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Author

Grimes, Nicole

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Philosophy

Nicole Grimes

The compositional output of Johannes Brahms contains a wealth of lieder and choral works that attest to the composer's intense engagement with literature and the Bible. Brahms was an avid reader, deeply engaged with the literature of his own time and that of the past. He was also strongly preoccupied with philosophy. Literary figures often provide a much more complex and rich account of the human condition than many of the ideologies of philosophy that dominated the nineteenth century. For instance, we find the philosophical ideologies of Kant and Hegel filtered through the writings of figures such as Hölderlin, Goethe and Schiller. Brahms was aware of this, which is evident in his compositional output in several ways.

The composer's broad intellectual curiosity was often concerned with philosophical issues. From an early age and throughout his life, he read widely and kept a log of proverbs and philosophical sayings that were significant to him.¹ His library testifies to an enduring interest in philosophical matters. Along with the volumes of Herder, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche that he read and annotated were anthologies of philosophy such as Friederike Kempner's volumes, the first of which (1883) contains excerpts of Kant, Locke, Cartesius, Frederick the Great, Marcus Aurelius and Rousseau; and the second (1886) includes passages from Plato, Leibnitz, Cicero and St-Pierre.² If Brahms 'preferred to draw his philosophy from literature, of which the Bible was indeed a prime example', then this is only part of the story.³ Certainly, Brahms was deeply preoccupied

¹ See G. Bozarth, 'Johannes Brahms's Collection of *Deutsche Sprichworte* (German Proverbs)', in D. Brodbeck (ed.), *Brahms Studies* (London and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 1–29; and D. Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 35–6.

² F. Kempner, *Auszüge aus den berühmtesten Philosophen von Plato bis auf unsere Zeit in beliebiger Zeit und Reihenfolge* (Breslau: K. Siegmund in Komm, 1883–6).

³ M. Musgrave, 'The Cultural World of Brahms', in R. Pascall (ed.), *Brahms: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6.

with questions regarding the human condition, fate and mortality. As Hans Christian Stekel proposes, he sought out the same difficult questions in his biblical settings as he did in his secular choral orchestral works in order to 'legitimise' them.⁴ But his philosophical interests were by no means limited to these areas.

Already at the earliest stage of Brahms's career, in the article 'New Paths' (1853) in which he hailed the young Brahms as the Messiah of music, Robert Schumann carved out a space for Brahms's music that intersects with philosophy and religion [see Ch. 31 'Germany'].⁵ Schumann's article directly confronts the question of national identity by specifically addressing the importance of continuing a German musical heritage. The particularly messianic tone of 'New Paths', which relies on a mixture of biblical and mythological imagery, was typical of Romantic writing. Many of its phrases resonate with the Christian Gospels, including 'one would and must appear', 'by whose cradle heroes stand guard' and 'this is a chosen one'. Schumann's nickname of 'eagle' for Brahms had for centuries been an attribute for John the Apostle, the author of the Book of Revelation. The striking imagery of destruction and renewal that is prominent in Revelation (and in apocalyptic literature) underpins Schumann's depiction of Brahms appearing on the musical scene 'fully armed', with musical compositions 'like a rushing current, as if in a waterfall, over whose cascading waves peaceful rainbows were drawn'.⁶

The title 'New Paths' was well observed: it had become a regular phrase for Franz Brendel's promotion of new music. Someone as well-read as Schumann, who was steeped in German philosophical and literary writings, would have recognised that Brendel explicitly positioned himself as a young Hegelian, citing the preface to Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, 1821): 'The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk' in his inaugural address to the journal in 1845.⁷ Hegel meant that philosophy understands reality only after the event. It cannot prescribe how the world ought to be.⁸

⁴ H. C. Stekel, *Sehnsucht und Distanz: theologische Aspekte in den wortgebundenen religiösen Kompositionen von Johannes Brahms* (Frankfurt a. M. and New York, Peter Lang, 1997), 67.

⁵ R. Schumann, 'Neue Bahnen', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 39/18 (28 October 1853), 185–6.

⁶ See D. Beller-McKenna, 'Brahms, the Bible, and Post-Romanticism: Cultural Issues in Johannes Brahms's Later Settings of Biblical Texts, 1877–1896,' PhD dissertation, Harvard University (1994), 24–34.

⁷ *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 22/1–2 (1 January 1845). G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 103.

⁸ P. Singer, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. T. Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 638.

In choosing to represent Brahms as Minerva, Schumann, arguably, banished Minerva's owl (which can be understood in this context as philosophy), returning to the goddess herself (which can be understood in this context as music) the importance she was due but that had been eclipsed in recent years in the journal in favour of long philosophical exegeses. In other words, Schumann questions the significance Brendel had accorded to his critical writings in the pages of the journal since 1845. 'New Paths' played Brendel at his own game by using Hegelian terminology to promote the one who would 'give the highest expression to the age in an ideal manner'. Banishing philosophy from the role it had been accorded in dictating the progress of music, Schumann returned the focus to music, presenting Brahms as 'fully armed', as independent of Brendel's 'progress' of the age and not reliant on the dictates of Brendel's philosophy.

Stekel suggests that Schumann's essay (and the death of its author) fortified Brahms's interest in the Bible as a philosophical and cultural text that could be drawn upon for spiritual guidance.⁹ The consistent absence of dogmatic texts in Brahms's religious output is well documented, for example, *A German Requiem* Op. 45 or the Two Motets Op. 74. In his secular settings of the legends of classical antiquity as mediated through German Idealist poetry such as *Nänie* Op. 82, *Schicksalslied* Op. 54 and *Gesang der Parzen* Op. 89, Brahms confronted the perceived gulf between divine and human, addressing issues of hope, fate, human suffering and death, without relying on religious dogma or drawing on the notion of an afterlife.

Fundamental to many of Brahms's 'fate-related' compositions is the notion of *Bildung*, with its characteristic assimilation of philosophical thought, which applies equally to the individual human life and the individual work of art. The self-education of the mind is a central trope of the Romantic philosophy of consciousness. The figure of the circuitous journey homeward, as the literary critic M. H. Abrams formulates it, is developed into a conduit for Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1807), which recounts a spiritual journey from the 'moment' of departure of an alienated self until it finds itself 'at home within itself in its otherness'.¹⁰ The ultimate goal of this spiritual journey is a recognition of the spirit's own identity.¹¹

⁹ Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit*, 34; see also J. Brachmann, *Kunst – Religion – Krise. Der Fall Brahms* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2003).

¹⁰ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner Felix Verlag, 1987), 549, as translated and cited in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York and London: Norton, 1971), 192.

¹¹ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 230.

Brahms was quite taken with the philosophy of consciousness in its literary guise. His frequent annotations in the Schiller-Goethe correspondence testify that he was certainly conversant with this Romantic plot archetype, for example the passage in which Schiller, taking issue with Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (*System des transcendentalen Idealismus*, 1800), addresses precisely the dichotomies central to Hölderlin's *Hyperion* between the conscious and the unconscious, between what Hölderlin would later term the 'aergic' and the 'organic', the two extremes of the 'eccentric orbit of all human life'.¹² An example of a composition informed by such philosophical preoccupations is *Schicksalslied* Op. 54. This work, which epitomises Brahms's response to the Romantic philosophy of consciousness, is based upon the composer's nuanced and sophisticated reading of Hölderlin's poem in its narrative context and relies on his familiarity with the spiritual journey of the *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age story.

Brahms's markings in his copy of the Goethe-Schiller correspondence also show an awareness of the role of subjectivity within philosophy, art and culture, and its relationship to a Romantic art-religion. His annotations point to his concern with the relationship between the imagination and more abstract faculties of the mind, for instance, 'while the philosopher can let his imagination repose, and the poet his abstracting faculty, I am obliged in this manner of proceeding, to keep both faculties always in equal action, and only by a constant excitement within me can I hold these two heterogenous elements in a kind of solution'.¹³ This correspondence also provided a conduit for Brahms's enduring interest in the nature of tragedy. His pencil markings indicate that he took note of the example of the ancients, including Aristotle's definition of tragedy (Letter 498). Here too we get a sense of his preoccupation with the tragic plays of Sophocles. As a corollary to his annotations in the correspondence, there is surely no stronger testament to this interest than the fact that his friend the philologist, Gustav Wendt, dedicated his 1884 translation of Sophocles to Brahms.¹⁴

Arthur Schopenhauer seems to have exerted a major influence upon Brahms's fate-related compositions, in particular the

¹² J. Adler and C. Louth (eds.), *Friedrich Hölderlin, Essays and Letters* (London: Penguin, 2009), 261–4.

¹³ Schiller to Goethe, 16 October 1795. J. W. von Goethe and F. Schiller, *Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe in den Jahren 1794–1805*, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (Stuttgart & Augsburg: J. G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1856), vol. 1, 100.

¹⁴ Sophocles, *Tragödien*, trans. G. Wendt, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Verlag der J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1884).

Four Serious Songs Op. 121. There is more to Brahms's engagement with Schopenhauer than Musgrave suggests in his claim that Brahms's only interest in Schopenhauer is 'attached to his musical sayings'.¹⁵ Josef Suk reports that when, in 1896, Brahms expressed reservations about the fervour of Dvořák's religious faith, he confessed that 'I have read too much Schopenhauer, and things appear much differently to me'.¹⁶ Beller-McKenna has explored the frequent association of the first two songs with chapter 46, 'On the Vanity and Suffering of Life' in *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, first edn. 1818–19), which puts forward the view that death or non-existence is preferable to a desolate life.¹⁷ Although *The World as Will and Representation* is absent from Brahms's library, he did own a number of other Schopenhauer books. His copy of *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics* (*Die beiden Grundprobleme der Ethik*, 1841) contains relatively few markings and marginalia by comparison with the 1851 *Parerga und Paralipomena*, which is heavily annotated, particularly in the passages where Schopenhauer discusses consciousness, dreams and the intuitively perceiving intellect. Brahms's annotations indicate that he was drawn to Schopenhauer's discussion of the natural and the supernatural. He paid attention to matters regarding reason, the Enlightenment, anti-clericalism and biblical criticism, as much as he considered Schopenhauer's pronouncements on false and artificially produced spirit apparitions. His characteristic blue pencil markings take note of Schopenhauer's pronouncements on the nature of reading and the inner life of the mind. He was also interested in meditations on ageing, such as the following passage (which resonates with Brahms's most often quoted statement on the creative process as later recorded by George Henschel): 'The pen is to thinking what the stick is to walking; but the easiest walking is without a stick and the most perfect thinking occurs when there is no pen in the hand. Only when we begin to grow old do we like to make use of the stick and to take up a pen.'¹⁸

The relationship between Brahms's music and Nietzsche's writings is equally important to our understanding of Brahms and

¹⁵ M. Musgrave, 'The Cultural World of Brahms', 6.

¹⁶ J. Suk, 'Aus meiner Jugend: Wiener-Brahms Erinnerungen von Josef Suk', *Der Merker* 2 (1910), 149, as cited in Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit*, 31.

¹⁷ A. Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1969).

¹⁸ A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena: kleine philosophische Schriften*, ed. J. Frauenstädt, 2nd edn (Berlin: A. W. Hayn, 1862), 543. See also G. Henschel, *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms* (Boston: Badger, 1907), 22–3.

philosophy.¹⁹ Nietzsche's enthusiasm for Brahms lasted roughly from 1874 to 1884, although in *Human, All Too Human* (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, 1878) he criticises recent music for becoming too intellectual, too 'modern', a censure possibly aimed at Brahms whose First Symphony Op. 68 had received similar rebukes in the contemporary press.²⁰ In *The Case of Wagner* (*Der Fall Wagner*, 1888), he is just as hostile to Brahms as to Wagner, and it is here that he famously recognised a 'melancholy of impotence' in the music of Brahms.²¹ One might assume, along with Kalbeck, that the composer was interested in the philosopher's famous and inflammatory remarks in *The Case of Wagner*. Yet there are no markings at all in Brahms's copy of this text.

He did highlight a number of passages in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*), however, which he had been sent in 1887 by Nietzsche himself. These markings are found only in the third of the three essays, called 'What Is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals'. Here, in a reversal of the familiar trope of reception whereby Brahms was cast as a chaste composer – not least by Wagner – and Wagner was cast as a composer of sensual music, Nietzsche asks:

What is the meaning of ascetic ideals? – Or, to take an individual case that I have often been asked about: what does it mean, for example, when an artist like Richard Wagner pays homage to chastity in his old age? In a certain sense, to be sure, he had always done this: but only in the very end in an ascetic sense.²²

In marking this passage, Brahms must surely have been aware that Nietzsche was contributing to an ongoing late nineteenth-century discourse on art, religion and nationalism, in which we may count 'What Is German?' (1878), 'Religion and Art' (1880), and the opera *Parsifal* (1878) as being amongst Wagner's contributions.²³

¹⁹ The 1895 edition of Nietzsche's writings housed at the Brahms *Bibliothek* in Vienna is absent from Kurt Hofmann's 1974 catalogue of the composer's library. See K. Hofmann, *Die Bibliothek von Johannes Brahms* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1974). Brahms's preoccupation with Nietzsche is given sustained consideration in Chapter 4 of my book, *Brahms's Elegies: The Poetics of Loss in Nineteenth-Century German Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²⁰ See W. Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 20.

²¹ F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in W. Kaufmann (ed. and trans.), *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, 2000), 643. Kaufmann, for reasons he makes clear in this edition, translates 'Melancholie des Unvermögens' as 'melancholy of incapacity'. I have amended this translation.

²² This translation is from Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 534.

²³ See *Richard Wagner Prose Works*, trans W. Ashton Ellis, 8 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1896), vol. 4, 149–69; and vol. 6, 211–52.

Brahms's annotations and marginalia indicate that he was drawn to another of the books Nietzsche wrote in 1888 (which was not published until 1895), the attack on Christianity and German culture with the provocative title *Der Antichrist*. Here Brahms marked several passages not only with his usual *Kratzspuren* (the term that Kurt Hofmann uses for Brahms's nail marks that he embedded in the page at a passage that was particularly noteworthy),²⁴ but also with large exclamation marks. Of note in this regard is Nietzsche's indictment of German Protestantism as articulated through the philosopher's attack on St Paul and Luther. Nietzsche's charge that Luther had robbed Europe of its last great cultural harvest, and his notion that 'If we never get rid of Christianity, the *Germans* will be to blame' elicited an exclamation mark in a heavy hand in Brahms's margin. The last passage that Brahms marked in his copy of *The Antichrist* – also with a large exclamation mark – reads:

For almost a millennium they have twisted and tangled everything they have laid their hands on, they have on their conscience all the half-heartedness – three-eighths-heartedness! – from which Europe is sick – they also have on their conscience the uncleanest kind of Christianity there is, the most incurable kind, the kind hardest to refute, Protestantism . . . If we never get rid of Christianity, the *Germans* will be to blame.²⁵

While we must avoid over-interpretation of Brahms's annotations in his books, we can offer an informed speculation as to what these exclamation marks might indicate. Brahms seems not to have believed in any dogmatic aspects of religious faith. During the 1870s and 1880s he carried out an extended correspondence with a number of his friends, including Josef Viktor Widmann, on the question of a 'godless' Christianity. Yet he certainly subscribed to a Lutheran theological and cultural worldview, and revered the Luther Bible as a cornerstone of German patriotism. This is evidenced in many of his compositions that set passages from the Luther Bible. He treats this text as a source of literary and moral edification while avoiding any mention of Christ's sacrifice. Examples include *A German Requiem*, the *Triumphlied* Op. 55, the Two Motets Op. 74 and the *Festival and Commemorative Verses* Op. 109. We might well imagine Brahms to have been intrigued, therefore, by Nietzsche's denouncing of a worldview that is predicated on a future reward and his espousing instead of a return to a focus on this life. We might surmise, however, that when Brahms placed exclamation marks beside passages in Nietzsche's

²⁴ See Hofmann, *Die Bibliothek von Johannes Brahms*.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 198.

The Antichrist, he did so because they struck at the heart of his patriotic, cultural and artistic identity.

Numerous books in Brahms's library indicate an interest in music aesthetics.²⁶ Perhaps the greatest figure in music aesthetics of the nineteenth century is Eduard Hanslick. In scholarship on Hanslick and Brahms, the composer is frequently associated with Hanslick's notion of absolute music in which spiritual content (*geistige Gehalt*) is very much reliant on metaphysics, philosophy and religion. Brahms's music concerns all of these attributes. It would be mistaken, however, to associate Brahms narrowly with Hanslick's *The Beautiful in Music (Vom Musikalisch-Schönen)*. By 1854 when Hanslick wrote this book, Brahms had just been introduced to the musical world through Schumann's 'New Paths', and had set about trying to find a publisher for his first works. When Hanslick wrote *The Beautiful in Music*, he had not yet discovered Brahms's music, and at no point in that book (nor in any of the subsequent nine editions) does Hanslick mention Brahms. Although these two struck up a lifelong friendship following their meeting in 1862, it was not until much later that Hanslick penned the majority of his Brahms reviews in his capacity as the music critic for Vienna's leading liberal daily newspaper, the *Neue Freie Presse*.²⁷ Rather than ignoring the poetic and expressive aspects of Brahms's oeuvre, Hanslick engages with the extra-musical aspects of Brahms's compositions and with their significant poetic, cultural, patriotic and socio-political elements.²⁸

Nicholas Cook has astutely argued that 'Hanslick did not say that music does not, cannot, or should not convey feelings, moods or emotions . . . [T] here should never have been any doubt as to what his basic thesis was – that the objective properties of music, rather than people's subjective responses to it, constitute the proper concern of musical aesthetics.'²⁹ Mark Burford further clarifies that Hanslick negotiated a 'middle ground between idealism and materialism', suggesting that 'in his attempt to characterize music's essence, Hanslick did not so much reject musical metaphysics as, to a certain extent, reconceptualize it by arguing that the ideal content of

²⁶ For instance, Brahms owned a copy of H. Ehrlich, *Die Musik-Aesthetik in ihrer Entwicklung von Kant bis auf die Gegenwart* (Leipzig: F. E. C. Leuckart, 1881).

²⁷ Most of these are found in E. Hanslick, *Concerte, Componisten und Virtuosen der letzten fünfzehn Jahre* (1886), with many also appearing in *Aus dem Tagebuch eines Musikers* (1892), *Fünf Jahre Musik* (1896), and *Aus neuer und neuester Zeit* (1900).

²⁸ See N. Grimes, 'Brahms's Poetic Allusions through Hanslick's Critical Lens', *American Brahms Society Newsletter* 29/2 (Fall 2011), 5–9.

²⁹ N. Cook, *The Schenker Project, Culture, Race and Music Theory in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 50.

music is a product of a human spirit, not a transcendent one'.³⁰ In this broader context, then, and widening our lens from Hanslick and Brahms and a narrow definition of 'absolute' music, this holds true for all of the repertoire considered in this chapter. Brahms intricately interwove compositional process with intellectual tradition and philosophical thought. His music is concerned with the notion of *Bildung*, the philosophy of consciousness, issues of cultural pessimism and the human condition. He encounters these issues in philosophical writings ranging from Hegel to Hölderlin and from Schiller to Schopenhauer, and in the Bible. The spirit (*Geist*) of Brahms's music, therefore, is not that of a transcendent spirit. Rather it is of the human mind intended for the edification of the human mind.

Further Reading

- D. Beller-McKenna, 'Brahms on Schopenhauer: The *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op. 121, and Late Nineteenth-Century Pessimism', in D. Brodbeck (ed.), *Brahms Studies 1* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994), 170–88
- M. Forster, K. Gjesdal, *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)
- N. Grimes, *Brahms's Elegies: The Poetics of Loss in Nineteenth-Century German Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)
- N. Grimes, 'German Liberalism, Nationalism, and Humanism in Hanslick's Writings on Brahms', in N. Grimes, S. Donovan and W. Marx (eds.), *Rethinking Hanslick: Music, Formalism, and Expression* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 160–84
- M. Musgrave, 'The Cultural World of Brahms', in R. Pascall (ed.), *Brahms: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–26
- D. Thatcher, 'Nietzsche and Brahms: A Forgotten Relationship', *Music & Letters* 54/3 (July 1973), 261–80

³⁰ M. Burford, 'Hanslick's Idealist Materialism', *19th-Century Music* 30/2 (Fall 2006), 167.