

## Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Jan Swafford. *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. xxii, 705 pp. ISBN 0-679-42261-7 (hardcover)

Styra Avins, editor and annotator. *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*. Trans. Styra Avins and Joseph Eisinger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xxviii, 858 pp. ISBN 0-19-816234-0 (hardcover)

Allan Hepburn

Volume 20, numéro 1, 1999

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015658ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015658ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

### ISSN

0710-0353 (imprimé)

2291-2436 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Hepburn, A. (1999). Compte rendu de [Jan Swafford. *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. xxii, 705 pp. ISBN 0-679-42261-7 (hardcover) / Styra Avins, editor and annotator. *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*. Trans. Styra Avins and Joseph Eisinger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xxviii, 858 pp. ISBN 0-19-816234-0 (hardcover)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 20(1), 135-138. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015658ar>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes, 2000

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

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

Jan Swafford. *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. xxii, 705 pp. ISBN 0-679-42261-7 (hardcover).

Styra Avins, editor and annotator. *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*. Trans. Styra Avins and Joseph Eisinger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xxviii, 858 pp. ISBN 0-19-816234-0 (hardcover).

Johannes Brahms, as composer, score editor, and letter writer, receives due diligence in two hefty volumes devoted to his life and epistolary output. Jan Swafford's *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* and Styra Avins's *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* tell the story of Brahms's life with markedly different emphasis placed on his psychology, business acumen, family circumstances, and cultural formation. These two works offer contrasting first-person and third-person perspectives on Brahms's career. In extant letters, Brahms never divulges the full story of his manoeuvring within politicized music circles of nineteenth-century Germany and Austria. Nor do his letters entirely disclose the extent of his class-consciousness, his callousness, or his shrewdness. He repeatedly proclaims his distaste for answering correspondence, which he performs as a chore, not as a pleasure. His life happened away from his desk, while he was travelling, socializing, conducting, pacing, reading. He also burned many of his letters. In this regard, a biography is essential for filling in the gaps left by Brahms's own omissions and suppressions of information. By the same token, his letters glint with autobiographical complexity that no biography, however complete, can duplicate.

Swafford's *Johannes Brahms* creates a heroic narrative for the slim, blond-haired, slum-child from Hamburg who, by the end of his life, conquered musical Vienna. Swafford frames Brahms's life with a performance of the Fourth Symphony at the Musikverein on 7 March 1897. Already dying from liver cancer, Brahms earns the resounding admiration of the audience: "The ovation roared on and on until it became almost unbearable, for the audience and for Brahms" (p. 4). Swafford narrates the same scene again at the end of his book to prove, after the wide periphrasis of Brahms's life and struggles, just how difficult the winning of admiration has been: "At the end of the symphony the ovation roared on and on, hats and handkerchiefs waving all over the hall, men of the Philharmonic on their feet bellowing and waving along with the crowd. Brahms stood weeping quietly in the torrent of love the Viennese were giving him" (p. 618). The scene is indeed tear-producing, since Brahms died less than a month later, on 3 April.

Swafford acknowledges his debt to two of Brahms's early biographers. Both Max Kalbeck's four-volume *Johannes Brahms* (1912–21) and Florence May's *Life of Brahms* (1905) provide eye-witness information about their subject; Kalbeck and May knew Brahms personally. The legend of Brahms being hauled out of bed by his father to play piano all night at a brothel derives from Kalbeck's biography. So, too, does the legend of Brahms's impoverished early life. Swafford, drawing on Kalbeck, skilfully interweaves the history of these indignities into a psychological portrait rich in detail. This is an immensely readable biography, with the force and sweep of a Victorian novel.

Moreover, Swafford confronts Brahms's problems with women head on. As Swafford claims, Brahms's misogyny amounts to "a refuge from women, especially a refuge from the feelings they aroused in him—the sexual, but also the tender and devoted" (p. 122). His retreat from Clara Schumann, his broken engagement with Agathe von Siebold, and his teasing but idle references to "pretty girls" strewn throughout his letters, reveal his tendency to glorify women—on the condition that they remain unavailable sexually. Love, to Brahms, was the corollary of frustration, yearning, musicality, suffering. His habit of frequenting prostitutes earned him a reputation for accessibility: "Streetwalkers affectionately called to him on the street and sought him out when they were short of cash" (p. 546). Swafford portrays Brahms as permanently damaged by his early exposure to the seedy demi-monde of Hamburg. He cannot direct his feelings towards an appropriate (i.e., bourgeois) love object. When he meets Elisabet von Stockhausen, for instance, "he was terrified of touching her, of falling in love with her. With the skewed sexuality the *Animierlokale* [bar-dancehall-whorehouses, or, literally, "stimulation pubs"] of Hamburg had bequeathed him, he could only imagine himself soiling such a creature with his passion" (p. 282). This biography conjectures why Brahms never resolved his divided feelings about women and why his personal relations were so frequently characterized by gruffness and sudden dismissal.

What if, however, the legend of Brahms's playing in brothels were untrue? What if he were not a slum-child, but really the son of a struggling, but socially advancing family? Styra Avins, in assembling and annotating Brahms's letters, has also read Kalbeck's biography, and she finds much to dispute in it: "The notion that Brahms came from a poverty-stricken home and had no formal education is widespread but entirely unfounded" (p. 2). Avins cites the quality of the schools attended by Johannes and his brother Fritz as evidence of the family's solvency. Proof of bourgeois values crops up in the letters themselves. Christiane Brahms chides her son about falling into debt: "You cannot be in debt, that won't do" (p. 37). This collection of letters reveals a middle-class insistence on public respectability, individual liberty, and fiscal responsibility. Especially in the voluminous correspondence with the music publisher Fritz Simrock, Johannes Brahms's powers of negotiating come to the fore. Although Brahms protests time and again that money held no interest for him, he became quite wealthy from his compositions. *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* opens diorama-like vistas into Brahms's contradictory responses to class, money, status, and family.

Palpable tenseness within the family is evident throughout Avins's *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*. Johann Jakob Brahms, *pater familias*, comes off as a self-absorbed and cruel character. Although his son calls him "an excellent man" (p. 318) and refuses to accuse him of wrongful action, Johann walks out on his wife and daughter, leaving them in the lurch monetarily. Christiane even suspects that her husband hoarded money against his going. Johannes mediates between the two; in fact, he thinks of himself as a mediator among rival factions on several occasions, which is odd, given Brahms's propensity for upsetting people and instigating hostilities. Avins's complex version of family life raises questions about Brahms's own feelings towards his parents, whom he had to care for financially. His late-in-life recollections of childhood unhappiness, as

well as his failure to speak directly about his feelings towards his family members, have caused numerous misconstructions of Brahms's behaviour. Freud—that other Viennese master of the repressed—acknowledges that emotional truth bears as much significance as fact in the creation of individual psychology. That principle might be applied to Brahms's own narratives about his early life: what Brahms remembers and what he felt are not the same thing, but are of equal importance.

Avins's annotations—summaries of major phases, a chronology, explanations of letters, a thorough bibliography, thumbnail sketches of correspondents and noteworthy people, appendices giving further information—make this book an indispensable, erudite, incomparable piece of scholarship. A deft summary of the romance between Brahms and Clara Schumann concludes that their friendship remained "platonic" (p. 759). Swafford, by contrast, plays with the ambiguities of the situation, and conjectures that Robert Schumann also played a part in this liaison: "Robert must have suspected that this protege loved his wife, and maybe he suspected Clara's feeling for Johannes" (p. 136). Maybe. Maybe not. The psychological dynamics of the affair are unsolvable. It is possible to argue that Johannes's admiration of Robert shaded into love for Clara. It is also possible that Clara was on the lookout for another composer to promote since Robert had exhausted his musical inspiration (she later cultivated Theodor Kirchner, but gave him up because he did not come up to scratch as a composer). It is also possible that Robert promoted infidelity as a way of detaching himself from Clara.

More crucial than romantic contretemps and novelistic conjectures, however, are the ways in which Swafford and Avins have changed interpretations of Brahms's life. These two works allow scholars to consider Brahms's work contextually. Inextricable from the circumstances of nineteenth-century culture, his career resulted from a nexus of issues specific to that period. Future scholarship would wisely elaborate the historical determinants of his achievements adumbrated in these two books. For example, his editing of Schumann, Couperin, and Chopin requires further consideration within nineteenth-century debates of historicism and historiography. His touchy Lutheranism and culturally defined liberalism need more investigation as subjects in themselves, but especially as they inform his stance with regard to Judaism. His "political personality" is enmeshed in numerous overlapping discourses, including music criticism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, and decadence.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, his relation to material culture needs examination. Although Brahms scornfully told Wagner he did not collect "curiosities," he was lying. He owned an extensive collection of manuscripts, treatises, autographed letters, and books; he even saved sand from a Schubert manuscript, as if Schubertian inspiration were transmitted via a blotter. Brahms's impulse to collect conforms to nineteenth-century habits of acquisition and bourgeois taste, what Peter Gay calls "individualism triumphant" manifest in objects.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>For an exemplary discussion of this, see Margaret Notley, "Brahms as Liberal: Genre, Style, and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna" *19th-Century Music* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 110 and passim.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Gay, *Pleasure Wars: The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* (New York: Norton, 1998), 138.

It would be helpful to think of Brahms also as an arriviste, someone who suffered class anxieties manifest in his repudiation of other artists (Liszt and Wagner most notably) and in his cultivation of the upper echelons of Viennese society (the Wittgensteins, the von Herzogenbergs). A heroic character insofar as the nineteenth century treated the lives of the great heroically, Brahms needs to be treated also as the psychologically odd, financially savvy, nationalistically aggressive and artistically careerist person that he was.

Allan Hepburn

Judit Frigyesi. *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. x, 357 pp. ISBN 0-520-20740-8 (hardcover).

With such major contributions to the literature as a doctoral dissertation (“Béla Bartók and Hungarian Nationalism: The Development of Bartók’s Social and Political Ideas at the Turn of the Century [1899–1903],” University of Pennsylvania, 1989) and the article “Béla Bartók and the Concept of Nation and Volk in Modern Hungary” (*The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 2 [1994]: 255–87), Judit Frigyesi has established herself over the past several years as a respected Bartók scholar. Yet now, this daring and ambitious book makes even those pieces seem like preparatory works, and forays into territory that has been largely unexplored, at least in Western scholarship. If, in the end, the book is less than entirely successful, this is due neither to the author’s preparation for the task, nor to a lack of effort in writing it.

Befitting his stature as one of the undisputed greats of contemporary music, Bartók’s life and work have given rise to an impressive body of scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup> However, closer analysis reveals a number of peculiarities which distinguish it from the literature on, say, Arnold Schoenberg, his great contemporary and, in many respects, comrade-in-arms as musical path breaker and latter-day cultural icon. Chief among these is the separation of the authors into two camps: native Hungarian-speakers and the rest. Although there have been some noteworthy crossovers, a complete mastery of Bartók’s difficult and unique native language has eluded (inevitably, I am tempted to add) even the most dedicated “foreigner.” And therein lies, I suggest, the central problem of Frigyesi’s book, both as preconceived task and as finished product.

Putting it somewhat simplistically, the book aims to present the musically and culturally sophisticated non-Hungarian reader with a portrait of the composer that is drawn against, and fleshed out with, figuratively “translated” matter from the linguistic and socio-cultural tapestry of his origins, his intellectual and artistic development.<sup>2</sup> In order to succeed, such an undertaking

---

<sup>1</sup> Readily available to the English-speaking reader from among a number of more or less comprehensive bibliographic compilations is Elliott Antokoletz’s *Béla Bartók: A Guide to Research*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland, 1997); it contains some 1,200 numbered entries, most of them annotated.

<sup>2</sup> The title originally planned for the book (*The Birth of Hungarian Modernism: Béla Bartók and Turn of the Century Budapest*; in Antokoletz, p. 269) seemed to project an even greater role for the cultural milieu.