

7 'Veiled symphonies'? The concertos

MALCOLM MACDONALD

Ever since Schumann, in 'Neue Bahnen', told the world that a twenty-year-old unknown from Hamburg had played him 'sonatas, or rather veiled symphonies'¹ ('Sonaten, mehr verschleierte Symphonien'), Brahms's works have been open to charges of inconcinnity, or at least ambiguity, of genre. Wagner, in 'On the Application of Music to Drama' ('Über die Anwendung der Musik auf das Drama', 1879), suggested a contrary formal mismatch: for him the Brahms symphonies were essentially 'transplanted' chamber music, 'quintets and the like served up as symphonies'. This leitmotif was long recycled by Brahms's detractors, and some of his more discriminating friends. All polemics aside, certainly in Brahms the streams of orchestral, chamber and instrumental music flow in unusually close proximity. Seemingly these genres did not require any sharp differentiation in his expressive aims, or the means of their realisation: all partook equally of his highly personal synthesis of romantic, classical and pre-classical techniques, and his ongoing development of post-Beethovenian sonata discourse.

Brahms's orchestral scores, moreover, reflect his development of a genuine and original orchestral style which deployed colour neither for its own sake, nor for merely pictorial or anecdotal effect. His orchestration relates colour to structure, to embody and articulate a dramatic but intricately developing musical argument with the directness and clarity, the identity of idea and expressive medium, of the smaller, 'purer' ensembles of his chamber and instrumental works.

Ultimately, however, the close kinship of genres in Brahms's *œuvre* is a function of his musical language, in which – for whatever reason, emotional, spiritual or psychological – intimacy (both confessional and secret) and grandeur (heroic, tragic or elegiac) are in continual counterpoise.

This central paradox of Brahmsian expression is fully reflected in the four concertos. Here, in the full tradition of the genre, instrumental soloists, as individuals, engage in contest or dialogue with the massed forces of the orchestra. Yet here too the other categories (even choral works and *Lieder*) are suggested in different ways. The concertos emerge from an imaginative continuum embracing symphonic, vocal and instrumental impulses.

Three of the concertos date from Brahms's full maturity, composed in fairly quick succession during the years 1878–87. However, the First Piano Concerto (1854–9) stands apart. It belongs to a much earlier phase of the composer's career; its *Sturm und Drang* character, and its long and particularly difficult parturition, made it a work of apprenticeship and self-discovery, a hard-achieved masterpiece of youth.

Brahms wrote his piano concertos in the first instance for the soloist he knew best: himself – and both, it can be suggested, contain autobiographical elements. The Violin Concerto and Double Concerto were both written for, and with a measure of collaboration from, Joseph Joachim, though the professional and personal relations of composer and violinist changed drastically over the intervening years. But Joachim was also intimately involved, much earlier, in the First Piano Concerto's genesis, as mentor – and provider, in his own works, of compositional parallels. So one aspect of these three concertos is the way they chart the course of Brahms's friendship with the great violinist-composer. Moreover, the Second Piano Concerto (1881), through its scherzo movement, bears a now unquantifiable relationship to the original plan of the Violin Concerto, the most 'Joachim-directed' work of the four.

Brahms's intense and difficult affections, both personal and musical, are surely sources of his music's intimacy of utterance, even in such large forms as these concertos. And the piano concertos, as most specifically 'his' works, are (in their slow movements) also the most overtly 'Clara-directed'. In their very fabric, the concertos commemorate friendship, and more.

Piano Concerto in D minor Op. 15

The First Piano Concerto grew directly out of Brahms's youthful series of piano sonatas – the first genre in which he had achieved mastery and characteristic expression on a large scale. Of the three sonatas we possess (last in a sequence of at least five²), the F# minor Op. 2 (1852), a species of fantasy-sonata deriving all its movements from a germinal motif, relates more directly to contemporary musical romanticism than to the classical traditions evoked in the C major Op. 1 (1852–3), whose first movement refers unmistakably to the opening of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier*. The huge F minor Sonata Op. 5 (1853) unites classical and romantic impulses in a powerful synthesis. Its five-movement form manifests structural and expressive innovation: the second of its two Andantes (the 'Rückblick'), with its remarkably 'orchestral' pianism, is a funereal and elegiac negative image of the warmly lyrical first Andante. If none of these sonatas entirely

avoids surplus rhetoric, all impress by their capacity for sustained and serious thought on a broad canvas, their challenging bravura technique and Brahms's unusual contrapuntal skill, canonic imitations and other devices 'uniting . . . the old contrapuntal art with the most modern technique', as Adolf Schubring noted in an important early critique.³ Nevertheless, despite their external complication the emotional life projected by these works is comparatively simple – even in the F minor, with its strong sense of an implied narrative of youthful aspiration, love, misfortune, despair and final victory.

Completed in October 1853 (but not refined for publication until December), that work may well have convinced Brahms he had driven the genre of solo sonata to its current limits. The work vividly exemplifies Schumann's phrase about 'veiled symphonies'; one formal model, indeed, could have been the five-movement narrative of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. The sheer magniloquence of Brahms's first movement and finale, and the orchestral shadings of his 'Rückblick', already implied a bigger medium. The next keyboard sonata, three movements of which were sketched by April of 1854, was designed for two pianos, not one. This is the work which became the First Piano Concerto. The metamorphoses which produced that result are known in broad outline, but there is much we do not understand. By June, Brahms found that his 'D minor Sonata' for two pianos (begun in the immediate aftermath of Schumann's madness and attempted suicide – a shattering blow for his young protégé) required yet larger forces for the proper expression of its ideas. It demanded to be nothing less than an orchestral symphony, justifying and fulfilling Schumann's prophecy and ardent hope that Brahms should assume the mastership of that form straight away. This symphony was intended, too, as a kind of memorial to Schumann's tragic fate. Brahms envisaged a four-movement design: the dramatic opening movement; an unusual 'slow scherzo' in sarabande tempo; a slow movement *per se* and a finale. Lacking experience in orchestration, however, he continued, through the summer of 1854, to evolve the work in two-piano score, for subsequent instrumentation. The finale was in fact never completed.⁴ One problem seems to have been that genuine piano writing, rather than symphonic composition sketch, kept intruding into Brahms's chosen four-hand medium. With J. O. Grimm's assistance, he essayed only an orchestration of the first movement, completed in late July, which provoked Joachim's derision. There matters rested until, in February 1855, Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann how he had dreamt he was playing a piano concerto based upon his 'hapless symphony', consisting of 'the first movement and scherzo with a finale, terribly difficult and grand'.⁵ Encouraged by Grimm and Joachim, he slowly effected this transforma-

tion. A new version of the first movement was completed in April 1856. However, the scherzo was discarded along with the other symphony movements. (Elements of it eventually found their way into the second movement of *Ein deutsches Requiem*.) It used to be thought that the symphony's slow movement was retained as the concerto's Adagio, but this is a new movement, completed in January 1857, probably after Brahms had achieved his rondo finale, 'difficult and grand' indeed. However, Brahms continued to revise and recast the concerto until 1858: a preliminary version of the whole work was tried over in Hannover, under Joachim's baton, in March of that year, and underwent further revision before the public premiere in 1859.

Had Brahms set out from the first to compose a piano concerto, would he have produced one on a scale so much larger than Mendelssohn's, Liszt's and even Schumann's concertos? The monumentality and symphonic breadth, unheard since Beethoven's E♭ Concerto, proved problematic for audiences and critics of early performances. These aspects were determined, obviously, by the concerto's origins in a symphony that must have been, in Michael Musgrave's phrase, 'the most powerful orchestral utterance in German music since Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the same key'.⁶ But the symphony's first movement was evidently shorter than the concerto movement we know – perhaps even quite terse, though slower in tempo,⁷ after the manner of the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth. Refashioning for piano and orchestra presumably justified the more pianistic passages of the symphony sketch, but also brought considerable expansion: not just through the intercalation of entries for the soloist. Joachim's letter of 3 January 1858 to Clara Schumann indicates far-reaching compositional modifications: 'He has added many beautifully quiet connecting passages, which I am sure would please you. The second theme, in particular, is broader and more satisfying. The whole thing seems to me almost too rich. But that is a good fault!'⁸

This suggests Brahms had to expand the movement to accommodate passages of dynamic contrast, balancing the monumental with more lyrical elements. Perhaps also to extend the range of modulation: one thinks immediately of the B♭ minor section, with its effect of remoteness, beginning at bar 45 and anticipating part of the second subject.⁹ Though Joachim's phrasing is ambiguous, either the second subject itself was thoroughly revised – making it 'broader and more satisfying' than its original form – or the subject we know replaced, at this late stage, a previous one deficient in those qualities.

The latter interpretation may seem drastic, but Brahms's 1889 revision of the first movement of his B major Trio – composed, like the D minor Sonata/Symphony, in 1854 – jettisoned the original second subject

entirely in favour of a new one, causing the whole movement to be recomposed after that point. We tend to assume that Brahms required the thirty-five-year lapse to perform such ruthless surgery. But his painstaking self-criticism was ingrained very early. If the concerto's second subject is indeed new, this might explain why its shape is echoed in the rondo subject of the finale: the echo would then be the original, the resemblance back-composed into the first movement's material.

Joachim's involvement in bringing the D minor Piano Concerto to birth can hardly be overstated. The great violinist, though only two years older than Brahms, had far more extensive orchestral experience, both as composer and as conductor. Brahms, just before he began his two-piano Sonata, attempted an orchestral overture, and it seems likely that both projects were partly engendered by the two-piano transcription of Joachim's *Overture to Shakespeare's 'Hamlet'* he made in the winter of 1853–4. The full scores of the concerto's movements went repeatedly to Joachim for advice and approval. But though Tovey once remarked that 'it is no exaggeration to say that [Brahms] learnt orchestration from Joachim',¹⁰ the relationship was not simply that of pupil to master. In 1855–6, Joachim too was engaged in orchestrating a symphonic work from a two-piano original: Schubert's C major Sonata, the 'Grand Duo' D. 812, which Schumann had thought an arrangement of a lost symphony. And it is Tovey again who records that Joachim bowed to Brahms's advice in perfecting this score.¹¹

Most significant of all: throughout 1856–8, Joachim was writing a concerto of his own – in the same key, D minor, as Brahms's and likewise of a size, difficulty and seriousness of purpose hardly approached in the previous thirty years. This was his Second Violin Concerto Op. 11, better known (where it is known at all) as the Concerto in the Hungarian Manner,¹² and still one of the most formidable works in its repertoire. The 'Hungarian Manner' refers, of course, to the full range of melodic and rhythmic imprints, cadential and decorative formulae and exotically inflected scales which made up the 'gypsy' style familiar to Central European café society and already enthusiastically exploited for purposes of local colour by Joachim's fellow countryman Liszt. Brahms too had begun his lifelong romance with this exotic resource in his early *Hungarian Song Variations*. Joachim, however, was at this period in full withdrawal from Liszt's circle, where previously he had been a protégé. What was unusual in Joachim's case was his determination to ennoble this nationalist style – take it, as it were, out of Liszt's hands – by absorbing its characteristics into the fabric of a work which is otherwise a very fully developed post-classical concerto. The historical process which till recently consigned Joachim's *Hungarian Concerto* to near-oblivion con-

sequently exaggerated the solitude of Brahms's achievement. Probably we should see the First Piano Concerto as emerging out of a shared concern to restore Beethovenian dignity and architectural logic to the concerto form: a concern maybe more pressing for Joachim (who had already perpetrated a one-movement concerto in the approved Lisztian manner) than Brahms, to whom Joachim's concerto is dedicated and who once wrote that his ideal concert programme would consist of his First Piano Concerto followed by his friend's *Hungarian Concerto*.

Despite their wide divergences of musical character, these two D minor concertos descend directly from Beethoven's Piano Concerto in C minor: especially in the scale of their opening tuttis and the determined integration of the solo instrument into an unfolding symphonic argument (in which virtuosity serves the more vividly to delineate musical ideas). Above all, the respective finales are clearly modelled on that of Beethoven's concerto, both in their large modified rondo plan and in such details as the phrase-structure of their principal subjects, the placing of cadenza-like links and the occurrence of a fugato-variation of the rondo theme.¹³ Brahms's D major Adagio, however, stands equally remote from Joachim's ternary 'Romanze' movement in G and Beethoven's poised sonata-form Largo (which, were Beethoven's concerto in D minor, would be in F# major). This is the most personal area of the First Piano Concerto, and one which – like all Brahms's concerto slow movements – seems to draw almost explicitly on vocal archetypes. In his autograph full score, Brahms underlaid the words 'Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini' beneath the serene violin–viola theme in the opening bars, syllabically broken in the manner of a singing text – and, as George Bozarth has shown,¹⁴ he considered having the words thus printed in the score as eventually published in 1871, but finally decided against. This text caused some early commentators to suspect the theme to be a quotation from the lost a cappella Mass he was working on at the same period. When movements of this so-called 'Missa Canonica' resurfaced in recent years, it proved to have a quite different Benedictus. Yet it can hardly be denied that the orchestral writing of the concerto's Adagio owes much to Brahms's study of Renaissance religious polyphony, especially Palestrina.

The Benedictus quotation points rather to a possible literary origin for such polyphonic textures. Siegfried Kross has noted acutely that, in E. T. A. Hoffmann's novel *Kater Murr*, this is the inscription over the door of the Benedictine Abbey of Kanzheim, where Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler finally gains a measure of peace.¹⁵ *Kater Murr*, of course, was one of the young Brahms's favourite books, the principal source for his adopting his Hoffmannesque *alter ego* of 'Johannes Kreisler junior'. This does not necessarily negate the more traditional view that the Benedictus text

refers to Schumann, whom Brahms and Joachim both called ‘Mynheer Domini’. Indeed it seems more reasonable to assume that the Adagio as a whole enshrines several levels of reference. The idea of an instrumental Requiem – latent, as it were, in the original plan of the D minor symphony – may hover over the movement, not only here at the opening but in the chorale-like writing for the woodwind choir after bar 70, and in the generally withdrawn and contemplative style of the solo part. This latter aspect, however, reminds us that Brahms also described the movement to Clara Schumann as ‘a gentle portrait of you.’¹⁶ The quality of intimate dialogue between piano and orchestra underlines the effect that here, after the very public heroics of the first movement, we are permitted to glimpse a far more private side of the composer. The piano writing is more improvisatory and decorative in effect than elsewhere in the concerto, and the delicately understated cadenza may reflect aspects of Clara’s pianism as well as Brahms’s.¹⁷

Violin Concerto in D major Op. 77

Almost twenty years elapsed after the completion of this concerto before Brahms returned to the genre with a violin concerto of his own for Joachim: a task he might have been expected to fulfil much earlier, given his closeness to Joachim and the latter’s international eminence as a soloist. Perhaps, among many possible deterrents, he scrupled to spoil the *Hungarian Concerto*’s chances to establish itself in the repertoire. By 1878 he probably felt he had waited long enough – and in the meantime had attained a complete command of the orchestra, demonstrated most recently in the two symphonies completed in 1876–7. The Violin Concerto evolved through the second half of 1878 in close consultation with Joachim, their collaboration continuing well into the following year, after the premiere, with extensive refinement of the solo part. Though Joachim’s role in this was vital, it was not always decisive for the final form of particular passages.¹⁸

In this concerto too, though evolved over a much shorter period than the First Piano Concerto, Brahms made drastic modifications to his original design. Once again he had planned a work in four movements. Almost unprecedented in a violin concerto, this scheme would presumably have produced a work even larger than Joachim’s; but at a late stage Brahms decided to jettison his two middle movements – one of them a scherzo – in favour of the single slow movement we know (which he termed ‘a feeble Adagio’). As the four-movement Second Piano Concerto bears out, it is unlikely that even his original intention was to create a

symphony-concerto hybrid.¹⁹ Rather, that he felt the need (to which he surrendered in that work) for a large canvas with the optimum number of areas of contrast, provided by four rather than three well-defined musical characters. For over twenty-five years he had been accustomed to such formal resources in his concerted chamber music. Perhaps the prospect of undue length eventually deterred him, considering the slow progress which both his Piano Concerto and Joachim's *Hungarian Concerto* had so far made in the world. None the less, the Violin Concerto certainly manifests affinities with Brahms's Second Symphony of the previous year: they share the same key, and their first movements – in each case a large, unhurried *Allegro non troppo* in 3/4 time, romantic in instrumental colouring – evoke a similar sense of opulent and sometimes shadowed pastoral.

Here, however, the 'symphonic' elements are held in an ideal balance with (which means they give the impression of having been subordinated to) the demands of an eloquent violin part. It is, in fact, the weightiest and meatiest violin solo since – Joachim's *Hungarian Concerto*. Yet the impression it creates is mercurial, voluble, rhapsodic: a sustained evocation of the effect of spontaneous improvisation, even though every phrase plays its role in a consummately planned symphonic scheme. Truly we may say of this concerto, as Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann: 'It is a magnificent piece, of remarkable freedom in its invention; it sounds as if [the composer] were fantasising, and everything is masterfully conceived and executed.'²⁰

These words, however, described the Concerto No. 22 in A minor by Viotti, published in 1803, which Brahms also called 'my very special passion'. It was a passion he shared with Joachim, who wrote a cadenza to it, and whose playing belonged to the classical French school of which Viotti was considered the founder. The A minor Concerto had a direct bearing, as we shall see, on Brahms's own Double Concerto in that key. But this letter (of June 1878) demonstrates that it was very much in his thoughts while composing his Violin Concerto as well. Brahms, indeed, ranks it with the Mozart concertos: no idle comparison, for it is a work of substance as well as brilliance, with a strain of turbulent proto-romantic feeling underlying its smoothly deployed classical forms.

Despite all the differences of period language and formal decorum, we can sense a community of expression between Viotti and Brahms. Yet if Viotti's concerto represented the expressive ideal which Brahms felt himself striving towards, there are few archaising tendencies in his own work. The *Adagio's* striking opening on paired woodwind and horns, recalling the plangent wind-band sound of the 'Corale St. Antoni' which Brahms took from an eighteenth-century Feld-Partita for his *Variations*

on a *Theme of Haydn*, is a notable exception, but in sonority only. Here as throughout he brings to bear the full resources of romantic harmony and instrumentation to produce the most substantial violin concerto since Beethoven: indeed, a work clearly composed against the background of Beethoven's concerto. In this slow movement, however, the character is of a song without words subjected to intense variation, the solo oboe and then the violin taking the place of a female voice.²¹

Modern instrumental virtuosity, in the traditions of Paganini, Ernst and Joachim himself, likewise receives its full due. Aside from the actual technical challenges of the solo part, this aspect is most prominent in those elements of the 'Hungarian Manner' with which the work is so richly endowed, entirely appropriate in a work intended for, and in part as a homage to, Joachim. The manner is firmly established in the soloist's very first utterance, dramatically entering on the lowest G and passionately and volubly spanning its entire gamut in bravura recreation of what had been the bucolic, triadic simplicity of the work's opening theme; and it is confirmed many times over before we reach the finale, which some commentators have gone so far as to term a 'gypsy rondo'. Yet Brahms, who loved the 'Hungarian Manner' as deeply as any composer of his century, and deployed it copiously in intervening chamber and instrumental works, tends not, in this concerto, to use the 'gypsy' melodic formulae which were such a piquant stylistic component of Joachim's *Hungarian Concerto*. Hungarian traits are achieved by more generalised suggestion: the rondo theme in thirds, the cimbalom-like rush of the accompaniment, the rhythmic structure and syncopation.

But Brahms's most striking homage to the virtuoso tradition (though it might be counted another 'archaising' element) is his decision to leave the first-movement cadenza to be supplied by the performer: a gap which Joachim filled in so exemplary a fashion that his remains the standard model, entirely of a piece with the rest of a concerto conceived to reflect, and with the benefit of, his playing style. The existence of so many later cadenzas of merit, however, shows that Brahms had set a problem of enduring fascination.²²

Second Piano Concerto

1878 was also the year Brahms began his Second Piano Concerto, in B \flat , only to lay it aside to concentrate on the Violin Concerto. Completion was delayed until 1881. This time Brahms had planned a work in three movements, which he subsequently expanded to four, introducing as the second movement a scherzo derived in some degree from the scherzo

drafted for the Violin Concerto.²³ The result was his longest concerto, still one of the largest in the repertoire, and one in which the potential of the concerto form as a symphony *manqué* seems most patent.

Yet among Brahms's concertos the B \flat has the fewest classical affinities. Its expressive stance is, from its opening bars (piano musingly duetting with the woodland mysteries of the horn), frankly romantic and personal, in places maybe even confessional. If the work mimics another genre it is not the symphony, but the concerted chamber ensemble, especially those large works for piano and strings of which Brahms was by now such a settled master: such as the three piano quartets, and in the first movement, with the soloistic horn, the Horn Trio as well. Despite the heroic outbursts and large paragraphing the predominant effect is one of intimacy, an intimacy most openly displayed in the last two movements but palpable from the horn–piano dialogue of the very opening. The pianist is often a listener and responder to other instrumental voices: true dialogue, a sharing of the melos, chamber-musical give and take of ideas and mutual exploration of their consequences, seem to be part of this concerto's essential meaning.

Whereas the First Concerto was a work of youthful aspiration – and in that sense also a clear continuation of the early piano sonatas – the Second is very much a product of mature reflection, apparently informed by a lifetime's experience, and by long memories. The piano part, which most players agree is even more taxing than that of the First, bristles with the kind of virtuoso technical challenges which had excited Brahms's lively interest for decades. It represents (above all in the first movement) a continuation of the modern (indeed, 'post-Lisztian') bravura approach demonstrated in the Op. 35 *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*. Yet as the concerto proceeds the soloist recedes from his heroic prominence, until in the third (and most 'chamber-musical') movement he has become an accompanist to sweeter voices.

Is it fanciful to see in this shift the changing role of pianism in Brahms's own life? Though he remained an active player in concertos, chamber music and song, his early ambitions as a solo virtuoso, so manifest in the piano sonatas, had been laid aside by the 1860s in favour of the act of composition. In the early 1850s the young Brahms's vigorous and original pianistic talents were the very basis of his musical personality – the basis, too, of his compositional work – but after the First Piano Concerto this was no longer the case. The piano, always vital, came gradually to occupy a different role in his life, less for public display, more for private study and intimate meditation.

Thus in one aspect the B \flat Concerto suggests itself as a kind of pianistic autobiography. The first movement, whose quality of carefully structured

improvisation is even more marked than in the Violin Concerto, plausibly presents a portrait of the young virtuoso, responding to the voice of Nature (the horn theme) with a hugely confident display of pianistic technique. A lion of the keyboard discovers a most ample stage on which to flex his powers. But the scherzo intervenes, in D minor. For Brahms this is a key of catastrophic associations – of Schumann’s suicide attempt and his own personal crisis, to judge by the First Piano Concerto’s 1854 origins, and by the D minor Ballade, also of that year, whose dramatisation of the Scots Border Ballad ‘Edward’ appears to symbolise the tangle of Brahms’s feelings for both Schumanns. This agitated movement is a *tragic* scherzo, directly opposing the boundless confidence of the first movement. The almost neo-Baroque, Handelian style of its robust and enlivening central trio perhaps represents the saving grace of study, the power of the music of the past to strengthen and stabilise the composer – as Brahms’s Baroque studies had strengthened him, issuing at length in the Op. 24 Handel Variations.

The Andante slow movement then indicates a period of withdrawal, of self-communing at the keyboard, almost of self-effacement. In Brahms’s own solo output this mood is most clearly felt in the long series of late pieces which had begun during the 1870s with the Op. 76 *Klavierstücke*. The wonderful main theme, however, is entrusted to the solo cello: the piano muses round it, decorates it, dialogues with the cello as a subordinate partner, and is essentially an accompanist to the clarinets in their contrasting F# episode. The extent to which this movement resembles a cello–piano duo suggests (quite apart from the tenderness of the main idea) some imaginative connection with Clara Schumann. The Romanze slow movement of her own Piano Concerto, even more of a cello–piano duo, could be cited as a forerunner here.

The finale, with its Hungarian rhythms, its relaxed evocation of dance and song, evokes another side of Brahms’s pianism: his sizeable output of *Unterhaltungsmusik*, music for enjoyment and relaxation, most notably in the Hungarian Dances and *Liebeslieder-Walzer*. This finale remains of the highest artistic quality (and is no relaxation for the pianist); but the popular elements blent in it are essential to any rounded portrait of its composer.

Any such interpretation of the B \flat Concerto must perforce remain speculative, and attempts to force Brahms’s music into a strictly programmatic scheme are likely to be misguided. Yet the wealth of acknowledged personal reference in his music generally encourages a ‘reading’ of this concerto; and speculation hovers most legitimately around the Andante, whose intimate tones have intrigued commentators for over a century. Here again, as in the Adagio of the Violin Concerto, the music evokes a

vocal rather than instrumental conception. It is an ancient commonplace of Brahms scholarship that the cello theme resembles, or rather presages, his *Lied* Op. 105 No. 2, 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer' ('Ever fainter grows my slumber') – a song of the approach of death, composed in 1886. More recently, Constantin Floros has drawn attention to the fact that in the F# major episode the first clarinet quotes the lines 'Vater in der Höhe, / aus der Fremde fleht dein Kind' ('Father in Heaven, from afar thy child implores') from Brahms's Schenkendorf setting 'Todessehnen' ('Yearning for death') Op. 86 No. 6.²⁴

This is an impressive identification, for the allusion is not simply melodic. Allowing for re-shaping to the Andante's 6/4 metre and to the concertante nature of the piano part, the allusion is literal as regards key and pitch, and nearly so for harmonic background. The song dates from 1878, therefore contemporary with Brahms's initial work on the concerto, and is rich in indications (among them the use of the shared Schumann–Brahms 'Clara motif') that it addresses Clara Schumann.

Schenkendorf's opening stanza asks 'who will rid my soul of the secret, heavy burden that, the more I hide it, clings the more strongly to me?' The F# minor line to which Brahms sets this question clearly evokes the *Dies Irae*,²⁵ suggesting that the burden will only be released by death. Later the text states that the poet and the 'sisterly being' may only be wed ('vermählt') in death. The appeal to the Heavenly Father quoted by the clarinet is for entrance to that realm where 'the language of spirits calls life by the name of love'.

Perhaps this most intimate and dreamlike of Brahms's concerto movements should therefore be considered in the light of 'Todessehnen' as a whole? Though the cello theme is in no direct sense a quotation of the song's opening, the rhythmic and intervallic profiles are such it seems legitimate to hazard that the song theme may be the background out of which it emerged (see Example 7.1).²⁶ One could speculate further that the cello–piano duo enshrines a symbolic dialogue with Clara Schumann; and that the secrets of that dialogue touch upon the approach of death and the mysteries of the hereafter, if there is one. On this reading the subsequent reinterpretation of the cello theme in 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer' probably arises from a continuing association of the ideas of death and slumber with this basic musical shape.

Concerto for Violin and Cello [Double Concerto] Op. 102

The solo cello's prominence in this Andante already presages Brahms's final and most remarkable contribution to the concerto genre, the Double

Example 7.1

(a) Brahms, 'Todessehnen' Op. 86 No. 6, bars 1–4

(b) Brahms, Piano Concerto in B♭ Op. 83, movement 3, bars 1–3

(c) Brahms, 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer' Op. 105 No. 2, bars 1–3

(a) *Langsam*

Ach, wer nimmt von mei - ner See - le die ge - hei - me, schwe - re Last.

(b) *Andante*

(c)

Im - mer lei - ser wird mein Schlum - mer

Concerto for violin and cello. Joachim's quartet partner since 1879, the cellist Robert Hausmann, had attempted over several years to persuade Brahms to compose a cello concerto, but what Brahms eventually produced in 1887 was a virtually unprecedented form: a duo-concerto where the cello, though often the instigator of musical events, shares the glory in equipoise with the violin. Specifically, in the first instance, Joachim's violin. The year following their collaboration on the Violin Concerto had brought a serious breach in their friendship, when Brahms chivalrously took Amalie Joachim's side when her husband instigated divorce proceedings against her. Joachim did not return to speaking terms with Brahms until 1883, and the relationship never regained its previous cordiality, which the Double Concerto was obviously in part an attempt to restore.

Though Brahms was not wholly successful, Joachim deeply appreciated the gesture. His professional esteem and admiration for his friend's music had never flagged, and once again he contributed to a significant extent in the shaping and refinement of the new concerto's solo string parts.²⁷ In October 1887 he partnered Hausmann in the Cologne premiere, under Brahms's baton. Among the features which indicate to whom the work is especially addressed are the violin's first entry after the tutti exposition, shaping the first theme's salient three-note figure to Joachim's personal 'F–A–E' motto; and the second subject, long recognised as referring to a favourite work, namely Viotti's A minor Concerto, already involved in Brahms's other concerto for Joachim. The model for

Example 7.2

(a) Viotti, Violin Concerto No. 22 in A minor,
movement 1, bars 1–2

(b) Brahms, Double Concerto in A minor Op. 102,
movement 1, bars 1–2



Brahms's theme is Viotti's opening subject; here, however, there is no question of simple quotation but rather the kind of creative allusion best shared between close friends (Example 7.2). Brahms's adoption of a concertino-like solo duo might indicate a throwback to the principles of the Baroque concerto grosso, unsurprising in a composer who had drawn so many fruitful lessons from the music of that period; but the behaviour and phraseology of the Double Concerto hardly bear this out. No doubt his available models included Bach's two-violin Concerto, but Mozart's violin–viola Sinfonia Concertante and Beethoven's Triple Concerto were surely more significant influences,²⁸ and the result is in fact the most frankly romantic of Brahms's concertante works, in his most advanced style.

Even more than the B \flat Piano Concerto, the Double Concerto is 'chamber music for soloists and orchestra', and takes its place in the grand sweep of Brahms's late chamber music, passionate and exploratory in its handling of instrumental resources, that stretches from the F major Cello Sonata to the G major String Quintet. The conception, perhaps, is closest to that of an expanded piano trio, the orchestra assuming the place of the pianoforte; and there are strong expressive links between the Double Concerto and Brahms's C minor Piano Trio Op. 101, completed the previous summer. The trio's four concise movements have yielded in the concerto, however, to a three-movement plan dominated by a large opening movement not merely symphonic in outline but enlarged by a brilliant cadenza-like introduction presenting cello and violin, separately and together, in bravura solos significantly marked in *modo d'un recitativo*.

Chamber music or not, the Double Concerto extends to its whole design the analogies with vocal music adumbrated in Brahms's previous

concerto slow movements. The very idea of two soloists in dialogue and duet suggests operatic parallels. It is maybe significant that some of Brahms's friends, in the year of the work's composition, had gained the idea he might be writing an opera; and that when the Landgrave of Hesse asked him about this, he replied that he was 'composing the entr'actes'. The idea of treating a concerto soloist like an opera character goes back at least as far as Spohr's *Gesangszene* for violin and orchestra, but by employing two instruments of contrasted range and tone Brahms vastly enlarged the dramatic potential. He invests the utterances of cello and violin with something of the sexual polarity of baritone/tenor hero and soprano heroine. Perhaps there is a further implication that the soloists, in this work conceived in the cause of friendship, represent Brahms and Joachim themselves: if so it is mildly ironic that Joachim, who could only be represented in his own instrument, and who Brahms believed had wronged his wife, should therefore have to take the feminine part of the discourse. No less ironic than that Brahms, so often self-conscious about his high tenor voice, should award himself the deep masculine cello register.

But of course the music itself, in the fantasy and imagination with which its materials are developed, transcends any such narrow interpretation. The warmth and strength of romantic feeling, palpable throughout the first movement and reaching its apogee in the slow movement with its ardent evocations of song and choral serenade, make the protagonists representatives of love in all its aspects. But virtuosity for mere display is avoided: the soloists are entirely integrated into the ongoing development of the work's material. Though violin and cello are strongly characterised as individuals, Brahms just as often combines them texturally as a single entity, in the manner of string–piano chamber music. Thus their ideal union occurs in the service of the musical ideas, typified by the ecstatic string roulades of the coda after the wit and geniality of the finale – once again a 'Hungarian' rondo in honour of Joachim, resolving all remaining conflicts in the spirit of the dance.