PART III

Brahms today: some personal responses

10 Conducting Brahms

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An approach to the music

The completion of my series of Brahms recordings with the London Classical Players provides an opportune moment to reflect on my approach to them.[1] I have come to Brahms as the latest stage in a long exploration of musical performance from a historically-informed viewpoint which began with the Baroque era, continued into the classical era with Haydn and Mozart, and has stretched through the works of Beethoven and Schubert to the Romantics Mendelssohn, Berlioz and Schumann, and eventually to Brahms, Wagner and Bruckner. The aim has been to seek to restore as much as possible the relationship between the scores, which have not changed, and the instruments, forces and performing styles, which most certainly have. I wanted to find out how things actually *were* in the performing situation, to get the relationship right in order to enable the music to sound fresh and natural. The use of earlier instruments and playing styles does not force us to be old-fashioned: on the contrary, it ought to help us to re-create these masterpieces afresh. Like Schumann, Brahms has long had a reputation as a poor orchestrator, his textures being seen as overloaded and unclear. Though Brahms's scoring has had many detractors, I have never agreed with their objections. But there is equally no doubt in my mind that using the resources of his own time can tell us much about his orchestration, and about the music itself.

The performance of standard repertory from an 'early music' point of view has always engendered a good deal of resistance – the suspicion that a speculative view of how things *might have been* is being forced onto a hallowed repertory of great works. Such a view has never been my starting point. I studied orchestral conducting at the Royal College of Music with Boult in the standard repertory and I still conduct 'conventional' orchestras in this music, and much else. My interest in 'early music', especially the choral music of the Baroque, was an extension of this. But whatever the medium, the aims are always the same: to bring the music to life; not as 'early music' but as good music played properly. With the London Classical Players in the Brahms works, I have used all the available

resources to seek to get as close as possible to the music as conceived and first experienced. In this respect, of course, existing orchestral tradition has been of little help – I had to start much further back. I want to know what originally lay behind tradition, to distinguish a true tradition from a false one (one hallowed simply by time and association with great artists). The Italians have an expression 'Tradizione e una maschera' – 'tradition is a mask', and if you take the mask away there is a skull. A playing style may have had its roots in something valuable, but these roots may now be little worth preserving. I have to admit that it is sometimes very difficult to decide. Take the way they play the waltz rhythm in Vienna. I'm sure there is something there that goes back a very long way – but you just can't tell, and I am not prepared to let anything in without a thorough examination. Mahler said that tradition is laziness – 'Schlamperei' (slovenliness, or bad habits, if you prefer). One must certainly always be alive to new possibilities. But I object to letting things be before we have even established what the composer originally wanted; one must first try to find out what he meant. We have found out a great deal already, and whatever choices one finally makes (performance is full of choices) one cannot afford to ignore the historical evidence where it exists.

Looking through nineteenth-century performance history decade by decade, I kept expecting to find the evidence to justify the styles of Brahms performance we have become familiar with in the twentieth century, but never did so. This is because the changes happened at the end of his life. The orchestra was transformed under the influence of Mahler and Strauss in the wake of Wagner's theatrical innovations: larger forces, with more penetrating strings, to balance more powerful brass and wind, originated in response to the new demands of the scores, larger halls and bigger audiences. Brahms has a special place within this change because, unlike Wagner, he was an avowed classicist. The transformation of playing forces and styles probably had a more distorting effect on the performance of his music than it did on Wagner's, with its heavier scoring and expressive slowness so determined by theatrical pacing. Brahms is significantly different, essentially classical in his intricate contrapuntal structure, rhythmic precision and interplay of figures, which is so often likened to chamber music. All classical music has a certain 'innocence' associated with it, and I want to capture that sonic quality in Brahms. But as well as doing justice to the sound, it is also important to get it right for expressive reasons, in view of the very false image that still persists of 'the bearded Brahms'. He was a man in vital early middle age when he wrote his *Requiem* and his symphonies. Indeed, he was even thought in many quarters to be a radical. There is an amusing example of the reception of his Second Symphony in Boston. One

critic suggested that there should be a emergency sign in the concert hall – 'exit in case of Brahms' – portraying him as a firebrand, a Stockhausen of the time. The historical image of Brahms has certainly suffered from his promotion by the anti-programmatic criticism stemming from the 1930s, which viewed his music as abstract because of his mastery of large forms and his interest in articulating complex structures. But I am suspicious of Stravinsky's notion that music must not be allowed to be 'about' something. Brahms's soul is writ on every page of his music.

Though Brahms's symphonies are instrumental, I have never been able to understand the view of them as 'abstract'. For me his works are always full of meaning and of drama. I find them almost Byronic; they become 'overwhelmed by grief and joy' just as much as Beethoven's. We are all familiar with the view of Mahler and Sibelius of the symphony as a 'world', a view stemming ultimately from Beethoven's Ninth, with its attendant notions of the composer's lofty role and of the deep significance of the symphony in reflecting the highest aspirations and most powerful experiences: William Walton said that 'you cannot write a symphony unless something terrible has happened to you'. I suspect that Brahms would have concurred. Of his symphonies, Beethoven claimed, 'I always see pictures.' Brahms too had his secret mental images: we know that many of his melodies were inspired by texts now forgotten and that he used secret pitch-ciphers. The fact that he so carefully suppressed the sources of his stimuli does not alter the effect of the result. This is highly charged emotional music.

So I try to come to Brahms without some of the prejudice which gathers round his name. For me his music mirrors his life. He was not simply intellectual, though he had extraordinary mastery of 'learned' devices. His mode of expression is certainly different from that of other composers, especially his great symphonic contemporaries Tchaikovsky and Bruckner, yet he was driven to composition by the same forces of desperation, inner conflict, joy and resolution. Indeed, his classicism may even have been a way of controlling the sprawling emotion. Of course, his drama is not like Tchaikovsky's 'primal scream'. His inner conflict is more contained, his whole musical personality more inward. It is much more 'lump in the throat' music – the contained emotion one feels at the end of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. And he is likewise different from Bruckner, with those massive effects of contrast, those Wagnerian aspirations. Brahms's sense of change and transmutation is more organic. Neither is there the bluntness of expression of Beethoven. Brahms is always modulated, and essentially lyrical. He comes out of a long German tradition of virtuosity in 'serious' composition that extends back through Bach to Schütz and even before.

I am by nature a dramatic conductor, at home in the opera house as much as in the concert hall. I respond to what I take to be the personal character of a work, or at least the emotion that it expresses. For me, to deny the emotional or evocative aspect of Brahms is as absurd as to suggest that Dickens, Hardy or Wharton could write a novel 'in the abstract'. I find something very personal going on in Brahms's symphonies, a quality that is just as strong as in the works of other romantic composers. I see the symphonies as psychic dramas; each one is biographical, making a sort of life cycle – perhaps one might think of it as Brahms's *Ring*. I know it is controversial to say these things in an artistic climate which (unlike that of the Romantics) still favours a 'structural' or 'objective' view of meaning. Yet I can't avoid such thoughts when I experience the music and consider the powerful events in his personal life.

Of course, Brahms left few clues to these inner dramas; it is for each listener to fill out the picture with his own imagination. But the cast of 'characters' includes Robert Schumann, Clara Schumann and their children, together with the violinist and composer Joseph Joachim. And the subject matter is Brahms's innermost feelings: his joy, his loneliness, love and deprivation, deep depression and artistic triumph. It is an absorbing and compelling tale, a non-verbal landscape of the heart.

Instruments and performing styles

Many kinds of evidence can be drawn on in providing a context for historically informed performance, both in the physical and the interpretative dimensions. First the physical, starting with the instruments themselves. The radical changes in instrument design in the nineteenth century affected the stringed instruments least of all. The basic features which distinguish the modern violin from the Baroque prototype – the angled neck, the extension of the fingerboard, added sound posts, the higher bridge and modern bow, the cello spike and the violin and viola chinrest – were all achieved early in the nineteenth century. Only in the use of gut strings rather than metal does the sound differ – more mellow, less bright. The rediscovery of earlier performing traditions is made possible by surviving teaching materials. At every stage in my historical quest with the London Classical Players it has been possible to find treatises which clarify much about string technique and performance values: J. J. Quantz about Handel and Bach, Leopold Mozart about Amadeus Mozart and Haydn, Louis Spohr about Beethoven, Pierre Baillot about Berlioz. Brahms is no exception to this. His greatest adviser in matters orchestral

was Joseph Joachim, the leading German classical violinist of the nineteenth century. Joachim's *Violinschule* of 1902–5 gives many points of guidance towards the performance of Brahms's works.[2] In the light of twentieth-century traditions of Brahms performance with large orchestras, modern instruments and modern playing styles, it is a surprise to find how much of Joachim's treatise represents a direct continuation of earlier traditions, respected by him until his death in 1907. Three techniques are of special interest in orchestral string playing: vibrato, *portamento* and *portato*.

In discussing vibrato Joachim quotes directly from Spohr,[3] emphasising the vocal origins of the device: 'the singer in the performance of passionate movements, or when forcing his voice to its highest pitch, produces a certain tremulous sound resembling the vibrations of a powerfully struck bell. This, with many other peculiarities of the human voice, the violinist can closely imitate. It consists in the wavering of a stopped note . . . this motion, however, should only be slight in order that the deviation from purity of tone may scarcely be observed by the ear . . . the player, however, must guard against using it too often and in improper places.'[4] He gives four species of vibrato for particular expressive effect in solo playing – slow and quick vibrato and variants of these. But in his comments Joachim repeats the caution that 'the pupil cannot be sufficiently warned against the habitual use of the tremolo, especially in the wrong place. A violinist whose taste is refined and healthy will always recognise the steady tone as the ruling one and will use the vibrato only where the expression seems to demand it.'[5] Since the purely symphonic repertoire calls for so few of these effects, if any, it follows that his caution is even more binding for this music, not least for Brahms.

Joachim's emphasis on the vocal model shows the importance of phrasing in instrumental music: as well as a pure singing quality, it must have an intimacy like speech to be fully expressive. The style he describes is thus very different from the style of 'obligatory vibrato' that came about in the early twentieth century. Heifetz and other players used it on every note, and the resultant brightness and projection has been an intimate part of the 'concert machine' tradition, gathering momentum from the 1930s, by which modern orchestras have been judged. But it is certainly not what Joachim wanted of string players, or what Brahms would have expected. Vibrato solves problems of tone and sometimes of intonation, but it does not address the question of musical sense. The nobility that both sought in music comes from not having instant gratification – salt and sugar all the time: rather, the gratification comes from waiting for the ear to lead to where the music is going, to a chord change or to the top of a

phrase, for example. Lack of vibrato gives a 'pure classical tone'; if you use it too much, you endanger the 'classical' style (for instance, you wouldn't dream of using vibrato on the clarinet – it would instantly suggest jazz). Brahms would have *known* vibrato playing from the gypsy violin music he loved so much, but this was a totally different style from that of his orchestral music. Nor does vibrato always increase volume. One can often obtain a louder sound from non-vibrato playing.

Another device Joachim discusses is *portamento:* 'the audible change of position . . . if two notes occurring in a melodic progression, and situated in different positions, are to be made to cling together. [It is likewise] borrowed from the human voice (Italian: portar la voce = carrying the voice, French = port de voix). . . The *portamento* used on the violin between two notes played with one bow-stroke corresponds, therefore, to what takes place in singing when the slur is placed over two notes which are meant to be sung on one syllable.' But Joachim again counsels against the 'constant use of wrongly executed *portamenti* [whereby]. . . the performance of a piece can become so disfigured as to result in mere caricature [and one should use] taste and judgement'.[6] The device is still to be heard in early twentieth-century performances, for example of the Elgar symphonies in the 1930s. But is interesting that, while vibrato has become commonplace, the twentieth century has shown increasing reserve towards *portamento*, which is often seen as tasteless and has largely disappeared from the performance of classical music. We follow Joachim in using some for special effects of expression, but always with lightened bow and the two notes unstressed, never weighted and stressed (which gives the vulgar 'whine' Joachim criticises). In my opinion, the next twenty years could see a similar decline in unplanned continuous vibrato. This fashion could change as that for *portamento* has.

The device we do make much use of is *portato* – a semi-slurring of the bow. Joachim says little directly on this in his treatise, through the subject emerges repeatedly in correspondence with Brahms in connection with markings for the Violin Concerto. It is described by Spohr and Baillot in the same expressive context as vibrato. However, its meaning has certainly changed. Baillot applies it to a single open string or stopped note. '*Portato*, the undulation produced by the bow alone [indicated by dots over the note covered by a slur], is of a calm and pure expression, because, on the one hand, it is generally used in slow or moderate tempi and on an open string, and on the other hand, when it is played with one finger on the string, which does not move, the intonation of the note remains fixed.'[7] The classification in *Grove* places it under 'slurred staccato', the 'distinct separation between two or more notes with the same bow-stroke indi-

cated by dots or strokes over individual notes all under a slur, an on-string stroke at moderate speed, [the] separation depending on the character of the music': that is half way between legato and staccato, played on the string.[8] A frequent illustration is the second theme of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. Brahms took a keen interest in the device, but disputed with Joachim how it should be notated. Brahms disliked the use of strokes covered by a slur, preferring dots covered by a slur for all such cases, commenting to the effect that 'you are still using this sign for staccato, but I still mean portato', and citing Beethoven's comparable usage to justify his choice.[9] Florence May observes that he 'made very much of the well-known effect of two notes slurred together: 'I know from his insistence to me on this point the mark has a special significance in his music.'[10] The variety and combination of these devices gave music before the twentieth century much greater animation and intimacy, some of which has been lost in modern orchestral performance. When Brahms indicates 'espressivo' he really wants more phrasing, not more volume. Phrasing and attention to the different bow-markings enhance expression and also really clean up the texture.

In contrast to the strings, which can tune the scale by ear, the need to obtain an equivalence of interval and resultant good intonation led to radical changes in brass and woodwind design during the nineteenth century: the introduction of valves and more keys respectively. Flute players would have had access either to the late eighteenth-century or early nineteenth-century simple-system instruments of German or Austrian design or to the modern Boehm system, perfected around 1850, with larger tone holes for greater sound and with improved intonation. The oboe known to Brahms would have been the Viennese Sellner instrument, a thirteen-key oboe which remains the basic Viennese instrument of today, though the Boehm design was available from the mid-century. The older instruments still retained features of the Baroque instrument, which was designed to have 'pockets of sound' like the harpsichord's 'dark' notes, different registers giving different effects: thus the scale was not smooth like that of the modern instrument, but had more variation and character. The bassoon and contrabassoon displayed similar qualities. In the case of the clarinet we have a better idea of the instruments Brahms knew and preferred thanks to his contact with Richard Mühlfeld, principal clarinettist of the Meiningen court orchestra. His instruments were of the Baermann design of the early nineteenth century, derived from Müller's so-called simple system, not from Boehm. Müller's tutor of 1825 illustrates an instrument with thirteen keys, two of which have extra levers for the right thumb. The Boehm design was slow to overtake the

Müller in Germany, though the fingering was easier. Mühlfeld's surviving instruments have a lighter and sweeter tone, and the instruments are more strongly melodic in character, performing some intervals much more easily.

Valves were available on horns and trumpets from the mid nineteenth century and they gained steady acceptance, soon replacing the natural instruments with crooks whose highly developed technique had first been codified in the mid eighteenth century. Brahms continued to write for instruments with crooks in all his orchestral music. His technique of writing for the horn is of particular interest. He had known the natural instrument since childhood, since it would have been played by his father. Brahms followed the classical composers in using relatively few stopped notes in his orchestral music, though, like them, he is much more adventurous in chamber music – notably in his Horn Trio Op. 40, where the stopped notes at the end of the slow movement show a remarkable grasp of the technique and the effects available. Like the classical composers, he covered the tonal range by specifying changes of crooks between and within movements and by scoring for pairs of instruments to cope with modulations. On the rare occasions he wanted the contrast of a stopped note for its particular effect, he indicated it and expected it to be played as such. Nevertheless there is evidence that many players would have performed his works on the horn in F, the standard valve instrument in Germany in his time, and this is the instrument we use in our recordings. It still differed greatly from the modern instrument in its more delicate sound.

Brahms's intimate knowledge enables him to score very effectively for the horn and find the best parts of the range. He treats it like an extension of the woodwind instruments, using it to blend with them in contrapuntal writing and to provide a bridge between purely solo and 'harmonic' tutti writing. The heavy brass chorus in Bruckner or Wagner (or even Schumann in the fourth movement of the *Rhenish* Symphony) is rare in Brahms. He wanted a particular sonority and used a full range of registers in his writing. The early valve horn, like the natural horn, can produce a forced sound with less distortion than the otherwise more mellifluous modern instrument: it has a characteristic rasping 'brassy' effect when blown hard.

Brahms generally treats the trumpet as a chorus instrument in the orchestra. In contrast to his use of the horn, his writing for trumpet solo is simple and chordal, as when it takes the opening motive in the closing bars of the first movement of the Second Symphony. Though he writes for the capabilities of the natural instrument, the instrument of his time

in Germany was the 6-foot trumpet in F (or, rarely, in G) which could be crooked down to C and sometimes B♭. The F trumpet, being longer than the B♭, had a less bright tone and blended better with the horns and trombones. In Brahms's writing for the trombone, he still observed a distinction between the B♭ instrument for the highest part and the B♭/F instrument for the second and bass parts; after his time all parts were played on the B♭/F instrument. The bass instrument would have had a wider bore than the second, giving a more distinctive bass to the section than in the modern ensemble, though still of a lighter and more vocal character than the modern instrument. The tuba was the only brass instrument to possess valves from its invention (in 1835): Brahms's bass tuba in F would also have been lighter than the usual modern instrument (the contrabass tuba). The timpani in Brahms's time would have been covered in skin, not plastic, tuned manually rather than by chromatic pedal, and played with leather-headed, not felt, sticks. The resultant sound is much more distinct and less muffled. Therefore the timpani parts assume a much clearer role in the texture: not a reinforcement or background to the orchestra, but a distinct voice, another form of counterpoint (except when they are used for an atmospheric function).

To turn from the instruments themselves to their combination and balance in the orchestra, the size of orchestra may well come as a shock to concertgoers accustomed to modern performances. German orchestras of the 1870s were generally no bigger than those of the 1830s, when Mendelssohn was in charge of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra: that is, eight to ten first violins was still the tradition. This naturally affects the balance of strings, woodwind and brass. The Gewandhaus layout was of nine firsts, eight seconds, five violas, five cellos and four basses. When Joachim gave the first British performance of Brahms's Symphony No. 1 at Cambridge, he had nine firsts, nine seconds, six violas, four cellos, and three basses. Brahms was obviously happy with this number: for the premiere of No. 4 at Meiningen he was offered more but turned them down. Although it is true that there were sometimes large string forces for festivals and charity concerts (just as in Haydn's and Beethoven's time), it was then customary to double the woodwind in proportion. The Vienna Philharmonic, with its unusually large string body (twelve firsts instead of nine), regularly performed with doubled wind. The modern complement of seventy string players creating a 'wall-to-wall' string sound against single woodwind considerably alters the balance Brahms would have assumed.

Though orchestra size solves many problems of clarity, some problems of balance remain. One is often required to decide on the quality of

one particular 'forte' against another. Brahms was very sparing in differentiating dynamics within a chord (unlike Mahler, who within tuttis can give as many as seven different dynamic markings at a time). One has to assume that there was a tradition of orchestral balance, and adjust as seems necessary. The orchestral layout of the time complements the musical texture: between 1750 and 1950, violins I and II were seated on opposite sides and, usually, horns and trumpets too. Our double basses are at the rear, and often divided in the manner described by Henschel to Brahms in his early experiments with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.[11] This plan reflects the musical structure of the scores, where the first and second violins, for instance, frequently respond to each other. The overall sonic design (three 'choirs' of strings, wind and brass) reminds me of the contrasting choirs in the motets of Giovanni Gabrieli and Schütz.

In considering issues of balance, one cannot of course ignore the most important factor in the production of sound from the orchestra – the room and its acoustic properties. Halls can work for or against the character of the music. We must realise how intimate the whole business was in such halls as the old Leipzig Gewandhaus, the Zurich Tonhalle and the Basel Casino. At Bad Kissingen, Bavaria, the surrounding galleries are so close around you that you could almost shake hands with the audience. In such halls one can use 'chamber music' gestures, as for example with the delicate return of the main theme of Symphony No. 2's first movement on the horns, an effect very different from the more public and generalised sound we often hear. Our recordings give an opportunity to hear the chamber music proportions of nearly all orchestras of the time. There is a striking difference, and, for me, the context fits the classicism of Brahms's writing.

The use of the resources of Brahms's time gives a significantly different sound from that with which most listeners will be familiar: first in the orchestra as a whole, and secondly in the main instrumental groups and solo instruments, and their relation to each other. This different balance is clearest in passages designed by the composer to share the same material among different instruments. In Variation 4 of the *St Antoni Variations*, for example, the inversion of the parts in the repetition involves oboe and horn against violas and lower strings (bars 1–5), full strings against flute and clarinet (bars 11–15), all in perfect balance with each other, not least the horn. In the canon by inversion in Variation 8, the lower string parts remain much clearer than in some modern performances – not least when the composer inverts the theme in canon in the second half, where the effect is often very muddy with full vibrato. In general, the orchestral parts are much clearer, the timbres of each section better heard, including the timpani. As in contrapuntal vocal music, each voice is heard as an individ-

ual in a crowd, never submerged. This is especially important for Brahms, whose complex rhythms and intricate motivic texture are *meant* to be heard: his scoring is never impressionistic in intent, but always thematic and related to the whole. Our results, I believe, disprove the traditional view of Brahms as a 'muddy' orchestrator – rich and intricate certainly, but beautifully calculated and balanced. I am reminded of one critic of our Schumann recordings, who commented, 'so Schumann was an orchestrator of genius'. The same applies to Brahms. The balance reveals the strings as participatory instruments in a complete texture, rather than the dominant group. It also shows more fully just what an active texture Brahms achieves, with all players sharing in the thematic material.

As regards the individual departments of the orchestra, one immediately notices our strings: the various techniques outlined earlier create a very different effect in some familiar passages. The lack of vibrato often gives the great string themes a different character – or seems to place them in a different perspective. In the fourth movement of Symphony No. 1, the great finale theme for violins, which Brahms indicated to be played on the G string, seems to point forward more. In the first movement of No. 2, the minor-key second theme on cellos sounds much more pensive and reflective; the main theme of the second movement has a more distant quality. As was mentioned above, we follow Joachim in using *portamento* rarely; but there is a place for it, as in the expressive elaboration of the first phrase of the second movement of No. 1, where it adds a subtle colouring in bar 13 (first violins). Of much greater importance to us, however, is the role of articulation and phrasing, especially the bow-determined device of *portato*, which stands out the more in the absence of constant vibrato. In the main theme of the first movement of No. 3, the clear marking of a two-note *portato* both contrasts with and complements the broad phrasing of the opening phrase, so that when the figure eventually comes on separate staccato bows at the climax and highest register of the theme, it really has an effect (bar 4). In the following transition theme a similar effect is implied, though not marked, with three notes marked with one slur and thus to be taken in one bow. In the second episode of the third movement of No. 2 the lack of vibrato really brings out the effect of the *portato*, especially when, placed in the lower parts, it contrasts with the legato of the upper parts (bar 114). In contrast, Brahms also indicates heavy staccato with wedges and separate bows for the strings, as in the passage at bars 97–100 in the first movement of No. 1. He gives numerous opportunities for varieties of bow-stroke and for contrast between them. His frequent indication 'pizzicato' is just one aspect of a constantly changing surface of articulation which I work very hard at in rehearsal to bring to the fullest expression.

In the brass and woodwind ensemble writing, one immediately notes the blend of the different instruments. They do not merge into a homogeneous sound – a synthetic sound where all lose some of their individual character – but retain their individual timbre and identity to a much greater extent than in some modern performances. The problem of the omnipresent horn in modern Brahms performances, tending to muddy the texture with its doublings and contrapuntal role, disappears with the lighter and more agile instrument of the period. In the coda to the slow movement of No. 1, the horn is usually held back in its melodic role in order not to overpower the violin; here the smaller-scaled horn and the light-vibrato violin balance more easily than the modern instruments. Earlier in this movement, the transition theme, which soars out on full violins, sounds pure and liquid, as though responding to the delicate tone of the oboe in the opening theme preceding it – a true balance.

Of the woodwind instruments themselves, it is the quality of the oboe which is perhaps most immediately notable in imparting character to a theme. The 'Quasi Andantino' of the third movement of No. 2 is a rustic dance melody over a folk-like pizzicato bass, the true character of which is perfectly revealed in the 'unevenness' of the period instrument, each phrase giving a slightly different effect according to its register, unlike the mellifluous modern instrument with no 'breaks'. The exposed high oboe writing in the introduction to the first movement of No. 1, creates a similarly distinct effect, especially when the line is continued down into the non-vibrato cellos. Variation 4 of the *St Antoni Variations* exploits its middle register. The clarinet has a similar melodic effect in the first movement of Symphony No. 3, another quasi-Baroque moment with an unfolding melody over a drone bass, which the timbre of the earlier instrument brings more fully to the surface. The fluid arpeggio melodic writing Brahms uses in the last movement of No. 2 and the first of No. 3 appears much more fresh and lively with the lighter period instrument. The clarity of the flute, though it has less melodic work, is everywhere apparent, from the opening of the first movement of No. 2, where it responds to the brass chorus, to the famous echo of the 'Alphorn theme' in the finale of No. 1.

'Music is not about sound'

Proper resources are necessary prerequisites for performance of this music as the composer would have imagined it. But music is not about 'sound' as such: it is about its sense, its direction, its shape, what it is saying. Music must 'speak' as well as sing. One might characterise sound

as 'the noise an orchestra makes'. Its problem is that it can be so seductive that one sometimes forgets the larger issues. Central to these is gesture. Gesture and phrasing are always as important as sound and intonation. In seeking shape and line, as with tempo and dynamics, one inevitably comes up against the issue of 'interpretation'. Interpretation has long been one of the keywords of modern music making – that quality which enables a performance to stand out amidst numerous others and which reinforces the cult of the virtuoso conductor who is associated with it, giving it a certain 'authority'. Yet the concept stems only from the early twentieth century and the age of the professional virtuoso conductor. Prior to this, for example in the time of Brahms's contemporary George Henschel, there was no such thing as 'interpretation'. One just played the music as well as one could.[12] The approaches of other conductors were not important, because one heard them too infrequently to perceive a 'tradition'. Brahms offered few aids to the performer and was wont to avoid questions on performance, seeming to accept performances coming from different traditions. There is thus no one way to play it. Brahms heard Nikisch, who was very free, and the young Weingartner, who was very classical, and he was apparently happy with both. Some composers are never happy with changes – Britten was very insistent on his markings, whereas Tippett did not mind as much. Brahms may likewise have been easy-going; he was certainly open to change for practical reasons when necessary.

There is nevertheless plenty of evidence to orientate us towards the range of possibilities which he accepted as his framework, especially as regards speed and to a degree dynamics. To some extent this tradition has been lost in modern performance. When critics speak of 'the great tradition' of performance, they are referring to the style and individuality of recent great orchestras and conductors, not to the tradition in which the music was actually written. For example, I find Furtwängler amazing and very dramatic. But he tends to use the score as a support for a structural improvisation. I want the drama without the excess. Toscanini is much stricter in tempo. Weingartner's recordings are also very convincing (although they were made long after he had earned Brahms's approval).

Brahms often used tempo directions which are difficult to interpret: with their qualifying 'più' and 'poco', they give the impression of a tempo which he had yet to finalise or perhaps one slightly different from the basic tempi suggested by single-word indications. The opening of Symphony No. 1 is the most tantalising example: just 'un poco sostenuto' out of nothing, which then has to be defined in relation to the 'Allegro' which follows for the main part of the movement. And in any case, how do we

determine a suitable tempo even for the basic tempo names, 'allegro', 'andante' and 'adagio', which are so often modified in his scores? Here a clue can be obtained by reference to the metronome marks which he provided for several works including the German Requiem. Though he did not want them regarded as absolutes – he had them all removed from the Requiem in the fullness of time, saying that everyone eventually changed their tempo – the fact that they were associated with the first complete performance gives them interest; they do at least give an indication of the relation between tempo name and speed of the beat, and (as important) of the relative speeds of the tempo names.

They are as follows:

1	Ziemlich langsam und mit Ausdruck	80
2	Langsam, marschmäßig	60
	etwas bewegter	80
	poco sostenuto	56
	allegro non troppo	108
3	Andante moderato	52
4	Mäßig bewegt	92
5	Langsam	104
6	Andante	92
	Vivace	112
	Allegro	100
7	Feierlich	80

I use these at least as a guide in my performance of the Requiem, keeping Brahms's faster Andante (movements 1, 2 [opening sections] and 4 were originally marked 'Andante') and a balance between the tempi of the movements 1 and 7 to facilitate the return of the first movement material.[13] The tempo-name /speed relation emerging from these marks demarcates the following ranges: Adagio 40–60; Andante 60–90; Allegro 90–120. They are especially notable for the wide range of the 'Andante' band, much wider than today. The relevance of the markings can be further confirmed by reference to the other works with metronome marks. The Andante movement of the Second Piano Concerto, for example, is crotchet = 83. Now this whole tradition of tempo has been lost and performance in the Andante and Adagio range has become much slower, radically affecting the performance of Brahms's works.

In choosing a speed to match a tempo name, I have assessed each symphony movement individually: every one of the sixteen is different with regard to character, and almost every one with regard to metre. My results are often different from customary tempi for these movements. The tempi of some of the main themes of each movement are as follows according to time unit (crotchet, dotted crotchet, minim, dotted minim):

Symphony/movement/metronome mark

	Symphony No. 1	Symphony No. 2	Symphony No. 3	Symphony No. 4
Allegro range	1 Allegro 108	1 Allegro non troppo 106	1 Allegro con brio 66	1 Allegro non troppo 63
	4 Allegro non troppo, ma con brio 116	4 Allegro con spirito 108	4 Allegro 80–84	3 Allegro giocoso 4 Allegro energico e passionato 108
Andante range	2 Andante sostenuto 50		2 Andante 70	2 Andante moderato 76
Adagio range	4 (1) Adagio 46	2 Adagio non troppo 48		

That these correlations are in line with the conventions Brahms would have known emerges from detailed comments by Fritz Steinbach (Hans von Bülow's successor at Meiningen and a favourite conductor of the composer) on his own performances of the symphonies, which were recorded by his pupil Walter Blume.[14] It is also interesting to note the obvious continuity from earlier generations of composers: Schumann gives 66 for the dotted minim beat of the opening Allegro of the *Rhenish* Symphony, which is almost identical to Beethoven's dotted minim = 60 for the first movement of the *Eroica* Symphony, a movement of a very similar type. Schumann gives crotchet = 52 for the Ziemlich langsam opening of Symphony No. 4 and crotchet = 66 for the Andante un poco maestoso of No. 1. The Beethoven–Schumann continuity gives an obvious model for the first movement of Brahms's No. 3, the third member of the *Eroica–Rhenish* succession, with its close rhythmic and thematic link to the *Rhenish*. Our tempo for this Allegro con brio is identical, at dotted minim = 66, though the metre is broader, 6/4 rather than 3/4. Steinbach does not give metronome marks, but he does give many details which help to characterise basic tempi as well as to decide on details of tempo modification. To return to some of the problematic tempo names, he comments of the 'un poco sostenuto' at the opening of the first movement of No. 1, for example, that 'the emphasis should be on "poco", therefore not too slow', so that one can beat the half bar, though 'initially in six'. The time signature 6/8 is after all very different from 6/4, where the subdivided beat, the crotchet, has a larger role in the inner rhythm. This treatment of the opening creates a very different effect from the majestic six-beat pattern adopted in so many performances. Of the main theme of the finale, 'allegro non troppo, ma con brio', Steinbach emphasises the importance of long breaths for its great line, and points out that its structure is of two-bar phrases, the end of each indicated by a descending dynamic wedge.

If the sense of a proper basic tempo for the character of the ideas and

their relation to one another is essential, so, of course, is a sense of modification. Brahms was against rigid, metronomic tempi, though also against an excess of modification, as emerges from his comment to Henschel that tempo modification was nothing new and should be taken *con discrezione*.[15] This was probably a dig at Wagner, who claimed the credit for its invention through his many freedoms with tempi as a performer. My general conclusion is that tempi should be spacious but forthright, tempo variation sensitive but simple. The music must have inner rhythm, but if you 'pull the rhythm around' too much you may lose it, since so much is built in, as, for example, with the hemiola pattern. My belief is that Brahms wanted few major changes and was happy with essentially straightforward tempi. I try to be sensitive to the structure and to the ebb and flow of the music. Brahms used very few tempo markings, only the essential ones to give the basic structure. Apart from sectional changes within movements, such as the contrast sections in ABA or scherzo–trio forms, they are almost all at the end of a movement or section to indicate slowing, usually marked 'più lento', 'poco rall.' etc. Separate coda sections with their own marking only occur in two of the symphonic movements – briefly in the first movement of No. 1 ('meno allegro' from 'allegro') and much more expansively in the first movement of No. 2. None the less, even here Brahms marks the 'tranquillo' and 'sempre tranquillo' sections 'in tempo'. Speeding up in a movement is very rare. He marks the return of the main theme of the fourth movement of No. 1, 'animato' (bar 220), later restoring the tempo with the marking 'largamente'; however, the lowercase printing suggests that this is to be only a slight change. Indeed, he intended these markings only for the full score and not for the parts.

My aim is never to contradict large-scale structural markings, or to anticipate them, thus undermining their effect. I assume that he intended his tempi to be basically 'straight' or, when marked for change, to be clearly changed, so that the change is an event, not just another tempo variation. We therefore avoid some of the freedoms which can be heard in traditional performances, such as in the 'Un poco sostenuto' opening of No. 1, which I keep quite clear and strict. Likewise, I take the concluding 'meno allegro' not too slow, but different from the opening, not a 'sostenuto' effect. In the coda of the first movement of No. 2, I try to match Brahms's difficult markings of 'tranquillo' and 'sempre tranquillo' in tempo, with no real slowing at the end of the coda, so that the closing chords come quickly. The 12/8 central section of the second movement is kept in strict tempo since Brahms gives no tempo change. In the last movement the second theme 'largamente' represents a significant slowing, and so must the 'tranquillo' and 'sempre tranquillo' sections of the middle section.

In main development sections of outer movements, we even receive encouragement from Steinbach to press forward in helping to sharpen the contrasts of tempo when they come. Of the development of the last movement of Symphony No. 3, for example, he says, 'at H [bar 134] the strings play on the bridge until the forte entry [at bar 141]. The driving tempo is valid above all [from] here . . . and following. In spite of having already arrived at fortissimo before K, we crescendo further one bar before K [bar 172] in all instruments up to the climax . . . at the triplet episode [from bar 252] one calms the tempo down. The semiquaver figures in the strings at O [bar 261] are played so that one dwells somewhat on the first semiquaver, quasi tenuto.'[16] We follow this description of movement 1 so that the 'agitato' (from bar 77) presses on until the 'poco rit.' which leads to the 'un poco sostenuto' retransition to the main theme, marked 'Tempo 1'. Another example of a strict and driving Allegro tempo is that of the *Tragic Overture*, which contains much internal contrast. I keep this strict, and also the proportional relation of the central section, marked at exactly half speed. These 'strict' tempi make the modifications, where they come, all the more telling and enable them to be subtle too. In the first movement of Symphony No. 1, the slight holding back for the reflective second theme, which seems so natural, benefits from not having been exploited in the parallel passage of the introduction. Keeping the 'poco sostenuto' until the exact point marked at the end of the third movement of No. 2, rather than earlier reinforces the touching contrast of the strings in the scoring. Likewise an exact observance of the 'poco rit. . . . un poco sostenuto' in the first movement of No. 3, helps to keep the basic shape of the movement. One is always tempted to do more shaping with tempo change. But once a performance goes out of shape it is ruined. One senses that shape in performance, as in structure, was always paramount for Brahms.

Tempo relationships are also vital to the structure of a whole work, the temporal dimension complementing the musical substance. The subject is especially interesting where the composer has achieved a reprise of opening materials at the close, thus implying a return to the same or a related tempo. This feature characterises two major works, the Requiem and the Third Symphony. As mentioned, Brahms recalls the closing section of the first movement of the Requiem at the close of the work via a transition from the main part of movement 7. Though the movements bear different markings – 'Ziemlich langsam und mit Ausdruck' and 'Feierlich' – it is clear from the MM crotchet = 80 that he wants something of the same tempo; indeed, he gives no tempo change for the dramatic return of the very contrasted opening material. Taken literally, his markings impart no sense of shape to the last movement, since the main part is

of a different character and clearly needs more animation than the reflective close. Yet he gives no suggestion that the end should be significantly slower. I therefore take the main section slightly quicker in order that the close can be around the marking of the first movement, and seem like a relaxation from the earlier part of the movement, allowing for a slightly slower tempo at the very end to signal the close of the entire work.

The tempo relationship in the Third Symphony is somewhat different. The recall of the opening theme in the closing bars of the work comes at the end of a coda marked 'Un poco sostenuto' following an Allegro movement, and gradually transforms its rhythmic and dynamic character – a calm dissolution of its original tensions. However, despite the transformation of mood, the fact that the first movement is marked Allegro con brio, suggesting a faster tempo than Allegro, must indicate that the eventual 'un poco sostenuto' marking for the theme cannot actually signify a much slower speed than that of its first appearance. The 'poco sostenuto' recalls prominent ideas from the second and third movements as well as the opening motto; if slowed a little as Brahms asks, the recollection of the slow movement can occur at exactly its original speed. In many performances the end gets too slow too soon. One must keep it moving so that it is a glowing sunset, but doesn't go on all night: it must be a climax, not an endless good-bye; its classical character must be acknowledged. This quiet ending is always a shock to the uninitiated listener, but it is one of the golden moments in the Brahms canon.

Brahms's dynamic markings are much more straightforward than his tempo marks. They generally cover only the range *pp*–*ff*. The extremities of *fff* and *ppp* are unusual and reserved for special moments – for example the atmospheric string tremolos under clarinets in thirds followed by oboe at the end of the second movement of Symphony No. 4, or for a contrasted repetition (third movement of No. 1, bars 39–40). But one notes immediately the constant use of dynamic 'hairpins' for expression, which occur throughout the texture. Their importance is confirmed in the fact that they even exist on individual notes as well as in phrases, as, for example, in the continuation of the first theme of the first movement of No. 4. They are further evidence of the importance of nuance and phrasing to the life of this music, and we may expect that many similar features of dynamic shaping were assumed by Brahms even when not marked in the score: Steinbach's markings, for example, add much that must be taken as part of the Brahms style. Perhaps most indicative is his comment on the opening of the first movement of No. 3. He points out that the two opening chords marked *forte* should be given a slight dynamic shaping by a diminuendo on each rather than a crescendo. These chords can some-

times seem a little feeble in effect, lacking any sense of relation to what follows. Nor is the scoring very bright, with the second trumpet obscured at the bottom in unison with the bassoon. Steinbach's suggestion for the dynamics, taken with a tempo quicker than in many performances, makes the whole effect more convincing. There are many places where such an approach enlivens the music. The many long pedals in Brahms, where the lack of harmonic movement can lead to monotony on the basis of the given marks, also benefit from dynamic shaping. In the introduction to No 1's first movement, I phrase the timpani part in one-bar phrases, with a crescendo at the end of each, creating a larger dynamic curve to reflect the music above. In the pedal fugue of the Requiem (movement 3) I reflect the dynamics of the choir and the structure of the fugue in the dynamics of the pedal, none being marked by Brahms. In contrast, I make use of preliminary diminuendos to intensify the ensuing crescendos and help to build the climax. Such details were simply the norm in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music-making.

In conclusion, the use of historical resources does not solve performance problems. The subtlety of great music requires a comparable sensitivity on the part of the performer, and many different approaches to tempi and expression can be taken. But the immediacy of the result can bring back to Brahms performance something which, to judge from decades of negative and rather bland Brahms criticism, it has lost (compare, for example, reviews of his day with our own). I find that these approaches interest performers of many kinds, not just of original instruments; that string players in 'conventional' orchestras begin to ask about the role of vibrato, for example; that attitudes towards tempi in 'conventional' performances are changing perceptibly. Not least among young audiences, there is a tangible enthusiasm for historically informed approaches which will surely be significant for the future of classical concert music, and Brahms in particular.