

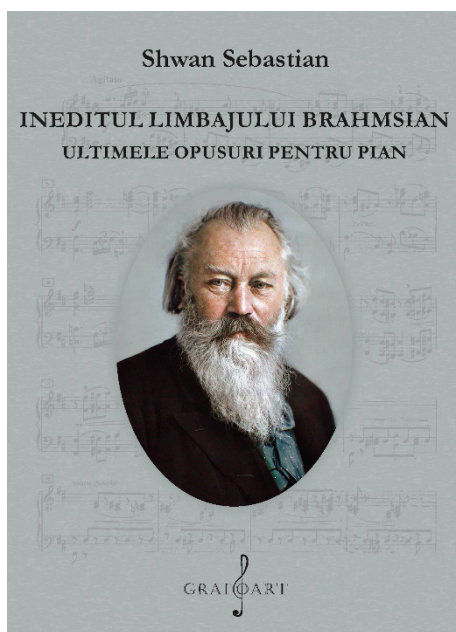
BOOK REVIEW

SHWAN SEBASTIAN – BRAHMS' NOVEL LANGUAGE

The sound needs light: the light of a word to unravel its beauty. A performer always lives among metaphors, and the pianist and teacher Shwan Sebastian is himself a metaphor: through his music and – albeit too rarely – through his thoughts and writings about music. This time, his favorite subject refers to Brahms' last compositions for piano that he approaches as a poet would, in a subtle, intense and profound way. On the verge of its artistic maturity, its interpretative essences are distilled in a musicological discourse of amazing depth, which proves his mastery of a technical analytical apparatus supplying all the relevant details. Everything for music, for its understanding; the author himself confesses that he climbed the ascending path to the “level of interpretation with awareness, because consciousness is the place where musical experience is manifest; the side acquired through analysis stabilizes talent. Through knowledge, we confirm what was undeclared in the beginning” (our translation).

The repertoire (interpreted with so much structural awareness and semantic sensitivity) acquires, through this wonderful book, “a structured foundation from an analytical, interpretative and pedagogical perspective, tracing research directions, identifying and analyzing the ideological and compositional profile that sets up and adjusts the interpretation. This book required vast research of Brahms' work, with a focus on his piano compositions which, to highlight from

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all perspectives, unavoidably entailed references to other areas of the composer's music, for example, the symphonic dimension, codified in his entire creation system" (our translation). The author multiple integrating the final opuses by Brahms in a multiple cultural, personal, social, historical and stylistic context, which defines the algorithms behind the creation of the great Romantic composer from the perspective of all discursive parameters (orchestration, harmony, rhetoric and aesthetic expression, musical structures, melody, rhythm and timber, interpretative, compositional and pedagogical valences).

Approaching the delicate brilliance of a highly elegant repertoire, Shwan Sebastian can access its expressiveness by means of his unique interpretative gift, crowned by a vivid musical consciousness, which plans every gesture with the precision of a strict analyst and the naturalness of an authentic talent. He has all the answers about the great music he interprets because he knows how to ask all the great questions about life and art. Similarly to Brahms' personality, Shwan Sebastian defines his generation though modesty, generosity and high values. The pianist is never content with little, he embraces the intensely polished detail, doubled by synthetic musical thinking; he never loses his discourse among the nuances of the multiform Romanticism.

We need his music, and musicology is enriched by one of its most beautiful manifestations in the Romanian art of the last century. The world lives though people who rise high, because only their thinking will be able to reach the future generations that will follow in their footsteps. When the word can sing next to music so eloquently and authentically, each sound feeds the inner universe – thirsty for light. Thus, the author reaches what he calls the **ULTIMATE BEAUTY**: I daresay that Brahms would have liked to read this book about his music.

The volume opens with **a general view of the historical, social and cultural context** – which is highly complex and is permeated by the revolution which influenced the entire 19th century through its reverberations. The cultural context of Romanticism was subsumed in all arts: literature and the plastic arts are considered for the first time as having functions in articulating the poetic universe of Brahms's compositions.

As a keen analyst of Brahms's music, the author refers to the composer's psychological profile, which is undoubtedly reflected in his art: the most important personalities of his life, his great predecessors (J. S. Bach and L. van Beethoven) and musician friends (J. Joachim, R. and Clara Schumann) contributed to the formation of the dominant traits of the greatest personality of musical Romanticism.

The second chapter of the volume under discussion is related to ***Brahms's pianistic identity and creation algorithms***, describing with unique maturity the details concerning both his compositional universe and his interpretative axes. Considered “a different type of Romantic” – capable of harmonizing his own contradictions with those of his epoch, J. Brahms is located stylistically (based on the stylistic sources, influences and interferences in his creation), reevaluated and revalorized (from the perspective of creators such as L. van Beethoven and R. Schumann).

Romantic ideals and spirit are discussed also through parallels between Romantic and Impressionist compositions, but also from the perspective of the resonances and confluences noticeable within the musical language. The research of the connections and correlations within Brahms's creation paradigms allows the author to analyze a certain stylistic parameter in the evolution of the musical discourse of a single instrument (harmony, melodic archetypes, rhythm: Pörschach Paradigm in the miniatures op. 76, Rhapsodies op. 79, but also the Thun Paradigm).

The third chapter investigates the ***stylistic attributes and individual interpretations of Brahms's language reflected in his piano compositions***, starting with a perspective on style as deviation and as choice, but also by identifying the stylistic parameters with expressive value: the tonal framework (semantic and aesthetic dimensions), the design of the melodic profiles reflected in metro-rhythmic strategies and formulae, elements of co-habitation with polyphony: “in Brahms's work, the design of the melodic profiles is mostly descending with gradual intervals, a feature which characterizes vocal music (for example, in the movement Adagio of Concert no. 1 in Re minor, op. 15). The descending evolution, in small intervals, gives the listener the feeling of intimacy, like a caress. The melodic formula made up of a perfect fourth, followed by a descending, gradual development, can be considered a signature of the Maestro” (p. 75) (our translation).

Several important genres are identified and highlighted in Brahms's creation: the variational genre (where the author describes the thematic metamorphosis and the undeclared leitmotifs: the lullaby, the motif of Beethoven's destiny), the pianistic miniature and the lied (from the Romantic perspective specific to J. Brahms), but also the symphonic universe. A very innovative argument is the reference to the orchestration factor as a way of exceeding the expressive limits of the piano, the chapter concludes by proposing an orchestral experiment-exercise which sums up the timber relationships among voices in the piano symphonic-type compositions as part of a case study: Intermezzo op. 118 no. 6 (“a work rich in symphonic implications, with very unusual expressive contrapuntal contrasts and tonal instability” - p. 92, our translation).

The fourth chapter really touches on ***the analysis of opuses 79, 116, 117, 118, 119 from various perspectives – methods and models of analysis*** (the theory of syntactic trees and structural parameters, the Riemann syntactic analysis and the rhetorical one, Schenkerian methods), but also in ***technical and interpretative particularities and details***. The chamber music connotations of Brahms's lied are part of the author's preoccupations concerning the art of the piano accompaniment, comparing technical-interpretative and expressive approaches in the opinion of several famous pianists, but also his own opinion on the didactic and pedagogical perspectives on certain study models.

The pianist and teacher Shwan Sebastian goes into details in his analysis with the precision of an experienced musicologist, also reaching the territory of the coordinates of the semantic context, which he describes each time with the certainty of the interpreter in charge of this aspect too: he becomes the co-creator when he can take the leap from execution to interpretation. Showing real musicological and literary qualities, the author underlines mysteriously certain segments of the work with relevant mottoes (Andante un poco adagio - Festina lente), adding also precious insertions regarding the condition of the genius creator (marked by a vibrant inner breath, by originality and change, whose creations have a symbolic value that alters reality), as well as the artistic context which validates the artistic language.

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