brahms tradition. I do not propose to speak of the composer from any but the critical point of view. In the first place, as I never knew him personally, I could give you no anecdotes at first hand. In the second place, his biography is singularly quiet and uneventful—there is nothing in the least picturesque or dramatic about it. In the third place, I am not going to speak in the least degree of Brahms as a man, or of the supposed influence of his character and habits upon his work, but solely of him as a musician. It seems to me that the sole concern that the outside public has with a creative artist is with such of his created work as he chooses to give to the world; to inquire farther is, it seems to me, to reduce ourselves to the level of the popular interviewer, and is, in a word, sheer impertinence. You remember what Browning says:—

" Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself ?

Unlock my heart with a sonnet-key ?

' *With this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart !* '

Did Shakespeare ? If so, the less Shakespeare he ! "

Under any circumstances, even if Shakespeare did unlock his heart with a sonnet-key, that is none of our business. " The style is the man," you say. Very well, it may be so; but our concern is with the style, not with the man.

And what then is the style of Brahms ? I can think of no better definition than to say that it is the fusion, in the terms of the musical material of the latter half of the nineteenth century, of the desire for emotional expression with the desire for structural proportion. Of course we find the same fusion in Beethoven, but it seems to me that the definition

is even more applicable to Brahms, as with the latter the elements that have to be fused into unity are the more complex, partly because Brahms came after Beethoven and the early romanticists, and partly because the line of development springing from Bach had practically left Beethoven on one side altogether. I must not be understood to mean that the style of Brahms is greater than that of Beethoven—very far from it; but it is a mere historical fact that the style of the former represents the unifying of a larger mass of heterogeneous material. On the one side there was the Beethoven tradition, which had been practically without vital force since Beethoven's death; on the other hand there was the romantic movement which had spread like a whirlwind over the art and literature of both France and Germany, and in music found its leader in the one country in Berlioz, in the other in Schumann—extremely dissimilar leaders, no doubt, as the latter was attached to the classicists by ties which the former scorned, but undoubtedly fighting in the same ranks. The romantic school—that is, the school which, to return to our definition, put the interests of expression definitely before the interests of structure, was the dominant one in Germany at the time when Brahms was maturing his principles, in the years from 1850 or so onwards, and his early instrumental work—we are not now speaking of his songs—is steeped in Schumann: the three piano sonatas and the B major Trio in its first version show, as far as structural technique is concerned, little or no indebtedness to Beethoven. With regard to the ideas themselves, the sonatas are probably to be bracketed with some of Mendelssohn's early work as the most astonishing things ever written by a youth of twenty; but when we compare them with the products of Brahms' later style, we see how great are their technical defects, in spite of their wonderful breadth and nobility of imagination. Brahms was, in fact, in those days looked upon by the romanticists, even by Liszt, as one of themselves; but he was soon to undeceive them. The vocal works from the first show little of Schumann—with a smaller canvas Brahms found the master-touch at once—(the "*Liebestreu*" is his first published song)—and by the time the D major Serenade was written, we recognise that the composer is coming to see that the Schumann tradition needs to be reinforced—nay, to be dominated by the Beethoven tradition. He had already assimilated the harmonic and contrapuntal method which had come to him from Bach through the romanticists, and also the emotional expression of the latter; he now fused with these that formal perfection which had been the distinguishing mark of Beethoven. Like Bach and Beethoven, he recognised that both form and expression are essential elements in a great

work of art, and from the mere historical fact that he came after them, his fusion of the two is more complete than theirs could be.

Few words in musical technicology have been more abused than "form." The orthodox scheme of fugue-form given in many text-books is in its origin a mere academic abstraction, and sonata-form has often been looked upon as simply a piece of ingenious mechanism. It really makes matters clearer if, instead of "form," we speak of "organic design" or "organic unity." Sonata-form in this sense is the reverse of mechanical, and has never been treated as such either by Beethoven or by Brahms, unquestionably its two greatest masters. The last quartets of Beethoven are formally as perfect as anything he ever wrote, but they are exceedingly free in almost every respect; again, the first movement of the G minor Quartet of Brahms, to take one of the best known instances, shows noticeable departures from the ordinary scheme, but is organically flawless. As a contrast, we may turn to the *Finale* of Schumann's C major Symphony, which, in spite of the beauty of its material, is an extreme example of the want of organism of any kind. What is called "sonata-form" is, in its broad lines, the great type of, so to speak, scientific homogeneity in musical workmanship; and it is because Beethoven and Brahms exactly understood those lines that they rank as the two greatest masters of form in the full sense that music has known. They do not look upon design as a mere academic framework nor as a hindrance to imaginative flights, but as, in the strict sense of the words, a thing of beauty in itself, and none the less beautiful for being subject to a certain restraint.

And Brahms does not develop the formal side of his music to the neglect of the expressive: as we said, his style is the fusion of the two. As he balances his emotions by the necessity of their presentation in beautiful form, so he balances his structure by the necessity of the beauty of the material it has to deal with. I cannot personally understand how some people cannot find beauty and emotion in Brahms. I quite admit that sometimes they lie rather below the surface of the music; but no great artistic work of any kind can ever be understood by the mere careless passer-by. The beauty, no doubt, is quiet, and the passion is sane; but to deny that the beauty and the passion are to be found in Brahms' work as a whole is, I think, to show oneself either unacquainted with the bulk of that work or incapable of distinguishing between beauty and sensuousness, and between emotion and hysteria.

And along with this mastery of form we find equal and equally free mastery of harmony and counterpoint. It suits the general tenor of Brahms' melodies to employ principally

diatonic harmonies, and he deliberately abandons the wider field attained by the chromatic method, and keeps the latter in reserve for special occasions. But there is never the least monotony or weakness about his harmonisation; it is extraordinarily simple and extraordinarily convincing. His arrangements of the seven books of "*Deutsche Volkslieder*" make almost all other harmonisations of folk-tunes sound forced and unnatural; and to show what he can do with none but common chords in the root position, I will play through the song, "*Ich schell' mein Horn in's Jammerthal.*" . . . . . Again, his counterpoint is living, and not, like most modern counterpoint, utterly dead. It has not, perhaps, the amazing variety and resource of that of Bach or that of Wagner—in their different ways the two greatest contrapuntists who have ever lived; but we must remember that the texture of both Bach and Wagner (in his later work, that is) is purely polyphonic and contrapuntal at almost every movement, while Brahms only uses these resources on occasion. But he never uses them academically, in the bad sense of that much-abused term, and he perfectly understands when conventional rules have to give way to higher artistic considerations. Perhaps I might mention a very striking and, I believe, little-known example of his harmonic freedom in unaccompanied diatonic four-part writing. In the harmonisation of a Volkslied, "*Sankt Raphael,*" published in 1865 with several others (all of which are technically most interesting), we find the following very unacademical things, to which I know no exact parallel elsewhere in music. The melody of the first two lines is the same, and the harmonisations are the same, except for the last chord; at the end of the first verse we have—



and at the end of the second—



again, we have—



Unquestionably the things are done in the most artistic manner in this way under these circumstances (Brahms wishes, of course, to have each chord in the richest position); but surely the man ought not to be called a pedant who can deliberately put down things which would never pass in any theoretical examination whatever.

On another point of Brahms' technique—namely, his orchestration, a word or two might be said. No doubt he lacks here that absolute mastery which we find in the later works of Wagner and in Dvořák; he has much less variety and much less sensuous beauty of sound. But his scoring is never in any sort of way bad, as Schumann's often is; and I think we may say that the style of orchestration adopted by him is the only one which fits in with the style of his ideas. And, even from the physical point of view, I must personally confess that the cool grey tints of Brahms are to me often a great relief after the continual blaze and intensity, whether in *ff* or *pp*, of the great bulk of modern scoring. After all, orchestration is, in a very definite sense, the lowest department of musical technique—it is the most sensuous and the least intellectual. It is simply a frame to the picture, and there is something seriously wrong if we cannot see the picture for the frame.

Brahms is indeed an intellectual artist in every sense of the word. To many persons, no doubt, intellectuality in music is supposed to be the equivalent of dullness, but there is really no sort of connection between the two terms. Intellectuality in music means neither mechanical pedantry nor soulless cleverness. It does not imply anything so absurd as that music worth anything can be composed unless in some sense it is felt rather than made, but it does imply very categorically that these feelings, these emotions, are of no account unless we have some standard, some intellectual standard, by which we can test their vitality and relative worth. The saying "I feel it" may mean a great deal, or it may mean absolutely nothing; to consider the presence of emotional feeling *per se* as a valid argument is simply equivalent to committing critical suicide. Music that is nothing more than the creature of impulse is but a poor thing, so also is music that is made without



any impulse at all (and the latter is no doubt the poorer, for the other has at any rate some sort of life about it); but these are certainly not the only two alternatives. To say that Brahms' music is intellectual does not mean that it is the work of a mere grammarian, without imagination or emotion; but it does mean that it has proportion and restraint, that it considers breadth of style as of paramount importance, and that it is at the opposite pole from the work of so-called musicians who apparently think that they are absolved from all further responsibility when they have put down whatever happens to come into their heads in their moments of inspiration. We see Brahms' intellectuality of temperament indeed not only in his pure technique and his fondness for forms like variations—in the proper sense of variations a definitely intellectual form—but also as regards that borderland of music where literature comes in. All his great choral works are written to poems of the very highest rank, and the words of his songs are almost invariably poetry and not mere verse. His music is the work of an educated man who not only knows all musical literature, but other literature as well, and can bring the results of his non-musical culture to bear on his music. But—and this brings me to what I personally regard as almost the cardinal principle of Brahms' work—he knows what the right function of music is, what in its nature it can do, and what it cannot. In other words, he is the great prophet in these latter days of what I consider to be music, so to speak, with a capital M—that is, "absolute music."

Many of you have no doubt seen two articles in the *Contemporary Review* for February and March, translated from a pamphlet entitled "Die Symphonie nach Beethoven," by the distinguished conductor Herr Felix Weingartner. I have, of course, no intention of criticising Herr Weingartner's remarks in detail, but I may quote what he says about absolute music. He says that "Music, which might be called absolute in a certain sense, that is, which is put together without any instigation, a mere formal conglomerate of sounds and trifling with phrases, has no right to any attention"—of course not; such productions are hardly music, absolute or any other. "All other music," he continues, "betrays, even without song or programme, the mental influence which affected the composer when he wrote it. In this sense none of our great masters were absolute musicians—Beethoven least of all." Of course the *locus classicus* with regard to Beethoven is the anecdote that he once said that he never composed without having a picture in his mind, to which he worked. Now, I do not think it at all beyond the bounds of possibility that Beethoven was simply joking when he said this, as we definitely know he

was doing in a considerable number of instances when he spoke of descriptive meaning in his music. (It would carry me too far to quote these cases in detail, but no doubt they are well known to you.) However, let us suppose he meant it seriously. He used the word "Bild"; if by this he meant pictorial representation in any sort of shape or form whatever, I can only quote Browning again, and say—the less Beethoven he. If by "Bild," however, he meant simply "idea," the matter is different; but if he implied that in the whole of his instrumental work there is embodied some definite emotional programme which can be plainly set forth in words—then again I say, the less Beethoven he. Herr Weingartner, though he very justly acknowledges that music cannot portray external events, but only moods (an acknowledgment that cuts fairly deep, and rules numberless modern compositions utterly out of court), yet speaks of *all* great music betraying the *mental influence* which affected the composer when he wrote it. I really do not know what this means. If it means that works in the minor key have been written when the composer was in a sad mood, and *vice versa*, that may be true in some cases, but it is demonstrably untrue in others. If he means that no great music was ever written without something that we call inspiration—some impulse of some kind—that is obviously the case; but if he means that this impulse can always be definitely formulated by us in universally intelligible language, or indeed in language of any kind, I can only deny the statement point blank. Of course hundreds of people have made programmes for instrumental works, but they exceedingly rarely agree in saying the same thing, and hundreds of others get along very well without any programmes at all. All music that is set to words has no doubt to express a definite mood, and I consider it a perfectly legitimate, though not the highest form of instrumental music, to express without words a definite mood (not a descriptive programme)—Mendelssohn's "Hebrides" Overture seems to me the very finest example of this; but I altogether deny that there is any compulsion on an instrumental composer to do so, or that, when he has stated nothing, there is the least probability that anything of the kind was ever meant. Herr Weingartner probably receives as gospel Wagner's statement that pure music ended with the Choral Symphony, which seems to me—if I may be pardoned for saying it—one of the most foolish remarks ever uttered by a great man in seeking illegitimate support for perfectly legitimate principles; but I doubt if even he would seriously accept Wagner's analysis of the C sharp minor Quartet—one of the most amazing specimens of rank insanity ever put on paper.

It seems to me that really almost the greatest legacy that Brahms has left to us is his support, his leadership, in the fight against this degradation of what, in its utter independence of anything else, is the noblest of all arts—instrumental music. Few things are more annoying to a composer—I speak perhaps with a little personal feeling—than to be asked what his untitled works mean. One can only answer that they mean nothing, which, if true, is perhaps not very polite. I doubt if anyone can appreciate more than myself the colossal genius of Wagner in dramatic music and the perfect soundness of his principles in the sphere of the stage; but when we find operatic principles transported bodily, with additions, into the pure instrumental music of composers like Richard Strauss, or, in pre-Wagnerian days, Berlioz, the result seems to me, in spite of the immense talent of some of these men, sheer pantomime and not music. Wagner himself was clear-sighted enough on this point: "My scores," he said, "are of little use to composers of instrumental music—music apart from the drama cannot risk what I do." Nothing more utterly ruins what otherwise may be a good work of art than one solitary touch of the theatrical; in programme music there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, and it is a step which it is very easy to take. In the midst of all these orchestral pictures and orchestral novels, and portrayals of all things and all emotions in heaven and earth, we feel, or we ought to feel, how immeasurably greater is the art so modestly concealed in a Haydn string quartet.

Of course, where words are concerned, programme music of some kind has to come in; but here again Brahms shows, I think, his unerring instinct as to how much music can do. In his earliest instrumental music he had no doubt coquetted a little with the romanticists; there is a quotation from a poem of Sternau to the *Andante* of the F minor Piano Sonata, the fourth movement of the same sonata is headed "Rückblick," and the first of the Balladen (Op. 10) refers to a poem of Herder. But all these, and also the kind of "Wiegenlied" motto to the Intermezzo, Op. 117, No. 1, are exceedingly vague, and were very probably, like nearly all of Schumann's titles, added after the music was written, and are harmless enough, if also perfectly useless. Apart from these instances, Brahms restricted his descriptive talents entirely to vocal music, where he followed Beethoven's principle of "Mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerei" considerably more closely than in the "Pastoral" Symphony Beethoven did himself. I should like to quote a few cases which seem to me to be typical of Brahms' attitude in this respect.

(Illustrations from "Verzagen," "Regenlied," "Während des Regens," "Auf dem Schiffe," "An die Nachtigall" (Op.

48), "An die Nachtigall" (Op. 97), "Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht," "Waldeseinsamkeit," "Lerchengesang.")

You notice that there is never anything like realism in his treatment of situations like these: it is always the mood, not the thing that is painted. And though the mood is always represented with matchless fidelity, it is not painted word by word, but as a whole, and consequently structural interests never suffer. In one very remarkable song, "Verrath," the words form an entire little novel in four chapters, with a duel and everything complete, and the style, while intensely dramatic, never gets out of hand for a moment. It is the only example in Brahms' works of a purely dramatic subject in separate scenes, and it is very interesting to see how triumphantly his principles carry him over the difficulties. But compare composers who adopt the word-by-word-painting principle. Consider, for example, Liszt's treatment of the noise of waves in the "Lorelei," and compare it with "Verzagen." All that Liszt's invention can produce consist of chromatic scales in the left hand and tremolo chords in the right—the ordinary realistic stock-in-trade of the elementary beginner, which in the first place is not music, and in the second does not produce the desired result with any sort of fidelity. It simply shows a lack of any technique of the most rudimentary kind: we surely ought to know at this time of day that scrappy realism is not art.

Again, as Brahms is not realistic, so neither is he national in the sense in which that word is so often used to-day. Of course no one ever altogether divests himself of his racial birthright; there are differences between the work of individuals of Teutonic, of Latin, of Slavonic descent, which are no doubt very largely due to the different blood that runs in their veins. But what I mean is that the aim of Brahms, as of all great composers, is to talk a world-language and not a dialect. As Dr. Johnson used to say that patriotism was the last refuge of a scoundrel, so we may say that local colour is the last refuge of composers who cannot compose. Of course I do not mean for a moment that every composer who employs local colour cannot compose, any more than Dr. Johnson meant that every patriotic person was a scoundrel. But to consider that local colour pure and simple has any artistic merit in itself is mere parochialism. Why should the fact that a barbaric noise is typically Russian make it any the more tolerable in England? There are composers like Grieg who confine themselves to deliberate adaptation, always of the style and very frequently of the actual melodies, of their national folk-music; in however delicate and artistic a way this may be done, such composers *ipso facto* cut themselves off from the company of those who are strong enough to invent their own manner of writing and their own

melodies. A man like Dvořák is, of course, different; he, like Haydn before him, is strongly influenced by his own Slavonic folk-tunes, but he turns them into music which is beyond racial consideration—there is the individual style to be seen through the local colour. Still more, Brahms' music is cosmopolitan and in no way specifically German, and when he occasionally adopts Hungarian idioms of style it is his individuality which is definitely the master; it is cosmopolitan music tinged with local colour, not, as with Dvořák, local colour seen through the medium of a strong individuality, still less, as with Grieg, through the medium of a weak one. But I do not wish to speak hardly of local colour composers. They at any rate understand, as very many composers do not, that they have not the gift of individual originality, and so they accordingly shelter themselves under the familiar roof of their own home. Still less must I be thought for a moment to depreciate folk-music in its original spontaneous forms. At its worst, it is sincere—at its best, it has produced tunes that the very greatest composers would have been only too proud to sign; and it is through an increased knowledge especially of British folk-music that we may best combat the irredeemably pernicious influence of that school of verse and music-mongers who, aided by great singers for whom no words of condemnation can be too strong, have made the fine old name of the English ballad unmentionable in decent musical society.

And if Brahms does not make use of folk-tunes, he has at any rate a quite sufficient number of tunes of his own. No nineteenth-century composer, except Beethoven and Schubert, has possessed even approximately comparable gifts of melody. There may be some people who say that Brahms could not write tunes, but I think that their opinion must simply arise from somewhat one-sided knowledge of his work. If they read through his 288 songs and part-songs, to speak of nothing else, I think they will reach a different conclusion. It is the greatest deficiency in nearly all composers that they cannot write tunes worth something—I say worth something, for of course there are tunes *and* tunes. The true simplicity does not mean mere non-complexity, which is only emptiness; it rather means that the most complex materials have been welded together and beaten out till nothing but the pure gold is left. It is not so very hard to pen pages of storm and stress which sound not so very unlike some pages of the great modern composers; but it is a different matter when we try to imitate the *Adagio* of Brahms' third Violin Sonata, or the tune in the slow movement of Dvořák's "New World" Symphony, or the opening phrase of "Parsifal." A composer who cannot write a great plain tune is, *ipso facto*, outside the charmed circle.

But though Brahms has, in the fullest measure, this gift of melodic invention, which places him on a level with Beethoven and Schubert, there is one point, and a very important one, in which he seems to me to just fail to reach them—I mean his general deficiency in equal directness of expression. I do not mean that his music is, at its best, any less “inspired” than theirs at its best; but in a great deal of it (though far from all) we can see some traces remaining of the mental labour which is, in some sense or other, a necessary factor in the production of any great work of art, but which in nearly everything of Beethoven and Schubert is concealed below the surface. In some ways they can, as it were, go to the point more straight than Brahms can. Of course with Brahms, as with any great composer, we feel that his great phrases are, in Wordsworth’s language, inevitable—that they cannot be touched without being ruined; but in the great moments of Beethoven especially, we feel not only that the phrase is inevitable, but that the secret of its inevitableness is beyond the reach of our, of any, analysis. As the Greeks would have said, it is written with the finger of a god, and that is the end of the matter. But with Brahms, except in a few of his highest flights, we feel that perhaps a fragment of the secret is not altogether beyond the reach of someone’s discovery. I think it is the fact that Beethoven can breathe this rarefied atmosphere more steadily that places him at the head of all. Schubert and Bach seem to me to come closest to him in this respect, and close to them comes Brahms—but still there is the difference. I personally count it as no disparagement of Brahms that he cannot quicken the physical pulse as Wagner can do, for in spite of all the splendour and magic of the music of “Tristan,” the effect it produces is unquestionably largely a matter of the nerves; but there are but few things of Brahms that can set what I may call the intellectual pulse throbbing as Beethoven can do with a touch as in the *Coda* of the “Leonora, No. 3,” and in many other places. I have no taste for feverish music, but the blood in Brahms’ veins ran perhaps just a little coldly at times.

I think that the charges of obscurity and hardness which are often made against Brahms’ music arise principally from the fact that his large works are, as a rule, undoubtedly very difficult to grasp on a first hearing when one has not the score to follow at the time—certainly more difficult than the large works of any other great composer except Bach. But this is simply a part of his style when working on a large canvas, and is in no sense a defect; no work of art or literature is meant for people who cannot spare five minutes to understand it, and in countless smaller works he is lucidity itself, and rivals Haydn and Mozart in simplicity. But

though this feeling usually, I think, disappears on closer acquaintance, I quite admit that with some of his work there is a legitimate basis for the charges. He has never written a note that is trivial or sentimental, and I am not much concerned to deny that, with his gaze always fixed in the opposite direction, he has occasionally gone to the opposite extreme. Some of his work is, no doubt, like a fruit with a rather unnecessarily hard rind. But, after all, it seems to me but a poor criticism that cannot see the sun on account of the spots on it: Beethoven or any other composer would fare badly under such handling. But as true criticism will with Beethoven sweep aside the "Battle of Vittoria" and "King Stephen" and all the rest of the numerous crumbs from his royal table, so it will with Brahms mention, and then neglect, the cases (after all, not so very frequent) where he had, as it were, to make intellectual bricks without emotional or æsthetically attractive straw. On the whole, he seems to me probably the most equal of all the great composers.

But some, no doubt, complain of Brahms' obscurity with a sidelong glance, not at Beethoven, but at music like that of the modern French school. It goes without saying that Brahms has nothing like the lightness of touch and *spirituel* style that we find in this school. There is a song from his Op. 107, "Der Salamander," a daintily cynical little poem which many French composers could no doubt have set to perfection, but which in Brahms' hands is undoubtedly a ponderous failure. But I altogether deny that refinement and lightness of touch are enough to make a composer. No French musician of this century, except possibly Berlioz and Bizet, seems to me to have reached even for a moment below the surface of music. No one can refuse complete admiration of their very remarkable technical skill in the narrow sphere to which their energies are confined; but after all music has something else to do than gratify the tastes of more or less cultured fashionable society. But I quite admit that Brahms is, on the whole, the heaviest-handed of the great composers, except Schumann and Wagner; he is not without the Beethovenish sort of humour, as in the wonderful setting of Goethe's Bacchanalian Song in Op. 72, but the mood is not nearly so common with him as with Beethoven, and the extreme delicacy of touch which he can show in the "Liebeslieder Walzer" and the "Zigeunerlieder" and other songs is, in non-vocal music, the exception rather than the rule. But this is, after all, only the defect of his qualities. "If," to quote from the admirable essay on Brahms by my friend Mr. Hadow of Oxford, "we are disposed to find fault with him because the greater part of his work is grave and earnest, let us at least endeavour to realize how such a criticism would sound if directed against the *Agamemnon*, or the *Divina Commedia*, or *Paradise Lost*."

No doubt, like the work of Aeschylus and Dante and Milton, the work of Brahms is, as a whole, alike in its most buoyant vigour and in its most dreamy repose, serious, we might almost say sombre in tone. In his vocal works he undoubtedly rises to his greatest heights in treating subjects like those of the "Schicksalslied," the "Gesang der Parzen," the "Requiem," and the "Ernste Gesänge" with which his lifework closed. Some indeed have spoken of his attitude in this respect as implying pessimism: I should prefer to call it the acceptance of the facts of things, and certainly he is never for a single moment pessimistic in the sense of morbid—every note he wrote from the first to the last is healthy to the core. He never raves or shrieks: like his two great spiritual parents, Bach and Beethoven, he knows that there is such a thing as reticence in art. Not one of the three "wears his heart upon his sleeve"—more or less direct as the expression of the idea may be, we feel anyhow the sense of reserve force beneath it—that the music is

"Such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound or foam."

But still the whole scale of worthy human emotion, from the most adamant decisiveness to the most pathetic tenderness, is represented by all three. All three are worshippers of the goddess of beauty, not in a form like that of the Venus de' Medici, but in a form like that of the Venus of Melos—the serene and severe, and therefore the noblest type. They never concerned themselves about the little vanities of virtuosi and people of that kind—their music is meant for those who understand it with their brains and with their hearts, and the rest need not trouble themselves. I do not mean of course to imply in any way that we want no other music than that of these three: there is room in legitimate art for all work, however light in kind, which does its best to attain a worthy ideal. But I am sure that the majority of us are inclined to be far too catholic in our tolerance; there is much music of popularity and renown which is in every fibre *antagonistic* to that of the great men, and we cannot honestly like both at once. There is no place for such within the pale, unless we are prepared to adopt in music the democratic theory in the sense of the rule of the numerical majority: and in that case the Book of Art is closed once and for all.

Brahms, in short, seems to me the ideal for music at the present time. He has left us examples of what seems to me absolutely flawless art in every department of music from the largest to the smallest, with the solitary exception of opera, which, after all, is only music in a partial sense. He



is the last, and from that mere historical fact the closest to us of those great composers who know that music can stand alone, and that it owes no debt to the stage or to anything outside itself. He may be—if music has to advance, he must be—in some manner superseded some day; but that day is not yet. I do not mean that we ought to imitate his individual manner of expression—for conscious imitation of a great man only means copying his weaknesses—but we ought to imitate his ideal. The ideal at which he aimed, and which he reached, is the ideal of an art which seeks, in the fullest sense of the word, nobility of idea and of style before all else—an art which, in its greatest beauty and its greatest emotional force, is still strong—an art which never compromises one jot of its principles and never appeals to the crude senses—an art which recognises the dignity and the value of reserve, and which knows that the greatest work is done, not under the expansive banner of anarchy, but under the dominion of intellectual, self-imposed laws. He is not of the company of those whom Goethe calls “ungebund’ne Geister.” As the great philosopher-poet has said in what seems to me the most pregnant epigram ever written about art:—

“Wer Grosses will, muss sich zusammen raffen;  
In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister,  
Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.”

“It is only Law that can give us Freedom.” That is the motto of Brahms and of all great work, and it is a motto which, in the dawn of the twentieth century, we do not always remember.

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## DISCUSSION.

THE CHAIRMAN moved a vote of thanks to the Lecturer, which was passed unanimously. The Chairman then invited discussion, saying that the lecture abounded in epigram and apothegm, which would suggest further remark.

Mr. JOHN FRANCIS BARNETT.—There is one point on which I slightly disagree with Dr. Walker, and that is on the origin of the style of Brahms. It seems to me that although he derived much from Schumann, there is a great deal in his style which seems to be more in sympathy with Beethoven. When I first heard Brahms' music, the impression produced upon me was that there was something decidedly Beethovenish about it, yet in many ways different from Beethoven. Brahms' style dissociates itself from Schumann's, in that it is much

sterner in character. One point, however, strikes me where there is a remarkable similarity between the three composers alluded to: it is in a certain profundity of idea which one every now and then comes across and which one never hears in Mozart or Haydn, a depth of sentiment which, perhaps, Beethoven was the first to express and which Brahms seems, as it were, to have gone even beneath. I think that profundity, if I might use the expression, is one of his characteristics. Another characteristic in which I think Brahms goes beyond Beethoven is in the interlacing of voice parts, and especially in the combination of different rhythms one against another. Probably in that respect Brahms has gone beyond Schumann, although Schumann no doubt suggested to Brahms those complex rhythms and interlacing of parts. There is perhaps a little disadvantage in these complex rhythms, for they tend to confuse one's impression of the music, and perhaps this may to a great extent account for the fact of Brahms' music not always being understood by those who hear it for the first time. Another reason why the charge of wanting clearness has been brought against Brahms is because the melody is not so much on the surface, but is interlaced with so many other melodies that it is sometimes difficult for those who are not accustomed to the subject to find out where the theme lies, and they come away with the impression that there has been a want of clearness of subject matter on the part of the composer. Of course, ardent lovers of Brahms will no doubt dissent from that view.

Mr. LANGLEY.—With regard to the remarks of the last speaker, I must say I thoroughly agree with him on the first point—the relation of Brahms to Schumann. I think the greatest mistake made about Brahms is that he is ever held up as a follower of Schumann. How the mistake could have arisen could never be accounted for by a study of his works. I always think that it arose from the fact that Schumann, who was always so catholic in his criticisms, held out a helping hand to Brahms by noticing his genius; and that Brahms, when he emerged into the world, felt, as every man should, a great debt of gratitude to Schumann for this early recognition, and spoke of Schumann in terms that might easily give rise to the idea that he considered himself his follower. In the preface of Deiter's book on Brahms this mistake is made, but towards the end of the book—as near as I can recollect, about two-thirds of the way through—a statement is made which thoroughly contradicts this, and I think that is worthy of notice. With regard to the second point—the matter of rhythm and combination—the question arises whether this complexity is a healthy element or not. To me it seems to be so artificial. Considering that rhythm, so far

as I understand its function, represents the pulsation of a work, I cannot see how there can be two rhythms going on at the same time.

Mr. DAVEY.—You know, ladies and gentlemen, that in the Catholic Church, when the question of making a saint comes before the College of Cardinals, a person is appointed as *advocatus diaboli*, or devil's advocate, and his business is to allege all that can be alleged against the claims of the candidate for saintship, so that he may not be canonized unless the evidence in his favour is overwhelming. Now let us see, before we pronounce Brahms a great composer, whether anything can be said against him. I think a great deal can be said, and quite sufficient to prevent him from being called a great composer. By "great" please understand what I mean. I mean great in the sense in which Brahms tried to be one of the greatest, like Beethoven and Mozart and Bach and Handel and Palestrina. It seems to me perfectly plain. I wish to ask Dr. Walker three questions. I must say, though, that he has himself admitted a very large amount of qualification; he said many things about Brahms which would not be generally admitted about a great composer. (1) Has Brahms invented either any novel forms or any novel use of resources? (2) In which department of the art is Brahms absolutely unrivalled? I know of none. (3) Can any composer be reckoned among the highest if distinct technical faults can be pointed out in his works? I will give my own answers to these questions in detail. First, Brahms has, so far as I know, invented absolutely nothing. If he had never been born the art would have been exactly where it is now. We should not have had his works, but otherwise the art would have been in exactly the same condition as we now see it. If I should make an exception it would be that he once composed a fugue on a pedal point. This was really a novelty, so far as I am aware; but he never did it again. It is not much of a fugue, but the effect is, I believe, decidedly new, and is very fine, especially the *crescendo* at the end. Secondly, I ask, in which department was Brahms unrivalled as a great composer should be? We will go through the various departments that he essayed. He wrote symphonies: are they as good as Beethoven's or Mozart's or Haydn's? He wrote concertos: are they as good as Bach's or Beethoven's or Mozart's? He wrote overtures: are they better than Beethoven's, or than Schumann's Overture to "Manfred"? He wrote violin quartets: are they better than Beethoven's or Mozart's or Haydn's? He wrote sonatas for solo and duet, and piano trios: are they better than Beethoven's? He wrote songs: are they better than Schumann's best? He wrote motets and other choral works: are they better than Bach's or Handel's? He wrote variations: are they better

than Bach's or Beethoven's? Every musician, I think, will agree that Brahms' works are not only not better than those of the older composers, but are not even so good. How then can a man be counted among the highest who has been beaten in almost everything he tried? I have not mentioned, however, the piano quartets and the quintet. The older composers, the great classical masters, did not try that combination of instruments; but Schumann tried them once, and Dvořák has tried them, and, in my opinion, Brahms' are not so good as theirs. But there comes in another matter. There is a saying that we are accustomed to use as a proverb, *De gustibus non est disputandum*. It is a common phrase in men's mouths, but how many persons act as if they believed it really? How many can say, your taste is different from mine, but we cannot dispute about it? Such a case arises, I think, with regard to Brahms' pianoforte quartets and quintets and Dvořák's. I like Dvořák's best; I have no doubt there are some who would prefer Brahms', because tastes differ. Now with regard to the third and perhaps the most difficult point. I have said that in my opinion a composer cannot be reckoned among the very highest if distinct technical faults can be pointed out in his works. Can you point out a distinct technical fault in Shakespeare's works, either of versification or dramatic construction or characterisation or wrongly used words? It is simply by the selective art or art of picking out the best that the artist becomes great. Now I can put my finger very easily on one technical fault in Brahms' work, and one which is perfectly obvious when it is seen. He cannot write for the whole of the pianoforte. He would compose whole sets of pieces in which he would scarcely use the two top octaves at all. I know Schumann made the same mistake; but it is a mistake, and a distinct fault. Let us notice now how it is that composers who have faults, however good they may be, yet break a little bit out of the run in time. I can remember—I am sorry to say I am old enough to remember—when there was a great boom in Schubert's sonatas. They were then talked about as if they were as good as Beethoven's. They were then comparatively fresh to the English public; but they are not so much talked about now, nor so much played. The reason is that there were faults in them; everybody admitted it. In course of time these faults are felt too strongly. When the new material is taken up, the freshness causes us to overlook or, at any rate, not to mind the faults; but that won't do when new composers come along. So with Schumann. I can remember the time when Schumann was held very much higher than he is now in general. It was admitted then that there were faults in his works, and the result is that he is now no longer quite in his former place.

He stands a little lower than the highest place, among the second-rate men, and I believe Brahms will have a lower place still, because he has invented nothing distinctly new. Let anyone take those later pianoforte pieces of Brahms, Op. 117 or thereabouts, and you will see there how the composer could not use the whole range of the keyboard. He was writing for a seven-octave instrument, but did not know how to use it. He had simply a defective taste, which did not enable him to pick out, as the great composers did, what was absolutely the best succession of notes. Having written out an idea, Beethoven patiently worked and worked until he had the best possible combination. We talk about Brahms being severe; he was never severe enough on his own works. For that reason I think he will not be reckoned among the highest. Besides this, there is, as has generally been said, a certain obscurity about him. He is not a popular composer. All the great composers were popular in their day; but Brahms was not. Why not? Because he is lacking in charm. I will here quote some lines by Matthew Arnold; they are great favourites of mine, and I think they sum the whole question up:—

“Charm is the glory which makes  
Song of the poet divine,  
Love is the fountain of charm.  
How without charm wilt thou draw,  
Poet! the world to thy way?  
Not by the lightnings of wit—  
Not by the thunder of scorn!  
These to the world, too, are given;  
Wit it possesses, and scorn—  
Charm is the poet's alone.”

Brahms has not that charm. Bach had it; Handel had it; Haydn had it; Mozart had it; Beethoven had it; Schubert had it; Schumann had it; Mendelssohn had it; Wagner had it; Dvořák has it; Sir Arthur Sullivan has it; Brahms never had it. The result of it all is simply that the faults of Brahms are too great for us to admit him among the saints. I think I have proved my case as the devil's advocate; he is not to be placed among the greatest composers. That his works have very great merits no one denies—very high merit indeed. They are no doubt intellectual, clever, able, original, and they have many other good qualities also; but there is one thing that they frequently have not, and that is more important than all of those—they are not musical.

Mr. SOUTHGATE.—I will leave Mr. Davey to the tender mercies of Dr. Walker. I believe I speak for the members, who must be all very thankful to Dr. Walker for the most able and excellent picture he has given us of Brahms. He

has not been like many advocates—said all for his hero and nothing against him. He has pointed out, he did not say faults, but defects in Brahms; and therefore I think we ought to thank him for his fairness in the matter. There is one feature of Brahms to which he alluded, or which he tried to apologise for—his obscurity, and, if I remember rightly, suggested that sometimes his blood ran rather coldly. Well, after all, is not that the case with practically all the composers? May I remind you of a very ancient adage—*nemo sapit omnibus horis*? Even Beethoven in the "Battle Symphony" has written some foolish music, which he had better not have done; and maybe Brahms was not always inspired, just as Beethoven and other great ones were not always inspired. As to what his place will be in the hierarchy, is it not too soon to settle that? I think it is. He is practically known to only a very few; and musicians alone can settle whether he has attained to the heights of other composers so far as emotional effect goes. Dr. Walker seemed rather inclined to apologise for emotion as somewhat of a weakness; but, after all, music is in its primary aspect the language of emotion, and without emotion I am afraid we should get a very mechanical kind of music. It might please our intellectual faculties, but would not do much else. There are two remarks that Mr. Davey made on which I should like to say a word. He asked what had Brahms invented. Well, I daresay Dr. Walker will tell us something more about that; and he asked whether he had composed any variations equal to Beethoven's or Bach's. Of course when we begin to compare musicians together, we all have our particular tastes; but I myself frankly say that in the Variations for Orchestra upon that Theme of Haydn—a remarkable five-bar theme, if I remember rightly—the way in which the subject is treated in the orchestra, and the masterly exposition of it in the richly varied variations, not only as a matter of technical skill but also in respect of orchestral colour, is very much finer than any variations I know of Beethoven's. And to mention the vocal works he has written, surely Beethoven is not claimed as a very great vocal writer! I think we should have to put him below Handel, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and others; but bearing in remembrance the extraordinary "German Requiem" and the noble "Schicksalslied," I think Brahms has risen to the very highest elevation, and has certainly done work which to my mind is greater and more pleasing than the Mass in D, the Mass in C, or any of the vocal works which Beethoven has left. I am sure I express the feeling of the other members when I say how thankful we are to Dr. Walker for the fairly balanced picture which he has given of the great composer.

The CHAIRMAN.—In order to accelerate discussion I waived the opportunity usually taken by the chairman here to address the meeting himself at the close of the lecture; as however there has been some controversy on this very important subject it is right that I should declare myself, and say that I am absolutely on the side of the lecturer and should be prepared to endorse the majority of his detailed remarks. I am grateful to Dr. Walker for having brought up this subject, for Brahms died on April 3rd, 1897, just two years ago, and it so happens that no paper has been read in this Association bearing on him or his decease. I am also grateful for the fact that a lecturer has come direct as it were from the University to perform this function. Any addition to the Brahms literature is welcome because this is so exceedingly scanty. Brahms' name occurred a good deal in newspaper literature, though he had nothing to do with it, in the long since defunct controversy between Wagnerites and Brahmsians, but as far as I am aware the first connected essay on Brahms was that of Dr. Deiters the Bonn critic in 1880; this is a meritorious production and was introduced into this country by Mrs. Newmarch seven or eight years later. In 1888 the critic A. B. Vogel wrote an essay on Brahms in the Leipsic "*Musikheroen*" series. In 1892 there was a slight ebullition of Brahms literature. Emil Krause, composer pianist and critic of Hamburg, wrote a pamphlet on Brahms, to precede a catalogue of works; I am not sure that this was not written in some trade interest. In the same year Wilibald Nagel of Zürich wrote a small book on "*Brahms as Beethoven's successor*," in which he spoke strongly in demonstration of that position. In the same year also Mr. Fuller Maitland wrote a Brahms biography and appreciation in the "*Masters of Modern Music*" series. In 1894 Hugues Imbert of Paris wrote a short pamphlet on Brahms; and it contains by the bye a rather pathetic remark from E. Hanslick the celebrated Vienna critic, to the effect that much as he marvelled at Brahms' art he marvelled still more at his health, for "now at sixty he walked like a student and slept like an infant"; three years later Brahms had died of an insidious malady. In 1898 appeared Mr. Hadow's essay on Brahms in the second series of his "*Studies in Modern Music*"; if I may take the liberty of making a suggestion to anyone in this room who wishes to read up the Brahms question, it is that they should read that essay, which is not only completely luminous and completely brilliant, but embodies also a feeling for all that is truest and best in music. If I am to make any remarks of my own on this subject it would be to suggest one or two very general reflections for which perhaps the lecture has left room. The first of these would be to point out that Brahms is one

of those composers who have announced their own idiom from their earliest works. This has by no means been the universal rule; it has rather been the exception. In the whole range of great composers from Palestrina to Beethoven, both inclusive, I do not know one who did not begin by showing himself as a mere emanation from some great school then prevalent in his age or country; his individuality was developed later; this was the law that ruled musical mental evolution in those days. I would even say the same thing of three later composers who bear the name of romantic: Weber, Chopin, and Wagner. Weber's early opus numbers, mostly pianoforte variations, have really no distinction whatever about them, and might have been written by nearly anyone of the period. Chopin's Op. 1 Rondo is wanting in distinction, and his early nocturnes were founded on Field. Even the mighty Wagner began at the very first by writing operas which if stronger than those of Marschner, were really in just the same style. The case is quite different with the following four—viz., Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms. One might hesitate perhaps about naming Berlioz, because his "Waverley" and "Francs Juges" do smack very considerably of Cherubini; but still they are this and much more. The case of the others is quite clear. Mendelssohn at seventeen burst on the world with the miraculous "Midsummer Night's Dream" Overture, which was like nothing else that had ever appeared in music. Schumann's miniature-painting on the pianoforte (his "Papillons" &c.) was just an equally novel revelation. Brahms' great C major Sonata with which he began his career had certainly no precedent of any sort in music. It is a fact concomitant with these, and probably it is a corollary to them, that these same composers never changed their style during their lives. Except for progress in the mastery of their tools, I don't think any "periods" can be assigned to the four composers I have last named. I make no deductions here as to the import of this beginning straight away with originality, but it is a very noticeable fact. A second point would be as to allegations of hardness, angularity, ill balance of sound, or such like things, which the lecturer has hinted may be and are made by some people against Brahms. It is possible no doubt to feel like that on occasion. But for those who have qualms in consequence as to the merit of the master, I would offer reassurance in the trite remark that the same thing has happened over and over again in the history of music, very nearly always in fact when something original has been produced, and that such objections have died a natural death with further experience. Roughly speaking I should say it takes a whole generation, which is thirty years or the time for a complete new set of adult men and women to come up,



before anything strongly new is thoroughly assimilated by executants and listeners. Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonatas are an example; taking the whole series, it took at least a generation before these lay under the fingers of the pianists, or were accounted natural music by the public. I have not the shadow of a doubt myself as to the beauties of Brahms' music finally winning their way just like those of any other great master, in so far as they have not already done so. A third point would be as to Brahms as a standard and bulwark. The contest between the specious and the truly and deeply emotional has always been going on. There were vast numbers at the time, musicians included, who genuinely considered Steibelt a better composer than Beethoven; and the same with this or that brilliant pianoforte writer as against Schumann. We have precisely the same danger of glamour at the present day, by those who don't see the truth of things. And this natural tendency is now aggravated by the development of indefinite and undecided theories as to the functions of music, which have started what might be called a programme-music and symphonic-poem movement. I make no objection in the abstract to these. Wagner's "*Siegfried Idyll*" is by way of being both, and is one of the most beautiful things in existence. But then note two things; first it is replete with Wagner's peculiar vein of beautiful melody, and secondly (what is not generally recognised) it is constructed strictly in "*Sonata-form*." I say not generally recognised, because the lesson is still very imperfectly learnt that manipulations of tonality lie at the bottom of modern construction more than manipulations of phrase, and that the double-bass tells at least as much of the secrets of the composer's construction as does the first violin. But if we have the "*Siegfried Idyll*" on the one side, we have unfortunately on the other side symphonic poems, nine out of ten of which have not got the melody, and ninety-nine out of a hundred of which have not got the form. I think these writers however talented do not know which way they are going or what they are doing, and are engaged on a race down-hill. I believe the symphonic poem movement to be in the history of the art little more than a fluff, or a burr floating in the wind. It is needless to say then how cordially I agree with those expressions in the lecture which indicate Brahms as a standard by which loose ideas can be corrected, and a bulwark against erroneous developments. Brahms' advent into the field of musical art has been one incalculable gain. There are other things which I could say, but I will not further detain you.

Dr. WALKER.—I must thank you for the very kind way in which you have received my paper. I am entirely in agreement with everything Dr. Maclean has said, except on one

point. It seems to me you can distinguish at least one definite change of style in Brahms, so far as instrumental work is concerned. The two versions of the B major Trio show a great difference in the command of instrumental structure, and it seems to me that unless he had realised that there were serious structural defects in the early version, he would not have revised it after more than thirty years. It is from about Op. 11 to Op. 18 that there seems to be a special sort of change—about the time when he really realised that Beethoven was the model. I think, as I said in my paper, that Schumann's influence only lasted through his very earliest instrumental works. Now with regard to Mr. Davey's questions, I think that the greatest thing Brahms invented was the return to the Beethoven principle—*i.e.*, the return to the feeling that structure and expression were both necessary. I think if Brahms had never written, music would have lost all sense of structure. And I do not think that a great composer should necessarily have an absolute command of any one department. If one takes almost any one, it is very difficult to find some department in which he was not surpassed in some way or other. We must take the great composers' work as a whole. As regards technical faults in Brahms, Mr. Davey only, I think, mentioned his partial neglect of the upper register of the piano, to which I do not attach much importance. We can find much more serious technical faults in most great men. Mr. Davey mentioned Shakespeare; but I think there was a great deal of truth in the French eighteenth-century criticism, which urged that he was as full of technical faults as a poet could well be—his colossal greatness is in spite of all that. As to great composers always being popular in their day, I think that is an exceedingly doubtful point. Besides, even if they were, I do not think it is a matter of the slightest importance. Music is meant for the musician—in the broadest sense of that word, of course. Referring to what Mr. Southgate said, I do not mean to depreciate emotion in music, but only emotion when undisciplined, and when the value of the particular emotion is not considered at all.

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