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BRAHMS: THE CRUCIAL YEARS 1853-1865

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## BRAHMS: THE CRUCIAL YEARS 1853-1865

The years 1853-1865 were critical years for Brahms, both personally and professionally. In 1853, he was barely twenty, unknown, but bursting with the energy of youth and passion. In 1865, he was thirty-two, a man known to all the musical world, but a man of intellectual pursuits and diligent study. This paper will seek to understand the relationship between Brahms's musical style and biography during these twelve years. The years 1853-1856 comprise Brahms's first compositional period, during which a noticeable change occurs: the passion is greatly subdued and formal clarity comes to the foreground. In short, the first period was more Beethovenian in spirit, the second more Schubertian.

In Brahms's personal affairs of the time, a great passion is awakened in the earlier years, then denied in the later. A great love and respect is developed, followed by the tragic illness and death of the one respected. Both events had a significant effect on Brahms the man and Brahms the composer.

In the words of W. B. Yeats, Brahms did not die "a foolish, passionate man". He put all that behind him quite soon, as soon in fact as he had rationalized his passion for Clara Schumann and after the disaster of Robert Schumann's insanity and death had confirmed him in his view that nothing in life could be taken on trust.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Burnett, James, Brahms: A Critical Study (New York, Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 73.

As Brahms could rationalize the passion out of his life, so could he rationalize it out of his music. He did this by extensive study of the masters, Bach and Palestrina specifically, until their styles were effectively assimilated into his own. His studies provided a damper for his youthful vigor, which was fast waning. This is not to say that the music after 1860 is lacking in energy. Quite the contrary. But the energy is of a more refined nature, that of a more mature man and musician. I say 1860 because this was the actual turning point of the stylistic change. This was the year of the Piano Concerto in D minor, a composition that points to both the past and future of Brahms's development. I will turn to it in some detail later. But first let us consider the events and works of the earliest years of Brahms's career: 1853-1854.

Brahms's public career began April 9, 1853, the day he and the Hungarian violinist, Eduard Reményi, left Hamburg on a concert tour. Only a few months later, the young Brahms was to return home a famous artist. The tour began with successful but insignificant stops at numerous small towns: Winsen, Lüneburg, and Celle, but on one of the last days of May, 1853, a stop was made at Hanover. Here Brahms met Joseph Joachim, violinist and concertmaster to the King of Hanover. It took only a few days for Joachim and Brahms to develop a lasting friendship, one that proved valuable to the twenty-year-old pianist. Their happy visit had to end abruptly, however, after the police discovered that Reményi, a Hungarian revolutionary, had dared play before the King. They were forced to leave Hanover. Brahms was consoled by Joachim's

invitation to come to him if further partnership with Reményi became impossible.

The next stop on the tour was Weimar, home of Liszt and his followers. Joachim, knowing of Liszt's helpfulness toward young artists, had recommended Brahms to him. The encounter didn't proceed as expected, for Liszt, though admiring Brahms's compositional ability, would help the young artist on his way only if Brahms would comply with Liszt's artistic views.

It should be mentioned here that in 1853 there existed three schools of musical thought in Germany: (1) the purists of Leipzig, those who held sacred the memory of Mendelssohn and clung to the methods and forms of Classicism; (2) the Schumannites, those who upheld expansion within the older forms, who advocated chromatic harmonies, mixed rhythms, and varied cadences, but all within a formal outline; and (3) the "New Germans", Liszt's group, who rejected old methods and demanded in particular that form should be dictated by the poetic idea, as exemplified in the music of Richard Wagner. Brahms could not accept a musical standard that was in some degree dependent on an extra-musical idea. He was more the Schumannite, standing somewhere between the ultra-conservatives and the "New Germans". In addition, Brahms was repulsed by the mode of life at Weimar, where everything revolved around the idolized Liszt, who was kept, as a god, separate from the people. Brahms could not hide his distaste from Liszt, nor his indifference to the music of this new school. Liszt was offended by the young man's attitude. Reményi, who needed

Liszt's patronage, was mortified. His subsequent refusal to go on playing with Brahms was due not only to his need for Liszt's approval but also to his envy over Brahms's growing popularity. Reményi was only too glad for the excuse to rid himself of Brahms.

At first in a quandry over where to turn, Brahms then remembered Joachim's invitation issued upon their separation at Hanover. He wrote Joachim the following letter:

(Weimar, June 29, 1853)

Dear Herr Joachim,

If I were not named "Kreisler", I should now have found well-founded reasons to be somewhat dispirited, to curse my art and my enthusiasm, and to retire as an eremite into solitude...Reményi is leaving Weimar without me. It is his wish, for my manner could not have given him the slightest pretext for doing so. I really did not need such another bitter experience; in this respect I had already quite enough material for a poet and composer.

I cannot return to Hamburg without anything to show, although there I should feel happiest with my heart tuned in C-G sharp. I must at least see two or three of my compositions in print, so that I can cheerfully look my parents in the face. Will you write to me soon, if you are going to be in Göttingen in the next few days; this would make me inexpressibly happy, and if so, may I visit you there? Perhaps I am presumptuous, but my position and my dejection force me into it...<sup>2</sup>

The summer of 1853 was therefore spent with Joachim in Göttingen. In mid-August, Brahms embarked on a trip along the Rhine, during which he introduced himself to influential musicians who could help him get his early works published.

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<sup>2</sup>Karl Geiringer, Brahms: His Life and Work (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936), pp. 46-47.

Through Wasielewski he was introduced to the music-loving Deichmann in Mehlem. It was during his stay with Deichmann that Brahms began a thorough study of Robert Schumann's music, thereby developing a great respect for this composer of genius.

In late August, Joachim visited the Schumanns in their home of Düsseldorf. He praised the young Brahms highly, thereby securing an invitation for his friend. On September 30, 1853, Brahms made his first visit to the Schumanns' home. His impression was great, as is shown by Robert Schumann's diary entries: September 30: "Herr Brahms from Hamburg"; October 1: "Visit from Brahms, a genius". Brahms's natural reserve melted quickly in the warm atmosphere of the Schumann home, and he who found it impossible to play any of his music for Liszt and his circle eagerly played for his newfound friends. It is believed that Brahms played his piano sonata in C, later published as his Opus 1. A great friendship developed between Clara, Robert, and Johannes, and Schumann introduced Brahms to a number of his circle, including Albert Dietrich and Julius Otto Grimm, both musicians who became Brahms's intimate friends.

Schumann, while offering friendship to Johannes, did not stop there. He strove to make Brahms known to the world. For this purpose, he wrote his essay, "Neue Bahnen" (New Paths), which appeared in the October 28th issue of the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, founded by Schumann himself. Following is that essay in full:

Years have passed--almost as many in number as those dedicated by me to the previous editorship of this journal, namely, ten--since I appeared on this scene so rich to me in remembrances. Often, in spite of arduous productive activity, I have felt tempted; many new and considerable talents have appeared, a fresh musical energy has seemed to announce itself through many of the earnest artists of the present time, even though their works are, for the most part, known to a limited circle only. I have thought, watching the path of these chosen ones with the greatest sympathy, that after such a preparation someone must and would suddenly appear, destined to give ideal presentment to the highest expression of the time, who would bring us his mastership, not in process of development, but would spring forth like Minerva fully armed from the head of Jove. And he is come, a young blood by whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch. He is called Johannes Brahms, came from Hamburg, where he has worked in obscure tranquillity, trained in the most difficult laws of art, by an excellent and enthusiastic teacher, and was lately introduced to me by an honoured, well-known master. He bore all the outward signs that proclaim to us, "This is one of the elect." Sitting at the piano, he proceeded to reveal to us wondrous regions. We were drawn into circles of ever deeper enchantment. His playing, too, was full of genius, and transformed the piano into an orchestra of wailing and jubilant voices. There were sonatas, more veiled symphonies--songs, whose poetry one would understand without knowing the words, though all are pervaded by a deep song-melody--simple pianoforte pieces, partly demoniacal, of the most graceful form--then sonatas for violin and piano--quartets for strings--and every one so different from the rest that each seemed to flow from a separate source. And then it was as though he, like a tumultuous stream, united all into a waterfall, bearing a peaceful rainbow over the rushing waves, met on the shore by butterflies' fluttering, and accompanied by nightingales' voices.

If he will sink his magic staff in the region where the capacity of masses in chorus and orchestra can lend him its powers, still more wonderful glimpses into the mysteries of the spirit-world will be before us. May the highest genius strengthen him for this, of which there is the prospect, since another genius, that of modesty, also dwells within him. His companions greet him on his first course through

the world, where, perhaps, wounds may await him, but laurels and palms also; we bid him welcome as a strong champion.

There is in all times a secret union of kindred spirits. Bind closer the circle, ye who belong to it, that the truth of art may shine ever clearer, spreading joy and blessing through the world.<sup>3</sup>

Instantly the name of Brahms became known. Very well and good for Brahms except that the public and critics expected great things from him. Brahms felt some fear and doubt in his ability to live up to their expectations. He explains in a letter to Schumann of November 1853:

The open praise which you bestowed on me has probably excited the expectations of the public to such a degree that I don't know how I can come anywhere near fulfilling them. Above all, it induces me to use extreme caution in selecting pieces for publication. I contemplate issuing none of my trios, and to designate as Op. 1 and Op. 2 the C major and F# minor sonatas, as Op. 3 the songs, and as Op. 4 the Eb minor Scherzo. Of course you understand that I strive with all my might to cause you as little embarrassment as possible.<sup>4</sup>

The two sonatas, together with the third sonata, Opus 5, represent the most serious, representative works of Brahms's early period. A Beethovenian romantic expression seems to predominate in these early works over the classical tradition of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier and the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert. But it is not a question of Classicism versus

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<sup>3</sup>Florence May, The Life of Johannes Brahms, Vol 1 (London: William Reeves, 1905), pp. 131-132.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Gal, Brahms: His Work and Personality (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 110-111.

Romanticism, rather a new orientation within Romanticism, including Beethovenian heroism along with intimate lyricism.

Brahms loved his early works, but was not too proud of them. When Simrock bought the rights to Brahms's earliest compositions from Breitkopf and Härtel in order to reissue them, Brahms wrote:

My dear Simrock, ought I to congratulate you? I can't say a word because I don't understand a word...It is not my fault if you overestimate me sky-high. I certainly have not contributed to this by either word or deed...<sup>5</sup>

Brahms introduced himself to Schumann with his Opus 1 on October 1, 1853. It is believed that this work inspired Schumann's article, "Neue Bahnen", quoted above. Schumann speaks in his article of the sonatas as "veiled symphonies". Truly, it is actually as if Brahms took an orchestral score, ranged the parts on two staves, and took out what was necessary to make it practical for two-hand capacity. Opus 2 is probably the most orchestral of the three sonatas, being of a wild and bombastic nature. The second movement contains a folk song melody, treated imitatively, and always in fully harmonized form. The latter calls for notation on three staves in some instances, lending to the orchestral nature of the sound and the unpianistic nature of the technique. Opus 1 is also orchestral, primarily because of the sheer accumulation of notes and because, in listening, it seems an easy task to assign orchestral instrumentation (for example, the "drum roll" at measure 139 and following, and the rich organ point beginning

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<sup>5</sup>Hans Gal, p. 108.

at measure 254). Opus 5 is less orchestral than the other two, but doesn't escape entirely. However, here there are more reasonable, refined solutions to piano technique.

Brahms's thematic material is quite varied within each sonata, but the Romantic, lyrical type of theme is by far the most prevalent. Within each movement, it is customary for Brahms to contrast his themes. Usually the first themes are rhythmic, contrasting with the more lyrical second themes. The opening bars of Opus 1 are commonly compared to the opening of Beethoven's Opus 106, especially in a rhythmic sense:

Example 1: Bars 1 and 2 of Opus 1:



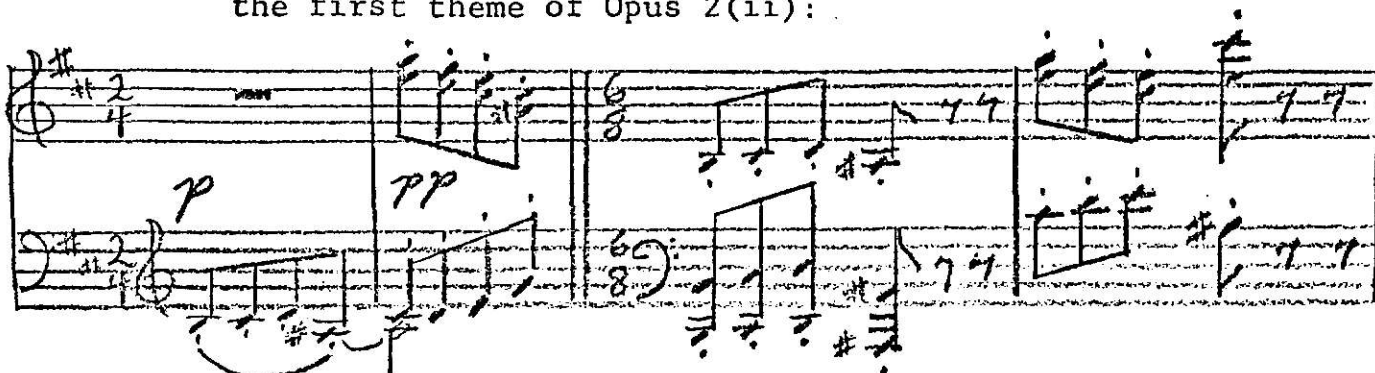
At this early stage, Brahms was fond of unifying his sonatas through the use of melodic interrelationships. For example, the first theme of Opus 1, fourth movement, is the same as the opening theme of the first movement, quoted above, with rhythmic changes:

Example 2: First theme of Opus 1, fourth movement:



The first theme of Opus 2, third movement, is the same as the first theme of the second movement:

Example 3: First theme of Opus 2(iii) compared with the first theme of Opus 2(ii):



This technique was also used in a more subtle fashion as he tended to relate not always whole themes, but sometimes motives of from three-to-five notes. For example, in Opus 1, the motive E-F-G-A-G of the opening, or its transpositions or inversions, occurs throughout the sonata. Brahms tended to place his references not only at phrase incipits but also at climaxes and principal cadences. The same technique is used in Opus 2, with the A-B-C#-F# motive of the opening, and in Opus 5, with the opening Ab-G-Db motive.

Brahms's harmony, mostly diatonic, is not too complex. Diverse harmonies, where they occur, are attributable to melodic inflections, modulations, and successively rising sequences. In Opus 5 (v), Brahms exploits some of the chromaticism of the Romantic vein, (measures 19+ and 90+), but purely diatonic harmony prevails, with the added interest of canonic devices. The key changes within the movements present no real surprises. The following shows tonality at strategic points within the first movements:

Second theme	Op. 1	vi
	Op. 2	v
	Op. 5	III
End of the Exposition:	Op. 1	I
	Op. 2	v
	Op. 5	VI
Beginning of the Development:	Op. 1	i
	Op. 2	VI
	Op. 5	#v
Beginning of the Recapitulation:	Op. 1	IV, changing to I
	Op. 2	i
	Op. 5	i, changing to I

The texture, as already mentioned, is full to the point of being orchestral in nature. Polyphonic and imitative writing is prevalent: note Opus 1 (i), the beginning of the development section, and Opus 1 (ii), measures 72-80. Extremes of contrapuntal interest exist in the final movement of Opus 5, especially in the "Più mosso" section, where the movement's third theme is treated contrapuntally.

Elements of rhythm figure prominently in these early sonatas. The bar line cannot be considered in a strict sense, nor can the subdivisions within the bar. Brahms constantly carries his phrases over the bar line, as in the Andante, Opus 5, first theme. His subdivisions within the measure do not always have the pulse of the given meter. A good example of hemiola can be found in measures eighty-one to eighty-four of Opus 1 (iii). To give the feel of "molto pesante", almost a pulse of 3/4 time is created in the middle of a 6/8 setting:

Example 4: Hemiola in Opus 1 (iii), measures 81-84:



The same rhythmic procedures are located in measures 9-10; 39-40; 106-107; and 200-201 of Opus 1 (iv). In each example, it is as if there are two bars of common time, though they are written in 9/8. Note measure fourteen of Opus 2 (i), in which two chords divide the 3/4 measure equally, looking like 6/8 time.

In the finale of Opus 1, at measures 176-180, there is a union of 9/8 and 6/8 in the same phrase. This is merely one example of Brahms's predilection for shifting meters. Note measure 47 and following of Opus 1 (ii): The meter changes from 2/4 to 4/16 to 3/16, back to 4/16, to 2/4 within the space of eight measures.

The last element in the sonatas to consider is that of form, as it is the means of organizing all the other elements into a coherent whole. The only form Brahms uses in his first movements is the sonata form. The form is quite regular, except Opus 5 presents three themes so similar that the contrast in character usually associated with sonata form themes is totally absent.

The finale of Opus 2, also in sonata form, is prefixed by a fantasia-like introduction and concluded by a coda in the

same style. Both sections are almost separated from the rest of the movement.

The second-movement forms are not quite as uniform, two being in a theme and variations setting, the other in a refrain form. The Andante of Opus 1 consists of a Volkslied of twelve measures in a minor key, then two variations in minor, one in major, and a codetta. The Andante of Opus 2 begins with a melody in two periods (8+10), then two variation settings in minor, concluding with a phrase extension. Then, to lead into the Scherzo movement there is an elaborate setting in major, ending on the dominant. Opus 5 (ii) has the form ABAC, A being the refrain, B and C the two episodes. Each episode is quite different in technical treatment, the first being a duet between the two hands, the second a very broad melody in the right hand, a pedal point below. Even the refrain is varied, primarily in accompaniment figuration.

The Scherzo-Trio is the one form Brahms uses for his third movements. They are all three quite standard in form.

The fourth movement is the final one for two of the sonatas (Opp. 1 and 2). Opus 1 (iv) is in rondo form, Opus 2, sonata form with introduction and coda in fantasia style. The fourth movement of Opus 5 is an Intermezzo ("In Retrospect"), consisting of one sixteen-bar sentence, repeated; the first section extended by a quasi-cadenza, the second by a codetta. The themes of this movement are all derived from the previous three movements. Opus 5 (v) is in rondo form.

These are the works of the enthusiastic young Brahms, who was well on his way at the age of twenty toward the career

of a musical genius. He had experienced no serious setbacks; on the contrary, he had been awarded the support of one of the finest, most well-respected composers of the day, Robert Schumann. Little did he know, at the beginning of 1854, that he was soon to experience tragedy and loss, the effects of which were so great that a very noticeable change in his music was to occur.

On February 27, 1854, Robert Schumann, Brahms's devoted friend and mentor, tried to end his life by throwing himself into the Rhine. The nervous disorder which had already tormented him, causing him to feel assailed by spirits and to be deafened by demoniacal shrieks, finally led him to seek death. He was saved; however, he woke to even deeper insanity. Even Clara was not allowed to see him. On March 4, he was sent to the private establishment of Dr. Richarz at Endenich, near Bonn.

Brahms, on first reading the news in the Cologne Gazette, set off immediately for Düsseldorf. On March 3, Johannes wrote to Joachim:

Dearest Joseph,

Do come on Saturday; it comforts Frau Schumann to see certain dear faces.

Schumann's condition seems to be improved. The physicians have hope, but no one is allowed to see him.

I have already been with Frau Schumann. She wept very much but was very glad to see me and to be able to expect you.<sup>6</sup>

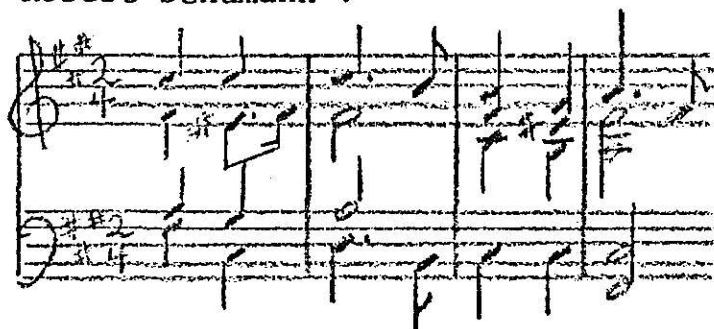
Brahms, Joachim, Grimm, and Dietrich did their best in the following months to console Clara. A touching memorial

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<sup>6</sup>May, pp. 164-165.

of Brahms's efforts to divert Clara's mind from her sorrow exists in his Opus 9, "Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann". The theme, taken from Schumann's "Album-blatt", Op. 99, no. 1, had been chosen also by Clara as the theme for her own set of variations written to commemorate Robert's forty-third birthday.

Example 5: Theme from "Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann":



An entry in Clara's diary expresses her appreciation of Johannes's affection:

He tried to bring solace to my heart. He composed variations on the beautiful, intimate theme, which made such a deep impression on me a year ago when I composed variations for my beloved Robert, and touched me deeply by his tender thoughtfulness.<sup>7</sup>

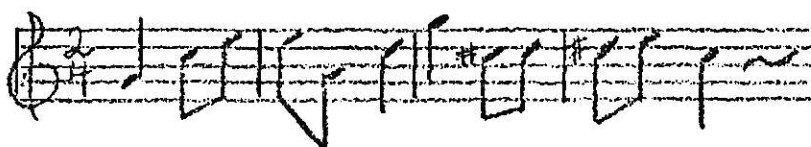
The manuscript of the composition bears the title, "Little Variations on a Theme of His, dedicated to Her". The whole work is an homage to the pair and contains numerous references to both Robert and Clara. The ninth of the sixteen variations is a paraphrase of Schumann's second "Album-blatt", while the tenth variation contains, beginning in the thirtieth bar, in the middle voice, the "Theme of Clara Wieck", from

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<sup>7</sup>May, p. 166.

Schumann's Impromptus, Op. 5 (no. 1, bar 17 et seq.)

Example 6: Clara's original theme:

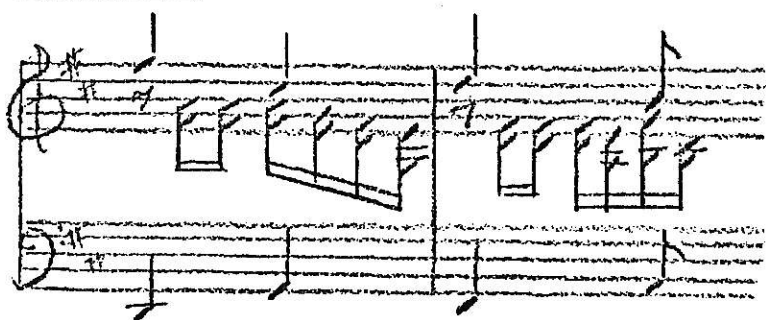


Example 7: Clara's theme as it appears in the tenth variation:



Also in the tenth variation, the original bass of Schumann's theme is used as melody in the upper part, and its inversion is used as bass part, while the original melody is imitated by diminution in the middle part.

Example 8:



There are sixteen variations, and five of them are in keys different from that of the theme. This is exactly the case in Schumann's variations, the "Etudes Symphoniques". It is more common for Brahms to confine his variations to the major and minor modes of one key, that of the theme.

In July, 1854, Clara left Düsseldorf for Berlin to visit her mother. While she was gone, Brahms was left the task of organizing Schumann's books and music, which he studied diligently. Brahms had by now become so attached to Clara and her children that he found it nearly impossible to leave. When in August, 1854, Clara went to Ostend on vacation, Brahms resolved to take a trip himself through Swabia. He found little pleasure in his journey, however, always wanting to turn back and spend his time waiting for Clara in Düsseldorf. Indeed, the Schumann's home had become his second home. There he could study Schumann's books and music, be of help to Clara, who returned his affection, and be near his good friend, Joachim. Consequently, it was in Düsseldorf that Brahms remained for the next two years.

Continued encouraging news from Endenich enabled Clara to plan an autumn concert tour. Out of responsibility to her children, she planned an especially rigorous schedule, hardly allowing herself a moment's rest. The Andante and Scherzo of Brahms's Opus 5 were included in several of Clara's programs for the season. They were received by the public with indifference, by the press with enthusiasm.

For ten days of Clara's tour she was based in Hamburg, and Brahms carefully planned his trip home to correspond with her visit. Christmas was spent quietly in Düsseldorf, where Joachim brought first-hand news of his visit with Schumann. Again the news was encouraging.

On January 11, 1855, Brahms himself was allowed to visit Schumann for several hours, after which he wrote:

I think with joy of the short hours I was allowed to spend with you, they were so delightful, but passed so quickly. I cannot tell your wife enough about them; it makes me doubly glad that you received me with such friendship and kindness, and that you still think of the hour with so much affection.

We shall be able to see you thus more and more frequently and pleasantly until we possess you again.<sup>8</sup>

The period of 1854-1860 was a relatively unproductive one compositionally for Brahms, except that throughout the spring and summer of 1854, he was working on a symphony. In this he had the help of Grimm, who guided him in his first attempts at orchestration. It is only natural that the current events of Brahms's life inspired his creative imagination in the composition of two of his most powerful movements. The work was never completed as a symphony, but as a sonata for two pianos, the first two movements of which became the opening movements of the Concerto in D minor for piano; the third is immortalized in the "Behold all Flesh", the march movement of the German Requiem.

Brahms frequently performed his sonata at this time with Clara or with Grimm, who never hesitated to inform Brahms of the inadequacy of the form to fit the ideas. Brahms's own self-criticism was forever a harsh reality, especially during his second period. He was always conscious of trying to live up to Schumann's praise, and he had already experienced his inability to master symphonic techniques. He thereby set himself on a rigorous course of study, involving the exchange of musical exercises with Joachim at fixed intervals. Their

exchange became systematized, as Brahms insisted on punctuality, imposing a fine for tardiness. This fine was to be spent on books to further their study. Much of Brahms's energy was spend on the study of early masters, Bach and Palestrina, for example. The complete edition of Bach's works, appearing in annual volumes, beginning in 1850, provided a most significant stimulus. Brahms worked hard at acquiring contrapuntal techniques, until finally new approaches were effectively assimilated into his own original style.

Throughout the year 1855, Schumann's health steadily worsened until, by the end of the year, the doctors were calling his case hopeless. Clara was forced to give up all expectation of a personal visit with her husband, whom she hadn't seen since February, 1854. She also had to continually keep in mind her financial responsibility toward her children. On April 7, 1856, she started for London where she was engaged for the season. Brahms tried consulting specialists about Schumann's condition, but the opinions were unanimous. Schumann was suffering from softening of the brain.

Brahms elected to stay in Düsseldorf for the summer, Dietrich's presence there giving him added satisfaction. On June 8, Schumann's forty-sixth birthday, Brahms again went to Endenich. He was distressed by his friend's condition, although Schumann had recognized him. Clara returned from England in July, and on the twenty-third was summoned to Endenich. However, because of the appearance of new symptoms before her arrival, she was forced to return to Düsseldorf and wait four suspenseful days before she left again for Bonn to

await the end. On July 27, she was allowed in Schumann's room. He could barely speak, but he did recognize her. He lingered another day or two before he died July 29, 1856.

In the early autumn of 1856, Clara, Brahms, Brahms's sister Elise, and some of Clara's children took a trip to Switzerland, after which a mystery ensues. Although it is clear from surviving correspondence that Johannes had fallen in love with Clara, the two suddenly parted. Although they continued as friends, visiting each other when they could and writing continually, they did not ever marry, and, so far as we know, never became romantically involved. Everything concerning them will remain a mystery because, in 1887, at Brahms's insistence, they destroyed all their correspondence to each other. So nothing in writing exists as explanation for Brahms's moving to Detmold and Clara's moving to Berlin in September 1857. Brahms had taken a position at the court of Detmold for the last three months of the year, giving lessons to the Princess, playing at court, and conducting an amateur choral society. In January, 1858, he left Detmold for Hamburg, where he became engrossed in studying, composing, and teaching.

In the absence of genuine documentation, theories are our only source of explanation for the Johannes-Clara relationship. Looking in Freudian terms at Brahms's psyche, some writers have stated that Brahms had an Oedipus complex. Clara was simply a mother-substitute (more believable when one remembers that Clara was fourteen years older than Johannes). To complicate matters, Brahms had, at a very early age, been exposed to prostitutes when he played the piano at numerous

"dives" in a rather seamy section of Hamburg. Consequently, the young boy developed the conception of two kinds of woman: the impure (prostitutes) and the pure (Mother). His physical desires were only directed toward the impure ladies. He could feel no romantic inclinations toward those women he considered pure, for they became for him mother-substitutes. If this theory were correct, Brahms could never marry Clara, because she fit into his "mother" category. Possibly lending credence to this theory is the fact that Brahms did frequent houses of prostitution (satisfying those desires possibly that could never be expressed elsewhere).

Looking a little less deeply into the composer's psyche, another theory has been developed, however not incompatible with the preceding theory. That is that Brahms was faced all his life with the conflict of wanting to marry and settle down, but recognizing that to do that, he would have to sacrifice some of his dedication to his art. This he could not do, for he could never be fully responsible to anything but his music. He loved Clara and no doubt wanted to marry her, but he realized that he could never make the necessary sacrifice where his music was concerned.<sup>9</sup> This theory is borne out in a section of Clara's daughter Eugenie's memoirs, in which she discusses Brahms's feelings toward her mother:

The realization was inevitable, however, that a task awaited him which demanded his entire strength and which could not be reconciled with an exclusive dedication to any single friendship.

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<sup>9</sup>Robert Schauflier subscribes to the Oedipus complex theory; Hans Gal to the view that Brahms was unwilling to make a sacrifice; and Karl Geiringer refuses to accept either theory.

To recognize this and immediately to seek a way out were acts in keeping with his strongly pronounced masculinity. Even the fact that this was done in a brusque way was inherent in his nature, and perhaps in the nature of the entire situation. But it is certain that he fought a hard fight in order to steer his ship of fate in a different direction, and that the knowledge of having hurt my mother at that time long haunted him and often manifested itself in his abrupt behavior, especially since the wrong could no longer be righted. This at least is what we children came to believe.<sup>10</sup>

That Brahms caused Clara much heartache is evident from her diaries, and the change in Brahms was irreversible. He became markedly less enthusiastic, less amiable.

The combination of the loss of his personal friend Robert Schumann, and the realization of his necessarily self-prescribed loneliness had a profound effect on Brahms. He became less trusting and he thenceforth buried his heart, so that he never again, but for one exception, allowed real love into his life. There were occasional flirtations, but no one deeply affected him again as Clara had done. The tragedy of Schumann's illness and death lent a somber quality to his second period music, and tragedy itself is the mood of the next great composition, the D minor Piano Concerto.

It was early 1858, while in Hamburg, that Brahms began work on the concerto, based on his previous orchestral attempt. Movement by movement he had been sending his work to Joachim for suggestions. He finally accepted an engagement to play the concerto at an Otten subscription concert in Hamburg on March 25. The concert engagement was canceled,

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<sup>10</sup>Gal, pp. 91-92.

however, when the owner of the only decent piano in Hamburg refused to loan it for the occasion.

Brahms hurried to Berlin to visit Clara on her return from a concert tour in Switzerland. In a few days' time, he received a telegram from Joachim, informing him that a rehearsal of the concerto had been arranged for March 30, 1858, at Hanover. Clara and Grimm were both present for the occasion. Afterwards, Clara wrote to her stepbrother:

I think you must be pleased to hear that the rehearsal went off splendidly today. There was only time to play it through once, but it almost went without a mistake and quite roused the musicians...The whole is wonderful, so rich and fervent, and has such unity! Johannes was blissful and played the last movement "prestissimo" from sheer delight. We took a walk afterwards; it was as though heaven had desired to lend special brightness to the day. Johannes enjoyed it in full measure; I wish you could have seen his happiness.<sup>11</sup>

It was too late in the season to arrange a public performance, but Brahms returned to Hamburg in full confidence.

April, May, and June were spent with Clara. At the end of July, Brahms went to Göttingen, with Clara close by in the Grimms's house. During the rest of the summer, he worked hard on a serenade, which was finished before the summer's end, but in the form of an octet for string and wind instruments. The work was later published as the Serenade in D Major, Op. 11, orchestrated on the recommendations of Clara and Joachim in 1859. Joachim praised his orchestration in which the full resources of the nineteenth century orchestra are exploited.

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<sup>11</sup>May, p. 231.

The Opus 11 is a serenade in character, but not in structure. Brahms was evidently fascinated by the sound of the wind players at Detmold, where he first conceived the idea of writing an eighteenth-century-style serenade, with its multiple short, relatively undeveloped movements. However, Brahms's preoccupation with development hindered him in this respect, and he created a complexity foreign to this type of composition. The serenade consists of allegro molto, scherzo, adagio non troppo, minuets 1 and 2, scherzo, rondo. The length and abundance of development of the first movement often hinders the piece's performance in totality. The work was published in the summer of 1860 by Breitkopf and Härtel.

At the end of September, 1858, Brahms left Göttingen and returned to his post at Detmold. With the coming of autumn, he was forced to attempt a performance of his piano concerto. But, as far as can be determined, the work was never performed in Detmold. Instead, Joachim arranged for its performance in Hanover on January 22, 1859, when Brahms would be free of his court duties. A second performance would follow at the Leipzig Gewandhaus concert on January 27.

Soon after his departure from Göttingen, Brahms had sent Grimm the sketches for what proved to be his second serenade, in A major, scored for small orchestra. Although Grimm's opinion was entirely favorable, completion of the work was delayed for several months.

It can be seen that after the critical period of Robert Schumann's illness and death, Brahms enjoyed a relatively quiet time, during which he could study and compose

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at leisure. The quiet afforded him some time to think of himself, and he realized how very lonely he was. He thought much of Agathe von Siebold, whose acquaintance he made at the Grimms's. Agathe was a talented singer and sang Brahms's songs with a certain affinity. It is clear from correspondence that the Grimms encouraged their intimacy. In fact, their friendship grew until Brahms felt an obligation by duty to express himself one way or the other. The result was unfavorable to Agathe, since Brahms couldn't bring himself to accept any binding ties at the outset of his career. It can be deduced from their letters to each other that Brahms really loved Agathe, so this experience was the second disappointment for him. Never again would Brahms open his heart to love. He was thenceforth dedicated solely to music.<sup>12</sup>

The D minor Piano Concerto was performed on January 22 in Hanover, in the presence of the entire court circle. Joachim conducted, Johannes played the solo. The Hanover correspondent to Signale reported:

The work had no great success with the public, but it aroused the decided respect and sympathy of the best musicians for the gifted artist.

Another critic had this to say:

The work, with all its serious striving, its rejection of triviality, its skilled instrumentation, seemed difficult to understand, even dry, and in parts, eminently fatiguing; nevertheless Brahms gave the impression of being a really

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<sup>12</sup>The majority of the biographical information was derived from Florence May, The Life of Johannes Brahms, Vol. 1 and 2 (London: William Reeves, 1905).

sterling musician, and it was conceded without reservation that he is not merely a virtuoso, but a great artist of pianoforte playing.<sup>13</sup>

Brahms left almost immediately for Leipzig, where he was to perform the concerto January 27. Unfortunately, the audience for which Brahms was to play in Leipzig was composed of Mendelssohn-worshippers on the one hand, and members of the New German school on the other. The day after the concert, Brahms wrote to Joachim.

In the first place it really went very well; I played much better than in Hanover, and the orchestra capitally...The first movement and the second were heard without a sign. At the end three hands attempted to fall slowly one upon the other, upon which a quite audible hissing from all sides forbade such demonstrations. There is nothing else to write about the event, for no one has yet said a syllable to me about the work...This failure has made no impression at all upon me, and the slight feeling of disappointment and flatness disappeared when I heard Haydn's C minor Symphony and the "Ruins of Athens". In spite of all this the concerto will please some day when I have improved its construction, and a second shall sound different.<sup>14</sup>

Brahms's sadness over this failure can certainly be read between the lines. His plan to "improve its construction" was never carried out; however, he was correct in saying his second concerto would be different.

The critic Bernsdorf had this to say after the Leipzig performance:

It is sad but true; new works do not succeed in Leipzig. Again at the fourteenth Gewandhaus concert was a composition borne to the grave. This work, however, cannot give pleasure. Save

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<sup>13</sup>May, p. 243.

<sup>14</sup>May, p. 245.

its serious intention, it has nothing to offer but waste, barren dreariness truly disconsolate... With deliberate intention, Herr Brahms has made the pianoforte part of his concerto as interesting as possible; it contains no effective treatment of the instrument, no new and ingenious passages, and wherever something appears which gives promise of effect, it is immediately crushed and suffocated by a thick crust of orchestral accompaniment...<sup>15</sup>

Bernsdorf represented the conservative section of the music-going public. The opposing section had this to report in the Neue Zeitschrift:

Notwithstanding its undeniable want of outward effect, we regard the poetic contents of the concerto as an unmistakable sign of significant and original creative power, and in the face of belittling criticisms of a certain portion of the public and press, we consider it our duty to insist on the admirable sides of the work, and to protest against the not very estimable manner in which judgment has been passed upon it.<sup>16</sup>

The concerto seems to belong more in a class with the earlier works. Hanslick, writing in 1888, says:

Brahms began, like Schumann, in Sturm und Drang, but he was much more daring and wild, more emancipated in respect to form and modulation. The fermentation period of his genius, which is generally supposed to have closed with his Opus 10 (Ballades for pianoforte), should, perhaps, be extended...does it not include the D minor Concerto, with its wild genius?<sup>17</sup>

The first piano concerto is, indeed, the focal point of Brahms's second period. In it are concentrated all the conflicts and problems of the artist's mastery, from their

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<sup>15</sup>May, p. 246.

<sup>16</sup>May, p. 247.

<sup>17</sup>May, p. 248.

inception. The first and second movements are imbued with highly-charged Romantic sentiment, while the third movement is more objective, more classically-oriented. Therein lies a progression from "Sturm und Drang" to a new classicism that had experienced Romanticism.

Brahms's hearing of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was associated in his mind with the Schumann tragedy, and the symphony's first theme suggested to him the idea of his own symphony that could also be associated with that tragedy. What resulted was a work all three movements of which could be related to Robert or Clara Schumann. It should be kept in mind, however, that this is not a programmatic piece in the nature of Liszt, but merely a piece bearing some associations to the Schumanns. The first movement was intended to portray Robert's crisis; the second is a little more ambitious. The manuscript copy was titled "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini". Schumann had always been known among friends as "Mynheer Domini", so the words could be interpreted as a tribute to Robert. But Brahms wrote to Clara in December, 1856, "I am also painting a lovely portrait of you--it is the Adagio." So, this movement could very well have been inspired by Clara. The Rondo, with its echoes of a gypsy band, recalls Reményi, and the latter was the one who took Brahms on the tour which led to the Schumanns. Thus, the Schumanns could be seen as central figures in the concerto.

Whatever its inspiration, the result was obviously not the critic's choice, nor was it a favorite of the public.

Beginning with the opening, the chosen orchestral instruments could not do justice to the first theme, so powerful and heroic and reminiscent of the Ninth Symphony. The inner strings of the violins and cellos lack power; the clarinets and bassoons sound dull; and the timpani roll has to be kept so discreet that its intended effect is nearly lost. Brahms's problems with orchestration are those of a pianist who saw things on a plane, unaccustomed to thinking of the three-dimensional possibilities of the orchestra. Brahms himself must have sensed the first movement's ineffectiveness, for he never tired of asking Joachim for advice. Just before the first public performance, Brahms wrote to his friend:

If you are willing and able, do write me a few words to let me know whether the effort wasn't altogether futile, and whether it has a chance. I no longer have either judgment or control of the piece.<sup>18</sup> Nothing decent will ever come of it anyway.<sup>18</sup>

The disappointment at the work's failure couldn't have been too sudden when such an attitude preceded its performance.

In his desire to emulate the Mozartian formal plan, in which the solo instrument puts its thematic material in opposition to that of the orchestra, Brahms wrote piano episodes almost totally independent of the orchestral material. It has been said that the concerto sounds like a symphony with piano obbligato. This particular concerto, with its inception as a symphony, easily falls into this category. What is conspicuously lacking is a playfulness and lightness of character usually associated with solo writing in a concerto,

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<sup>18</sup>Gal, p. 116.

although the Rondo surpasses the other two movements in this respect. But the concerto as a whole is grim and heavy in mood.

The Rondo finale, although approaching more the Classical ideal, somehow doesn't balance the titanic first movement. There is too much of a "devil-may-care" attitude (hardly the finale Beethoven would have chosen for his Ninth Symphony!).

Some of the piano writing is clumsy (for example, the frequent instances of rapidly repeated full chords). The scoring is massive and often muddled, showing Brahms's lack of experience with orchestral writing.

This composition undoubtedly marks the end of Brahms's youthful period. Never again was he to let himself go with uninhibited passion; never was he to show his inwardmost emotions with such clarity. The impetuous side of his nature here took its last hold upon him. The externally spectacular element in his music went with his youth. From here on, Brahms cultivated the contemplative rather than the theatrical, just as in his character, he became more reserved, more introverted, and less the trusting, naive youth.

After the Leipzig performance of his concerto, Brahms returned home to Hamburg, misunderstood by the musical academics of Leipzig and unrecognized by the public. Although Brahms was despondent, his friends were still hopeful for his future. Avé Lallement, a member of the Hamburg Philharmonic Committee, arranged for a March 24th performance of the concerto, with a premier of the D major Serenade March 28th.

Joachim came to conduct and the singer Julius Stockhausen came to perform. The three names served to fill the concert room and crowds were turned from the doors. This time Johannes was truly successful. The Concerto excited the audience to loud applause, as did the new Serenade.

Brahms now made Hamburg his home, where he was at once accepted by his fellow citizens. He became conductor of a ladies' choir, for whom he also composed. In August, 1860, he refused the invitation to return to Detmold. Summer 1860 was spent in Bonn with Clara and Joachim, where he met Simrock, who published his Serenade in A major, Op. 16. The Serenade in D major, Op. 11, was published at this time by Breitkopf and Härtel. The piano concerto, refused by Breitkopf and Härtel, was accepted by Rieter-Biedermann.

Autumn 1860 was marked by the appearance of the String Sextet in Bb, the first of Brahms's compositions to attain general popularity. Joachim immediately approved and introduced it to Hanover at his Quarter concert of October 20.

Brahms gave up conducting the ladies' choir in the spring of 1861; when he was devoting himself to the first two piano quartets. He sent the C minor Quartet in completed form to Joachim, whose reservations regarding the first movement went unheeded. Joachim gave full praise to the "Rondo alla Zingarese", written in emulation of the finale of Joachim's Hungarian Concerto. The quartet was performed November 16, 1861, by Clara, Böie, Breyther, and Lee in Hamburg. It was performed frequently in Hanover in early 1862 by Brahms,

Joachim, and colleagues. It was published by Simrock in early 1863, dedicated to Baron Reinhard von Dalwigk, court intendant to the Grand Duke of Oldenburg: a musical amateur and admirer of Brahms.

Brahms's thoughts now turned to Vienna, as he yearned to see the home of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and Beethoven. Besides, he yearned to try his luck with the Viennese music-loving public. On September 8, 1862, he left for his first visit to Vienna, and he didn't return to Hamburg until the spring of 1863.

The G minor Quartet was frequently performed in Vienna and was so well-received that Brahms obtained offers from more than one Viennese publisher which, however, he declined. On November 29, he gave a concert of his own, during which he felt a rapport with the audience such as he had never felt in Germany. He wrote home:

...I played as freely as though I were sitting at home with friends; one is certainly influenced quite differently by this public than by ours. You should have seen the attention and seen and heard the applause...I am very glad I gave the concert...<sup>19</sup>

By September, 1862, the String Quintet in F minor was completed. In 1864, this work was completely revised as the Piano Quintet in F minor, after having been made a sonata for two pianos. The string quintet was performed privately in Vienna, then in 1863 in Hanover on Brahms's way home. The form proved insufficiently sonorous for its material. The work was rearranged for two pianos, and subsequently as a

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<sup>19</sup>May, p. 333.

piano quintet (published as Op. 34). This extensive reworking of a single composition was typical of Brahms at this time and represents the intellectual workings of the second period.

In May, 1863, Brahms received a call to return to Vienna, as the post of conductor of the Singakademie had become vacant. Brahms was elected the successor. The offer was quite tempting to Brahms, as he had recently been turned down as successor to the conductor of his own Hamburg Philharmonic. The latter experience was one of the greatest disappointments of Brahms's life. Here, then, in Vienna, was another chance for him to settle down with a regular position. But, characteristically, Brahms had to deliberate about the offer before replying. He wrote to Hanslick:

You will wonder that a most glad and grateful reply did not anticipate your own and many other kind letters received by me. I seem to myself, however, as one who has been praised beyond desert and should like to creep into hiding for a while. I resolved, on receipt of the telegraphic despatch (through Flatz who must always be to the fore) to be content with such a flattering summons and not to tempt the gods further... And since nothing more is in question than whether I have the courage to say "yes", it shall be so. Had I refused, my reasons would have been misunderstood by the Academy, and by you Viennese generally...<sup>20</sup>

By the last week of August, Brahms was back in Vienna.

Thus, Brahms's second period was more intellectual, more tranquil and intimate, in which he followed strict classical principles more directly. The piano alone was no longer adequate, so Brahms turned primarily to the piano in combination with other instruments. The transition to orchestral works

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<sup>20</sup>May, p. 344.

could only be covered step-by-step. Representative works of this period belong mainly to the chamber music category, for example: the String Sextet in Bb major, the Piano Quartet in G minor, and the Piano Quintet in F minor. Throughout this period Brahms still avoided the string quartet and the symphony. The economy of the first and the unlimited possibilities of the second overawed him. At the piano, he turned to the variation form, with the monumental Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel. The Classical element predominates in this set, with its ultrabaroque theme.

The Classical element certainly predominates in the category of form throughout the period. As we have seen, the piano quartet, string sextet, and piano quintet are all represented. The String Sextet in Bb, Opus 18, shows abundant Classical influence, whereas the early piano sonatas had demonstrated a Beethovenian romantic influence. The spirit of Schubert is evident in the second and third themes of the first movement; Beethoven's influence is evident in the Scherzo; and Haydn rings through in the rondo subject of the final movement. The movement forms are Beethovenian: sonata form, theme and variations, scherzo, and rondo.

The Piano Quartet in G minor, Opus 25, is in four movements: Allegro, Intermezzo-Trio, Andante con moto, and Rondo alla Zingarese. The first movement contains an abundance of vigorous themes, suggesting an early creative period (the work was completed only in September 1861). Also of a first-period nature is the orchestral flavor of the march-like third movement. But there are indications that this is indeed a

later work. Consider, for example, how the first and second themes of movement one are connected by the same passionate, sixteenth-note accompaniment motive. In the development of this movement, he treats only the first theme group. The intermezzo has nothing in common with Brahms's earlier Scherzi. This movement is written in a mysterious, subdued character, common in some of his later compositions. The "Rondo alla Zingarese" is the first instance of Brahms's using a Hungarian theme in a chamber work. It is a most suitable finale for this youthful composition, whereas a Hungarian finale had been most unsuitable for the Concerto in D minor.

The Piano Quintet in F minor, Opus 34, is classically concise, its first movement consisting of barely three hundred bars. The opening movement presents five themes, all quite contrasting, but their elaborations are concise. The tender Andante is followed by a playful Scherzo, with frequent changes from major to minor and from 6/8 to 2/4 time. Genuinely Brahmsian is the broadening and simplifying of the Trio opening. A broad Romantic introduction, serving as the germ of the entire movement, opens the Finale. The real exposition follows.

The Piano Quintet was published in 1865, a year in which we find Brahms a resident of Vienna, far from his native Hamburg as the result of a disappointment, and far from the one he dearly loves, also the result of a disappointment. The latter was a self-imposed reality, however, since Brahms realized he could never commit himself to anyone or anything but his music. So the Brahms of 1865 is a loner, content to devote himself entirely to study and composition. The music

he was writing showed the results of extensive study of those who preceded him. The Classical style had its influence, paralleling the influence of events in his life, specifically Robert Schumann's crisis and his loss of Clara. That influence was a maturing one, taming some of the youthful exuberance of the earliest works. The Piano Concerto in D minor was a turning point in Brahms's career, because it illustrated a progression from heroic Romanticism to more objective Classical expression. Thenceforth, Brahms was never to return to the theatrical or the spectacular, just as he was never to open his heart to deep love or trust again.

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BRAHMS: THE CRUCIAL YEARS 1853-1865

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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The years 1853-1865 were crucial for Brahms because during that time his music underwent a noticeable style change, and events in his life caused a considerable personality change. With the death of his dear friend and idol, Robert Schumann, and the loss of his love, Clara Schumann, Brahms withdrew into himself. Correspondingly, as Brahms entered his second compositional period, his music became more reserved, more Classically -- than Romantically -- oriented. Passion was greatly subdued as formal clarity came to the foreground. The turning point occurred in the year 1860, with the D minor Piano Concerto. It is in this work that the change is exemplified, as the progression from passionate to formal can be seen from movement one to three.

Three early works were studied which illustrate Brahms's youthful style. They are Opus 1, Piano Sonata in C major; Opus 2, Piano Sonata in F# minor; and Opus 5, Piano Sonata in F minor. Then the Piano Concerto in D minor is discussed as a transition work leading into Brahms's second compositional period. The second period works studied are the Bb major Sextet; the Piano Quartet in G minor; the Piano Quintet in F minor; and, briefly, the Serenade in D major.

This paper has sought to show what appears to be a real correlation between Brahms's biography and his compositional style during these twelve years. Along with a discussion of the music, then, is a biographical summary of the years covered and a brief psychological study of Brahms's relationship with Clara.