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BRAHMS: THE CRUCIAL YEARS 1853-1865

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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 hid 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 tranquility, 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):

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The bottom staff is also in G major and 2/4 time, starting with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The notation includes various rhythmic values (quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes), rests, and dynamic markings. The two staves are aligned to show the relationship between the first theme of Opus 2(iii) and 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

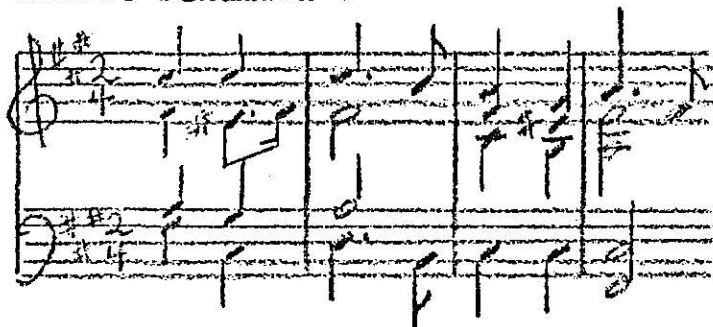
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<sup>6</sup>May, pp. 164-165.



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>

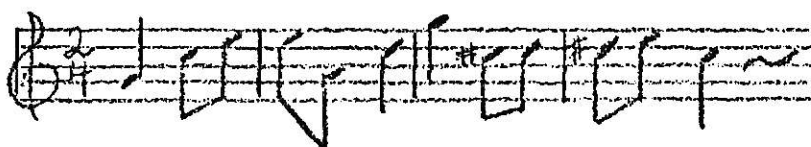
The manuscript of the composition bears the title, "Little Variations on a Theme of His, dedicated to Her". The whole work is an homage to the pair and contains numerous references to both Robert and Clara. The ninth of the sixteen variations is a paraphrase of Schumann's second "Album-blatt", while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

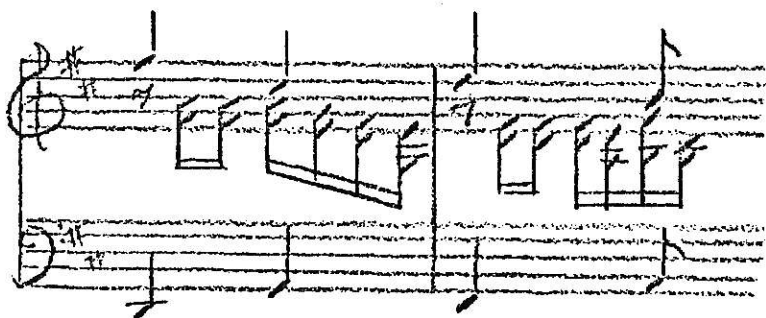


Example 7: Clara's theme as it appears in the tenth variation:



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.