

"Performance Practices in Johannes Brahms's Chamber Music" by Clive Brown, Neal Peres da Costa, and Kate Bennett Wadsworth

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Michael Musgrave

Serious modern discussion of Brahms performance practice has come from the extension of earlier historical performing practice studies into the Romantic period on the valid grounds that Brahms was himself a continuation of this tradition as performer as well as composer. Representative stages have been the recordings of Roger Norrington of the symphonies and German Requiem with the London Classical Players (1991-1996), Robert Pascall's *Playing Brahms: A Study in 19th-century Performance Practice* (1991), which partly provided the scholarly background to these recordings, and the collected essays in *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Practice*, (ed. Musgrave and Sherman, 2003), all aiming to seek performances closer to those known by Brahms. The present text may be seen as the latest stage in this process, in which closer attention has been directed to piano music and the solo sonatas with piano.

The present book is in a format uniform with the individual Bärenreiter score-volumes of these sonatas, which it complements. This review will also therefore include reference to selected scores provided by the publisher. The book comprises four independent essays as chapters and a brief epilogue. Although it has no preface or statement of aims, just a list of contents, it serves to elaborate and add to the many observations on performance practice in the commentaries of the individual editions. It is of thirty-four sides with extensive notes, doubled in length by a German translation. The essays are as follows: "General Issues of Performing Practice" (Clive Brown); "String Performance Practice" (Clive Brown); "Performing Practice in Piano Playing" (Neal Peres da Costa); "Brahms and the Cello" (Kate Bennett Wadsworth); "Epilogue" (Clive Brown).

The issues will be familiar from the extensive existing writings of Clive Brown on performance, most notably *Classic & Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900*, and his recent focus on Brahms, especially in his article "Joachim's Violin Playing and the



Performance of Brahms's String Music" in *Performing Brahms*, and the Bärenreiter edition of the Violin Concerto (BA 9049-90); and in the recent book on piano performance *Off the Record* by Neal da Costa. Brown's general introduction thus stresses Brahms's famed aversion to providing metronome marks and to metronomic tempi and discusses basic issues of phrasing and articulation. His chapter on the violin deals with vibrato (described as "nuancing the sound"), portamento ("expressive fingering"), and bowing. Da Costa's chapter on piano deals with agogic issues, especially dislocation between hands and arpeggiation of chords, legato "overholding" (otherwise generally known as "handpedal"), and pedaling. Wadsworth's chapter on the cello helpfully outlines Brahms's knowledge of the cello in youth, the cellists in his circle, and who were his first partners in cello works (also noting the lack of recordings by them relative to those of contemporaries for violin or piano); "Continuity and Change" outlines the changing use of the cello regarding posture and related issues of fingering and positions. Brown's epilogue quotes from Brahms's friend, the violinist Richard Barth, stressing the loss of a Brahmsian performance tradition in the decades after his death, and thus represents the rationale for the nature of the book and the editions.

This publication is especially distinctive in that it provides very wide ranging background information on performance features of Brahms's time and his immediate successors, which are directly applicable to performance recommendations in the critical notes to the editions. The source materials draw very widely on contemporary or near contemporary tutors, performer reminiscences, and early recordings. Although the book and editions repeat much that is known by these writers, it is invaluable in bringing them all together, and it must be stressed how much this adds to the field.

Of tutors, as well as those often quoted in the recent literature, such as the *Violinschule* of Joachim/Moser, and that of Baillot and of de Bériot; or Fanny Davies's reminiscences of Brahms's piano playing (in *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*), numerous much less quoted names and their writings appear: at random such influential teachers of the past as, in the nineteenth century, Ferdinand David, Ernst Pauer, Sigismond Thalberg, and Karl Reinecke; and in the twentieth century, Tobias Matthay and Frank Merrick, and players such as Artur Schnabel, Leopold Auer, Karl Klingler, Adolf Busch, Franz Kneisel. Marie Soldat; and from numerous performer reminiscences, such as those of the pianist Willy Rehberg and cellist William Whitehouse.

Even observations from sources outside the performance field appear, such as those of the Schumann biographer Friederich Niecks, Arnold Schoenberg, and those of Edmund Fellowes, famed editor of *The English Madrigal School*. Many recordings are

cited by details of downloading or CDs that make early formats available in modern transcription: including such interesting items as compilations of recordings by Beatrice Harrison and Raphael Wallfisch.

The ultimate value of this scholarship can only be gauged in relation to the performance recommendations in the commentary of the performing editions. Each edition has three main sections: history, listing of early performing editions, and the critical commentary. The commentary contains in each edition the following: rhythm and timing; dynamics and articulation; dots and strokes; slurring and non-legato; pedaling and over-holding; arpeggiation and dislocation; string instrument fingering; string instrument harmonics and vibrato. Thus, for example, in the Violin Sonata in A Op.100 (Bärenreiter Edition 9432), the early performance editions referred to are: 1917: Leopold Auer and Rudolph Ganz; 1918: Franz Kneisel and Harold Bauer; 1926: Carl Flesch and Artur Schnabel; 1926: Ossip Schnirlin and Robert Kahn; 1929: Clemens Schultze-Biesantz and Leo Kähler. For the Cello Sonata, Op. 38, they are: 1921: Cornelius van Vliet and Edwin Hughes; 1922: Hugo Becker and Carl Friedberg; 1926: Julius Klengel. Comparisons of tempi are very usefully provided in tabular form.

The performance recommendations aim to illuminate how Brahms's original published markings have been interpreted in these performance editions, or how they may be interpreted by reference to the broader performance literature. Of the numerous observations, as well as the many varied alternatives for bowings and positions, one notes especially the seeking of the expressive implications of Brahms's crescendo/diminuendo wedge hairpins and use of *portato* dots under single slurs in piano as well as solo parts. For example, in the opening bars of Op. 100, the frequent hairpins are seen as inviting a broadening of the tempo and downbeat arpeggiation for emphasis (also noted here is Schnabel's added "tranq. molto" marking). In the opening piano bars of Op. 38, the *portato* dots are seen as an invitation to the same effect, here claiming Moscheles's recommendation in his Op. 70 (24 Studien for piano) as the precedent for a quick chordal spreading; additionally, Phillip Corri's treatise of 1810 (*L'anima di musica*) is also cited as suggesting a much slower spreading for such a passage. Brahms's changes of marking in the sources are also seen as an opportunity for performance interpretation: as in Op. 100, bars 67-74 and 203-10 of the first movement, where he amends "molto dolce e leggiero" to "dol. e leggiero," suggesting that "in order to enhance a sweet tone, slight arpeggiation of the right hand chords (where possible) with occasional dislocation is stylistically appropriate."

Also provided to this reviewer was the volume of the two clarinet sonatas Op. 120/1 and 2 (Bärenreiter Edition 10906), not referred to in the book. But it can be added

here that the historical background is especially detailed on early English performance; and the important point is made that, by comparison with the string sonatas, few early editions by performers exist: the clarinet was still a chamber instrument of lesser popularity. Only the editions by Oskar Schubert/Carl Friedberg (Simrock: revised edition 1928) and Carl Herrmann and Heinrich Badings (Peters: c.1929) are cited.

Performing Practices in Brahms's Chamber Music and the related editions therefore represent a radical contribution to the study of performance practice. Whereas modern critical "Urtext" editions focus on the history of the creation of the text and its final accuracy—a movement stimulated by adverse reaction to the textual revisions of performers—this book and its related editions take the text for granted and rather focus on its meaning in performance through the commentary on such editions, providing a guide for performers where Urtext editions strictly leave the matter open. The texts themselves, described as "Urtexts," have critical reports detailing their sources and editorial decisions additional to the Performance Practice Reports. (The piano fingerings are provided by da Silva).

Few would dispute that modern Brahms playing is generally much more standardized in style than that represented by early recordings. In the age before widely available sound reproduction, individuality of expression was more prized than the avoidance of technical flaws, which were soon forgotten in a live performance: regrettably, modern performance criticism is so often based on comparison with other current performances, not on the text or on any historically verified precedent. But the central question for the historical approach is how the mass of historical information under review relates to the pursuit of Barth's lost tradition of Brahms performance—however broadly defined. This material therefore offers a parallel to the more familiar comments on the performances of Brahms's admired Fritz Steinbach by his pupil Blume, so often quoted for historical authority in the discussion of orchestral performance (Walter Blume, ed., *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition. Seine Sinfonien und Haydn Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach* [author's typescript] 1933: reprinted edition by Georg Olms Verlag, 2013).

The matter is complex, and inevitably controversial: whether one, or a selected group of performance sources, can represent a tradition - and indeed whether uniformity was ever part of performance tradition; and how far into the past performance recommendations should be regarded as relevant: indeed, whether one should mix recommendations from different performer sources: perhaps too much information can lead to a hodgepodge of features or insufficient clarity: here in the notes to Op. 100,

second movement, for example, the text only offers “Ganz gives interesting damper pedal marks.”

For older observers, it is chastening to see how far things have moved in modern performance exactitude inspired by Urtext editions, so that even players one grew up with as paragons of modern discipline are now identified as playing in ways worthy of special historical classification: like breaking octaves in the bass, or spreading chords for emphasis, freedom in pedaling or choices of touch.

But each generation ultimately chooses its own values and authenticities: the streamlined technological efficiency of modern life impacts musical performance as it does everything else: reflective and flexible tempi and expressive portamento still raise critical eyebrows. This conflict can never be resolved for the individual as long as performance is regarded as an essentially personal communication. So this book and all the work of these scholars offer a great range of stimuli to the imagination in seeking satisfying performances of Brahms, as well as of the broader repertory of the period.

The many separate sections of the publications under review have led to some oversights of consistency. The essays in the book do not have continuous note sequence but are separate. This results in much repetition of full references rather than short second and subsequent references. It also results in inconsistency in the spelling of some names. Kurt Hofmann’s name is spelled incorrectly twice in different ways (as “Hofman” on p. 24, note 85, and as “Hoffmann” on p. 34, note 1) and in the German translation but is spelled correctly in the editions of Op. 100 (p. IV, note 9) and Op. 38 (III, note 3); Robert Pascall appears as “Pascal” on p. 23, note 83 and in the translation; Klingler is misprinted as “Klinge” on p. 6, note 22 (though correct on the facing page, and correct in both cases in the translation). *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* is given in the more complete form (p. 24 note 89) only after its first abbreviated reference on p. 16, note 7; and the same as between notes 42 and 52 in the edition of op.120/1: it is only ever given in incomplete form in the notes to Op. 38. Of factual attributions, although *Performing Brahms* is widely cited in both book and editions, the editorship is mistakenly cited as by George Bozarth (who was a contributor) in noting Brown's Joachim article (p. 27, note 1: chapter on the cello).