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### Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms was born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany during the Romantic era. He was the second of three children to Johanna Henrika Christiane Nissen and Johann Jakob Brahms. He started playing music at an early age with his father playing as double bassist in the Hamburg Philharmonic Society. Johannes started playing the piano at seven years of age.

In his teens, Brahms was already an accomplished musician and “he used his talent to earn money at local inns, in brothels and along the city’s docks” (Editors) to help his family who was considered poor. In 1853, Brahms and Robert Schumann met and grew to be good friends. Schumann dubbed Brahms “young eagle” (Editors) in a famous article which helped Brahms to become known in the music world.

Brahms and Schumann were good friends and when Schumann grew ill in 1854, Brahms helped Schumanns’ wife with managing the household. Following the death of Schumann in 1856, Brahms and the widow, Clara, grew close. There has been mention by historians that Brahms fell in love with Clara though they remained friends as the feeling was not mutual on the part of Clara.

Over the course of the next several years, Brahms conducted a women’s choir in Hamburg which he was appointed to in 1859 (Editors). During the course of the next several years, he would go on to write various pieces and became the principal conductor in Vienna of the Society of Friends of Music. In 1868, Brahms finished “Ein Deutsches Requiem, Op. 45”

known as “A German Requiem” which is often referenced “as one of the most important choral music created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Editors).

Brahms also wrote on the lighter side of the musical sphere as he offered two volumes of “Hungarian Dances” for piano duet. These were very successful and later in the same year, 1869, he composed “Liebeslieder”. “A work sparkling with humour and incorporating graceful Viennese dance tunes” (Brahms, Encyclopædia Britannica). During this time, he wrote some of his best songs.

Listening to “A German Requiem” it does start out with the orchestra as well as choir as described in a few texts. Relaxing sounds from this piece singing about scripture. The fact that Brahms finished this requiem following the death of his mother is not surprising as I can relate to the intense sound of the music which I am sure helped him through the difficult time of losing a parent. The sound of the choir at times during the opus part II sounds spiritual as if angels are singing along with the orchestra (Herbert von Karajan).

It is surprising that there are many works from Brahms. Reading through the various works cited and other publications, he was a perfectionist. If a piece did not meet up to his high standards, the work was destroyed. Often times if it did not meet his high standards, the works would go unpublished. At one point in 1890 he claimed he was giving up composing although short-lived and he was back at it again (Editors).

By early 1880s, the musical community were aware of Brahms and often referred to him as the “‘three great Bs’ (meaning Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms), to whom they accorded the same rank of eminence” (Brahms, Encyclopædia Britannica). Still, there were those that looked down upon Brahms as “too old-fashioned and inexpressive” (Brahms, Encyclopædia Britannica).

Two of those looking down upon Brahms were Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, but overall, the work of Brahms continued to rise in acceptance.

Brahms stayed in Vienna for the rest of his life and he remained a bachelor. Never marrying even when he found interest in other women. Various writings refer back to his love for Clara, but the feelings were not mutual and along with a few other on and off again dating, he never met anyone to marry. In some ways, this could be what led to his ability to continue composing masterpieces. He certainly took the death of his mother and used that to finish “A German Requiem” and there are indications he used other circumstances of his life to write other pieces too.

“Brahms is the most misunderstood and neglected of all the great lied-composers ... His instrumental music sometimes sounds almost ashamed of its own emotivity” (Sams). This was an appropriate quote selected as it depicts what was read in a few other books as well as on various web sites. Brahms was misunderstood and his musical compositions were not understood either. Yet listening to his pieces it is still possible to get chills and hear the mastery he had in his compositions. He might have been misunderstood, but the world grew to love his music and talent.

One of the most widely played songs of Brahms and one that many of us either heard as child or have played for our own children is “Lullaby”. A simple melody to help children go to sleep. Slow and purposeful to allow the mind to ease and fall to sleep. The piece I listened to was done on a piano. Most of the work being done in the treble clef and the left hand doing the bass clef only a few notes or chords to accompany the right hand. Simple and easy to play or hear to allow drifting off to sleep.

Commonly known as *Brahms' Lullaby* was published in 1868 titled "Good Evening, good night" as Op. 49, No. 4 (Contributors). The lyrics of the first verse a collection of German folk poems and the second stanza written by George Scherer. The melody was a gift to one of Brahms friends on the birth of her second son. It is amazing that after 148 years, *Brahms' Lullaby* is still played on many devices to put children to sleep. Until this was discussed in our class and then again I read it doing research for this paper, I had no idea. The *Brahms' Lullaby* was simply something I heard and thought Fisher Price or a toy company had invented. Not the case!

Brahms died on April 3, 1897 due to complications from cancer. Prior to his death, his good friend Clara Schumann passed and shortly after Brahms became ill and died. He gave his last performance in March 1897 in Vienna before falling ill (Editors).

Brahms composed approximately twenty-nine pieces with four of his works being Symphonies which are of course four movements. That is a lot of compositions from one person for a relatively short timeframe dying at just shy of his sixty-fourth birthday. Certainly makes one wonder how many more would have been completed if he would not have been a perfectionist destroying those that did not meet up to his standards. The masterpieces he produced and those that were destroyed or that were never finished and where those would have ended up in his collection.

Going through and listening to a number of pieces by Brahms, I came across an MP3 on iTunes entitled "The Best of Brahms" and listened to most of the pieces. It is odd how going through listening to the music on the album, I recognize songs that I have heard when I was young and did not realize it was Brahms. "Hungarian Dance No. 5" is an example of one that I have heard a number of times but never knew it was Brahms or did not recall it was Brahms.

Listening to the music of Brahms, I can certainly hear the resemblance of works from others from his time. Yet, he does his own individualized take on the work from the time too. He makes it his own and helped to be part of the “three great Bs” and his music is timeless. Still played today for our children to put them to sleep or inspire on a lazy afternoon listening to the incredible music Brahms composed so many years ago.

Overall, I have enjoyed getting to know Brahms music and more about him. I look forward to being able to play some of his music on the piano. He was not the composer I selected for my final playing piece, but I do anticipate sitting down to select one of his pieces to play in my living room. Playing *Brahms’ Lullaby* to help calm down children as we babysit or selecting one of the more complicated pieces and mastering on my own to perform for my family.

The quote that accurately depicts Brahms ability to produce so many great pieces and yet also have the ability to dispose of those pieces which did not meet his standards can be found in one simple quote:

“It is not hard to compose, but what is fabulously hard is to leave the superfluous notes under the table.”

– Johannes Brahms (Editors)

To conclude, Brahms led a bachelor life and did what he enjoyed the way he needed to in order to develop and create incredible music. Much of that music still being played and enjoyed today. He used events in his life to make the music we enjoy and hear today performed throughout the world.

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