

3 Brahms and his audience: the later Viennese years 1875–1897

LEON BOTSTEIN

Music in the public sphere: Brahms and the spectre of Wagnerism

The writing of music history frequently gains its primary impetus from that which we regard in our own time as great music: those works through which we have chosen to define the essential achievement and identity of a composer. Working backwards, so to speak, from a retrospective evaluation of an entire corpus of music, we distort biography and history to fit our judgements, justifying our own tastes through the medium of scholarly historical explanation. In the case of Johannes Brahms, his popularity and renown are now most often associated with his orchestral music. Therefore, among the most carefully scrutinised aspects of his evolution as a composer is his presumed difficult and sustained struggle with the task of writing a symphony.¹ His first explicit public foray into this genre was completed relatively late in his career. The C minor Symphony was finished and first performed in 1876. Brahms was already well established and world famous. His substantial early reputation throughout Europe obviously did not derive from his work as a composer of symphonies. His most spectacular success before the completion of Op. 68 was achieved with *Ein deutsches Requiem* in 1868 and (with the added fifth movement) in 1869. The prominent Berlin critic Louis Ehlert, who considered himself a fair-minded but not uncritical Brahms enthusiast, had little doubt, writing in 1880, that the symphonic form was not, and would likely never be, Brahms's *forte*. To the contrary, Ehlert expressed considerable disappointment in the Second Symphony and was somewhat cool towards the First. For Ehlert, Brahms stood out as a composer of choral music and chamber music and as a master of the song form. In the end, the First Sextet, the Piano Quintet, the *Schicksalslied*, and the Handel Variations were the truly original and first-class works of Brahms.²

Since 1945 (if not before), owing to the overwhelming dominance in the twentieth century of symphony orchestra concerts in defining taste and reputation, our image of Brahms has become focused on the highly visible place the four symphonies, the two piano concertos, the Violin

[51]

Concerto, the Double Concerto and the smaller orchestral works possess in the repertoire.³ By 1950, Brahms's orchestral music had achieved second place in popularity, after the works of Beethoven, within the concert programmes of American orchestras. Hans von Bülow's famous quips about Brahms's First Symphony as Beethoven's Tenth and about the three 'B's' became serious realities. The early nineteenth century had succeeded in reviving the reputation of Bach and had elevated Beethoven to the rank of the seminal genius of modern times. As far as symphonic music was concerned, despite the scepticism of many of Brahms's contemporaries, his achievements with orchestral music ultimately catapulted him into becoming the third 'B'.

If any period in Brahms's life can be viewed as being dominated by the composition of orchestral music, the last twenty-five years of his life qualify as such. Not only were all four symphonies written during this time, but so too were the Violin Concerto, the Second Piano Concerto, the Double Concerto, the *Tragic Overture*, and the *Academic Festival Overture*. With the exception of the First Piano Concerto and the two serenades, the canonic Brahms orchestral repertoire dates from after the mid-1870s. The earliest of the well-known orchestral pieces, the orchestral version of the Haydn Variations, dates from 1874.

In the extensive biographical literature on Brahms, great significance has been placed on the composer's resolve to come to terms, through composition, publication and performance, with his ambition to master traditional large-scale instrumental forms. It was not until 1873 that Brahms finally published two string quartets, Op. 51; although he had previously written more than twenty quartets, none of them seemed to him worthy of publication or performance. Siegfried Kross's recent biographical study identifies the second half of Brahms's creative life as being defined by his successful arrival in the 1870s on a path started much earlier towards the string quartet and symphony.⁴ Brahms's seemingly unusually long journey towards these forms has been explained by the use of two major strategies alongside one another: the evolution of his work has been subjected on the one hand to a mixture of sophisticated psychological interpretation and on the other to elegant formal analysis.⁵

There are, however, other ways to illuminate the sequence of events in Brahms's output as a composer that draw on the realities of musical life between 1860 and 1880 well beyond the scope of biography. By the early 1870s, major shifts in the political significance and social character of musical culture were becoming apparent.⁶ Despite our penchant for concentrating almost exclusively on the psychological illuminations of an artist's creative process augmented by detailed, close analyses of musical texts to argue for a coherent narrative regarding the development of a

composer's technique and aesthetic ambitions, the fact remains that Brahms – like many of the legendary predecessors he so admired, including Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – responded to practical realities. Our own attachment to the image of the genuine artist as motivated, so to speak, by some construct we invent of inner necessity and inspiration should not blind us to the fact that Brahms was eager to be successful financially and socially as a composer, in a quite simple and straightforward manner. In 1875 he not only stepped down as director of the concerts of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*, but he also gave up any residual ambitions he might have once harboured for a permanent position as either a performer or a teacher. In his final years he was appropriately proud of his financial success as a composer and musician who had lived well for more than two decades, primarily as a result of royalties. From 1875 on, he supplemented his income from composition by a not-too-strenuous regimen of concert-giving.

Although Brahms moved to Vienna in the early 1860s with the encouragement of Bertha Faber, it took him many years to feel entirely at home in that city and to be free from serious bouts of homesickness for Hamburg. Only in 1871 did he move into the building on the *Karlsgasse* where he was to remain until his death. An avid, if not fanatical, reader and collector of books and manuscripts, Brahms decided finally in 1877, fifteen years after he first arrived in Vienna, to move the bulk of his personal library from Hamburg to Vienna.⁷ The emergence into the public arena of Brahms the symphonist and master of the orchestra coincided almost exactly with his decision to remain in Vienna and assume a role as a leading and permanent participant in the cultural life of the Habsburg Imperial capital.

This symmetry in events is no mere coincidence. The leading musical institution in Vienna was the *Gesellschaft*, the Society for the Friends of Music, whose concerts and activities remained the centrepiece of the city's public musical culture throughout Brahms's life. Although Brahms had his difficulties with the Society and stepped down in 1875 in part because of a complex and awkward rivalry with the handsome and dashing darling of the local musical public, Johann Ritter von Herbeck (whose talents as a musician were not universally admired), after 1875 the Society continued to be the institutional anchor and focus of Brahms's life in Vienna.⁸ He was a member of the governing board of directors of the *Gesellschaft* for decades. He took a keen interest in its affairs, particularly in the archive, the library and the conservatoire. In his will he left the Society his library and manuscripts. Even Theophil von Hansen's neo-classical design for the new home of the *Gesellschaft*, opened in 1870, not to speak of the iconography of its decorative elements and the historical

reference evoked by its interior spaces, mirrored many of Brahms's basic aesthetic convictions.⁹

Although Brahms never taught at the Conservatoire (which in Brahms's lifetime remained a private academy, not a state institution, owned and operated by the Gesellschaft), from the mid-1870s until the end of his life he cast a long, albeit indirect, shadow over the education of musicians in Vienna through his influence on the curriculum of the Conservatoire, and his relations with its faculty. From the mid 1870s on, he maintained contact with most of the prominent composers residing in the city. In 1886 he accepted the honorary chairmanship of Vienna's Society of Composers. The director of the Vienna Conservatoire, the violinist Josef Hellmesberger, with whom Brahms made his debut in Vienna in 1862, was a close associate. Brahms's circle of friends also included Julius Epstein, Robert Fuchs, Anton Door and Josef Gänsbacher, all of whom taught at the Conservatoire. Brahms was also on excellent terms with Johann Strauss Jun., Karl Goldmark and Ignaz Brüll, all highly visible composers in the city, as well as with Carl Ferdinand Pohl and Eusebius Mandyczewski, prominent music historians in Vienna, who, in succession, were employed by the Society. And of course Brahms was also associated with Eduard Hanslick (who held the first chair in music history at the University), Richard Heuberger and Max Kalbeck, all of whom were influential voices in the Viennese critical press during the last decades of Brahms's life. Even the illustrious critic and historian August Wilhelm Ambros, who died in 1876 in Vienna, was a Brahms supporter. Last but not least, Brahms kept up with colleagues in the second city of the Empire, Budapest, with, among others, the composer Robert Volkmann, the violinist Jenő Hubay, the cellist David Popper and Hans Koessler, the composer who would later become one of Béla Bartók's teachers.

Brahms was not a passive member of the Gesellschaft board, and his views were well known, which in part was why its students in the 1870s, including Hugo Wolf and some of his classmates (Gustav Mahler among them), developed hostile or, at best, ambivalent feelings about Brahms. Wolf's vicious attacks in the *Salonblatt* during the mid-1880s were an extreme reflection of the conviction among the young that Brahms represented a conservative, anti-Wagnerian, and – more to the point – anti-Brucknerian influence, powerful not so much in the critical press as indirectly in helping to shape the attitudes of leading pedagogues and colleagues. Brahms sat on juries in Vienna that awarded stipends and prizes.¹⁰ Although Bruckner had been chosen to succeed the theorist Simon Sechter as a member of the faculty, strictly speaking he was not a teacher of composition. Brahms much preferred Fuchs, who did teach composition. Madness often clarifies the 'obvious'. Mahler's close and

gifted young friend Hans Rott was institutionalised after a paranoid episode, during which he sought to prevent someone from lighting a cigar on a train he was travelling on because he believed that Brahms had planted a bomb; Brahms wanted to kill him because he challenged, by his talent, Brahms's prejudices regarding how music ought to be.¹¹

Brahms emerged in the 1870s as the defender of high academic standards for musical training. His notoriously abrupt and unkind views of the work of many contemporaries marked him as a conservative and traditionalist within the musical world of Vienna. That local image of conservatism was not tempered by Brahms's enthusiastic embrace of Viennese popular music – not only the works of Johann Strauss Jun., but the urban folk music of his day. Wagnerians of Mahler's generation shared Brahms's attraction to seemingly authentic old rural folk traditions, but they were ideologically far less sympathetic to the urban popular and salon genres associated with the modern cosmopolitan life of post-1875 Vienna. This sort of music seemed to pander too clearly to ephemeral bourgeois fashion. Composers in this genre (one thinks, for example, of Richard Heuberger's 1898 hit *Der Opernball*) were said to lack ideals and were too content with mere popularity and commercial success.

The symphonic era of Brahms's career coincided with his assumption of a tacit but dominant public role in helping to shape the direction of musical tastes and the education of a new generation in Vienna. For example, in 1896 Brahms helped the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein support prizes with his own funds for new works written for chamber ensembles, including winds and brass.¹² The fact that Brahms held no salaried post should not prevent us from appreciating the enormous weight of his influence. The Brahms of the 1880s and 90s was a famous local personality, a powerfully public figure within a defined civic cultural context.

From the mid-1870s on, Brahms and the Viennese contemporaries with whom he associated were primarily preoccupied with the anxious perception that a precipitous decline in the standards of musical culture was under way. An obscure but useful coincidence of chronology is the fact that Nietzsche's great essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' was written in 1874, at the very moment that Brahms made his successful turn to the writing of symphonies. Nietzsche, despite his later severe and penetrating reversal on the question of Wagner, and unlike that other famous former Wagnerian who became a Brahms advocate, Hans von Bülow, never formed an entirely sympathetic view of Brahms.¹³ Indeed, Nietzsche's trenchant description of his own age as 'over-saturated with history' fairly describes one of Brahms's salient qualities, precisely the characteristic that informed Brahms's form of cultural

and historical pessimism. An obsessive preoccupation with history seemed to Nietzsche ‘dangerous to life’ because it ‘implanted the belief, harmful at any time, in the old age of mankind, the belief that one is a late-comer and epigone; it leads an age into a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism’.¹⁴

This description might aptly apply to Brahms’s view of his personal place in history and the overall fate of his own historical era. Both seemed condemned to a recognition of their own ‘lateness’.¹⁵ The monumental achievements in the history of music weighed heavily on Brahms. The symphony was ultimately the most daunting legacy in terms of music of the past, the most public and far-reaching dimension of Beethoven’s output. By the mid 1870s the legacy of Beethoven had been claimed in a radical manner by adherents of the New German School (through the claims of Liszt and Wagner). In their view, Beethoven’s accomplishment demanded that a new generation create a distinctive music of the future that could match the grandeur and originality Beethoven had exhibited in his own historical era. Imitation of tradition, particularly Beethoven’s symphonies, was a dead end and constituted a misreading of the true meaning of Beethoven.¹⁶ Sceptics of this view, most of them admirers of Brahms, took their opinions on the musical past from Schumann. Schumann’s legacy as a key figure in Brahms’s musical development was to impart the perhaps more terrifying ambition to find ways to reconcile history and tradition with contemporaneity and originality. Mendelssohn and Schumann helped pioneer the nineteenth-century Bach revival, in part to circumvent the overwhelming dominance of Beethoven and find a way to use history against itself. They sought to find alternative historical precedents to which the music of Beethoven was not closely linked.

Brahms continued this line of endeavour – the reconstruction and realignment of the narrative of music history so that history and tradition could continue to serve as guides to the modern composer. In stark contrast, Wagner amalgamated music history, sorting through it so that a teleology emerged that justified his own innovations as the legitimate progressive culmination of a uniform and true logic of historical development. He believed in the necessity of progress in art and culture. Brahms reserved his enthusiasm for modernity and progress to science, scholarship and technology, not art. Brahms the historian was inspired by the impressive development of historical scholarship in his own time, not only in the field of music. He admired not only Philipp Spitta, but Theodor Mommsen and Jacob Burckhardt.¹⁷ Therefore, Brahms the music historian concerned himself with more than Beethoven.

Particularly after the mid-1870s, he was deeply engaged as an amateur music historian, editor and collector of manuscripts, focusing on Schumann, Schubert, Haydn and Mozart.¹⁸ In addition, his experiences as a choral conductor in the 1860s had led him to the Baroque and Renaissance masters. One of the criticisms levelled at Brahms by Society members in Vienna during his brief tenure in the early 1870s as conductor of the Gesellschaft concerts was his choice of repertoire – his introduction of works by Isaac and Cherubini, and his advocacy of less familiar works of Bach and Handel.¹⁹ Even Hanslick was sceptical about the introduction of music from the Renaissance to contemporary listeners. Brahms's choices in terms of modern repertoire were viewed as equally conservative. They included Goldmark, Dietrich and Bruch. Schumann and Mendelssohn figured prominently in his programmes as well. All these choices were viewed not only as explicitly anti-Wagnerian, but as public demonstrations of the utility of the musical past for contemporary musical culture.²⁰

Brahms's debut as a composer of a symphony in 1876 and his subsequent orchestral output represented not only the realisation of a composer's personal ambition: going public with symphonic and orchestral music constituted a public statement in response to a perceived need to challenge the Wagnerian appropriation of Beethoven and put forward a competitive example – in music – of how history could be respected, remain undistorted, and yet serve as a source of contemporary inspiration. Brahms's symphonic output from the mid-1870s represented an explicit attempt to seize initiative through music on a grand public scale in defence of normative musical standards perceived as being under siege: Wagner's success, after all, derived from the wide popularity and allure of his music. It was the music that gave credence to his ideas.²¹

By 1876 Wagner was at the height of both notoriety and fame, particularly in Vienna. Not only had he become the cause célèbre of a younger generation (including Wolf, Mahler, Rott and the music historian Guido Adler), but he had found adherents among Brahms's Viennese contemporaries, including Josef Standhartner, the prominent Viennese physician and patron of music (and fellow Gesellschaft board member), Hans Makart, Vienna's lionised painter (and rival of Brahms's friend Anselm Feuerbach) and of course Anton Bruckner. The 1871 Vienna premiere of *Die Meistersinger*, a work that, ironically, Brahms admired deeply (almost as much as Mozart's *Figaro*), was marred by open conflict between pro- and anti-Wagnerian groups.²² Wagner harboured a profound sense of revenge towards Vienna. By his own account he had been poorly treated there in the 1860s. In 1875, one year before the completion of Brahms's First Symphony, Wagner returned to Vienna in unrivalled

triumph, conducting orchestral performances of his music in the Gesellschaft's home, the Musikverein, to adoring audiences in packed houses. The magnitude of Wagner's success in the concert hall with orchestral excerpts could not have escaped Brahms.

There is little doubt that Brahms struggled to come to terms with the burden of being an heir to a glorious musical past in the wake of Wagnerism's rapid rise during the 1870s. Before the completion of the First Symphony the need for a counterattack through music on a large scale, written for the public concert stage (and not through published polemics, as had been tried by Brahms's close associates with disastrous results in the late 1850s), was evident to him. Brahms chose to perform Max Bruch's most successful large-scale work, the secular oratorio *Odysseus*, in 1875 in Vienna as part of the Gesellschaft concerts, knowing that the work had been conceived as a direct answer to Wagner. The appeal of *Odysseus* to Brahms (who was sympathetic but essentially cool to Bruch's achievements) lay in the fact that Bruch had chosen a classical epic subject equal to the mythic allure of the *Ring* and *Tristan*. Like Brahms in *Rinaldo*, Bruch, using the oratorio tradition, achieved the sense of drama through music and text, without employing the illusions of the theatre. Furthermore, Bruch fashioned the title role as a challenge to the character and sonority of Wotan. The immediate success of *Odysseus* with the public throughout Germany was seen as a victory in a struggle against Wagnerism.²³

If the younger generation of Viennese composers and musicians after the mid-1870s saw Brahms as abrupt and arrogant, they misunderstood the extent to which he used history against himself, just as Nietzsche surmised. Josef Suk, the Czech composer and Dvořák's son-in-law, recounted how Brahms commented with irony, when seeing the young Suk's impressive quintet, that neither Suk nor Dvořák, and not even he himself, really knew how to write a quintet. Mozart did.²⁴ The symphonic legacy of Beethoven was imposing indeed; however, it did not, as some historians have assumed, deter composers after Beethoven from writing symphonies. Quite the contrary, the decades between the deaths of Beethoven and Schubert and the appearance of Brahms's First were filled with new symphonies, including, of course, those by Schumann and Mendelssohn. As Kross has recently pointed out, we too often forget the enormous number of symphonies written by now-forgotten but once highly regarded composers.²⁵ Walter Frisch, in order to defend the nearly singular character of Brahms's symphonic achievement, has taken particular pains, using analysis, to point out the weaknesses in the symphonies of Bruch, who properly merits scrutiny as the contemporary German composer writing in traditional genres most comparable to Brahms. Yet it

is not clear that Bruch's symphonies or all the symphonies between Schumann and Brahms are as weak as we suspect. Our own criteria of musical greatness and what qualifies as sufficient for masterpiece status demand self-critical re-assessments, initially through modern performance and rehearing.²⁶ None the less, it is clear that what concerned Brahms was not the *death* of the symphony, if not after Beethoven, then after Schumann, but rather the poor quality of its quite flourishing life.

Contemporary musical culture needed great, lush and imposing large-scale music that was not Wagnerian. Brahms's decision to enter the public arena from the late 1870s on with – in quite rapid succession – four essays in the symphonic form can be understood as a polemical act not of self-aggrandisement, but one designed to argue that a popular and powerful historical model was not aesthetically moribund. One therefore did not have to follow Wagnerian fashion into the theatre or the murky and formless regions of Lisztian symphonic tone poetry. Despite the success of the *Triumphlied*, particularly in the context of the tepid public reaction to *Rinaldo* in Vienna (the glowing critical reviews and analyses notwithstanding²⁷), it became clear to Brahms that if he wished to capture the imagination of the contemporary concert-going public with music possessed of a large-scale dramatic scope and sonority, his strongest suit would be with the frameworks and procedures of the symphony and the concerto. These forms of instrumental music constituted the repertoire without text or explicit poetic programme that had the most sustained and continuing history of greatness and popularity.

What concerned Brahms in the mid-1870s with respect to musical culture in Vienna was not the quality of Wagner's music. To the contrary, with the exception of Brahms's break with Hermann Levi over Levi's enthusiasm for Wagner, Brahms avoided participating in anti-Wagnerian polemics and did not shun those who respected Wagner the composer. Actually Brahms often expressed genuine admiration for the greatness of Wagner's music.²⁸ What troubled him was the influence of Wagner – both the man and the musician – on others, particularly the young. Furthermore, Wagner's narrative strategies – effective in stage music and music drama – did not work in instrumental music, as Liszt's music amply demonstrated.²⁹ The danger was that Wagnerian norms would replace those derived from Viennese classicism and pre-1848 musical romanticism. Furthermore, the argument that the models of Viennese classicism were dead and useless and that new modes of expression had to be invented was anathema to Brahms. In this regard, it is important to realise that among Brahms's circle in Vienna (and Zurich) were professional and amateur classicists, including Theodor Gomperz, J. Viktor Widmann and one of Brahms's closest friends, the surgeon Theodor

Billroth.³⁰ Like Anselm Feuerbach, Brahms became enamoured of Italy and its Roman and Renaissance heritage. In his Karlsgasse apartment, alongside a bust of Beethoven, hung copies of Raphael and Leonardo. In the visual arts, Brahms admired Adolph Menzel, Arnold Böcklin and Max Klinger, all of whom reconciled a respect for the classical and Renaissance traditions and techniques of Italy with the development of a distinct individual style and originality. In imagery, composition and the use of the materials of painting, they seemed to him to furnish a parallel to what contemporary composers ought to do using the musical equivalents of the plastic arts of Greco-Roman antiquity and their subsequent evocation during the Renaissance: the musical forms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The extension of tradition and the potential vitality of neo-classicism were central to Brahms's agenda. Within the framework of classicism Brahms included the work of Mendelssohn and Schumann, who were themselves so crucial in elevating the legacy of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven to classical status.

Standards of musicality: the Viennese debate

Brahms's focus on orchestral and symphonic music from the mid-1870s on therefore can be understood as being driven in part by political factors. At the heart of what we have come to understand imperfectly and inappropriately as a widespread Brahms–Wagner rivalry in the culture of German-speaking Europe during the last quarter of the nineteenth century lay a more narrowly defined but more urgent and pressing immediate issue of contemporary cultural politics located within Vienna. From Brahms's point of view (one echoed by both Hanslick and Billroth) the drift of musical taste, particularly in the direction of Wagner – apart from its larger unattractive political and cultural meanings – was a symptom of a decline in musicality and musical standards in Vienna, the community to which Brahms had decided to commit himself.³¹ Ironically, Wagner himself was not viewed as lacking those very standards about which Brahms and his immediate Viennese circle were so concerned. The struggle was rather over the soul, so to speak, of the next generation of composers, performers and above all, amateurs and listeners.

The particular local controversies in which Brahms became engaged in Vienna in the 1870s concerning the state of musical culture, musical practice and musical education in the city had their own somewhat longer history that predated Wagner's popularity in Vienna. Owing to his work in Vienna in the 1860s as conductor and performer, Brahms had become

intimately familiar with these controversies. By 1848 the Viennese elite had become accustomed to regarding musicality as a key defining a perhaps unique local virtue: a dimension of civic superiority without peer within Europe. Yet even among the Viennese, this local conceit of Vienna as the quintessential *Musikstadt* was being challenged by a younger generation inspired by the revolution and reaction of 1848 and 1849. Frustrated revolutionary hopes were quickly transferred from politics to culture.³² In 1855, less than a decade before Brahms's debut in Vienna, the critic Selmar Bagge (a prize student of Simon Sechter's who worked first in Vienna but later wrote criticism primarily from Leipzig), who became a staunch admirer of Brahms while employed as an organist in Gumpendorf (near Vienna), wrote a scathing critique of the musical standards of Vienna's Society for the Friends of Music. Bagge's complaints included an attack on the level of amateur music-making in the Society (whose standards he found deplorable), the failure at the Conservatoire to teach serious ear-training and theory owing to an over-reliance on the piano, and a general inability in the Conservatoire either to teach first-class technique or to cultivate a serious aesthetic sensibility.³³

By the time Brahms arrived in Vienna in the 1860s, the Gesellschaft, as result of local debate and criticism during the 1850s, was in the midst of a radical transformation from being a semi-private club, devoted to amateur music-making and governed by aristocratic amateurs, which also maintained a Conservatoire and gave concerts, to a public institution dedicated to the dissemination of musical culture led by professionals in whose public concerts professional musicians would predominate. Two amateur performing organisations of the Society, the Orchesterverein and the Singverein, were consonant with the original charter. Founded in 1812, the Gesellschaft represented an effort by Vienna's aristocratic and financial elite to pool resources in order to continue musical activities once sponsored by individuals as patrons in their own palatial homes. The Napoleonic invasions brought to an end an eighteenth-century tradition of private individual patronage of collective music-making – the use of large ensembles of voices and instruments. Between the 1830s and 1870, the Society maintained a public concert hall with about 500 seats. But by the time the new home of the Society, the famous Musikverein (designed to seat over 1,400), was opened in 1870, the Orchesterverein had receded from any major role in Vienna's public concert life. Amateur instrumentalists had almost entirely vanished from the stage. The Society's own public concerts were performed increasingly by professional musicians. Those few amateur instrumentalists who participated in the Society's public concerts after 1870 were exclusively in the upper string sections. During Brahms's tenure as director in the early 1870s, the

winds, the brass, and the double-basses were all professionals and, more often than not, members of the Opera Orchestra, the leading instrumentalists in the city.³⁴

The last stronghold of public amateur music-making in the 1860s in Vienna – and throughout the rest of the century – was the arena of choral singing. By the time Brahms first arrived in Vienna he was already an experienced choral conductor through his work in Detmold and Hamburg. During the 1860s, he was extremely critical of local standards. He took a dim view of Vienna's star choral conductor, Herbeck, whose performance of Handel's *Messiah* suffered not only from stylistic lapses with respect to appropriate performance practice but from an overall lack of quality. As a choral conductor at the Singakademie and later the Singverein, Brahms was known as an individual intent on raising the Viennese expectations regarding proper standards of performance. When Brahms took over the Society's concerts in 1872, he succeeded another popular figure for whom he had little respect, particularly as a composer, the great pianist Anton Rubinstein. From the moment of his arrival, Brahms was drawn to the cause of elevating the tastes and ambitions of the Gesellschaft, from its audiences to its amateur participants.

Throughout the period of Brahms's residency in Vienna, most leading local patrons and practitioners of music were associated with one or another of the many choral societies that flourished in the city. These included not only the Singverein and the newer Singakademie (which Brahms conducted in 1863–4) but also the very influential Wiener Männergesangverein and the Schubertbund. The two individuals most responsible for the successful campaign to raise funds for a new home for the Society were Nikolaus Dumba and Franz Egger, both of whom had close ties to these choral groups.³⁵ The most popular composer among Viennese amateurs during the early 1870s was Schubert. Throughout Brahms's years in Vienna the musical politics of the city could be mapped by the shifting local attitudes towards Schubert and his music. The Viennese followers of both Brahms and Bruckner claimed Schubert for themselves. By the mid-1890s the struggle over the interpretation of Schubert's achievement and reputation – in anticipation of the centenary of his birth – became a centrepiece of the strident political conflict between liberals and Christian Socialists that dominated that decade.³⁶

At the root of the debate over musical standards during the 1860s and 70s in Vienna – a debate that continued throughout Brahms's lifetime – was a fundamental shift in the social composition of the musical public and the attendant habits of music-making and listening in the city. Some observers, like Bagge, believed that the new public for music lacked the fundamental training for high-quality music-making, in part because it

was too dependent on the piano as the primary instrument of musical education. The city's leading piano manufacturer, Ludwig Bösendorfer, writing in 1898, decried the enormous growth in the popularity of the piano in Vienna in the decades after 1848 as a 'plague' that was inimical to the cultivation of true musicality. The popularity of the piano took a particularly dramatic step forward in the 1870s, in part due to industrial, commercial and technological innovations. In 1867 at the Paris Exposition, Steinway and Sons caused a sensation. They displayed a 'parlor grand' piano with overstringing and basic design features that included a metal plate and a mode of frame construction that lent the piano a strikingly rich sonority and the capacity to hold its tuning for much longer periods of time than had previously been believed possible. The piano had made steady progress towards mechanical reliability, pitch stability, improved actions and lower unit prices, which helped fuel its rapid rise in popularity between 1830 and 1870. The Steinway piano of the 1860s demonstrated the possibility of building full-sounding pianos for home use that required relatively little maintenance and produced a pleasing resonance. The Steinways explicitly chose not to exhibit at the Vienna Exposition of 1873. Instead, they arranged to have examples of their instruments made available outside the framework of the formal exhibits, much to the consternation of Bösendorfer. Indeed, the jury at the Vienna Exposition went out of its way to single out the Steinway. Among the enthusiasts for the new piano on the jury was none other than Eduard Hanslick. He was in good company. After all, Berlioz, Wagner and Liszt all embraced the technological improvements in the piano that came to Europe from America in the 1860s and 1870s.³⁷

The innovations visible in the Steinway piano in 1873 were copied, approximated and imitated rapidly by most of the German and Austrian piano industry, including Friedrich Ehrbar, a friend of Brahms in whose small concert hall in Vienna many of Brahms's symphonic works were first heard privately in two- and four-hand piano arrangements. Although sales of pianos in Vienna had been growing in the 1860s, they flourished even more strikingly in the 1870s, despite the financial crash of 1873. Although Brahms and Bösendorfer were never close friends, they shared a common aesthetic prejudice with regard to the sound of the piano. Brahms's piano at home was a Viennese instrument, a *Streicher*, which had belonged to Schumann and which was, of course, constructed using a pre-Steinway system. Likewise, Bösendorfer, much to the financial detriment of his firm, resisted adopting many of the innovations in piano design because he preferred what he regarded as the sweeter, less metallic and more lyrical sound of the older Viennese tradition. Indeed, the new pianos sounded orchestral and symphonic; they evoked the sounds of the

public concert hall and seemed no longer appropriate vehicles of domestic and intimate music-making.

At stake in the evolution of the modern piano and its introduction into Vienna was more than a debate about the aesthetics of piano sound. The new technology was linked with a new musical culture of listeners, a new industrial system of manufacture and a new form of commercial marketing (pioneered by William Steinway³⁸) all at odds with Viennese guilds and artisan traditions. The modern piano stayed in tune longer; its more penetrating sound allowed for less discriminating listening and therefore appealed more to a broader public than to those with clear musical gifts. The more ‘user-friendly’ the modern keyboard instrument seemed, the more pessimists worried about the disappearance of a higher grade of musical literacy, the sort required for singing and playing string instruments – those indispensable components of the classical traditions of chamber music. The keyboard had long been an essential part of a domestic musical ensemble, an equal partner to the voice and the violin. It no doubt had also served as a vehicle for the individual playing to herself or himself. The modern piano sounded more like a device for the reproduction of the sound of the large ensembles of public music-making from a concert hall and less like an instrument of personal and domestic expression. In many respects Brahms was an enthusiastic observer of modernity, including the Edison phonograph and the photographic camera. But his sentimental attachment to the Streicher piano was symptomatic of his pessimism regarding the level of musical discrimination that the owners of the improved pianos were developing. Brahms never endorsed the fanatical defence of the Viennese tradition of piano construction to which Bösendorfer devoted his later years. None the less, Brahms was pleased to play the Bösendorfers (despite his friendship with Ehrbar, Bösendorfer’s local rival) and was delighted that Bösendorfer supplied the Conservatoire with his pianos.

When Ehlert wrote in 1880 that Brahms ‘doesn’t write for the people but for a parterre of kings’, he was not alluding to any particular affection on Brahms’s part for the aristocratic and noble classes.³⁹ Before 1870 Brahms had consciously directed his music at the most sophisticated amateurs and the most literate musical public – an elite whose habits of listening were evocative of an earlier era. In the years between the mid-1850s and the mid-1870s, there seemed to be a sufficient public to appreciate and participate in chamber music and choral singing and therefore in the music Brahms chose to publish during those years. By the mid-1870s the survival of these patterns and habits of musical life seemed in doubt. As the evolution of the Society of Friends of Music itself revealed, after 1870 the public for music, which had been dominated by active

amateurs who even dabbled in writing music (Ludwig Bösendorfer among them), was increasingly a passive audience inspired by public listening. Public performances – the hearing of works in groups in public spaces – generated the purchase of sheet music. In contrast, the buying of books continued as a result of the reading of written criticism, the advice of others, the reading of excerpts in journals and newspapers or mere chance – followed by browsing and borrowing. As literacy spread, so did the commerce of publishing. However, insofar as the sale of sheet music had once been partly the result of reading reviews of texts (not merely performances), the ability to sight-read printed music, word-of-mouth recommendation and browsing through libraries without prior public performance, by the 1870s musical commerce was increasingly dependent on the public event and the response to hearing professional performances.

Music education flourished in Vienna, but it revealed new characteristics. The seemingly debased levels of literacy were more widespread, and they made the dense musical argument of Brahms less and not more accessible, particularly without the memory of public performances by professionals. Vienna's musical culture became as dependent upon institutions of public music-making, both local and institutional – including the first examples of modern-style impresarios, concert managers and travelling ensembles (including full orchestras) – as it was on reading and playing music at home in the first instance, and reading about music through the medium of journalism. Brahms's music from the 1870s on reveals his keen awareness – drawn from his experiences in Vienna – of new challenges represented by the new public. That public was a growing cadre of listeners whose active skills of music-making were not as uniformly well-developed as those of the elite milieu to which Schumann and Mendelssohn had become accustomed in the 1840s. Ultimately it would be frequent performances of his symphonies, followed by reviews, that would drive the sale of the piano versions. These piano versions of the symphonies, in turn, would lead the concert-dependent public to Brahms's chamber music. The same pattern would become true for quartets and other chamber music as well. Public performances by leading ensembles would lead to the purchase of two- and four-hand piano versions. The modern piano in the contemporary home came to be used as a tool of reproduction. It could evoke the memory of public performance and anticipate its future experience.

Brahms's turn to music entirely dependent on public performance by professionals, particularly his use of a large orchestra, reflected a practical concession to the changing realities of musical life, not only in his adopted city but throughout Europe. It also reflected his desire to enter

into an open struggle through his own music against the new music that adapted all too well to the new culture and was explicitly designed to capture the imaginations of music's expanded public. As Arnold Schoenberg, Brahms's most influential twentieth-century advocate, pointed out, Wagner's genius consisted in part of his brilliant expressive use of thematic repetition in combination with harmonic ingenuity.⁴⁰ Wagner had found a way of writing great music that in the end made for easy listening. Brahms knew very well how elegant and subtle Wagner's writing was, and he knew that its popularity rested not on its internal musical sophistication but on its uniquely magical, if not narcotic, musical surface. Wagner could keep the focus of the listener on a single line. The illusion that the surface – the narrative and ornament of sound in Wagner – could suffice remained undisturbed. Wagner therefore appealed to the untutored and tutored alike. In contrast, the surface of Brahms seemed to demand a journey into the musical interior and an engagement with the logic of musical composition. It is in this context, therefore, that the structure and orchestration of Brahms's symphonies can be understood. In his own way, Brahms sought to approximate Wagner's success, but only in terms of scale. The symphony, the concerto and the string quartet – the classical forms – despite the desultory character they had assumed at the hands of some of his contemporaries, possessed the potential for a principled response to the Wagnerian challenge. Spurred by a concern for the future of music, Brahms met the need of his day by producing brilliant alternatives for the listening public composed within the consciously chosen framework of tradition and history. He turned out to be right. The broad public was enchanted by the surface of Brahms's orchestral writing and the connoisseur dazzled and moved by the interior logic of his musical imagination.

The social context of Viennese musical politics

The transformation of musical culture in the city of Vienna during the period of Brahms's residency ran parallel with fundamental changes in the character of the city itself. The social and political changes well beyond the confines of the world of music that Brahms witnessed cannot be assumed to be entirely irrelevant to the evolution of his aesthetic ambitions. The 1870s are frequently regarded as watershed years in Brahms's life. The physical changes in his appearance alone tell a remarkable story. In 1878 he wrote to Bertha Faber that during the summer in Pörtlach he had grown a beard. Although he blamed the event on the lack of a barber, the decision to maintain a beard can be understood as a conscious choice

to demarcate the boundary between youth and adulthood.⁴¹ At the age of forty-three Brahms made his dramatic public appearance as a composer of the most impressive large-scale symphony, if not since Beethoven, then certainly since Schumann and Mendelssohn. The conscious assumption of the image of solidity and gravity mirrored an explicit intent to associate himself with a particular stratum of society. That stratum – the liberal elite of Vienna – experienced its heyday and most triumphant moment in the *Gründerzeit* era of the late 1860s and early 1870s. Brahms's assumption of a new appearance in the late 1870s can be construed, as will become immediately evident, as a politically significant sign of allegiance to a particular segment of Viennese society. Once again psychology and politics intersect in Brahms's biography. Indeed, Brahms's circle of friends and his intellectual and political alliances in Vienna offer insights into his personality and ambitions in the two decades after 1876.

Before embarking on an effort to describe Brahms's place in Viennese society in the last twenty-five years of his life, one might ask in what way Brahms's conscious transformation in his self-presentation can be understood as defining his own awareness of the changes in the social structure of his day and age. Again, thinking about Wagner reveals one answer. By assuming a clearly urban bourgeois appearance, Brahms went to great lengths to place a visible distance between his image of an artist's proper public persona and Wagner's. Brahms had no tolerance of either the pose of bohemianism or the explicitly anti-bourgeois aestheticism that would come to dominate Wahnfried and Wagner's inner circle, particularly in Wagner's last years in Venice. Wagner's Italy was not Brahms's, any more than Brahms's clothes – decidedly emblematic of a prosperous but yet frugal member of an urban middle class – could be mistaken for Wagner's idiosyncratic, not to say exotic, finery.

The young Brahms who left Hamburg, went on tour and met Joachim and Schumann in the 1850s, and who later went to Detmold and spent time in Hannover and Göttingen, was introduced to an elite cultural and social urban milieu that had its clear roots in the *Vormärz*. The years 1848–50 were decisive in the European nineteenth century. Wagner's association with Bakunin, his role in the Revolution of 1848, his flight from Dresden and his sojourn in Zurich can be usefully contrasted to Brahms's experiences during the same years. Like Wagner, Brahms also spent time in Zurich, a city with which he had a particular affinity and where he had life-long friends. It was Brahms who opened the Tonhalle in 1895, conducting a performance of his *Triumphlied*, and his friends there included Friedrich Hegar, Viktor Widmann, Arnold Böcklin, Gottfried Keller and Billroth (who, like Brahms, eventually moved to Vienna).⁴² Brahms had a more distant, but none the less important, contact with the Zurich resident

Mathilde Wesendonck, who had inspired and protected Wagner; but Brahms was never a political refugee and had no political associations with radical or revolutionary movements. Although he, like Wagner, suffered from insecurity about his origins and formal education he never struggled with his own status as a bourgeois. In fact, he aspired to an ideal of middle-class respectability that Wagner despised and supplanted with a style of life perhaps, ironically, even more susceptible to scorn as essentially bourgeois, all appearances and disclaimers notwithstanding. Unlike Wagner, Brahms lacked grandiose social pretensions. He had little of Wagner's obsession with nobility and aristocratic privilege.

Brahms felt particularly comfortable in the highly cultivated intellectual and literary circles into which he was introduced by the Schumanns and Joachim. Insofar as one can speak loosely of a cultural 'establishment' in Europe before 1850, the influence of which extended beyond the Revolution of 1848, it was Wagner, not Brahms, who rebelled against it. The circles in which Brahms travelled and the individuals whom he befriended in the 1850s – Agathe von Siebold, Julius Grimm, Julius Stockhausen, Julius Allgeyer and Bettina von Arnim – were the best exemplars of a cultural milieu to whom the music of Mendelssohn and Schumann spoke with immediacy and in whose company both of these composers during their lifetime felt particularly at home. This milieu consisted of educated, cultured aristocrats who continued the pattern of patronage and activity associated with aristocrats of the late eighteenth century such as Baron van Swieten and the Viennese patrons and friends of Mozart and Beethoven. The individuals we meet in the accounts of Goethe in Weimar, particularly in the conversations that Eckermann recorded in the later 1820s, help round out the picture.

By the mid-century, a highly educated, musically active and intensely literate elite had evolved. The growth of the middle-class audience for high culture between 1815 and 1848 in German-speaking Europe was significant, and its habits extended and imitated the traditions of a particular segment of the aristocracy. The Society for the Friends of Music was remarkable in that it was founded as an organisation in which a cultivated older aristocracy and a 'second' society of well-to-do professionals, civil servants, bankers and merchants collaborated on behalf of music. Although the patronage of music in Vienna and throughout German-speaking Europe was increasingly dependent on new wealth gained through commerce and not through land, the tone continued to be set by the aristocracy. The same pattern can be observed in the Berlin of Abraham Mendelssohn and his children Fanny and Felix.

Only in the 1860s in Vienna did the cultural leadership shift from the older aristocracy to non-aristocrats and the more recently ennobled

members of the ‘second’ society. Egger and Dumba, who greeted the Emperor at the opening of the Musikverein in 1870, were respectively a lawyer and an industrialist. They were representatives of the leaders of a new economic and social era. Their immediate predecessor as head of the Gesellschaft had been Prince Czartoryski, a member of the landed aristocracy. Brahms’s physical transformation in 1878 was a symbolic recognition of the ascendancy of a middle-class elite. The pattern of Brahms’s friendships continued to mirror his own idealised picture of the world to which he had been introduced in the 1850s. By the mid-1870s, the ‘second society’ of Vienna, made up of either recently ennobled individuals – a new aristocracy of wealth – or leading urban citizens without titles, was firmly in control. Brahms’s friends included the Herzogenbergs, the Wittgenstein family, the Fabers, the Fellingings, Alice Barbi (who married an aristocrat), Josephine von Wertheimstein and Viktor Miller zu Aichholz: a mixture of professionals, civil servants, artists, writers, industrialists and academics.⁴³ With few exceptions, the high aristocracy in the later nineteenth century, having ceded the arena of culture, learning and art to a new elite of wealth, retreated to the confines of the Jockey Club and to non-intellectual habits decidedly in contrast to those of their predecessors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴⁴

By the 1830s and 1840s, London and Paris had already developed a wider-ranging urban public for art music and literature. The evolution of concert life that we associate with the Crystal Palace in London after 1851 has its closest analogue in developments in Vienna that began only in the late 1860s.⁴⁵ A new kind of urban life took shape during the last decades of Brahms’s life in Vienna. This can be demonstrated statistically. In 1850 Vienna had under 500,000 inhabitants, of whom nearly 60 per cent could be considered native to the city. In 1890 Vienna had become a metropolis of nearly 1,400,000, of whom only 35 per cent were native. Slightly under 60 per cent of the city in which Brahms lived in 1890 had immigrated there from within the Habsburg Empire. By the end of the century the membership rosters of Vienna’s leading musical institutions mirrored this change.⁴⁶

From the mid-1870s to Brahms’s death in 1897, despite this enormous explosion in population, Vienna’s concert life expanded quite slowly. Only in 1913 did the city build a new concert hall, the Konzerthaus.⁴⁷ Despite considerable public discussion from the 1880s to the 1890s, all efforts to create a new professional symphony orchestra for the city (apart from the Vienna Philharmonic, which gave only a select number of concerts each season) failed. Between 1870 and 1913, in addition to the Musikverein, only the Bösendorfersaal, with 500 seats, was opened as a new concert venue. Concerts were given in ballrooms and parks, but the

demand for music exceeded the supply. In 1874 the Conservatoire in Vienna had 620 students; in the year of Brahms's death there were close to 900. In addition, several smaller conservatoires were founded in the city to accommodate the enormous pressure for musical instruction.⁴⁸

The dramatic growth in Vienna's population occurred primarily after 1867, when the Habsburg monarchy was reorganised as the Dual Monarchy as a result of its defeat by the Prussians in 1866. The internal migration into Vienna included a very high percentage of Jews, among others. By the time of Brahms's death, Jews accounted for between 9 and 10 per cent of Vienna's population; in the inner city, in the first district, 11 per cent of the population was Jewish. By contrast, nearly 30 per cent of the enrolment in the Conservatoire was of Jewish origin.⁴⁹ Apart from Jews, the new migrants to the city included Moravians, Bohemians, Hungarians, Slovenes and Poles.

The Vienna Brahms encountered in 1862 seemed therefore more like Schubert's Vienna; the city in which he died was very different. Most dramatic was the constantly decreasing percentage of native German speakers, and among them native-born Viennese. The new inhabitants of Vienna were not only different in terms of social status but also far more diverse in terms of nationality and religion. The politics surrounding this dramatic social change were as radical as the demographic changes suggest. During the thirty-five years of Brahms's residency in the city, political liberalism experienced a steady and dramatic decline. As Richard Heuberger reported, in the 1890s Brahms was deeply disturbed by the rise of Christian Social political radicalism, which appealed to a nativist and angry community of artisans and shopkeepers. Led by Karl Lueger, a brilliant, attractive and dynamic modern-style urban politician, the Christian Social Party would eventually come to power by the end of the decade, in defiance of the wishes of the Emperor Franz Josef. Central to the platform of this new radicalism was anti-Semitism, an alliance with the Catholic Church and an anti-cosmopolitan ideology rife with a nostalgia for a pre-industrial Vienna.

The 1860s were a period of rapid economic development. When Brahms first arrived the city's walls were being torn down, and the open spaces separating the inner city from the outlying districts were being systematically filled with monumental structures, elegant palaces and apartment buildings grouped around a new magnificent boulevard, the Ringstrasse.⁵⁰ Brahms lived through these changes. However, the economic boom came to a dramatic halt in 1873. In that year the high point of economic growth and liberal optimism had been reached and passed. What occurred in the 1860s and early 1870s can be compared to other periods of unregulated rapid acceleration, replete with overexpansion,

excessive numbers of speculative ventures and an explosion of shaky new stock companies and investment schemes. Between 1 May and 9 May 1873, over two hundred Viennese companies declared bankruptcy. By the end of the year, over forty banks, six insurance companies a railroad company, and fifty-two industries were liquidated. The crash of 1873 coincided with what had been planned as the most dramatic display of industrial and social progress in the Empire and Vienna, the World Exposition of 1873. The year of the crash was followed not only by a sustained economic depression but by a cholera epidemic. The Viennese economy did not recover fully until the mid-1890s.⁵¹

The consequence of this sequence of boom and bust, accompanied as it was by constant demographic growth, was a massive political reorientation. The years from 1873 to 1893 marked the Habsburg Empire's sustained decline as a world power, its stabilisation as a client-state of the new Prussian-dominated German Empire, and the rapid rise of nationalism within the Empire among Czechs, Poles and Hungarians in particular. Nationalism, however, was not limited to the non-German populations of the Empire. By the final decades of Brahms's life, a powerful and visible pan-Germanism in Vienna had come into being, alongside the Germanocentric Christian Social movement, which argued for the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy and an alliance between a German Austria and the German Empire. Christian Socialism benefited most from a Viennese politics of resentment that grew out of the debacle of 1873. Anti-Semitism thrived on the image of the Jew as the quintessential capitalist speculator and foreign exploiter. The local rage for Wagner, German chauvinism and political anti-Semitism were inextricably linked. At the same time, socialism, an underground movement, gained support among both intellectuals and the working classes of the city. The liberal elite, the very individuals who were in charge of the leading musical institutions, became increasingly beleaguered in their fight against the new politics and ideologies.

If Brahms owed the early years of his career to the support of a privileged group insulated from the modern realities of urbanisation and industrialisation, his loyalties in Vienna remained steadfastly allied with late nineteenth-century Viennese liberalism.⁵² Brahms himself was an outsider in Vienna and remained so despite his prominence. He was a Protestant, a member of a minority smaller in number than the Jews, living in an overwhelmingly Catholic city. He was a north German who maintained a lifelong admiration for Bismarck. The *Triumphlied*, which was performed with great success in Vienna, can be considered a revealing transitional work in Brahms's development. Written for large-scale orchestra and chorus, it was an act of German patriotism still somewhat

foreign to Viennese sensibilities in 1871. It is significant that Brahms never returned to this form of nationalist expression. By the end of the decade Brahms's patriotism could easily have been misread as sympathetic to a new breed of intolerant nationalist and racialist local politics. Even in 1871 Brahms was careful to express his pride in Wilhelm I's accomplishment through a religious text set to music designed to evoke a connection to the history of music through explicit references to Handel, Bach and Beethoven.

Brahms's reputation among the Viennese in the 1880s was seen as linked to the older liberal elite dating from the 1860s as well as to his identity as a cosmopolitan personality. Many of his closest friends were either Jews or of Jewish origin. Among them was Daniel Spitzer, the brilliant satirist. Brahms not only became the object of hostile invective and criticism cloaked in the language of musical aesthetics, as in the case of Hugo Wolf: barely below the surface of Wolf's diatribes lay the political overtones and consequences of a certain type of widespread Wagnerian enthusiasm that would flourish in Vienna in the 1880s. Vienna's Wagnerians saw themselves as defenders of German culture against a foreign cosmopolitanism. By the end of the 1880s Wagnerism and pan-Germanism and other species of German nationalism were closely allied with local anti-Semitism. Vienna's Ringtheater burned in 1881, killing hundreds of people. The extensive trial that followed led eventually to the institution of new safety regulations for public theatres. The Ringtheater had been the primary venue for much light opera and operetta. Its public was extensively Jewish, as was much of the public for music and theatre in late nineteenth-century Vienna. Richard Wagner was delighted by the disaster and joked about the possibility of yet another fire that would kill all the Jews at a performance of Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, that emblematic work of religious toleration, a play that celebrated the character of Moses Mendelssohn. Brahms was shaken by the fire. Spitzer understood the extent to which Brahms was viewed by the Viennese anti-Semites as almost a Jew himself and poked fun at the idea that Brahms could be tarred by the brush of local anti-Semitism.⁵³

By the late 1880s Brahms had become profoundly dismayed by the direction culture and politics were taking in his adopted home. This fact helps to explain his antipathy to Anton Bruckner. In contrast to Brahms, Bruckner had willingly become the darling of the Viennese right wing. He consented to be the honorary head of a new Wagner Society in Vienna whose by-laws explicitly excluded Jews from membership. In the 1890s Bruckner was hailed as the rightful successor to Schubert. In the context of Viennese politics, Schubert was celebrated as a symbol of native German talent and local Viennese authenticity. Bruckner, a devout

Catholic from Linz, seemed to be a modern counterpart in the expression of a distinct Austro-German voice in music. Furthermore, he was an avowed disciple of Wagner. Although many of his students and acolytes were of Jewish origin, Bruckner's reputation, despite the reservations of the liberal critical and pro-Brahmsian press, particularly Hanslick and Kalbeck, grew in part because he and his music seemed to provide an alternative voice, one more forward-looking aesthetically and more in tune with Vienna's peculiar brand of German nationalism. Bruckner the local hero was the antidote to Brahms. Brahms's antipathy was not only to the music, but to the man and the politics with which he was associated. Brahms's Schubert was a composer more the heir to Beethoven. His Schubert was the musician who was profoundly admired by Schumann and Mendelssohn – a giant of classicism and romanticism of international significance.⁵⁴

In the cultural environment of late nineteenth-century Vienna, it was nearly impossible for Dvořák to gain a foothold as more than an exotic and gifted exponent of how Czech and Slavic elements could be integrated, albeit superficially, into the traditions of German music. That Brahms and Hanslick (who was of Jewish origin) fought an ongoing battle on Dvořák's behalf is one of the clearest pointers to Brahms's intolerance of the new ways of political thinking. In turn, Dvořák's refusal to accept Brahms's offer to bequeath him his fortune if he would relocate to Vienna reflects in part the Czech composer's assessment that the Vienna of the 1890s could not make a truly hospitable home; it also mirrored Brahms's naive hope in the sustainability of a world of music and culture that interpreted national identity in a more old-fashioned and benign manner. Brahms's embrace of folk music included not only German texts and melodies, but Hungarian, Turkish, Persian and Slavic ones as well. Brahms's lifelong special engagement with German folk-songs – from the Piano Sonata Op. 1 to the *Deutsche Volkslieder* from the 1890s – is comparable much more to Haydn's use of folk material and the mature Bartók's view of the essential shared roots of all so-called national folk musics than to the musical nationalism of the late nineteenth century.

The two sets of *Liebesliederwalzer*, Op. 52 from 1869 and Op. 65 from 1875, make this point poignantly. The texts are drawn from a wide range of ethnic and national sources. Yet the musical form is unmistakably Viennese. By 1875 the Ringstrasse was virtually complete. Its development had already triggered a local nostalgia for Alt-Wien, an idealised version of the city's past before 1848, a time that seemed more coherent, simpler and more attractive, before the city's expansion, new populations and new modern forms of commerce. With characteristic irony, Brahms poked fun at this species of local pride and nostalgia. Through music the

shared condition and common humanity of all of God's peoples are revealed. The quite local – the Viennese waltz – and the universally intimate – the trials and tribulations all humans encounter in the name of love – are effortlessly reconciled in works of music that bridge the gap between popular and concert genres, making an implicit mockery of claims to uniqueness based on language, nationality and place of birth.

For the listener and scholar, the extra-musical contexts surrounding Brahms's life must be considered in relationship to the remarkable output of music intended for public performance that Brahms wrote in the late 1870s and throughout the 1880s. Despite the rage for Wagner beyond German-speaking Europe, which continued after Wagner's death in 1883, Brahms was all too aware how closely allied Wagner's music was to racist-nationalist nationalism. Among non-Germans, Wagner fuelled ideas parallel to the kind of Germanocentric arrogance he himself propagated. Consider the admission by Theodor Herzl, the Budapest-born Viennese writer who wrote for the same newspaper as Hanslick and Julius Korngold, the *Neue Freie Presse*, that one of his inspirations for his 1897 formulation of Jewish nationalism – Zionism – was the effect of hearing *Tannhäuser*.⁵⁵ For Brahms, music, as both public experience and private activity, if located in the traditions of the pre-1860 world, might very well help further a different outlook on life. In his view, music was part of an older conception of *Bildung*, in which music, literature and painting were capable of cultivating a sensibility and an expressive subtlety at odds with the vulgarities of modern mass intolerance and hatred.

One of the most powerful critical insights into Brahms's later symphonic music has been the claim that, despite the scale of the forces he used, the orchestral music never relinquishes its essential character as chamber music.⁵⁶ The aptness of this perception connects directly with Brahms's ideological project during his last decades of compositional productivity, insofar as one can argue that he had a coherent agenda. The connoisseurship required in the appreciation of chamber music – which in the late nineteenth century was still regarded as the highest form of music – was precisely that which he wished to encourage within the expanded new public he encountered in Vienna after 1876. When Brahms went on tour with Hans von Bülow's Meiningen Orchestra, conducting his Fourth Symphony, he knew he was reaching a still wider concert-going public – the very public Wagner had captured more than a decade earlier. Too often commentators have confused Brahms's aesthetic ambitions with Eduard Hanslick's philosophical arguments from 1854 on behalf of the aesthetics of 'absolute music'. This represents a misunderstanding. Although Brahms was deeply interested in musical aesthetics and read widely about them in literature and philosophy, he never sub-

scribed to the kind of narrow formalist agenda we have come to associate with Hanslick.

Like Schumann and Mendelssohn, Brahms assumed that the impact of his music on his public needed to be emotional and to have content that was not strictly musical in character. That impact was associated with what he regarded as the significance and achievement of Viennese classicism – the music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. Secular music spoke to the inner sensibilities of individuals and confronted their powers of feeling and discrimination. Music celebrated the universality of human experience. Brahms maintained a profound and straightforward Protestant religiosity. He believed that his music, like that of Bach, could evoke among his contemporaries the sense of the grace of God and a proper humility and wonder at God's work in nature and in humanity.

Not surprisingly, among the attractions of Bülow's orchestra for Brahms was that its level of performance – the quality of the orchestra itself – set new standards well above even those of Hans Richter and the Vienna Philharmonic. Cultural standards, love of learning and humanism seemed unquestionably allied in Brahms's mind, as is most poignantly evident in his reminiscences left to us by his friends in his final years. His generosity at the end of his life to many members of the younger generation revealed his religiously based optimism, which was often buried beneath a penchant for melancholy and ironic pessimism.⁵⁷ The social, political and cultural realities he observed deepened this natural bent towards a critical and severe outlook. But amidst Brahms's flirtation with melancholy, he retained, to his last days, the simplicity of his youthful enthusiasms and his capacity for wonderment. An ideal of beauty and the lyrical – the search for a powerful simplicity of musical expression, transfigured by the clarity and sustained logic of musical form and development (qualities that Heinrich Schenker so valued in Brahms) – seemed to renew his faith in the necessity of art and the capacity for awe in the face of life's sufferings, joy, loss and contradiction.⁵⁸ Wisdom and pessimism, as well as affirmation and religious faith, are inextricably intertwined in Brahms's secular instrumental music of his last decades. These qualities are perhaps most apparent in the very last works – including the chorale preludes Op. 122, the Four Serious Songs Op. 121, and the chamber music for clarinet – music that reveals Brahms's faith and his debt to the past. Brahms's mature works sought to communicate hope without any falsification of the harsh complexities of life so that individuals in an endangered modern world might be inspired to combat the erosion of intimacy, imagination, culture, civility and civilisation.

