

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Brahms, the Story Teller

VIER BALLADEN (FOUR BALLADES), OPUS 10 (1854)

Dedicated to J.O. Grimm

d minor (Edward)

D Major

b minor

B Major

ACHT KLAVIERSTÜCKE (EIGHT PIANO PIECES), OPUS 76 (1871-78)

Capriccio in f[#] minor

Capriccio in b minor

Intermezzo in A^b Major

Intermezzo in B^b Major

Capriccio in c[#] minor

Intermezzo in A Major

Intermezzo in a minor

Capriccio in C Major

INTERMISSION

DREI INTERMEZZI (THREE INTERMEZZI), OPUS 117 (1892)

E^b Major

b^b minor

c[#] minor

SONATA #2 IN F[#] MINOR, OPUS 2 (1852)

Dedicated to Clara Schumann

Allegro non troppo, ma energico

Andante con espressione

Scherzo: Allegro

Finale: Introduzione – Sostenuto; Allegro non troppo e rubato;

Molto sostenuto

This epithet could well apply to nearly all of Brahms's mature works for solo piano, in which he became a master of the miniature, the Guy de Maupassant of piano composers. Yet, the *Four Ballades, Opus 10*, composed in late 1853 and early 1854, show unmistakable signs of his later genius in the genre. They are cyclical, in that the parallel keys of d minor-D Major, and b minor-B Major, are introduced respectively. The relative major-minor key relationship between #2 and #3 is an obvious one. Furthermore, each of the Ballades introduces the tonal center of the following work at some point (in #3, this occurs at the end). #1 is the only one of the four, however, that has a narrative, the eponymous *Edward Ballade* taken from the great theologian and poet, Johann Gottfried Herder's magnum opus, *Stimmen der Völker in ihren Liedern (The Voices of the People through their Songs)*. The *Edward Ballade* was of Scottish origin, and appeared in several versions. The one preferred by Herder gives us a dialogue between mother and son. She asks why his sword is so bloodied. He answers at first that he has killed his falcon. She answers: 'Your falcon's blood is not so red!' He then says he has killed his steed. She answers: 'But, your steed was already old and had no such need. What other pain is troubling you, my son?' 'Ah, mother, I have killed my father. As penance, I will wander the earth. My belongings and earthly possessions will fall to ruins. My family will have to beg!' Then, the truth is revealed: 'Edward, what will become of your mother?' 'Damned be your soul, mother, and hell's fire on you as well, for it is *you* who bade me do this!!' It has been postulated that Brahms was drawn to the *Edward Ballade* as a means of dealing with his feelings over Robert and Clara Schumann, following so closely upon his introduction into their household. For Brahms, d minor denoted anger, despair, tragedy, and even nobility of character, and he used it frequently throughout his early years, including the first piano concerto (Opus 15), and the slow movement of his Opus 18 string sextet. By contrast, B Major, which appears in the recapitulation of #2 and the opening theme of #4, can be seen as both longing and reflective, ultimately a yearning for inner peace. Brahms was a complex character, and these early pieces embody these conflicts more than any others. As miniatures, they point the way to his maturity.

The *Eight Piano Pieces* of Opus 76 were composed from 1871 through 1878. We know little of the genesis of each work—Brahms saw to that, as sketches and other fragments which would have shed light on such matters were destroyed—but we do know that his life during those years was basically a happy one on the professional plane, if unfulfilled at a personal level. This decade produced three major orchestral works – the *Haydn Variations*, and the first and second symphonies. A fourth, the violin concerto, should be included as well. The fact that Brahms was able, after many years of frustration, to complete a symphony at all must have been a source of enormous satisfaction, not to mention relief, for him. He had finally broken the spell cast by Beethoven's 9th. The symphony as an art form had been reborn! Furthermore, his meteoric rise within the musical establishment of his adopted city, Vienna, must surely have

given him a sense of security that his own hometown of Hamburg never afforded him. The *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* (*Society of Friends of Music*), of which he was the director from 1872 until his death, gave him enormous influence over musical matters not only within Vienna, but throughout Europe. It is thought that Opus 76, #1, the f[#] minor Intermezzo, was written as early as 1871. I would postulate, rather, that it was written slightly later, in early 1872, and occasioned the death of Brahms' father, Johann Jacob, in Hamburg. The opening bars are frightening in their presentiment of impending gloom. Yet, by the end, we feel a certain resignation and beauty in the inevitable, and the tonal center shifts at the last moment to the parallel major. The b minor Capriccio is one of my very favorite pieces. It is charming and wistful, clever yet delicate, reflective yet unsentimental. The A^b Intermezzo, on the other hand, is very gentle and, at times, sentimental in a longing sort of way. The B^b Intermezzo is similar, perhaps with added simplicity of means. The c[#] minor Capriccio shows Brahms at his most intense and passionate. Yet, even here, the middle section is almost excruciatingly tender and loving. The outer sections of the A Major Intermezzo depict an intimate dialogue between two close friends. In the middle section, one of the two is telling a story. The a minor Intermezzo shows Brahms's fascination with, and study of, the past. The writing at times is contrapuntal, yet the feeling is one of great simplicity and transparency. The final C Major Capriccio exudes a fortuitous combination of exuberance and happiness. Yet, there is always a certain tenderness and, for want of a better word, a sort of passionate reflection. I feel it is these latter qualities which have long endeared Brahms to the general public. We see (or, rather, hear) so much of ourselves through this man and his yearnings. Fulfillment is always at arm's length, rarely achieved.

The *Three Intermezzi*, Opus 117, represent the height of Brahms's powers as a miniaturist. Part of a much larger group of short pieces, starting with Opus 116 and finishing with 119, these wonderful pieces might never have seen the light of day. During the summer of 1890, Brahms threatened to abandon composing. Perhaps he saw that the world around him was changing in a way he could not forestall, nor understand. Strauss's *Don Juan* had had an enormous success in 1889. The later symphonies on Anton Bruckner, long Brahms's nemesis, were receiving belated attention. Mahler and Schönberg were standing in the wings (Brahms helped the former enormously in the early years of his career), and Debussy would compose his ground-breaking tone poem, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (*Prelude to the afternoon of a fawn*), four years hence. Yet, in spite of his threats that summer, the latter part of 1890 initiated a period of compositional activity that rivaled anything he had done previously, and would culminate over the next several years in his second string quintet; the trio, quintet, and two sonatas for clarinet; the six quartets for mixed voices; the *Vier Ernste Gesänge* (*Four Serious Songs*); and the four great sets of piano miniatures of Opuses 116-119. Brahms composed Opus 117 during the summer of 1892, during his annual holiday in Bad Ischl. It is known that Clara Schumann, by then in poor health and living in Frankfurt, held these pieces dearly, and it

might have been with this in mind that Brahms told a friend that he had composed 'three cradle-songs of my sorrows'. All three are in song form, the first of the three a Scottish lullaby (*Schlaf sanft mein Kind, schlaf sanft und schön! Mich dauert's sehr, dich weinen sehn. Sleep softly my child, sleep softly and beautifully. It pains me to see thee weep.*), taken once again from Herders *Stimmen der Völker*. In the middle section of this lullaby, we perceive the troubled dreams of the young child. #2 in b^b minor/D^b Major is a love poem, wistful and longing in the outer sections, full of hope and reconciliation in the middle. #3 in c[#] minor brings us back to Brahms's study of the earlier composers. It has a distinctly religious sound and feeling, to my way of thinking, this in spite of Brahms's own self-professed antipathy to dogma of any sort. The middle section is a flight of fantasy away from this world.

The *Sonata in f[#] minor*, Opus 2, was Brahms's first work in the genre, albeit published second (such instances abound in the history of piano music—the first two Beethoven piano concerti, both Chopin concerti, and so on). Brahms was only 19 when he composed it in 1852, and had not yet met Robert and Clara Schumann. The first movement is full of youthful vigor, the tonal center of f[#] minor the point of departure for rhapsodic, intense and passionate writing. The exposition, for reasons I cannot understand, is not repeated, thereby making this movement shorter than usual. The second movement is a set of variations based on an old German *minnelied*, a song (usually a love song) accompanied on the lute by a singer, or group of singers, during the Middle Ages. Here are the lyrics: *Mir ist leide, daß der Winter beide Wald und auch die Heide hat gemachet kahl. Sein Bezwingen läßt nicht Blumen entspringen, noch die Vöglein singen ihren süßen Schall* (*I am sad, that Winter has lain both the woods and the heathlands bare. It allows neither the flowers to bloom, nor the birds to sing.*). This theme shows motivic unity with the opening bars of the first movement, the melody taken from the second, third, fourth and fifth notes of that movement's theme (Beethoven does something similar in his *Sonata in D major*, Opus 10 #3). The ensuing *Scherzo* is a foreshortening of those exact same four notes, yet the mood here is so very different that such an obvious feature could easily be overlooked. The middle section of the *Scherzo* is taken, I would think, from a German drinking song. Brahms was known to frequent beer halls, both as a youth and as an adult, and one can easily imagine a group of young people seated on a bench at a long table, steins of beer at the ready, swaying to and fro while harmonizing the melody. The return of the theme of the *Scherzo*, incidentally, is one of those moments where one realizes that Brahms must have had very large hands. I admit to having had to make some adaptation here—otherwise, I shouldn't be able to perform a few of these bars. The last movement is framed by a slow introduction and an even slower coda. The body of the movement is impassioned and lively, with broad orchestral strokes in the piano writing. We must not forget that Brahms, along with all other young aspiring composers, lived deeply in the shadow of Beethoven. His given instrument was the piano, but he longed to write something on a larger scale. His first symphony would not

appear until 1876. We somehow feel this frustration, and the desire to break the bonds of limitation of instrumentation, in this sonata.

Now, I'm going to make a confession. I played all of Brahms's solo piano works many years ago at the Wigmore Hall in London. At the age of 31, doing a complete cycle of such a great composer's works was a thrill and a privilege, let alone an enormous responsibility. Since then, I have had the joy of performing the complete Beethoven sonatas, and both books of Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*, among many other works. It is natural that one's feelings toward certain pieces will have changed over the course of having learned so much great literature, particularly the 48 Preludes and Fugues. True enough, when I set about relearning this sonata a few months ago, I came up against all sorts of internal barriers, and shared my feelings with a number of friends, colleagues and students. And, inevitably, I realized that the only course of action was to try and put myself into the mind-set of a nineteen year old composer, to sense how a young man of enormous talent and potential would react at all levels to the world around him. Perhaps many in tonight's audience will understand and even be able to identify with such a need, and I am confident that this effort has helped me to supersede my initial doubts over the work.

Program notes © Craig Sheppard 2011.

CRAIG SHEPPARD is Professor of Piano at the School of Music since 1993. In June, 2011, he returns to China to give master classes at the Central Conservatory in Beijing and the Conservatory in Chengdu. With his colleague, Dr. Robin McCabe, Sheppard founded the highly successful UW Piano Institute last summer, following a recital at the Minnesota Beethoven Festival in which the reviewer stated: "With [the two recitals of] Yo-Yo Ma and Sheppard, the festival is off to a sensational start." 2008 and 2009 saw the inclusion of clips from Sheppard's cycle of Beethoven sonatas in the exhibition, *Schulz's Beethoven: Schroeder's Muse*, mounted at both the Charles Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa, CA, and San José State University. In May, 2008, Sheppard gave solo recitals and master classes in four major cities in The Peoples' Republic of China - Beijing, Shanghai, Xiamen and Shenzhen. In March, 2008, he appeared for the second time in the Hunter Council Chambers of Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, performing Book II of Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*, a work he recorded subsequently in Seattle's Meany Theater in April, 2008 (released on Romeo Records in November, 2008).

Craig Sheppard has made eight trips to the Far East since June 2002—five to Japan, and one each to China, Korea and Taiwan—giving lectures, master classes and concerts in major venues and universities. On May 18th, 2004, he wound up a seven-concert series in Seattle's Meany Theater that was dedicated to the 32 Beethoven Piano Sonatas, a popular series that met with great critical

acclaim. In April, 1999, he gave his long-awaited recital début at the Berlin Philharmonic, also to great critical acclaim. In 1999, he was presented by the Seattle Symphony in a highly acclaimed series of lecture/recitals at the Benaroya Hall. He appeared with the Seattle Symphony in 1998 in their inaugural season at Benaroya, and was also previously featured with the orchestra in the opening concerts of the 1996-97 season at the Opera House, along with the violinist Midori. Sheppard is invited frequently to perform at summer venues such as the Seattle Chamber Music Festival, and taught and performed for a number of summers at the Heifetz International Music Institute in Wolfboro, New Hampshire.

Craig Sheppard was born and raised in Philadelphia. Following initial studies with Dr. Lois Hedner and Susan Starr, he attended the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia as a student of Eleanor Sokoloff, and earned both his Bachelors and Masters degrees at the Juilliard School in New York, studying with Sascha Gorodnitzki. In addition to working privately with Claude Frank and Lillian Kallir during summers at Tanglewood, Sheppard studied subsequently with Ilona Kabos, Peter Feuchtwanger, and Sir Clifford Curzon in London, and also worked with Rudolf Serkin and Pablo Casals at the Marlboro Festival.

Following a highly successful New York début at the Metropolitan Museum in 1972, Sheppard won the silver medal later that year at the Leeds International Pianoforte Competition in England. Moving to London in 1973, he quickly established himself through recording and frequent appearances on BBC radio and television as one of the preeminent pianists of his generation, giving cycles of Bach's *Klavierübung* and the complete solo works of Brahms in London and other musical centers. During the twenty years he lived in England, he also taught at Lancaster University, the Yehudi Menuhin School, and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, in addition to giving master classes at both Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Sheppard has performed with all the major orchestras in Great Britain, as well as those of Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta, Dallas, Seattle, Buffalo and Rochester, among others in the United States, and with such conductors as Sir Georg Solti, Sir Charles Mackerras, James Levine, Leonard Slatkin, Michael Tilson Thomas, Sir Andrew Davis, Sir John Pritchard, Lord Yehudi Menuhin, Erich Leinsdorf, Kurt Sanderling, Neeme Järvi, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Hans Vonk, Aaron Copland, David Zinman, Gerard Schwarz and Peter Erös.

Since 2005, Sheppard's recordings have appeared on the Roméo label, all of which have received great critical acclaim, both at home and abroad. His recital of the last three Schubert sonatas, performed in Meany Theater in May of 2010, was released in December, 2010. He has also recorded over the years on the EMI (Classics for Pleasure), Polygram (Philips), Sony, Chandos and Cirrus labels. Five CDs, all of live performances—including his Berlin performance of the Goldberg Variations, Beethoven's Diabelli Variations plus the Scriabin Fifth Sonata, Chopin and Scriabin *Préludes*, five Scarlatti Sonatas coupled with the Opus 39 Etudes Tableaux of Rachmaninoff, and a Schumann disc including the

complete Novelettes of Opus 21—are available on the label AT (Annette Tangermann)/Berlin, at-label@gmx.de.

Sheppard has appeared on many national and international piano competition juries, and his students are laureates of numerous national and international competitions. A voracious reader, he is well known for his broad academic interests, particularly foreign languages.

For more information, visit www.craigsheppard.net.

Tonight's concert is being recorded by Dmitriy Lipay for future release on Roméo Records. It is also being videoed by my good friend, Professor Fumio Ohuchi, Professor of Materials Science and Engineering.

The piano used in tonight's performance is my own model D Hamburg Steinway, #489770. The piano technician is Susan Cady.

Upcoming Performances:

Craig Sheppard performs the Brahms Piano Quintet with the Emerson String Quartet on Tuesday, March 8, 2011 in Meany Theater.

The next concert in the *Mostly Brahms* series will take place on Thursday, April 28, 2011 in Meany Theater. The program is:

VARIATIONS ON AN ORIGINAL THEME, OP. 21A
VARIATIONS ON A HUNGARIAN THEMES, OP. 21B
16 WALTZES, OP. 39
SONATA #3 IN F MINOR, OP. 5

Presents a Faculty Recital:

CRAIG SHEPPARD,
piano

Mostly Brahms

7:30 PM
February 9, 2011
Meany Theater

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