

## Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

### Understanding Johannes Brahms

*Brahms String Quartets, New Budapest Quartet, Hyperion 66651-52*

*Complete Brahms Violin Sonatas, Zino Francescatti and Robert Casadesus, Library of Congress 74321*

*Brahms Violinsonaten, Adolf Busch and Rudolf Serkin, EMI 64495*

*Brahms Cello and Piano Sonatas Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax, Sony SK48191*

*Brahms Handel Variations, Emanuel Ax, Sony SK48046*

Several new CDs of Brahms's chamber works contain clues about why modern listeners have so much trouble listening to, let alone composing, classical music. Brahms, the last great classical composer (d. 1897), was trying to convey to the next generation of musicians the uniquely classical method of constructing his compositions from an idea conceived in the composer's mind as a unit, for which Lyndon LaRouche uses the term "thought object."

This process is described in *Johannes Brahms as a Man, Teacher, and Artist*, by Brahms's student Gustav Jenner (1865-1920), quoted in the Schiller Institute's 1992 *Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration*.

Most Brahms listeners and performers today are attracted to what they call his "passion," heard as sheer sensuality, getting carried away by "lush" violin or piano sounds. Others may believe they dislike Brahms for being "heavy" or "gloomy," with "strange harmonies." In fact, Brahms's emotional power flows from the rigorous unity of the idea behind each work which drives the particular notes to the conclusion—just as we find in the music of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart—but with Brahms's own creative personality.

### Not a 'leitmotiv'

The New Budapest String Quartet's recent release of Brahms string quartets are an exceptionally integrated performance, faithful to his intent to "maintain one fundamental mood throughout," as the liner notes put it. Zino Francescatti and Robert Casadesus playing three violin and piano sonatas, one of the Library of Congress's live recordings from 1949-52, also achieve unity.

Less successful is the 1931-33 recording of the violin-piano sonatas by Adolf Busch and Rudolf Serkin, who seem so much in a hurry that they fail to draw out the internal voices. That is, even those who recognize "Brahms's principle of unification," as EMI's notes say, often have no idea of the *ordering principle* by which it is produced.

The unity here is not the mere repetition of a passage, as in the leitmotiv of Brahms's antagonist Richard Wagner, in which you know when the dwarf is coming by his theme song. Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax's expressive version of Brahms's cello-piano sonatas goes a bit off here, by *only* emphasizing the different passages in Op. 38, for example, whose material is taken from J.S. Bach's "Art of the Fugue."

As Jenner's book makes clear, the unit concept is not a repetition, but rather a *transformation* of basic material, which itself is a unit. Brahms trained his students on theme and variations, Jenner writes, because it demands that a composer take an entire poetic unit, the theme, inside his mind, and transform it:

"In the variation form, that which is essential is given in the theme; in the preservation of this essence within the form, the mind is exercised and sharpened, and the imagination grows more profound, in that it becomes accustomed to exhausting the content of

an idea. . . .

"It is certainly not enough to merely ornament the theme's melody with a few arabesques; on the contrary, the object is to penetrate deeply into the core of the theme, and out of it, to invent new things, without, however, violating the form of the theme. . . ."

### Bass pedal point

To ensure the transformation be never arbitrary, Brahms guided Jenner to focus on the pedal point of the bass line of the theme: "Here, too, the variation, the development, must proceed from what is already given, if the whole is not to take on the impression of arbitrariness. 'You must always keep your goal fixed before your eyes, and that is only possible when the bass line is firmly established; otherwise you're floating in the air. . . ."

"'The bass is more important than the melody,' Brahms said. Not that this bass line had to be preserved under all circumstances; but through the complementary and explicatory melodic line of the bass, the melody of the upper voices first takes on a definite physiognomy, and a *variation of the bass can modify the entire character of a melody more strongly than a variation of this melody itself.*"

That power of the pedal point is shown in Brahms's piano "Variations on a Theme by Handel" Op. 24, which turns Handel's opening three bass notes, B-flat-A+B-flat, into the pedal point for all his extensive 24 variations. Through diminution and transposition of this into the soprano voice, Brahms also creates from it the motif of all the variations. But alter one note of those three, and the sonata-length whole is radically changed (see the Schiller Institute's *A Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration*, pp. 231-6, especially Figure 12.9).