

John Eliot Gardiner

in conversation with Hugh Wood

Hugh Wood Clara Schumann said she thought the first movement of Brahms' Second Symphony 'more significant in invention' than that of the First, and predicted in her diary (on 3 and 6 October 1877) that he would have 'a more telling success with the public'. Do you think she was right?

John Eliot Gardiner I really don't understand the first statement, nor know how to react to the second. These non-technical assessments of relative worth are so difficult to deal with, being usually disguised for simple gestures of approval ('I like it') or preference ('I prefer the other one'). I wonder what she means by 'significance', and what qualities are being satisfied (or not) in the invention? Does it refer to the future – in other words, to the way Brahms' music will go on developing? If that is the case, then surely she's being a bit coy here. Why can't she say what she really means? Probably because it is unsayable. It would boil down to: 'You wrote of your passion for me in the First Symphony, and though I'm terribly flattered, it makes me acutely uneasy...'. As for her prediction that the Second would have more popular success than the First, the truth is that all four of Brahms' symphonies had a mixed reception initially, Wagner leading the way with his scathing criticisms of the First and Second.

HW The First and Second Symphonies are remarkably different in character: the First epic, heroic, philosophic, somewhat autobiographical, the Second more relaxed and amenable and characterised, in the words of Brahms' friend Billroth, by 'an effortless discharge of lucid ideas and warm emotion'. Nevertheless, the writing of the Second, in a single summer, followed hard upon the long-awaited

completion of the First. What is the connection between them?

JEG Commentators often point to the (painfully) slow gestation of Brahms' First and compare it to the way he seemed to speed through the entire process of completing the Second – conception, sketches, drafts, composition and copying out, all during the summer of 1877. Yet it's possible that he actually began composing the Second a couple of years earlier, bearing in mind how very little else of substance he completed in 1875-6. Apparently all through the summer of '77 while composing the Second he was giving his First Symphony a thorough working-over, checking full score proofs and preparing the piano reduction. All of this would point to a sense in which the two symphonies are, if not shots at the same target from two different angles, then at least a pair insofar as the Second seems to build on the foundations of the First. That could explain why contemporary critics were quick to point out the parallels with Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth.

HW And you don't have to listen to the Second for very long to discover that its cheerfulness has been grossly exaggerated. The matter is not made any easier by Brahms' habit, springing from his perennial and rather irritating self-deprecation, of deliberately wrong-footing his friends.

JEG Yes, at one moment he described it as 'a quite innocent, cheerful little thing... all blue sky, babbling of streams, sunshine and cool green shade... it is really no symphony but merely a *sinfonietta*'. Many of his friends took the bait, finding it to be optimistic, happy and blissful (it 'could only [have been] composed in the country, in the midst of nature' according to Ferdinand Pohl). Yet on another occasion Brahms insisted that it was 'so melancholy that you won't stand it. I've never written anything so sad, so *mollig*: the score must appear with a black border!'

HW What are we to make of this? Is there a contradiction there, or do such different impressions merely show that when listening to music Subjectivity Rules?

JEG Isn't it a bit of both? You need only point to the intervention of the trombones in the first movement (bars 33-45: track 5, 0'53") and the predominantly dark sonorities of the second (the only true Adagio in any of the four symphonies!), to realise that it's the alternation of and contrast between light and darkness that really matter for him. 'I admit that I am a severely melancholic person, that black wings are constantly flapping above us', he wrote to a friend. Best of all, perhaps, is the superb moment in the first movement's coda, so admired by Hans Gal, when the double main theme, already extended and richly developed, 'unexpectedly grows into a *cantilena* of such magnificent breadth that it seems there can be no end to its singing'.

HW Is it more 'classical', then, than the First – and if so, how would you define 'classical' here in a stylistic sense?

JEG In terms of orchestration and architectural form both symphonies look decidedly classical. But another sense of 'classical' comes from the conductor Hermann Levi. Conducting the First Symphony in Munich in 1878, Levi experienced hostility not, as one might expect, from the local Wagnerians, but from what he called 'the so-called classicists', for whom Brahms was simply too modern. 'None of this would have been important', he wrote, 'if I had only had some support from within the orchestra. But there wasn't a single musician whose eye I could catch at any of the most beautiful passages.' Strange, then, that a year later, when preparing the Second, Levi confessed to Clara, 'I have not been able to make the Adagio my own; it leaves me cold.'

Yet for all the trappings of modernity, Brahms is quite old-fashioned when it comes to phrase-structures and slurrings, operating very much in line with the conventions laid down more than a century before by Leopold Mozart (1755) and further adumbrated in Louis Spohr's *Violinschule* (1832), all of which points to a generally more 'inflected' style of phrase-shapings than people are used to now, with rests and breaths separating the sub-divisions of melodic phrasings. One of the younger generation of conductors to grasp this, and someone whom, according to Kalbeck, Brahms particularly admired, was Fritz Steinbach (1855-1916). He was in charge of the famous Meiningen Court Orchestra and took it to London in 1902 where he made a great impression with his cycle of Brahms symphonies, praised for the 'life and impulse' of his conducting and much admired by Fritz Busch, Toscanini and Adrian Boult. Detailed notes as to how Steinbach interpreted Brahms' (unnotated) instructions have come down to us transcribed by a former pupil, Walter Blume, and were published in 1933. In these he insists, for example, on the need for flexible tempo, for lingering initial upbeats, for punctuation and phrasings off ('absetzen'), just as a singer might be inclined to catch a breath mid-melody as it were. This is useful testimony for us now, helping to identify points of repose and to clarify the connective links between and within phrases, features we associate with far earlier 'classical' composers. But one should be wary of adopting it wholesale: there is no way of being 100% sure of what stems directly from Brahms, from Steinbach, or from Blume's memory of observing Steinbach at work. The trick is to integrate these snippets of directives within the overall shape of phrases without self-consciously drawing attention to them.

Take the very opening of the Second Symphony. By applying to the beautiful horn theme Brahms' general rule of shortening the second note of a slurred pair (confirmed by Steinbach, who actually adds a staccato dot to the third beat of the first two bars as well as a separating

rest on the bar-lines) one gains a refreshing corrective to the ‘plaster-float’ legato of many performances. But too literal an application breaks up the line into one-bar segments and can kill the mellifluous unfolding of the natural-horn writing. So it’s all a matter of degree and balance. Even such familiar musical colleagues as Joachim and Brahms couldn’t agree whether slurs were an indication for individually shaped phrases or for an overall legato. In fact Brahms got quite tetchy when, in reviewing the Violin Concerto, Joachim sought to replace his own ‘scharfe Strichpunkte’ (vertical staccato strokes) under the slur with two staccato dots: ‘With what right, since when, and on what authority do you violinists write the sign for *portamento* [meaning *portato*] where none is intended?’ What’s at issue here is not the musical effect (surely they’d have agreed on this) but the notation being used, typical of the lack of consistency in the use of articulation marks that often bedevils the relationship between composers and performers and still causes headaches for the interpreter today. On the other hand Brahms, when he chooses to, can deliberately engineer the simultaneous presentation of the same material as in the finale of his Second Symphony (bars 114-117 and 317-320: track 8 2’14”): slurred in the flutes, separate and *marcato* in the violins.

HW We have now got thoroughly used to the idea that music of the past was conceived for, and played upon, the instruments of the past (or its then ‘present’), which differ subtly but significantly from those we still hear played by mainstream symphony orchestras nowadays. How did your beliefs on this subject affect your preparations for performing and then recording these Brahms symphonies?

JEG Look, this is *dauerhafte Musik* – music built to last. Perhaps the main thing here is not to make these symphonies sound ‘old’ or venerable. Ridding them of a false antique patina is the aim here,

helping them to sound as fresh and as new now as they did at the time, making sure in the process not to eliminate those strange and quirky brahmsian features that tend to get ironed out in smooth, modern-style performances. By the way, we shouldn't be fooled by the size of the Meiningen orchestra (totalling 49 players) into thinking that it corresponded to Brahms' ideal. He used it for semi-private read-throughs of his symphonies to gauge whether his notation and performance directions were being understood and whether the sounds he heard in his inner ear were being replicated by the players. We decided to adopt a more full-bodied approach to the overall orchestral sound, using a total of 62 players – still a lot fewer than the 107 Hamburg musicians Brahms himself conducted in a special 'festival' performance of his Second Symphony in 1878. During rehearsals we found Steinbach's detailed observations helpful when it came to phrase-shapes and breaths and in pursuit of that elusive 'expansive elasticity' that the pianist Fanny Davies confirms as being one of the chief characteristics of Brahms' own interpretations. Many of these features were incorporated by Steinbach's successor at the Cologne conservatory, Hermann Abendroth (1883-1956), who made fascinating live recordings of the first two symphonies just before and just after World War II.

So, in place of the standard all-purpose orchestra vibrato, our string principals encourage their sections to use the bow as the primary means of expression (another typically 'classical' trait of course), augmented by a discreet use of slides between notes, choosing fingerings to match and varying in speed, but expressively audible. Then, instead of using an off-the-string *spiccato* for anything short and brilliant, we try to hold it in reserve for special moments (such as the *presto* section of the third movement), and to cultivate a subtly differentiated repertoire of on-the-string bow strokes ranging from a broad, full-bowed *détaché* to the more vigorous, briskly accented

martelé.

When it comes to ferreting out appropriate instruments for the repertoire we are tackling, the musicians of the ORR are single-minded sleuths. One ends up standing in front of an amazing orchestral apparatus comprising Viennese-style mid-nineteenth-century woodwind, a string section equipped with thick gut strings, German slide trombones, rotary-valve trumpets and leather-headed kettle drums, and – this is probably the biggest surprise even to those who are relatively used to ‘period’ performance practice – *Waldhörner*, or natural horns. Brahms himself seems to have learnt to play the natural horn from his father, and even though the growing fashion for valve-horns meant that he probably resigned himself never to hearing his symphonies played with four natural horns, there is plentiful evidence from the way he composes for them that these were his instruments of choice. Everything in his orchestral writing is playable on these instruments. He clearly relished the different open and closed sonorities – why else go to the trouble of placing a ‘stopped’ tone to underline a particular modulation, or to give a special colour to the spacing of a chord (bars 454-477: track 5, 17’20”))? If it wasn’t to exploit the characteristics of their various crooks, and the natural harmonics of the different keys, why would he have obliged the third and fourth horns to change from an E to an E flat and then to an F crook in the finale of his First Symphony, for example?

HW Surely it’s not just period instruments that count here, but a more characteristically ‘vocal’ approach to Brahms’ orchestral world – another matter I know you are deeply concerned with. Perhaps it goes back to the vivid historical consciousness that once upon a time *all* ‘serious’ (which then meant ‘church’) music was vocal, and that instrumental music was only a latecomer on the scene. Brahms’ passion for the vocal music of the Renaissance and Baroque meant that the interplay

between vocal and instrumental forces and styles was still a meaningful one, surely?

JEG Absolutely. All the historically 'correct' instruments in the world cannot guarantee you a convincing interpretation, let alone the dreaded 'authentic' tag, unless the music really takes wing and *sings*! From the glee with which he exploited their idiosyncrasies, their collisions and colourful juxtapositions, it's so obvious that Brahms conceived of the sections of his orchestra as comprising contrasted 'choirs' of sound. I'm sure this affected his choice of low brass instruments, still seen as church instruments at this time with their sombre, melancholic connotations. Didn't he say, 'I cannot manage without trombones in the Second Symphony'? He might equally have said 'I need a male voice choir here' as he did for his *Alto Rhapsody*, drawing on the effective example of his beloved Schubert in his *Gesang der Geister über den Wassern*.

HW The beginning of the *Alto Rhapsody* is an outstanding example of how you need not necessarily start a piece with a tonic chord. It all goes back to the first bar of the slow introduction of Beethoven's First Symphony. Schumann took this oblique approach towards stating the tonic a lot further, and Brahms here is obviously building on Schumann. The text demands the establishment of a lost, alienated, tragic mood. To ignore the home-seeking sense of tonality is the way to do this. Apart from the barely noticeable tonic chord in C minor in the first bar (on the fourth, weak upbeat), in all these 47 bars there is no tonic cadence and the section ends on a half-close. Movement towards a cadence is always interrupted at the last second. The sequence in bars 3 to 4 is a tone down, at this stage of the piece a disconcerting manoeuvre only to be found in Beethoven. Brahms could outdo Wagner in harmonic daring, on occasion.

JEG He's Janus-faced as usual: archaic in the origins of his inspiration and the meshing of solo voice, male chorus and instruments, yet up-to-the-minute, as you say, in chromatic harmonies and prophetic of Schoenberg and others. I'd like to ask you, Hugh, as a composer: how do you put your finger on Brahms' way of deriving so much of his material from such a small thematic cell – and of making it sound so natural and organic? I'm thinking here particularly of the finale to the Second Symphony.

HW I feel happiest with music which works the motif very hard, which is saturated by it. The finale of the Second Symphony is not exceptional in doing this. It all comes from Beethoven – as so much in Brahms does... and he knew it.