

## SIGNIFICANT PERSONALITIES AS TURNING POINTS IN THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF JOHANNES BRAHMS

SEBASTIAN SHWAN<sup>1</sup>, STELA DRĂGULIN<sup>2</sup>

**SUMMARY.** This paper aims to reveal the turning points in the life and work of German composer Johannes Brahms. These main events were influenced by certain figures of the epoch, whose encounters marked the artistic activity of Brahms. In explaining the reasons that lay behind the composition of a work, emotion is one of the most specific criteria. Personal experience becomes the indispensable condition of artistic creation and lays at the core of the creative impulse. The paper is structured according to the following four aspects: *the first friends* (together with Albert Dietrich and their mentor, Robert Schumann, Brahms contributed to the composition of the *FAE Sonata for piano and violin*, Julius Otto Grimm is the witness of Brahms' love for Agathe von Siebold, while Julius Stockhausen emerges as the master of the Brahms lieder), *the conductors* who became the composer's close friends and promoted his symphonies (Hermann Levi, Hans Richter, Hans von Bülow, the latter a genuine emissary of Brahms's works, the author of the *Three B syntagm – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms*), *the Viennese friends* (the critic Eduard Hanslick, who characterized the works in Opp. 117-119 as genuine monologues and Joseph Hellmesberger, founder of the quartet name after him, with whom Brahms performed gems of the chamber music repertoire), and *the confidants of Brahms*, permanent figures in the life of the composer (the surgeon Theodor Billroth and Joseph Viktor Widmann, the author of the memoirs that revealed significant aspects of the composer's life and works).

**Keywords:** Johannes Brahms, works, life, significant personalities, friends

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<sup>1</sup> PhD Student, Transilvania University of Braşov, the Faculty of Music.  
E-mail: shwan.sebastian@unitbv.ro

<sup>2</sup> Professor PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, dragulin@unitbv.ro

## Introduction

The music of Johannes Brahms reflects the complexity of human emotions, exploring a vast range of moods and contradictory experiences; it moves from the elegiac, melancholic, tragic frame of mind, to a joyful, serene, idyllic, or capricious temper. Arnold Schönberg considered that the symphonic and chamber works are dominated by the epic and lyrical.<sup>3</sup>

His music is essentially poetic, supported by expressive concepts and images, inspired by verses and poems. In Brahms' works one may perceive the savor of the North, the image of the Holstein farmer, with his contradictory construction, a harsh man, but at the same time a dreamer. The poetic vein that characterizes the coast of the North Sea is persistent, the meadows and gardens, the waters of the Elba, a wild, but at the same time sweet ambient. Mystery gradually creeps into the works, floating on a gentle breeze. The legends and traditional ballads of the North are filled with fantastic elements, often embracing the epic and heroic, but also a touch of nostalgia and melancholy. The grandeur of Brahms' works resides in the mythical. These sources of inspiration will live in the soul of Brahms, will come through in his compositions, regardless of the stages of his life.

Personal experience is regarded as indispensable for the artistic creation, the act of creation is seen as a mental release from anxiety, fear, tensions. As Gustav Mahler writes, "(...) *eventually, the purpose of art is the release from suffering and its overcoming.*"<sup>4</sup>

The profound personal experiences of Brahms served as basis for the creative impulse that led to the conception of numerous masterpieces. Heartache, disease, and the death of loved ones, but also gratitude for his mentors, admiration for virtuoso performers, and appreciation of friends, all had the gift of releasing creative energy. Brahms himself admitted that the events in his life had a powerful impact on his creation, some triggering, others stimulating composition, but all related to the inner need for creation.

Brahms loved and respected his friends. He wrote them letters, dedicated compositions to them, at times he overwhelmed them with attention. Some friendships lasted throughout his life, unaltered by time. Brahms was aware of the fact that he was an anxious and difficult person, of exceptional frankness. He cherished honesty, truthfulness, despising the display of exaggerated flattery, even if this meant hurting the feelings of his friends.

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<sup>3</sup> Floros, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Killian, 1984, p. 46.

## 2. Important figures in the life and creation of Brahms

The current article does not aim to present a chronological sequence of the main events in the life of Johannes Brahms. Instead, the personalities that marked his life and works will be evoked. In other words, the figure of Brahms is presented from various perspectives, as in a kaleidoscope, seen through the eyes of those who had known him and had understood him more or less. Nonetheless, all these figures had loved him.

### 2.1. The First Friends

The name of **Albert Dietrich** (1829-1908) can be read on the manuscript of the *Piano Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2*, as proof of the fact that Dietrich was among the first friends Brahms had met following his arrival to Düsseldorf in 1853.

Brahms' first work for piano, the *Scherzo in E-flat minor*, published later under the opus number 4, had raised controversies, owing to the thematic motif that seemed to be inspired by Chopin (*Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31*). The evolution of Brahms had been independent: living isolated in Hamburg, the composer had no contact with the works of Schumann, nor Chopin. Conscious of this fact, Dietrich considered it was his duty to defend his friend.<sup>5</sup>

Praiseworthy pupil of Schumann, Dietrich helped Brahms in solving the first issues related to orchestration. Together with their mentor, Robert Schumann, the two composed the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, dedicated to the violinist Joseph Joachim, a composition that marked their friendship. The *Sonata F.A.E.* ("Frei, aber einsam", the initials of Joachim's life motto) consists of a first part, *Allegro* (in A minor), composed by Dietrich, a *Scherzo* (in C minor), composed by Brahms, and an *Intermezzo* and *Finale* (in F major, respectively A major), composed by Schumann.

Witness to numerous events in the life of Brahms, Dietrich was among the few to whom Brahms could open up, confessing the secrets of his soul. During their long walks on the beach of the Bremen port (April 10, 1869), were born the first ideas regarding the *Schicksalslied (Song of Destiny)*, for mixed choir and orchestra, *Op. 54*. Feeling at ease and relaxed in the presence of Dietrich, Brahms invited him to join the warm atmosphere of the Rösing family, where genuine vocal music evenings were organized in the pavilion of the family's garden (the *Duets, Op. 28* and the *3 Quartets*,

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<sup>5</sup> Niemann, 1920, p. 40.

*Op. 31* were inspired by these soirées). A letter written to Dietrich reveals that Brahms was certain that the harsh school of life had influenced his temperament and character.<sup>6</sup> It was again Dietrich whom Brahms notified regarding his departure to Vienna, on September 7, 1862.

E.g. 1



**Albert Dietrich**  
(1829-1908)



**Julius Otto Grimm**  
(1827-1903)

Similar to Albert Dietrich, **Julius Otto Grimm** (1827-1903) was also among the first friends whom Brahms had made acquaintance with during his first trip to Leipzig, in 1853. During his entire life, Grimm was a loyal supporter of Brahms' music. As a sign of appreciation, the composer dedicated the *4 Ballads for Piano, Op. 10*, to his friend.

The love story between Brahms and Agathe von Siebold can be traced back to the vacation the composer had spent in the Göttingen home of the Grimm family, in 1858. Years later, in 1864, the letter of Otto Grimm brought back the memory of the lost love, which resulted in Brahms' deliverance through the composition of the *String Sextet No. 2 in G major, Op. 36*.

The memory of youth's enthusiasm and exuberance impelled Brahms to write his life-long friend: "*Do you remember the Trio in B major of our youth? Would you still be curious to listen to it now, after I have groomed and arranged its hair?*"<sup>7</sup> The German maestro aspired to "appease" his work, as seen later from the perspective of his musical maturity, thus publishing in 1890 the concert version familiar today.

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<sup>6</sup> Ștefănescu, 1982, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> San-Galli, 1912, p. 250.

## 2.2. The master of Brahms' Lieder

The most famous German baritone of his time, well-known pedagogue of the art of Lieder, **Julius Stockhausen** (1826-1906) was the first to perform the complete Lieder of Schubert and Schumann, often accompanied at the piano by Brahms himself. He was the one to trace a certain direction regarding the performance of Brahms' vocal music.

Through the two Lieder recitals in Köln and Bonn, at the end of May 1856, the new pair of musicians, Stockhausen-Brahms, marked the beginning of a prolific and lasting friendship and artistic partnership.

In 1862 Julius Stockhausen was offered the direction of the Hamburg Philharmonic, a position much desired by Brahms. As a consequence, the relationship between the two musicians suffered a temporary estrangement. Fortunately, this tense situation was rapidly forgotten, as proven by the fact that Brahms dedicated the cycle of 15 songs, known as *Romanzen aus L. Tieck's Magelone*, Op. 33, to Stockhausen. The first six songs in this collection were first performed by the famous baritone within a concert in Hamburg, on April 4, 1862.

Later, in February 1868, the two musicians undertook a new tour of Lieder in the northern regions of Germany, then Copenhagen. A month later, two famous compositions belonging to the collection of *Lieder*, Op. 43, namely *Von ewiger Liebe* and *Die Mainacht*, were performed for the first time in Hamburg. In the same year, on 10 April 1869, the premiere of the *German Requiem (Ein deutsches Requiem)*, Op. 45, took place at the cathedral in Bremen, with the same Julius Stockhausen as soloist.

The following year recorded another tour, as one of the most important musical events in Vienna. The friendship of Stockhausen and Brahms was fortified each year, due to these successes.

E.g. 2



**Julius Stockhausen (1826-1906)**

## 2.2. The Conductor Friends

“You cannot imagine what it means to ceaselessly hear the steps of the Titan behind you,”<sup>8</sup> Brahms revealed to his friend, **Hermann Levi** (1839-1900), one of the most important conductors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1864 Levi was appointed conductor of the Karlsruhe opera, belonging to Brahms’ group of friends in Karlsruhe.

Referring to the *Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34*, Levi affirmed that “nothing comparable to this work had been heard, since 1828,”<sup>9</sup> the year of Schubert’s death. It is also him who suggested that Brahms should transform the *Sonata in F minor for two pianos* to an arrangement for chamber orchestra. The controversial *Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15*, which several years before had been coldly received in Leipzig, was performed in 1865 in Karlsruhe, under the baton of Levi, this time enjoying a genuine success. Also here, six years later, in 1871, Hermann Levi conducted the first performance of the complete *Triumphlied, Op. 55*, a work for baritone solo, choir, and orchestra, composed to mark the German victory in the Franco-Prussian War.

The era of the Brahms symphonies was initiated with the orchestral version of the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56*, a work which enjoyed success in Vienna, Leipzig, and München, where Levi conducted the representations on December 10, 1872 and March 13, 1874. These were among the last collaborations between the two, for the friendship between Levi and Brahms did not survive. Some believed that the reason behind this rupture was Levi’s approach to the music of Wagner. Others supposed that the genuine motive was the dispute between Franz Wüllner and Hermann Levi, regarding the occupation of the important position as conductor of the München philharmonic orchestra. The second supposition seems more plausible, for Hermann Levi remained friends with Clara Schumann, who was a fiercer opponent of Wagner’s music than Brahms. The correspondence of the two conductors with Brahms reveals that the composer considered Levi’s attitude toward Wüllner disrespectful and believed it was his duty to support the latter in this difficult period, in the autumn of 1853.

The Austro-Hungarian Hans Richter (1843-1916) conducted in 1876 the premiere of Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Bayreuth Festival. A year later, in Vienna, Richter decided to rise above the Wagner-Brahms dispute and approached the works of Brahms.

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<sup>8</sup> Niemann, 1920, p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Ștefănescu, 1982, p. 125.

Thus, if Hans von Bülow was the one to conduct the symphonies of Brahms in Meiningen, Hans Richter conducted several of the composer's works in Vienna: The Symphony No. 2 in D major (the "Pastoral Symphony"), on December 10, 1877, the Tragic Overture (Tragische Ouvertüre), Op. 81, on December 26, 1880, the Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83 in 1881, and the Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90, on December 2, 1883, the latter proclaimed by Richter to be Brahms' *Eroica*. On January 17, 1886, the Viennese public enthusiastically applauded the Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98, under the baton of the same Hans Richter.

E.g. 3



Hermann Levi  
(1839-1900)



Hans Richter  
(1843-1916)



Hans von Bülow  
(1830-1894)

**Hans von Bülow** (1830-1894) is described by the music critic La Mara, as an exemplary pianist of his epoch and the greatest conductor, and teacher, promoter of purity and truth in arts. He studied the piano with Friedrich Wieck and Moritz Hauptmann, and was among the close friends of Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt, until the disturbing experience caused by his wife, Cosima (the daughter of Liszt), leaving him for his best friend, Wagner. From that moment, also convinced by the genuine value of Brahms' works, von Bülow becomes the most passionate supporter of Brahms. The *Violin Sonata No. 3 in D minor, Op. 108* was dedicated by Brahms to von Bülow, as a token of their friendship.

Brahms met Hermann Levi in 1854 in Hanover, at the time when von Bülow was known mostly as a virtuoso pianist. The impression Brahms made on him was that "*in his talent, there is something truly blessed by God*"<sup>10</sup>, as von

<sup>10</sup> Niemann, 1920, p. 270.

Bülow recounts his mother on January 6, 1854. In the same year, on first of March, within a recital in Hamburg, von Bülow performs Brahms' *Sonata No. 1 in C major, Op. 1*, a work made known to him by Liszt, who considered that *"among all the works that Brahms had played to him, this gave him the most definite idea regarding his creative talent."*<sup>11</sup>

Beginning with the year 1876, Hans von Bülow, the one who names the first symphony of Brahms "The 10<sup>th</sup> symphony of Beethoven", becomes one of the fiercest defenders, emissaries, and promoters of Brahms' works. By contrast, he *proved to be unrelenting with the works of Bruch and other similar compositions.*<sup>12</sup> Thus, through a grand program consisting solely of works by Brahms – *the Tragic Overture, the Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, the Variations on a Theme by Haydn, the Symphony Op. 1 in C minor, Op. 68, and the Academic Festival Overture (Akademische Festouvertüre), Op. 80* – on November 27, 1881, at the forefront of the Meiningen ensemble, von Bülow sets out on a tour through Germany's most important cities. As an ultimate sign of his admiration and devotion for the works of Brahms, on 3 February 1884, in Meiningen, von Bülow conducts two times in the same evening the *Symphony No. 3 "Eroica", or "Germanica", as Max Kalbeck named it. A year later, in October 1885, still in Meiningen, the first representation of Brahms' fourth symphony is prepared. Following the resounding success on the evening of October 25, the orchestra conducted by von Bülow sets out on a long tour, dedicated to the promotion of this work.*

Von Bülow was beside Brahms on September 9, 1889 as well, when the city of Hamburg offered the composer the title of honorary citizen. The work dedicated to this event, the *Fest- und Gedenksprüche (Festival and Commemoration Sentences), Op. 109*, a cycle of three motets for mixed double choir, was conducted by Hans von Bülow. Ironically, this was the last time when Brahms breathed the air of his hometown.

### 2.3. The Viennese Friends

Born in Prague, the first professor of aesthetics at the University of Vienna, **Eduard Hanslick** (1825-1904) was one of the most important music critics of the Austrian metropolis. Highly subjective, to Hanslick music had begun with Mozart and would end with Brahms, thus expressing his opposition against the works of Wagner and Bruckner. His ostentatious attitude, favorable for the creation of the Hamburg-born composer, and at the same time denigrating the master of opera, further intensified the gap between the supporters of the two composers, Brahms and Wagner.

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<sup>11</sup> May, 1905, Vol. 1, p. 136.

<sup>12</sup> Ștefănescu, 1982, p. 252.





**Hanslick and Brahms**  
(Caricature from the Figaro magazine, issue 11, Vienna 1890)

Despite the flaws of Hanslick's character, Brahms was sincerely fond of him. Member of Brahms' group of close friends, Hanslick was also present in the house of the writer Josef Viktor Widmann, in Switzerland.

When he lived in the house of Julius Allgeyer, in Karlsruhe, Brahms composed the *16 Waltzes for Four Hands, Op. 39*, dedicated to the critic.

The designation of the miniatures in Opp. 116-119 as *Monologues for piano* belongs to Eduard Hanslick, who introduced the composer as early as March 8, 1863, in his chronic, as "*an independent and original personality, a genuine and well-organized talent.*"<sup>13</sup> On February 3, 1864, he applauded the activity of the newly arrived composer in Vienna as a *veritable redemption*.<sup>14</sup>

Hanslick stood by the side of Brahms during the last concert, on March 7, 1897, when Brahms, profoundly moved, responded to the public's acclaim after each movement of the *Symphony No. 4*, thus expressing its appreciation and gratitude for a lifetime of work dedicated to music. "*I believed that the ovations will never cease,*" Hanslick is reported to have said at the end of the concert.<sup>15</sup>

**Joseph Hellmesberger** (1828-1893) was the director of the Vienna Conservatory, concertmaster of the Court Opera orchestra in Vienna (1860), founder and director of the famous chamber orchestra that bore his name –

<sup>13</sup> May, 1905, Vol. 2, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ștefănescu, 1982, p. 113.

<sup>15</sup> Zbarcea, 2010, CD 15, min. 35.

*Hellmesberger Quartet* (1849). It is a well-known fact that the Hellmesbergers were a family of notable musicians. The young Enescu was hosted in the house of professor Joseph Hellmesberger Jr. in 1889, on which occasion the Romanian composer had the opportunity of meeting Brahms and being acquainted with the work of the great German composer, through the rehearsals and musical evenings filled with the spirit of music.

Hellmesberger's artistry in the art of playing the violin was remarkable, due to his suppleness, musicality, warmth of sound, and lyrical performance, contrasting with the grave approach of Joseph Joachim.

**E.g. 5**



**Joseph Hellmesberger**  
(1828-1893)

Hellmesberger met Brahms for the first time in 1862, through **Julius Epstein**, an extraordinary pianist specializing in the works of Mozart and Beethoven. Epstein was the host who enabled Brahms' admission into the Viennese musical world, and with whom he remained a life-long friend. A great philanthropist, Epstein sought to promote, protect, and guide young artists at the beginning of their careers. Thus, in 1875, when the 15-year-old Gustav Mahler was admitted to the Vienna Conservatory, Epstein agreed to work without charge, intuitively sensing the unusual talent of the new student.

On November 16, 1862 Brahms had his first contact with the Viennese public, performing alongside the Hellmesberger Quartet the *Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25*, followed, two weeks later, by the *Piano Quartet No. 2 in A major, Op. 26*. The performance by Brahms and Joseph Hellmesberger of the *Violin Sonata No. 1 in G major, Op. 78*, known as the "Regenssonate", on November 2, 1879, was an event that would remain in the memory of the Viennese audience for a long time.

## 2.4. The confidants of Brahms

Of North-German origin, **Theodor Billroth** (1829-1894) was considered the best German surgeon at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the founder of modern abdominal surgery. From 1867, he was professor and director of the Vienna University, the surgery section. His fame is also confirmed by the fact that his portrait was shown on an Austrian coin in 1929, marking 100 years from his birth.

Amateur musician, passionate pianist, displaying great respect for Brahms' chamber music, Billroth also ventured into the study of the viola, in order to participate in the musical gatherings that took place in his Viennese home. The *String Quartets, Op. 51* were dedicated to him by Brahms.

The two met for the first time in 1866, in Zürich. An enthusiast traveler, Billroth accompanied Brahms on several of his trips in Italy. Together, they visited Rome, Naples, Florence, and Venice. Returning reinvigorated from this voyage, in the summer of 1878, at Pörschach, the composer turns back to his first passion, the piano, composing the *8 Klavierstücke, Op. 76*. This is also the moment that marks the period of the piano miniatures.

The warmth and radiance of the Italian scenery awakened in the heart of the Northern hero novel emotions and sounds. Began in the summer of 1879 at Pörschach, the *Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83* was inspired by Brahms' second trip to Italy, in the spring of 1881. The final form of the concerto was accomplished in Pressbaum, in the summer of the same year.

Regarding the *Rhapsodies, Op. 79*, Billroth considered that these works embody the enthusiasm of the young Johannes, to a greater degree than the works composed at the height of Brahms's career. However, he is reserved with respect to the last *Monologues for piano, Opp. 116-119*, unable to understand their depth.

Billroth is the one to whom Brahms enthusiastically tells, in 1880, about his first trip to Bad Ischl, a prolific place for creation, where he would return to in the summer of 1882, then, beginning with 1889, every year.

According to Billroth, Brahms displayed the first signs of weariness in 1890, when he had the first attempt of withdrawal from the musical life, desiring to dedicate his time to reading and walks in nature. However, destiny had different plans for the great composer. Unfortunately, his faithful friend died before Brahms, in 1894.



**Theodor Billroth**  
(1829-1894)



**Josef Viktor Widmann**  
(1842-1911)

Poet, pastor, librettist, and editor, **Josef Viktor Widmann** (1842-1911) was born in Moravia, to Austrian parents. From his childhood, Switzerland became his home. His memories about Brahms revealed several enlightening aspects about the life and works of the composer (*Johannes Brahms in Erinnerungen*, published in Berlin, in 1898 and *Recollections of Johannes Brahms*, published together with Albert Dietrich, in London, in 1899).

The two met in 1866, at the Music Festival in Zürich, but their true friendship began in 1874. During three years, they discovered the beauties of Italy together. To the name of Widmann are also linked the vacations spent in the Hofstetten village, in Switzerland, between 1886-1888. There the *Violin Sonata No. 2 in A major, Op. 78*, also known as the “*Thuner Sonate*”, was conceived. The verses of the poet Josef Widmann recall the memories of their walks along the shores of the Thun lake.

In the winter of 1891, Widmann accompanied Brahms to the ducal castle in Meiningen, where music could be heard ceaselessly from morning until midnight. There, the figure of the clarinet player Richard Mühlfeld charmed the two.

Widmann translated to German several works of the Romanian poet Vasile Alecsandri, set to music by the composer Eusebiu Mandicevski in his *18 Romanian Folk Songs for Voice and Piano, Op. 7*. Mandicevski was greatly influenced by Brahms, regarding the importance of folklore in music composition.

Brahms's last trip to his adoptive country, Switzerland, took place in October 1896, accompanied by the chords of the *Triumphlied*, Op. 55. This was the last meeting of the two friends.

Their close bond encouraged Brahms to recount Widmann old memories from his youth, when he had devised alone a system of staves, long before knowing that this truly existed.<sup>16</sup> In his memoirs, Widmann writes that the powerful creative emotions experienced by the young Brahms at dawn, when he was returning from work, were the happiest, because only then had he the necessary silence to write down his own musical ideas.<sup>17</sup>

Widmann is the one to whom Brahms bitterly confided, explaining why he had chosen not to marry. He could not have endured the disappointment in the eyes of his wife, and even less, her pity: "*No, I don't even want to think what hell this could have been for me, knowing how I am shaped.*"<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusions

Johannes Brahms had a particular appreciation for the *Blue Danube* of Johann Strauss the Son. He loved beyond words the sound of Joachim's violin, and believed in Dvořák, easing the way for his music in Germany. Brahms was a sensible and delicate soul, hidden within a harsh shell. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that beauty often moved him to tears: the feelings that come forth from Goethe's *Geschwister*<sup>19</sup>, the contemplation of Parmigianino's *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine* (Widmann, 1898, p. 124), or the ecstatic foretelling of his death, sung in the conclusion of the third song from the cycle *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121, "*O Tod, wie wohl tust du!*".<sup>20</sup> Then, emotions would overwhelm him, so that any barrier was shattered and feelings were expressed.

Robert Schumann wrote: "... *When I think about the utter perfection of certain works of Bach and Beethoven, I refer to the rare states of the souls, which the artist must translate to me, and to whom I ask for depth and poetic novelty regarding each detail...*".<sup>21</sup> Brahms understood and felt the vision of his master, and he also managed to accomplish it.

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<sup>16</sup> May, 1905, Vol. 1, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Widmann, 1898, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> San-Galli, 1912, p. 57-58.

<sup>19</sup> Widmann, 1898, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Ophüls, 1921, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Schumann, 1941, Vol. 1, p. 434.

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