



*Brahms and Bruckner  
as Artistic Antipodes*

Studies in Musical Semantics

Translated by Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch

CONSTANTIN FLOROS

# Foreword

Every age, it is said, interprets the art works of the past in a new way. If one tries to pinpoint the meaning of this adage, one may find that the art works of the past are frequently judged by categories that were developed for the evaluation of contemporary art. Every period has its preferences and aversions: inevitably the current evaluative system is made the basis of judging the art of the past.

The advanced instrumental music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, is full of extra-musical intentions. Yet since the 1920's, it is preferentially regarded as autonomously conceived music. Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Bruckner and Mahler are generally referred to as masters of *absolute music*. The fact that in their instrumental works they frequently set out from extra-musical conceptions is ignored or minimized.

To understand this paradoxical state of affairs in its full range, one has to realize that the ideal by which a large part of the New Music of the 1920's and 1930's oriented itself was that of *absolute music*. In connection with the spread of an "anti-romantic" frame of mind, the one-time ideal of a poeticized instrumental music was from ca. 1920 on dismissed as an anachronism, typical only of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term "program music" in many cases became a synonym for obsolete, "inferior" or even "bad" music. In view of this we can understand the tendency of many critics to keep the works of Beethoven, Schumann, Bruckner and Mahler free of the taint of the programmatic and to regard even Liszt's program music as "music as such," regardless of their explicit programs.

The aesthetics of autonomy, highly controversial in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, enjoyed veritable triumphs in the 20th. That largely accounts for the fact that even today many musicians, musicologists and lovers of music value autonomously conceived compositions more highly than any music inspired by anything extra-musical.

Exemplary of what has been said is the history of the assessment of Brahms and Bruckner. In the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Brahms and Bruckner were regarded as antipodes. Some fifty years ago, by contrast, the view began to emerge in highly reputable publications that their

contemporaries had overestimated the “dimension of their distance.” The general accord in the musical endeavors of both composers, it was argued, was not to be missed: both wrote autonomously conceived music, both held on to traditional forms, and both rejected program music.

Are these perceptions really true to the historical reality? The present study seeks an answer to this question. Part One tries to elucidate Brahms’ relation to Bruckner in its biographic, historical, artistic and art-theoretical aspects. At the center of the second part, whose subject is Brahms’ early work, is the question whether Brahms is indeed an autonomously working composer. The topic of the third part is a taboo of Bruckner research: Bruckner’s relation to program music.

The book came into being parallel to my work *on Gustav Mahler and the Symphony of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* and forms a complement to it. It is based on the principle of intertextuality and on the method of semantic analysis, which I developed in the 1960’s and demonstrated on numerous musical works. Both the Archive of the Association of the Friends of Music in Vienna and the Music Collection of the Austrian National Library provided valuable material for my investigations, as did the publishing house Breitkopf & Härtel and the musicological publishing firm of the International Bruckner Society. My thanks for support of various kinds are due to Professor Otto Biba, Hofrat Professor Franz Grasberger, the Archive of the Bruckner Society, Ms. Lieselotte Sievers of Breitkopf & Härtel, Ms. Isolde Fedderies of Peter Lang, and my friend Professor Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch of Indiana University, who has meticulously translated a number of my works and often provided impulses and suggestions. The collaboration with him was again a joy because of the questions he asked and his many constructive comments.

The subject of Brahms and Bruckner has occupied me at least since 1974. After several decades, I produced two fairly extensive monographs about the two composers, which appeared in German in 1997 and 2004, respectively, and in English translation in 2010 and 2011 (*Johannes Brahms. “Free but Alone.” A Life for a Poetic Music* and *Anton Bruckner. The Man and the Work*, both published by Peter Lang). I want to emphasize that the two monographs do not overlap in any way in content with the present volume. The present English translation has also been

materially expanded from the German original by the addition of two new chapters, about Brahms' Piano Variations op. 23 and about his relations with his father Johann Jakob.

Constantin Floros, January 2015



# Part One

## Brahms and Bruckner: A Radical Historical, Art-Theoretical and Artistic Contrast

“Since the biographies of both men are now before us, let us briefly go through and juxtapose the differences between them.” Plutarch, *Bίοι παράλληλοι* (comparison of Agesilaos and Pompey)

“For just as Plutarch in his biographies weighs and compares every great man against a second great one, so the reader holds every great character of a biography quietly next to a second great one (namely his own) and takes note of what results.” Jean Paul, *Leben des Quintus Fixlein*



# I. Aspects and Issues

“Whoever, in the Steyrer Zeitung of April 6, dragged the pedal point in Brahms’ Requiem into the critical discourse? I am not a pedal-point pusher and care nothing for it. Pedal point is no stroke of genius, merely a means to an end.” Bruckner to Franz Bayer, April 22, 1893.<sup>1</sup>

Since no study of the arts can do without the comparative method, we don’t have to ask why it is sensible and indeed necessary to study contemporary artists, poets, writers and composers comparatively. Certainly the method of the “double portrait” has long been in profitable use, especially in art history and literary criticism. The most productive confrontations are those that are based on historical contrasts.

The subject of Brahms and Bruckner implies such a historical contrast. Unlike the antitheses Palestrina-Di Lasso, or Bach-Handel, which are artistic ones but do not involve any personal rivalry, the relation of Brahms to Bruckner is determined by an antagonistic element that is a historical fact. Brahms and Bruckner were opponents, antipodes, rivals already during their lifetime. Their historical relation reminds one of the polarity between Gluck and Piccini or the antagonism between Schönberg and Stravinsky.

Like Gluck and Piccini of yore, Brahms and Bruckner were involved in contentions that cannot be ignored in any annalistic historiography of the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dispute about Brahms and Bruckner was something that agitated composers, publicists, writers on music and men of letters. It was only after ca. 1920 that the apologetic engagement pro and contra Brahms and Bruckner gave way to a sober, distanced way of looking, which pushed the antagonistic element into the background and sought to apprehend the uniqueness of each composer.

In view of the historical background of the contrast, and considering how different Brahms’ music appears from that of Bruckner’s even to a mere listener, it must seem at least curious that the very attractive subject “Brahms and Bruckner” has so far been the object of only one remarkable special study by Werner F. Korte<sup>2</sup> – though one has to add that many biographies and essays about Bruckner and Brahms do touch on the relation to

the respective antagonist. Here one might mention especially the Bruckner study by Alfred Orel,<sup>3</sup> the first to attempt a stylistic comparison of Bruckner and Brahms.

If one makes an effort to collect the various views on our subject from the rather voluminous Brahms and Bruckner literature, one will soon notice that the picture that musicology has painted of the relation between the two antipodes in many respects exhibits firm contours. All commentators emphasize the strong personal contrast. At the latest since Alfred Orel, Brahms is regarded as the prototype of the “reflective” artist, Bruckner as representative of “naïve” art, of the “pure musician.” Likewise since Orel, Brahms appears to many “as the consciously conservative artist, Bruckner as the consciously progressive one.” Although such leading composers as Arnold Schönberg<sup>4</sup> and Anton Webern<sup>5</sup> have emphatically pointed to progressive traits in Brahms’ work, Brahms is widely regarded as the “classic of Romanticism.”<sup>6</sup>

There is uniform agreement on yet another, very important point: Brahms and Bruckner, the antipodes, are uniformly classified as masters of absolute music. Numerous critics never tire of asserting that the work of both men should be understood solely as “music as such.” A selection of representative judgments may illustrate the point. In 1898, Julius Spengel proclaimed that “no composer since Beethoven” had “made music so utterly without ‘program’” as Brahms. “Brahms,” Stengel said, “stands on the ground of absolute music and in this respect is wholly distant from the most modern efforts of our newest.”<sup>7</sup> In 1909, Felix Weingartner expressed the view that Brahms was “the most ‘absolute’ musician among the newer masters.”<sup>8</sup> Victor Urbantschitsch found in 1927 that

Brahms remained all his life true to absolute music; even where his instrumental music has been instigated by something extra-musical (e.g., in op. 15, op. 81), he withholds the program and wants the listener to be impacted only by the music as such. The formal problems of the time, regarding the use of the sonata scheme for tone-poetic purposes, thus did not exist as such for him as an absolute musician. As a great creative artist with classicist ideals he thereby stood outside the currents of the time, the time of the ‘*gesamtkunstwerk*’ and of program music.<sup>9</sup>

As late as 1961, Hans Gal<sup>10</sup> spoke of the “uncompromisingly absolute character” of Brahms’ music.

Hans Merian, in turn, opined about Bruckner, in 1902, that he, like Brahms, based himself exclusively on “absolute music.”<sup>11</sup> Fritz Volbach thought in 1909 that Bruckner, “with his classical tendency of the symphonic form,” and “as ‘absolute’ musician of strictest observance,” represented “more nearly a contrast to Wagner.”<sup>12</sup> Robert Haas wrote in 1934 that Bruckner, “as the strongest proclaimer of a truly absolute music,” was misunderstood by those “who championed just that music as well as by the Wagner party, which could approach his works only via the inevitable programmatic interpretation.”<sup>13</sup> And Peter Raabe thought in 1944 that Bruckner had been “the absolutest of all absolute musicians.”<sup>14</sup>

Our summary would be incomplete, however, if we did not add that the opinions about the nature and extent of the artistic contrast between Brahms and Bruckner are less unanimous. Alfred Orel, for example was firmly convinced that the “inner” contrast “is expressed on every page of the scores and in every direction of compositional technique.” He therefore sought to fathom the “essential difference” between the two composers through “technical analyses” of harmony, motifs and themes, rhythm, movement construction, instrumentation and overall form. To later critics, on the other hand, the artistic distance seemed less enormous. Thus Guido Adler thought the music historian had to recognize both composers as belonging to “the same period image” (*zeitbild*), “no matter how different the melodic, motivic-thematic, contrapuntal, harmonic, formal elements, in short, their personal style might be.”<sup>15</sup> Werner Korte, too, who analyzed a number of selected movements of Bruckner and Brahms according to structuralist methods, was of the opinion that we today, in contrast to Bruckner’s and Brahms’ contemporaries, recognize “the common historical and technical point of departure of their so contradictory life testimonies.”<sup>16</sup>

To fully understand this point of view, one has to recall that Korte interpreted both Bruckner’s and Brahms’ musical work as “autonomous,” i.e., “absolute.” Brahms and Bruckner, according to Korte, produced two “late-Romantic solutions of the autonomous [music] conception,” that is to say, of a conception for which anything extra-musical is irrelevant. At a time in which leading musicians like Wagner, Schumann and Liszt had turned to the “preconceived extra-musical concept” of Romanticism, Bruckner and Brahms, according to Korte, were “called upon to make the

great ‘absolute’ symphonic form [of classicism], the autonomous chamber music, one more time the destiny of their creative life.” In that they were dependent on the “creative means” of Romanticism, that is, on means that had been applied to “extra-musical givens,” namely to the drama, to poetic and programmed conceptions. “That situation from the start fatefully denied to Bruckner’s and Brahms’ creative process a consistent fulfillment of their music-autonomous intention.” The difference between Bruckner and Brahms, Korte says, results from their respective relation to the tradition and to the creative materials of Romanticism. Bruckner applied Romantic means in full measure and thus, in “naïve unconcern,” brought into being a modern, progressive symphony. Brahms, on the other hand, who reflected the great tradition into his workshop, had curtailed the use of the Romantic means economically, had tried to fit them into the inherited model, and thus found a retrospective, reactionary solution for the symphony. The tragedy of Brahms, and also of Bruckner, according to Korte, lies in the fact that their achievement and solution had to suffer a fracture “between autonomous tradition and Romantic enablement.”

The tendency to lessen the artistic distance between Bruckner and Brahms also characterizes some remarks of Karl Geiringer. He warns of overlooking the agreement in musical endeavor and notes that both composers were symphonists, “who held to the traditional forms and rejected program music.”<sup>17</sup>

As plausible as several of these views of Brahms’ relation to Bruckner may appear, one will not be able to maintain that the fundamental questions raised have all been answered once and for all. Did Bruckner’s and Brahms’ contemporaries indeed overestimate “the dimension of the distance” between the two controversial artists, as Korte surmises? Is the work of Bruckner and Brahms really conceived as autonomously as it purports to be? Did Bruckner and Brahms really cling to traditional forms and rejected program music?

We think that the subject “Brahms and Bruckner” also presents a number of aspects beyond the questions raised so far, aspects that urgently require elucidation. Whoever wants to reach a deeper understanding of the contrast will have to research the relation of the two antipodes in all directions. Three aspects would have to be taken into special consideration.

1. One does not have to be a declared opponent of the alluring idea of an art history without artists to concede that art and the personality of the artist can hardly be separated altogether. And whoever concedes this will have to admit that the contrariety in the personalities of Brahms and Bruckner requires a closer investigation. One has to scrutinize and define the contrasts resulting from character, upbringing, education, weltanschauung and religiosity more closely than has been done to date. Numerous reflections would have to circle about the question to what extent certain peculiarities in the work can be explained in terms of differences in education, weltanschauung and religiosity.

2. The relation of Bruckner and Brahms must not be viewed in isolation from the background of the musical history and musical aesthetics of the time. The antithesis Bruckner-Brahms in fact reflects more profound and weighty art-theoretical conflicts, which decisively determined German music in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

3. A scientifically grounded determination of the relation between Bruckner and Brahms can of course be undertaken only after a careful comparative examination of their works. The method of analysis, however, cannot be exclusively formal, stylistic or structuralist. One has to be willing to include also questions that transcend that framework. In particular, questions about the historical conditions under which the works of Bruckner and Brahms came into being, and about the extra-musical “contents” of the works, merit careful scrutiny.