



JOHANNES BRAHMS

Johannes Brahms

1833-1897

Johannes Brahms suffered from the anxiety of modern creators—he felt intimidated by the greatness of earlier composers. Could he live up to their standards? He waited until he was forty-three to write his first symphony: by that age Beethoven had written eight of his nine. “Composing a symphony is no laughing matter,” Brahms said. “You have no idea of how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven.”

Brahms’s upbringing left him careful to avoid dangers; with great strength of will he made himself into a composer of the highest standards. He burned all works which did not meet his demand for excellence.

Johannes Brahms was born May 7, 1833, in a crowded tenement in the north German port of Hamburg. His father had been born into a peasant family, but had wanted to become a musician. He had come to Hamburg, where he played the double bass. At twenty-four he had married his forty-one-year-old landlady; Johannes was the second of four children of this marriage, which eventually broke up.

His musical talent became apparent early, and his family was tempted to exploit him as a prodigy to help the shaky family finances. But two good teachers prevented this. The first, O. F. W. Cossel, turned his pupil over to Edward Marxsen when he felt he could teach the boy no more. Both men recognized Johannes’s immense promise: they grounded Brahms thoroughly in the music of Bach and told him that his talent imposed great responsibilities on him.

When Johannes became a teenager he played the piano in waterfront bars and bawdy houses to make money for his family. In later years, he told a friend, “That was my first experience of women. And you expect me to honor them as you do!” He remained ill at ease with respectable women; when he found himself attracted to a female pupil, he would stop teaching her. Perhaps he feared being attracted to women, and felt it safer to go without love than to care too much.

Brahms was a handsome young man — blond, with blue eyes, a bit delicate, and with a high-pitched voice which he disliked. He managed to make it gruff with the passage of time. In 1853 his friend the great violinist Joseph Joachim took Brahms to meet Robert and Clara Schumann. Immediately they liked one another, and Schumann recognized what he had met. In his diary entry for September 30, 1853 Schumann wrote: “Brahms to see me (a genius).” He urged his publishers to print Brahms’s works, and hailed him in “New Paths,” the first critical article he had written in ten years, as a young eagle, the next great composer. Brahms felt this praise imposed upon him the heavy responsibility of not embarrassing Schumann by doing anything unworthy. Quickly he decided that most of the music he had written so far was not good enough to publish.

Shortly after, in February 1854, Schumann went mad. The Schumanns had little money, and Clara was pregnant with her eighth child. Brahms came to help her. For two years he lived nearby, supporting her with money he got from teaching. He visited Schumann in the asylum, but would not let Clara go. Schumann was, he said, “a very very horrifying and pitiful sight.” In later years he said, “To me, Schumann’s memory is holy. The noble, pure artist forever remains my ideal. I will hardly be privileged ever to love a better person; neither, it is to be hoped, will I have to come again so horrifyingly close to such a terrible fate and share such suffering.”

While all his life Clara Schumann remained one of the people he most loved, and whose musical advice he most valued, Robert’s tragedy was a trauma for him. He determined to avoid situations which fully engaged his emotions; the rest of his life was as uneventful as Brahms could make it, and his music reflects this sense of careful control. He wrote no music for the stage, where the composer must reveal emotions in his work; instead he concentrated on works in the classical forms. When asked why he didn’t write an opera, he replied, “I cannot make up my mind to either a first opera or a first marriage.”

In 1862 Brahms left Hamburg for Vienna, where he spent the rest of his life. He loved the friendly, informal city. It had a gaiety which he lacked, but appreciated. “Do tell Dvořák,” he once wrote, “how much I enjoy his gay creativity.”

Johannes Brahms on the way to
the Red Hedgehog, by Otto Böhler



Vienna offered him the solitude he needed for creating, and coffeehouses and a social circle for friendship when he wanted it. He grew older, heavier, and gruffer. Hans von Bülow nicknamed him "the Bear," and he had a bearlike tendency to give his friends some rough verbal cuffings from time to time. He grew a beard so that no one could tell if he was wearing a necktie, and became a bit slovenly in his habits. Sometimes he forgot to put on his suspenders when he dressed; then if he conducted, his pants would start to slide down his stomach.

He lived inexpensively and was able to save and invest all the royalties he received. In his later years he gave a great deal of money to worthy causes or people, always as secretly as possible.

As a composer he worked with the standard classical forms, rejecting Liszt's "Music of the Future," which he thought full of false pathos, formless improvisation, and vacant invention. He called it "a swindle." Form meant a great deal to him: he took pleasure in pointing out to Clara Schumann that in what he meant to be his last work he had quoted again a German folk song he had used in his Opus One, so that he ended where he had begun.

He had the interesting habit of always producing twin works. When he thought about a work of a particular form, he developed enough ideas for another like it, so that his serenades, piano quartets, sextets, symphonies, overtures, string quartets, and clarinet sonatas come in pairs. His last work was "Four Serious Songs," written in anticipation of Clara Schumann's death. He would not hear them performed: his emotions were too strong. He died April 3, 1897, of cancer of the liver, the disease that had also killed his father.