

Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Michael Musgrave. *Brahms: A German Requiem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xii, 97 pp. ISBN 0521409950 (paperback)

David Brodbeck. *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. x, 115 pp. ISBN 052147959 (paperback)

Dillon R. Parmer

Volume 21, Number 2, 2001

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014489ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014489ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

0710-0353 (print)

2291-2436 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Parmer, D. R. (2001). Review of [Michael Musgrave. *Brahms: A German Requiem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xii, 97 pp. ISBN 0521409950 (paperback) / David Brodbeck. *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. x, 115 pp. ISBN 052147959 (paperback)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 21(2), 118–123. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014489ar>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes, 2002

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

BOOK REVIEWS/RECENSIONS

Michael Musgrave. *Brahms: A German Requiem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xii, 97 pp. ISBN 0521409950 (paperback).

David Brodbeck. *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. x, 115 pp. ISBN 052147959 (paperback).

It is fitting that the two first installments to feature Johannes Brahms in the Cambridge Music Handbooks series—Michael Musgrave's *Brahms: A German Requiem* (1996) and David Brodbeck's *Brahms: Symphony No. 1* (1997)—not only appeared near, or during, the centenary of his death, but also treat the very works which secured for the composer both international recognition and a permanent place in the canon. It is also fitting that these first installments reflect the two scholarly traditions that have defined Brahms research in English, the British and the American. The former is well represented by the seasoned Brahms scholar Michael Musgrave, who gives a most sober account of the *Requiem*. His is a handbook in the strict sense, for even the uninitiated can follow its systematic coverage with little difficulty. The latter tradition, embodied here in the work of the younger scholar David Brodbeck, differs from its British counterpart by forgoing the mandates of a "handbook." Drawing upon the "New Musicology," particularly hermeneutics, Brodbeck sets about instead to unlock the meaning of the symphony and to defend the work against its detractors in a discussion which only readers with better-than-average musical sophistication can follow with ease. It is perhaps as a result of these differing traditions, as well as their intended audiences, that the respective treatment of these two musical monuments diverge in overall approach and emphasis.

This difference of approach is evident from the start. The discussion of the protracted compositional histories of each opus, for instance, covers the topic with varying degrees of economy. As is already well known, both the *Requiem* and the Symphony stem from the same compositional impulse, an aborted Duo Piano Sonata/Symphony in D Minor of February 1854, modeled on Beethoven's Ninth and Schumann's Fourth Symphonies. Supposedly inspired by Schumann's attempted suicide, the aborted work survives in the first movement of Brahms's First Piano Concerto, in the second movement of the *Requiem*, and, indirectly, in the Symphony (in that Brahms retained elements from his models). Musgrave clearly delineates the evolution of the *Requiem* from its birth in this aborted opus, through an intermediary six-movement version of 1866, to the final seven-movement form of September 1868. What Musgrave covers with succinctness, Brodbeck overwhelms with a surplus of not-always-revealing

documentary evidence. Readers can follow Brahms's progress on the Symphony from its putative beginnings in 1854, through its various prepublication performances and subsequent revisions in 1876-1877, to its final version of 1877, but only by wading through copious extracts from letters, and also by stopping frequently to explore earlier and intermediary efforts in other genres.

Despite the lack of a complete documentary histories, both scholars manage to shed some new light on at least one major issue. Musgrave argues that the death of Brahms's mother in February 1865 did not necessarily inspire the interpolated fifth movement for soprano solo and chorus—which so many students of the *Requiem* like to believe—but rather prompted the completion of work upon which Brahms had already embarked before 1865. And Brodbeck, armed with new manuscript evidence, makes a strong case regarding the multiple versions for the second movement of the Symphony: the first version was more like the final published version (a large-scale ternary form) and not at all like the intermediary rondo-form version Brahms used in pre-publication performances (or the sonata-form version that other scholars have proposed). To Brodbeck's credit as an archivist, moreover, the volume of documentary extracts he brings to the discussion does serve to clarify how difficult it must have been for Brahms to compose a symphony given the musical polemics of time, the inherent difficulties of the genre itself notwithstanding: not only was the young composer burdened by the enormous pressure, laid upon him by friends and colleagues, to produce a symphony that would fulfill Schumann's prophetic "Neue Bahnen" of 1853, but he was also haunted by the ever-present shadow of Beethoven against whose example everyone was measured.

As Brodbeck's account makes patently clear, the reception of Brahms's music has been embroiled in polemics from the first, and the two present studies are no exception. Musgrave adopts the formalist approach with which Brahms's music has been associated historically, whereas Brodbeck ventures into the realm of "hermeneutics." The rigors of formalism allow Musgrave to treat the *Requiem* systematically, one chapter dealing with text and music as a whole, another with structure and style in individual movements. The first of these provides readers with the original German text, an English translation, and annotations indicating all Biblical and Apocryphal sources. Here, readers find that Brahms's compilation, rather than being an *ad hoc* assemblage of Biblical extracts, is instead a coherent three-part meditation on human suffering. This textual structure is itself balanced by a large-scale tripartite musical structure (movements 1-3 and movements 6-7 framing movements 4-5) and a corresponding symmetrical tonal plan, all of which is unified by two recurring thematic ideas (the so-called "Selig" motif and a chorale theme drawn from the Lutheran chorale repertory). Thus, readers are prepared for the more detailed formal and stylistic analyses of the ensuing chapter. Especially helpful here are tables outlining formal design: even lay readers can grasp how Brahms superimposes elements from two or more formal schemes in a single movement. Also noteworthy is the attention accorded to Brahms's mixture of musical styles from the baroque era (in the four-part chorale writing, the

chorale prelude and fantasia, and fugue), the operatic idiom (in the arioso and aria passages for soloists), and secular traditions (in the march and waltz).

Although Musgrave softens his formalism by including general statements about expressive effect, overall mood, and atmosphere, readers in search of an approach that struggles to convey musical meaning in words must turn to Brodbeck's account, which occupies three chapters, two devoted to the outer movements, a third to the inner two movements. Here, readers find blow-by-blow descriptions of each movement delivered less in the jargon of music theory and more in the purple prose of an "interpreter" who, nevertheless, requires his readers to alternate between score and handbook. When he does discuss form, as in the complex first movement and the peculiar "deformed" sonata form of the finale, the best assistance Brodbeck offers the less initiated comes in the form of tabulated verbal description. Interrupting the flow of this hermeneutic reading are frequent digressions that disentangle Brahms's dense web of musical allusions to past masterworks. To the already familiar echoes of the *Freudenthema* from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Brodbeck adds a staggering list of putative models and allusive sources that extend from Bach to Wagner. For the first movement, he cites Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the chorale "Ermuntre dich," Schumann's Fourth Symphony and his incidental music to Byron's *Manfred*, and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, to name a few. Some of these return in the second movement to be joined with references to Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony, Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, and the *Romanze* from Schumann's Fourth Symphony. To these, the finale adds Schubert's Eighth Symphony, Bach's Cantata No. 106, Schumann's Second Symphony, and the finale of Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony. By far the most provocative references are those to Schumann's Fourth Symphony (the so-called "Clara" Symphony) and the incidental music to Byron's *Manfred*. Indeed, the musical connections seem indisputable and allow Brodbeck to assert rhetorically that the "paucity of thematic materials and the severity with which they are treated, the inability of the music ever to shake free of the motto's anxious chromatic grip" is a musical correlate of "Manfred's struggle with oppressive guilt over his love for Astarte and so, by extension, Brahms's own internal wrestling on account of his 'forbidden' relationship with Clara" (p. 45). As provocative as this supposition is, readers are left to determine how precisely it figures in the details of musical structure. Brodbeck too seems unable to synthesize his many insights and, in the end, falls back on others to characterize the overall expressive trajectory of the Symphony as a secularized Christian journey from suffering to salvation.

From the first, both works came under criticism, the *Requiem* for its blatant avoidance of Christian theology, the Symphony for details of its compositional technique. Musgrave addresses the de-Christianization by viewing Brahms's text as a culmination of an increasingly secularized Protestant tradition. This tendency he traces in several works by Heinrich Schütz and J.S. Bach (which already set, individually or in similar compilations, many of the texts used by Brahms), through Schubert's *Deutsches Requiem* (which anticipates Brahms's avoidance of Latin), to Schumann's secular oratorios (e.g. *Requiem for*

Mignon). Thus, Brahms's *Requiem* is not a Christian meditation on the souls of the departed, as in the Roman text, but a personal meditation on his own losses (of his youth, Schumann, and his mother) and a search for consolation in the wake of such bereavement. Within Brahms's own history of textual choice, Musgrave shows that the *Requiem* text appears midway between his interest in optimistic biblical texts stressing faith and the otherworldly, and more secular texts stressing pessimism, resignation, and the here and now.

Despite the "humanization" and "personalization" of the work, there can be no question that the monumental nature of the *Requiem*—its sheer symphonic scope, its central apostrophe to Blessedness in the fourth movement, the difficulties it poses for performers, and its circular return to the first movement in the last—places it firmly within the tradition of the Latin Requiem and other great choral works. Musgrave's brief account of reception shows, in fact, that the opus was received as such. Two contemporary critics, Adolf Schubring and Amadeus Macewski, cite historical lineage (Bach's serious artfulness, the elevated power of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, Schubertian melody and harmony), the extensive use of counterpoint, the synthesis of old and new styles, and the thematic and harmonic originality. As can be expected, opposition came largely from the Wagnerians, Wagner himself indicting the composition for embodying the Protestant ethos which he loathed so much. Not even nineteenth-century England spared it from polemics, for even a performance by a high-caliber ensemble, in this case the Bach choir, could not rescue the *Requiem* from the bitter sarcasm of a perfect Wagnerite the likes of Bernard Shaw.

Much of the criticism leveled against the Symphony, which Brodbeck transcribes for the reader in whole, derives partly from such musical polemics, and partly from such matters of compositional technique as the overly dense web of allusions, the cerebral preoccupation with motivic development, the irregular and complex formal designs, the lack of lyrical themes. These latter issues Brodbeck addresses head on, his entire discussion reading perhaps as a defense against them. Although these features can be viewed as stemming from Brahms's struggle with the genre, his insistence on synthesizing old and new, and his secret expressive intentions, Brodbeck concludes that the Symphony itself presupposes a sophisticated listener for whom such difficulties become invitations to reflection. As such, Brodbeck suggests that the Symphony was conceived not for Brahms's contemporaries, but for posterity.

Both authors strive to bring their overview of each opus to the present but in ways that betray their differing audiences. Rather than show how polemics prevail in the ongoing reception history of *Requiem*, Musgrave instead stresses the history of its performance practice. First, he leads readers through various early performances of the work, some directed by Brahms himself, to show that initial success was largely dependent on the quality of the performance, the demands of its choral writing being unprecedented for the time. Although Brahms established a "tradition of performance" through his involvement in the earliest performances, Musgrave brings to bear documentary evidence revealing that Brahms himself adapted both *tempi* and expression to suit his specific performing conditions and situations. The extent of this flexibility in

regard to *tempi* is then explored in a comparison of eight recorded performances from three generations of conductors: Wilhelm Furtwängler (1948), Otto Klemperer (1962), and Bruno Walter (1954); Herbert von Karajan (1956), Rudolf Kempe (1955), and Wolfgang Sawallisch (1962); and Roger Norrington (1990) and John Eliot Gardiner (1991). Rather than dismiss the “romanticized” approaches of the older generation in favor of the so-called “authentic” approach of the younger, Musgrave instead points up the romantic/classical duality inherent in the work itself, and affirms the broad scope of interpretive range thereby allowed.

Whereas Musgrave brings the reception history of the work to the present through a comparative analysis of performing traditions, Brodbeck takes the present back to the past. Each contemporary review that Brodbeck transcribes for his readers shows that even the earliest commentators were concerned, to varying degrees, with the very questions that occupy today’s scholars: the practice of quotation and allusion, the expressive (i.e. programmatic) content of the work, the technique of developing variation, and the relationship of Brahms to Beethoven. Readers find that Brahms incorporated substantial extra-compositional references to make a statement about his musical lineage. In contrast to the received view of the composer as a champion of absolute music, these reviewers also betray an interest in defining the expressive content of work, some even proposing a secret program. Indeed, to bring the point home, Brodbeck supplies readers with a poetic text, drafted by Kalbeck himself, for each movement of the Symphony (see Appendix 1). Of primary concern was of course the question of Brahms’s place in relation to Beethoven’s legacy. On the one hand, someone the likes of the conductor Hans von Bülow christened Brahms’s First Symphony as “The Tenth” implying thereby a very specific descendency. On the other hand were those sympathetic with Wagner and the New German School. Wagner himself dismissed von Bülow’s contention by arguing that Brahms confused the chamber with the symphonic idiom: in short he couched elitist chamber music, with its over development of thematic materials, in the guise of a symphony and as such could not claim rightful heritage as Beethoven’s heir. Brodbeck himself unwittingly concedes this point when he tries to rescue the Symphony from polemics by bequeathing it to a sophisticated posterity capable of reflection.

There can be no doubt that these first installments to the Cambridge Music Handbooks series to feature the music of Johannes Brahms represent, in their own ways, important contributions to the series in general. Even though Musgrave does not venture to break new ground in musical scholarship, his thoughtful synthesis of the extant evidence and his clearly presented commentary, make his contribution a most desirable resource for any student of the *Requiem*. Those in search of historical information, as well as detailed analyses of text and music, are well served here, but Musgrave’s emphasis on performance-related issues suggests that it is the performing musician who will find this book most helpful. Indeed, the final chapter, as well as those treating the work itself, might well stimulate the interpretive imagination of even the professional conductor. Brodbeck’s contribution, addressed as it is to an

audience of scholars, warrants a more critical response. Brodbeck borrows overtly and covertly from the discourses of "New Musicology," with little explanation and frequently no documentation. Readers unfamiliar with the jargon of these discourses remain in the dark. Although his entire discussion is firmly rooted in a prodigious accumulation of documentary evidence, his marshalling of that evidence is not always selective or critical. Readers must wade through reams of extracts from letters and diary entries, for instance, to discover that the genesis of the Symphony prior to the 1870s still remains shrouded in mystery. Brodbeck also falls back on quotation of documents to tell the story with little critical commentary, while his reading of the Symphony, perhaps the most significant portion of the book, is largely dependant on Kalbeck's sometimes questionable assumptions, which Brodbeck leaves unchallenged. The principal problem of this study, however, is the extent to which this all-important hermeneutic reading is interrupted by digressions that flesh out the musical contexts necessary for unpacking the meaning for various extra-compositional references. It would have been far more effective to deal with this aspect of the symphony in a preliminary chapter that enumerated not only such models and allusive sources, but also defined critically the extent of their significance. With the musical background thus sketched, the reader (and even the writer) are free to follow the vicissitudes of expression which this difficult work undergoes. Unlike Musgrave who keeps his research from clouding the presentation of his material, Brodbeck in the end sacrifices the requirements of a handbook for the sake of methodological rigor. Nevertheless, his contribution daringly probes expressive depths that hitherto still await as thorough an exploration in the music of Brahms.

Dillon R. Parmer

David Lidov. *Elements of Semiotics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. xvi, 288 pp. ISBN 0-312-21413-8 (hardcover).

Raymond Monelle. *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000. xvi, 248 pp. ISBN 0-691-05716-8 (paperback).

Musical semiotics is at a crossroads. The field established itself in the 1970s, expanded in the 1980s, and was consolidated in the 1990s. Now, leading figures are returning to basic questions about the nature of analysis, hermeneutics, and semiosis, wishing to set a viable course for the next decade. Two such authors are David Lidov and Raymond Monelle. Monelle's book is narrowly focused on music, whereas Lidov's is a work of general semiotic theory with a special interest in aesthetics (and written by a music theorist/composer). It is profitable to read and review these works side-by-side. Lidov and Monelle have been colleagues for many years, and concern themselves with similar issues. However, while Lidov has devoted himself to refurbishing structuralist semiotics, Monelle has turned towards postmodernism. As a result, the books implicitly speak to one another, sketching divergent options on the question of