

# TONIC

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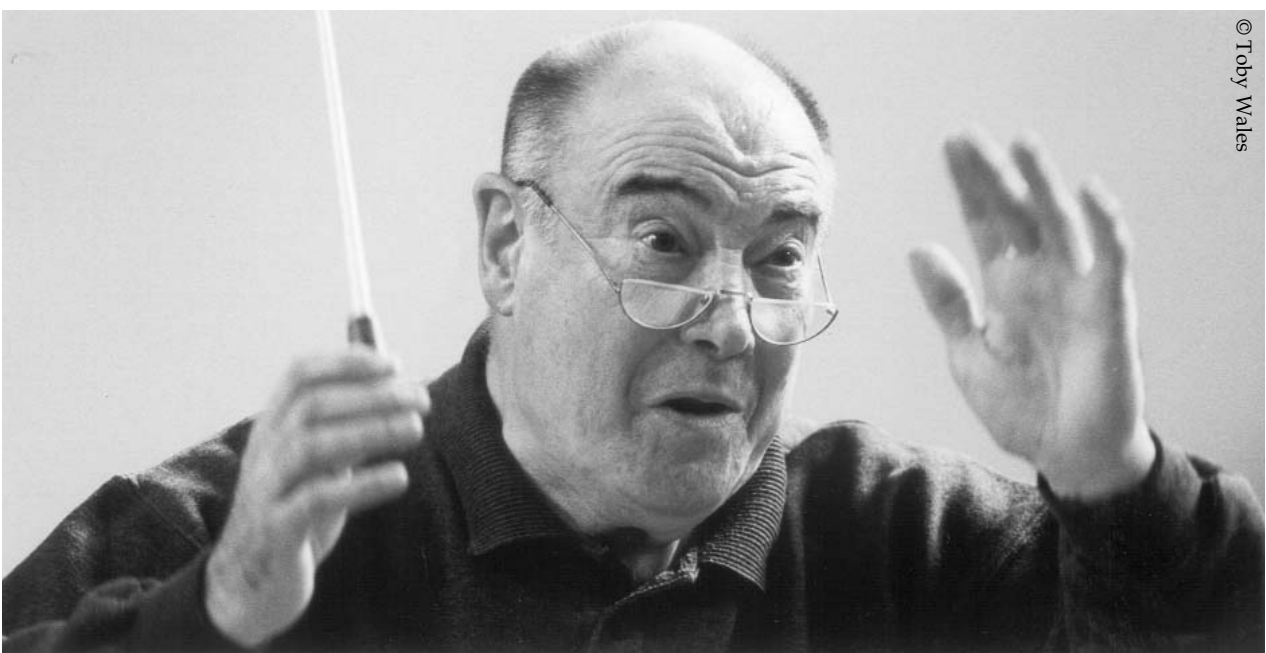
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VERNON HANDLEY CBE  
1930–2008  
A Brief Reminiscence by Martin Anderson

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Once upon a time in the early 1980s Vernon Handley, the organist Jane Parker-Smith and I were enjoying a quiet drink together. Tod – as Handley was known to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with him – was in reflexive mood. “I want to do a boxed set of the Simpson symphonies and a boxed set of the Rubbra symphonies and a boxed set of the Arnold symphonies and then I could die a happy man.” “Then”, I said, “we would have a boxed set of Handley.” He laughed – but at the same time shot me one of those that’s-not-very-funny looks.

Now that we do have a boxed set of Handley – he died on 10 September at the age of 77 – that story seems to illustrate the two sides of Tod’s life: the unswerving devotion to British music and the insecurity that, privately, attended his career. For Tod felt he was never really given his due for his half-century of unremitting service to British music, and he was entirely right. One would have thought that a grateful nation would have responded with due recognition – and the knighthood that all of musical Britain thought he had long since earned would have been all the acknowledgement he required. That it never came his way is hard to explain. In part, it is because he never played the establishment’s game. He turned down an OBE in 1988, explaining that, since he was so directly associated with British music, the want of a higher honour suggested that British music itself didn’t deserve any better. That offer of an OBE itself might have been the result of a behind-the-scenes campaign to try to get the knighthood for him; I was involved tan-



gentially and, more importantly, so was David Mellor, then a cabinet minister, but still no knighthood. So when other British conductors got their gongs simply for managing to become prominent, Tod quite rightly felt aggrieved, for all that a CBE was to come his way in 2004. It is to the lasting shame of those who decided such matters in the corridors of power that the honour he already earned decades before was consistently denied him; it would have brought him profound satisfaction.

Of course, his refusal to change his course reflected the personality that makes his life something to celebrate. He never courted attention: his job was to get on with the music. When he was on the podium, his concern was always for the people in front of him, not those behind him. Tod modelled his conducting technique and his gentlemanly manner with orchestras on the man who had taken him in hand at the outset of his career: Sir Adrian Boult. Boult's long stick, and the extraordinary clarity with which he wielded it, were features also of Handley's work. But whereas Boult's old-world civility could sometimes be blast aside by an explosion of anger, I never heard a Handley rehearsal where he wasn't consideration itself for the musicians. Just how thoughtful he could be was illustrated for me one day when he was rehearsing the London Philharmonic in Henry Wood Hall. Calling a halt for the mid-morning coffee-break, he didn't go through the list of things he wanted to be done differently next time around. Instead, he climbed off the podium and walked through the orchestra, chatting to them all, section by section. I asked him afterwards why he hadn't simply addressed them *en masse*. "Well, they've just come back from a tour of Spain, poor dears, and they're tired. So they need their cup of tea. And they'll remember it better if I chat to them individually." No wonder musicians played for him.

The independence of spirit that brought a degree of marginalisation was compounded by kidney problems that made him a frequent canceller, so that orchestras were sometimes cautious about booking him. But it was a different indisposition which had the most immediate effect on Bob Simpson. I was one of a carful of friends who drove down to Southampton in April 1987 to hear Tod give the second performance of Bob's Ninth Symphony; he had conducted the premiere in Poole a couple of days beforehand, on the 8th. The first half of the concert featured the Dvořák Cello Concerto so, having arrived from London not long before it was scheduled to begin, we decided to skip the Dvořák and have a bite to eat, the better to concentrate on the Simpson. Arriving all well in time for the second half of the concert, we were struck by the music being played in the hall and looked at one another: "That's not Dvořák!" Tod had had a nose-bleed and had been carted off to hospital, and Bob had been left with no option than to step into the breach and conduct the work himself.

It's a mark of Tod Handley's generosity of spirit that in the Hyperion cycle of Simpson symphonies he was happy to step back and let Matthew Taylor, the dedicatee of No. 11, conduct that work. The boxed set that finally did emerge in 2006 is a monument to his industry, his craft, his sense of service, and his very absence at the head of the Eleventh pays tribute to his big-heartedness, his humility and his decency.

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## EDITORIAL

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In this year's *Tonic*, which was conceived much before the sad news of the demise of our President, Vernon Handley CBE, I want to present a number of programme-notes by Robert Simpson from Angela Simpson's collection, some of them very rare indeed. Sadly, quite a number of his programme-notes were lost for two reasons. The first was that Simpson, when asked to supply programme notes for a work, consulted his card index, and if he had already written something he considered re-usable, he simply supplied the copy he had; consequently some programme notes, of which he formerly had had a number of copies, would now have to be found again, probably after careful consultation with his correspondence, quite an amount of which has survived in Angela Simpson's collection. The second reason why some of his programme-notes are currently unavailable (I wouldn't say lost because they may be found in the years to come) is closely linked to this first habit of giving away copies of his texts. In his later years Simpson changed from typewriter to word-processor, but unfortunately this word-processor is now lost. So after he had printed out a number of copies of his programme-notes, he gave them away one after the other to those interested, knowing that he could reproduce them easily (luckily word-processor printouts have survived of the texts on Brahms's String Sextet Op. 18 and the Piano Pieces Op. 118, as well as the text on "completing" unfinished masterpieces). Now that his word-processor is lost, we are all the more aware of how many of these items are currently missing from his collection. The items I would also have liked to have included in this issue of *Tonic* are articles on Bach's Clavier Partita in B $\flat$  BWV 825, Brahms's Horn Trio in E $\flat$ , Op. 40, his String Quintet in G, Op. 111 and Piano Pieces, Op. 119, and Reger's Clarinet Quintet in A, Op. 146.

Simpson's collection of programme notes consists of three general sections, all connected by a card index. The first section is the collection of printed programme notes for concerts of the most varied kind. These programmes are numbered and complete, though not entirely in consecutive order. It might well be that quite a number of printed programmes containing notes by Simpson never entered his collection because they were never given to him. The second section of programme notes are so-called "file copies", i.e. typescripts of the programme notes where the printed programmes are missing; these notes being mostly undated. Sometimes there are duplications between sections one and two but this is comparatively rare, as are rare duplications between sections two and three, the word processor files that are mentioned in the card index but which have survived as file copies (see above). Economic as Simpson was, there seem to be only few cases when he has been dealing with the same work more than once; usually he preferred to re-use what he had previously written.

It is highly interesting to have collected in this year's *Tonic* the complete currently known notes by Simpson on three German composers who form a kind of tradition, and I want to ask you not bear with me if the youngest composer follows the oldest one. Max Reger (1873–1916) was an ardent admirer of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), whom he praised as “the beginning and end of all music”. On the other hand, he came into personal contact with Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) just shortly before the latter's death, and it may even be that he met him in Vienna (there is evidence but no actual proof that this is the case). An additional text, long ago supplied by the late Richard Edwards, from the *Music Review* of 1949 adds more light to some of Brahms's music. The issue opens with two texts of a more general nature, giving some kind of “programme” and linking some of the following texts. I don't want to give too much information here but rather wish you to enjoy the diversity of this year's contributions, most of which are probably hardly known to you.

As I said before, nearly all of this material comes from Angela Simpson's collection, selected on my visit with Terry Hazell to Angela Simpson on 22 May 2008. I would like to express my gratitude both for her hospitality and help in compiling this issue of *Tonic* and for her kind permission to reproduce the texts. And I would also like to express my gratitude to Martin Anderson who at so short notice supplied his reminiscences of the late Vernon Handley.

Jürgen Schaarwächter

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## VARIATIONS AS FINALE

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Every work in these four concerts ends with a set of variations; at first sight, this idea might seem to threaten some sort of monotony, or even didacticism (the last thing you want at a concert!). But there is great variety, and every work is an individual masterpiece – some of them supreme masterpieces. Why have so many masters ended works with variations? The question is impossible to answer in a note like this, but we can touch on a few points.

On the face of it, variation form is static with its continual covering of the same trace; if it has large motion it is very large – from variation to variation, perhaps through groups of variations, building a grand edifice that is rarely dramatic like sonata. This is true of nearly all independent sets of variations from the Goldberg and Diabelli downwards. But when variations become part of a larger scheme, they may have a different function – perhaps to begin a work on a quiet plane, or to provide a period of repose in the midst of more active elements. As finale, a set of variations is likely to be pressed into a greater variety of uses. Essentially it is often a high plateau, reached after a climb or a variegated journey: or we might at length find ourselves strolling in gentle country after various breathless adventures: or we may in the end be staring at something at once static and active, fulminating majestically like a volcano or the finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony [in E minor, Op. 98]. In all these cases, calm or blazing, the variation-finale is a last steadying or canalizing of the work's energies.

In chamber music we rarely find the powerfully assertive kind of variation-finale; sustained orchestral weight seems natural to it. The most monumental finales in this series are in Beethoven's incomparable [Piano Sonata in C minor] Op. 111 and in Busoni's impressive and neglected second violin sonata, and both these in the end make a profoundly calm resolution. Beethoven of course will never do the same thing twice, and in [the G major and E major Sonatas] Op. 96 and Op. 109 the two finales, while they show varied movement and texture, like someone wandering happily in a beautiful country he has discovered, are in a sense opposites, the violin sonata moving to a lively conclusion that brings back the scent of the activity (not the material) of the sonata-form first movement, and the variation-finale of the piano work reacting from both the improvisatory first movement and the whip-like severity of the scherzo. Here Beethoven makes the finale as self-contained as possible, beginning and ending (like Bach's Goldberg Variations [BWV 988]) with the plain theme itself.

If a work is disturbing, like Mozart's D minor quartet [K. 421], or perhaps elegiac, like Brahms's Clarinet Quintet, the variation-finale seems to concentrate the nature of the work by distilling it in a succession of ways, and in both these cases (as also in Mozart's C minor wind serenade and the piano concerto in the same key [K. 388 and 491]) we end

with the impression of something ineradicable – almost the feeling of coming full circle, as if the music never really left the character in which it was born. This is a very Mozartean thing, and it is interesting that Brahms came to it late in life.

It is also likely that if a work demands a gently humorous conclusion the composer will find himself, like Nielsen and Rubbra, writing variations. Nielsen's Wind Quintet [Op. 43] finally makes comic play with a chorale, which represents the plateau reached when the work has moved undramatically from E to A. Rubbra's kindly and witty finale [in an unnamed composition, possibly the Third Violin Sonata, Op. 133] settles down to variations as a relaxation after deeper matters; this is a masterwork by a composer who, like Busoni, has not had his due.

There is also the type of variation-finale that, while it is happily relaxed or lives calmly, is an intellectual *dénouement* in the sense that it sums up the essence of some musical specific with which the work has been pre-occupied – an interval, or an oscillation between tonalities hitherto exploited on a broad scale and now encapsulated. Some may be surprised that one of the finest examples of this second kind is by the proverbially easy-going Dvorák. But his beautiful String Sextet [in A, Op. 48] is only one of many subtle works by this much loved and misunderstood master – loved usually in his less substantial works and otherwise shamefully disregarded.

These programmes, we hope, will stimulate the thought of enjoyment and the enjoyment of thought. The examples here are only a few of their kind, and a much larger series could be devised. But there is as much range here as could be got into four concerts emphasising the classics. If each work gives us its final settlement in a way possible only to variations, that involves none but the best and most artistic kind of monotony, the kind various as the leaves on the trees or the persons in the audience. Art, as Nielsen said, is the sound of life. Here is one aspect of it.

From a concert programme for the London Society of Chamber Music at the Purcell Room on 31 May 1982, containing Nielsen's Wind Quintet and Praeludium and Theme with Variations for solo Violin, Bach's Partita in D minor for solo Violin, BWV 1004, and Mozart's Wind Serenade in C minor, K. 388.

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## ON 'COMPLETING' UNFINISHED MASTERPIECES

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If a composer of genius leaves a major work unfinished, there's an inevitable temptation to have a go at finishing it. In 1928 on the centenary of Schubert's death, the Columbia recording Company actually organised a competition for a completion of his famous unfinished symphony [in B minor, D759]. There's the torso of a scherzo and trio, but no trace of a finale, which had to be entirely composed. The prize was won by Frank Merrick; but that magnificent and modest musician would have been the last to claim that his was more than an attempt. How could it be otherwise? After all, Merrick's ears belonged to the twentieth Century, and between Schubert and himself was a whole century of music of which Schubert had no inkling, but which had inescapably conditioned Merrick's musical mind. If Merrick were to try a completion of the kind Schubert might have made, he would have to wipe from his mind all he knew of later music – clearly impossible. Because it was impossible, all he could do was to attempt some kind of Schubertian pastiche – skilfully, no doubt, but hardly convincing in Schubert's terms. For Schubert was an original genius of a different age. Some might even think it impertinent to “complete” a work of such a master – but I'm sure Merrick didn't regard it as more than an interesting exercise, or game, even, and would never have advocated that the symphony should henceforth be performed with its new ending. Later on Gerald Abraham suggested that the real finale of Schubert's unfinished symphony was the B minor Entr'acte from *Rosamunde*, but I can't see that this totally unsymphonic piece is at all adequate, or a proper balance to those marvellous first two movements. Schubert did have trouble with finales – all the more reason for us to refrain from rashly trying to help him out, either by inventing music ourselves or transplanting pieces of his own.

Perhaps the most nearly convincing completion of an unfinished classic is Tovey's of the last fugue in *The Art of Fugue* [BWV 1080] – this would probably have been Bach's greatest fugue, yet Tovey's task, awesome though it was, was made a shade easier by the schematic nature of Bach's fugue and the fact that he was himself a contrapuntist of Bach-like ability.

We're faced with a slightly different case when the original composer is recently dead, and a pupil or friend with some knowledge of his intentions undertakes to finish off the work. The most famous case, of course, is Mozart's Requiem [K. 626] in which Süssmayr, with some such knowledge, seemed to do a hack job for him. It was a hack job and no mistake, and there have been other musicological attempts, more accomplished and scholarly, but in no case even claiming to provide what Mozart may have really wanted. There's also the case of Busoni's *Doktor Faust*, which he left with its last scene missing, supplied soon after his death by his pupil Philipp Jarnach – we can actually hear without difficulty the very point where Busoni stops and Jarnach begins. In our own time



Anthony Beaumont, rightly feeling unhappy about Jarnach's ending, has done another of his own, based on considerable research and insight – yet, impressed though we may be, we still can't say that the job has been done finally – only the composer himself could have done that. The one thing that may be said for finishing off the last section of a very big work like an opera (especially one by a neglected genius like Busoni) is that it makes the work more accessible, and an audience may be prepared to accept a competent but makeshift finish for the sake of the rest, provided it begins near enough to the end.

In such a case, and even more in the case of Deryck Cooke's work on the sketch of Mahler's Tenth Symphony, which was virtually complete from beginning to end, we may be grateful to any musician with the talent to make such material available to us in performable shape – Cooke himself was always adamant that this was no "completion" – he always insisted on describing it as "a performing version of the sketch". He knew better than most that if Mahler had got to the stage of fully scoring this symphony, he would certainly have made many alterations as he went along, so that the finished work would have been different in a thousand unpredictable ways. Even so, there was here a solid basis for putting the thing into playable shape, so long as strong claims weren't made for it. Several attempts have been made, I don't see how the job could have been done better than by Cooke, himself an immensely gifted musician with a rare insight into Mahler's mind.

We can reasonably accept that – but what are we to say about trying to knock together a projected work by a great master from a collection of fragmentary sketches? This has been attempted recently for both Beethoven and Schubert – a couple of tenth symphonies, no less! Schubert left various sketches for symphonies, most of them abandoned. In the case of the so-called "Tenth Symphony" the sketched ideas themselves are sometimes striking, but more often mere jottings that might have turned into something better if Schubert had persisted with them. I think he would have preferred them to be left alone in the state they were, rather than spun together in a so-called symphony that seems an awful come-down after the Great C major [D944].

The recent case of Beethoven's "Tenth" is even worse. It's been pointed out more than once that Beethoven's methods of sketching were such that he would pursue a concept for a long time by all sorts of shorthand means – sometimes ideas that seem crude are only outlines of the real thing – and then quite suddenly it would all "gel" – take form and life, become born all at once, so that all he needed to do was write it down. The process of sketching was the process of focussing the whole in his mind. The sketches themselves, taken note for note, were significant only for him. If we don't know this significance (and we can't) we have no hope of making such jottings turn into a living forth, especially if we can't be sure at what stage they are when we find them. At one point the *Eroica* [Symphony in E $\flat$  major, Op. 55] appeared to begin like this:

Ex. 1



Suppose Beethoven had died soon after, and somebody had got hold of the sketches at that stage? He would surely not have deduced the magnificent simplicity of the real thing!

Ex. 2 [gramophone recording: Beethoven Eroica, beginning, 14 Bars; 0'15"]

Moreover, the vital thing we can't get even from such sketches, however extensive, is momentum – the way the finished masterpiece *moves*, and this is a thing possible only to the master to whom the ideas occurred in the first place. It's difficult enough for the composer himself to try to finish an unfinished earlier work of his own, and this question of movement is bound up with the problem. In later years he may have a different sense of movement, and may not wish to recapture something he has lost or abandoned. How much harder, then, for another composer of a later age, and even worse for a non-composer, to make such intrepid attempts!

And now to one of the latest of unfinished symphonies [...], Bruckner's Ninth. Bruckner left about 400 bars of sketches for the finale, enough to tempt all sorts of rash ventures. He probably would have finished it if his well-meaning supporters hadn't bullied him into unnessecary and damaging revisions of his First and Third symphonies at a time when his health was seriously failing. The sketches begin with a fascinating idea – it floats in a kind of purgatorial tonal limbo:-

Ex. 3 [gramophone recording Chandos CHAN 8469: Bruckner IX, beginning for 0'26", to end of horn chord and flute phrase; this performance is too fast; if the Inbal (Samale/Maz-zuca completion, TELDEC 22292-42426-2) one is slower and more atmospheric, use that (it is, ed.)]

I use the word "purgatorial" intentionally. Bruckner was a naively devout Catholic. He believed implicitly in every Catholic teaching, including Purgatory. In the immediately preceding *Adagio* of the Ninth Symphony, the last movement he completed, there's a theme he described as his "farewell to life":-

Ex. 4 [gramophone recording: Bruckner IX, *Adagio*, letter B to C; 1'37"]

It seems more than likely, since Bruckner intended to dedicate the symphony to God, that the work was consciously a summing up of the composer's beliefs, in terms of a journey from the last stages of life to death, and perhaps beyond. The whole, as far as it goes, is like some vast funeral celebration, from its cathedral-like beginning, through the terrifying scherzo, to the slow movement's farewell to life. The very end of this *Adagio*, with its recall of themes from the 7th and 8th symphonies, has the uncanny stillness of the corpse on the bier:-

Ex. 5 [gramophone recording: Bruckner IX, *Adagio*, letter X to end; 1'16"]

What was to follow? If the symphony was to deal with a continuation of the journey after death, how could Bruckner, given the kind of beliefs he held, cope with such a situation? How, for instance, could he have the temerity to predict the extent of his own stay in Purgatory? How could he possibly visualise, let alone auralise, what for *him* were *unutterable* mysteries? For two years he wrestled with these terrible problems, while his health grew worse and his strength ebbed, the situation exacerbated by the futile revisions of earlier works. It wouldn't be surprising if his failure to finish the finale were due simply to exhaustion – but add to that the psychological difficulties created for him by his naive faith at this extremity of his life, and perhaps we can sense the impossibility of his task.

How impossible, then, for anyone *else* to weld this mass of only vaguely planned sketches into a convincing whole! And they *are* only vague; there's what seems like a sketched chorale, but it seems to me only a skeleton – if we compare it with the magnificent chorale in the finale of the Fifth Symphony, it seems only a succession of harmonies. First, then, the chorale in No. 5 followed by the sketch in No. 9:-

Ex. 6 [Bruckner V, finale, chorale]

Ex. 7 [Bruckner IX, finale, sketch]

In these sketches there's no momentum – only an arrangement that suggests no more than a certain sequence, without binding energy, the slow inexorable energy that informs all Bruckner's greatest movements. Even if this slow momentum were present (and there's absolutely no trace of it) the sketches go no further than the possible beginning of a coda, whereupon the bold completer must compose Bruckner's greatest climax for his, forgetting all the music he has known that came after Bruckner. Impossible, I say. I have the greatest respect for those who have tried, but neither William Carragan in America, nor Samale and Mazzuca in Italy, would claim to have "completed" this supremely unfinished or unfinished masterpieces. All these musicians would say is that they have provided a performable sequence of sketches, to give us an idea of the kind of sounds and shapes that were humming about Bruckner's ears as he was leaving the world, and including some, I'm afraid that were not. There's one passage in Carragan's coda (on the trumpet) that could have been conceived only after experience of Metro Goldwyn Mayer, something rather beyond Bruckner's ken.

Ex. 8 [gramophone recording Chandos CHAN 8469: Bruckner IX, finale, Carragan's completion, letter Xx, bar 657, fade at bar 672; from 20'17": 0'28"]

There is no way in which this symphony can be completed, which is why it will nearly always be performed as we have hitherto known it, three wonderful movements that are (dare I say almost?) finished in themselves. Perhaps Bruckner might still have touched them up in various ways I think I can suspect, but at least there's nothing inchoate about their grandeur, as there is about the remaining sketches. And perhaps the

awesome tearing of the veil at the climax of the Adagio, and the stillness that follows it, really is Bruckner's last word. Beyond that is either the unknown or oblivion, according to your guess or mine.

This text was written for a BBC Radio3 broadcast, 1989. There are two corrected word processor printouts in Angela Simpson's collection, one obviously a slight revision of the other.

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*THE ART OF FUGUE*  
with the original notes for the Brunel University performance  
of Robert Simpson's string quartet arrangement

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To listen to the whole of *The Art of Fugue* at one sitting is a marvellous experience if you can absorb it; it is, in fact, the only way of appreciating the vast unfolding of the great work, its progress from simplicity to profound complexity in the pursuit of a single theme, combined in diverse ways with itself and with other subjects. There is, however, no reason why fugues should not be taken out of context, or grouped in various ways, for each is an individual masterpiece. Contrapuncti I, IX, X and XIV should show this, as well as a growth of its own from simplicity to complexity. In Contrapunctus I Bach is concerned to display the main subject; it is severe and memorable, both of which qualities it must needs have if it is to serve (and survive) the most searching purposes of Bach's mind. The first fugue itself is simple in structure, entries of the subject in various harmonic regions being interspersed with beautifully composed free episodes. Contrapunctus IX is a lively fugue; it begins with a new subject in running quavers, across which the main theme eventually stretches itself with a kind of athletic nonchalance. A new theme also begins Contrapunctus X, this time reflective, even mysterious in character; it, too, is eventually combined with the main subject, and there is a prominent scale-figure that generates some exquisite episodes. This is one of the loveliest of Bach's fugues.

The last fugue in this group is also the last extant section of the whole work, but Bach left it unfinished. Sir Donald Tovey's magnificent completion of it is used this evening, in preference to the sentimental and frustrating practice of allowing the fugue to trail off into an over-awed hush ("Here the Master's hand faltered", etc., etc.). In this, perhaps the greatest fugue Bach ever wrote, there are (by the time Bach broke off) three new subjects; (1) a severe *cantus firmus*, like a plainchant, (2) a long flowing theme in mostly conjunct quavers and (3) BACH (H is German nomenclature for B $\flat$ ). These three themes had just reached a full combination when Bach's death intervened. It is obvious that one thing is missing, the main theme itself, which in fact will make a quadruple invertible combination with the three new ones. Tovey, with a superb sense of proportion and climax, and a contrapuntal mastery by no means inferior to Bach's, achieves the almost impossible feat of a just culmination to this wonderful work.

Notes for a Victoria and Albert Museum concert by the Hirsch Chamber Players on 26 January 1964,  
where four of Simpson's arrangements were performed.

Bach was working on the *Art of Fugue* when he died in 1750. It is a set of fugues in which he sought to demonstrate the possibilities of a subject common to them all. The subject itself is plain but strikingly memorable, and the fugues treat it with progressive elaboration, culminating in the unfinished Contrapunctus XIV, which Tovey magnificently completed (published in his edition of 1931). Bach's score is in vocal clefs, and the myth that it was not intended for performance has died hard; it is no mere academic study, but living music, and most of it so written that it can be played with two hands on a single keyboard. It has been arranged for many media, even for orchestra, but it is essential that the four parts should retain their identities throughout (not possible with colourful orchestral mixtures), and the string quartet is an ideal medium for conveying the beauty of four-part counterpoint with perfect clarity and sensitivity. But the tessitura of Bach's original D minor is too low for a normal string quartet – it would need one violin, two violas and a cello, or violin, viola and two cellos to maintain the original key without disturbing the integrity of the parts. In the knowledge that Bach never hesitated to transpose his own music for practical reasons, I have moved this work to G minor to make it accessible to the regular string quartet which, though it has a wonderful repertoire, is lacking in short pieces with which to open concerts (there is no need to play the whole *Art of Fugue* in one breath!). Amongst Bach's fugues are also four canons, on the same subject. These I have not included, believing them to be trial runs for a possible *Art of Canon*. *The Art of Fugue* is one of Bach's greatest works, and therefore one of the greatest in the world.

The first four fugues are the simplest, treating the subject alone, with no strettis or combinations with other themes, and with episodes of free polyphony separating its appearances. Nos. III and IV are based on the inverted subject. The first four fugues having exposed the subject with simple treatment, the next three show what can be done with it in combination with itself, inverted and overlapping itself at various intervals. These, naturally enough, are the most involuted fugues, though one would not immediately think so when listening unsuspecting to the beautiful and serene No. V; here the *stretti* (or overlappings) employ the subject with its inversion. The sixth fugue is in *stile francese*, familiar in the French overture of the period with its pompous dotted rhythms; here the subject is combined with overlappings of its own diminution (itself in shorter notes). No. VII is *per Augmentationem et Diminutionem*, and the combination of the original subject with its own diminution and augmentation (itself in longer notes) results in an astonishing continuous tissue of *stretto*; apart from the final cadential bars, there are only three subjectless bars in the whole thing. In Contrapuncti VIII, IX, X and XI Bach combines his original subject with new ones. The eighth is one of two three-part fugues in the collection and is a gloriously supple and vigorous example of how to write in three parts (much more difficult than in four). It opens with one of the new subjects, striding downwards and with a touch of chromaticism in it. This is then combined with another new subject, also moving downwards, like a stepladder – again with chromatic elements. These two are eventually combined with the original subject in a new rhythm, all three forming a

splendid triple counterpoint (that is, three subjects combined, any of them capable of fanning top, middle or bass, in any order).

The second of the four fugues in which Bach combines the original subject with others, No. IX is a lively essay in double counterpoint at the twelfth; that simply means that two themes are combined – (1) at the “normal” interval of an octave, and (2) at the twelfth (an octave plus a fourth), with quite different harmonic effect. This brilliant quick fugue is enjoyable whether or not you can follow these matters – which is as Bach wanted it. The new subject in running quavers is heard first, then the original one stretches itself over it in long notes, and the combinations at the different intervals occur periodically, with episodes between. Contrapunctus X is the third of the four fugues that concentrate on the combination of the main subject with others. It is one of the most beautiful in the whole cycle, notable for the serenity of its motion. It opens with the new subject, arching with inimitable grace. No. IX had a double counterpoint at the twelfth – this fugue shows one at the tenth (an inverted third, and the calm warmth of the whole is a result of this). The scale-figure in the first theme (the new one) gives rise to some lovely episodes. The XIth Contrapunctus is the grandest of the four fugues in which Bach combines the original subject with others; it is the culmination of this group and is certainly the most impressive completed fugue in the entire work, surpassed only by the supreme unfinished Contrapunctus XIV. Its subject-matter is the same as that of Contrapunctus VIII, but mostly inverted and much more strongly chromaticized. Unlike the other fugues in this group, it begins with the main *Art of Fugue* subject, but upside down and in the rhythmic form found in Contrapunctus VIII. The second theme is the same as the first in Contrapunctus VIII inverted, now climbing and accompanied by a rising chromatic scale. Then we hear also the “stepladder” subject from Contrapunctus VIII this time climbing – but soon it begins to go both up and down, and the triple counterpoint of Contrapunctus VIII is inverted, plus the chromatic scale. All this sounds very complicated, but the effect is of teeming music of great intensity.

Having written four simple fugues, three *stretto* fugues, and four in which the main subject is combined with others with various kinds of counterpoint, Bach now turns to the problem of totally invertible fugue – that is to say fugue in which all the parts together can be turned upside down from start to finish, note for note. This might seem to be an exercise of repellent dryness, but the exercise for Bach consists in doing this and making music at the same time. In Contrapunctus XII we find a straightforward simple fugue in four parts, followed at once by its inversion, but XIII is less obvious. It is a 3-part fugue – at least it was so written at first. But Bach was so delighted with it that he arranged it for two claviers and for this purpose added a free fourth part to the whole. This extra part has been used in the string quartet arrangement of the vivacious piece, in which the *recitus* is followed immediately by the *inversus*.

The last and greatest extant fugue of the cycle was left unfinished by Bach. The main *Art of Fugue* subject does not occur in it so far as it was written, but the three new subjects already used make with it a quadruple counterpoint to convince all but the most obsti-

nate. Accordingly, Tovey completed the fugue, making use of this quadruple counterpoint (all four themes able to combine with any one of them as bass to the others) and the result is so impressive that it is hard to tell when Bach ends and Tovey begins. It may reasonably be doubted that Bach himself would have ended the fugue very differently, and this magnificent conclusion is at all events preferable to the sentimental practice of allowing the music to trail off into thin air, like the spirit of the frustrated composer being dragged off to Heaven. The first subject is like a plainsong, or a chorale, the second is a flowing *andamento*, and the third is BACH (B $\flat$ , A, C, B $\flat$ ). Each is developed in turn, and Bach's manuscript breaks off at the moment when all three are combined. Since the main *Art of Fugue* subject has already been extensively developed in the earlier fugues, there would be no point in devoting a fourth section to it alone, and to bring it in as soon as possible with the other themes is artistically wise; this is what Tovey does. Like the rest of the *Art of Fugue*, this movement is transposed from the original D minor to G minor, to make it practicable for a normal string quartet. This means that when it first occurs BACH is E $\flat$ , D, F, E $\flat$ ! Purely musically this has no effect on the coherence of the music, and if anyone wishes to complain, we beg them to be content. The answer is BACH.

Notes for the Brunel University performance of Robert Simpson's arrangement of *The Art of Fugue*, 3 May–21 June 1980, by the Delmé String Quartet (Galina Solodchin, David Ogden, John Underwood and Stephen Orton). The performance was divided into several sections (Contrapunctus I–IV, V–VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII–XIII, and XIV), combining the Bach arrangements with quartets by Simpson and Beethoven. The Robert Simpson Society was founded on 21 June before the final concert.



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## MORE BACH

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### Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, BWV 1052

The sternest and grandest of Bach's keyboard concertos was probably written between 1729 and 1736, when he was at Leipzig. The origins of many of the concertos are not known, and it is quite likely (even fairly certain) that this particular work represents a keyboard arrangement of a lost violin concerto. The slow movement, particularly, seems to cry out for the violin, and it is not surprising that there has been more than one reconstruction. Performance on the piano is for once more satisfactory than on harpsichord, at least in the *Adagio* because of the cantabile originating with the violin, especially in a building the size of the Albert Hall. The other two movements are also undeniably impressive on the piano, and although Bach disapproved of the early pianos he inspected, it would be more than interesting to know what his reactions would have been to the present-day instrument. Here certainly is a work with the long and powerful sentences and trenchant rhythms the piano can deliver most finely – long sentences, indeed! Try holding your breath while Bach sweeps through his opening ritornello in both first and last movements – a good way of appreciating the richness and power of his invention. The severity and strength of this music are such as to merit no other comparison than with the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

From a Henry Wood Promenade Concert programme at the Royal Albert Hall on 28 August 1964.

### Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004, for solo violin

Its final set of variations, the famous Chaconne, renders this the greatest of all works for solo violin, the genius of which is fully embodied in it. Bach cuts down the number of other movements to make room for it, because it is on a vast scale, and it is not surprising either that it is often played independently or that it has been arranged for many other media. In any form it is one of the greatest and most comprehensive variation works ever written. Bach's deep familiarity with the instrument speaks from every bar, and we may never cease to wonder at the extraordinary variety of feeling and texture he extracts from it, all within the bounds of a single tempo. It has been suggested that the essence of Bach's solo string works lies in the power to suggest unequivocal harmony by means of a single line; this is only sporadically true, and much of the time Bach makes nonsense of the idea by being completely explicit about the harmony, with very frequent use of chords. The Chaconne is one of the supreme examples of a final set of variations forming a kind of spiritual plateau; perhaps it is unlikely that Bach thought of it in these lofty terms – it is more probable that he was out to show what he could do at a time when polyphonic violin playing was widely practised. He

was himself skilful with the instrument, though there seems to be no record of him performing Bruhns's feat of improvising a violin partita while adding a bass with his feet on the organ pedals.

From a concert programme for the London Society of Chamber Music at the Purcell Room on 31 May 1982.

Suite No. 3 in D major, BWV 1068, for orchestra

Bach's four orchestral suites were composed during his tenure of the post of *Kapellmeister* at Cöthen in the years 1717–1723. It was in this period that he was able to concentrate on concerted instrumental music more than at any other time, and it includes the Brandenburg concertos as well as a great deal of chamber music. He had at his disposal an orchestra of regular constitution and so was able to form orchestral habits for the first time in his life. The Third and Fourth suites are both scored for a fuller orchestra than the other two, and include three trumpets and drums, and the present work is the most often played of all four. Undoubtedly this is because of its second movement, the famous and exquisite *Air*, nowadays fortunately much less frequently murdered on the G string of the fiddle than it used to be. The other movements are characteristic secular Bach, beginning with an imposing French overture, whose broad introduction with its typically dotted rhythms leads to a great central contrapuntal *Allegro* that sweeps exhilaratingly along until it eventually returns to the introduction by way of *coda*. After the *Air*, the remaining three movements are notable for the elegance and ingenuity of their phrase-lengths; Bach was one of the greatest masters in this field, and his music is always full of delightful rhythmic surprises. When his intention is to entertain, as in these pieces, the surprises are made as much for his amusement as for ours.

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## REGER

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Suite in D major, Op. 131d, No. 2, for viola alone

Reger's solo string music is too often dismissed as merely dull and archaic, as this delightful little work will show. Unaccompanied string music is a subject dear to the obscurantist intellectuals, who talk plausibly about "linear harmony" and similar donnish bluffs. This frightens people away from such works, most of which are intended for enjoyment. We are told that the solo line is (or should be) at once its own melody and bass, that the composer is guilty of horrid impurities if our ears are tempted to supply imaginary harmony. Is it not time this Beckmesserism were tossed overboard? Bach, in his solo-sonatas, was content to leave the single line alone so long as its implied bass remained unambiguous: where doubt was likely, he obligingly supplied pointers in double or triple stopping, and the secret of his superiority to all other explorers in this field lies in the fact that he lived at a time when it was supremely possible for a stylised harmonic background to be taken for granted; this, of course, is coupled with his uncanny genius for the accurate placing of ambiguities and signposts at precisely the right moments. In Reger's day the chances of ambiguity are greater and they are rightly incorporated as an essential part of the style, the harmonic pointers often being delayed purposely beyond the crucial instants. Like Bach's, the music needs no accompaniment, not because it is "linear harmony" but because where it does not itself supply the harmonies it suggests them securely into the listener's ear. In making his point, Reger uses the simplest possible tunes and the effect is thoroughly charming and entertaining.

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Serenade No. 1 in D major, Op. 11

The two comparatively early Serenades of Brahms have always been neglected. The A major (No. 2 [Op. 16]) makes use of an orchestra without violins and so needs special conditions that tend to make its performances somewhat rare; but this delightful work in D major is scored for normal classical forces – yet we do not hear it as often as it deserves. It is sometimes remarked that the public prefers music without too many problems, that works with fanciful titles and good tunes tend to oust their more serious, finer companions. Yet can it be doubted that, if Brahms had omitted the minuet and second scherzo from this work and called the remaining four movements his First Symphony, it would have been heard much more frequently? It is entirely characteristic Brahms, it is highly organized, thoroughly symphonic; it has, moreover, many memorable melodies, scored with a sense of delight, to say nothing of great skill. But like the great orchestral serenades of Mozart it has suffered a little from its title; some of Mozart's serenades are greater works than some of his symphonies that get played more. Not that this work is on the plane of Brahms's four great symphonies, but it is at least as comparable with them as, say, Beethoven's First Symphony [in C major, Op. 21] is with the *Eroica* [in E $\flat$  major, Op. 55].

Brahms at first wrote this Serenade in the form of a nonet, for flute, two clarinets, horn, bassoon, and string quartet, and it was thus first performed in Hamburg in 1859. The composer was then twenty-six and already sufficiently notable for the prospect of a symphony from him to be exciting. But he had already discarded ideas for symphonies (one of them became the D minor Piano Concerto), and it was to be a long time before he ventured to risk comparison with Beethoven. He realized, however, that the nonet was really a full-blown orchestral work, and immediately after the first performance he orchestrated it, and presumably destroyed the original.

The influences of Haydn and Beethoven are marked; the opening horn theme may remind us of the finale of Haydn's last symphony [in D major, Hob. I:104] – but the great expansiveness of the continuation is completely Brahmsian, as also is the second theme with its wide span and luxuriously stretching slow triplets, while the development is of such breadth and resource as had not (at this time) been achieved by any composer since Schubert. The first scherzo is in D minor; its beginning is like a shadowy hint of the powerful second movement of the B $\flat$  Piano Concerto, and there is not a bar in it that could be by anyone but Brahms, not even in the more forthright, enthusiastic trio. In the slow movement the young composer, influenced no doubt by the *Scene by the brook* in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony [in F major, Op. 68], seems determined to attain the utmost in perfectly calculated indolence; not surprisingly he does not quite succeed, for his invention is somewhat dry compared with Beethoven's, and his conscientiousness not always of an apt kind; but there are many beauties, especially in the second group of themes. The charming pair of minuets is justly popular apart from the rest of the work,

and is one of the earliest examples of Brahms's love of the clarinets. Though its title is deliberately old-fashioned, it is one of the most characteristically Brahmsian parts of the Serenade. In the second scherzo Brahms humorously acknowledges his debt to the Beethoven of the Second Symphony [in D major, Op. 36], the Septet [in E $\flat$  major, Op. 20], the "Spring" Violin Sonata [in F major, Op. 24], and the "Pastoral" Piano Sonata [in D major], Op. 28 – all mixed into a glorious concoction. After this the final Rondo, like the first movement, is expansive and Brahmsian, of subtle design and the highest of spirits.

From a BBC Third Programme Queen Elizabeth Hall concert on 1 February 1969

### Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15

How many listeners realise that this colossal concerto was finished before Brahms was twenty-six? Its maturity and grandeur are such as to conjure visions of the formidable, experienced, middle-aged Brahms, with flowing beard and fierce, penetrating stare. It suggests the sort of man Carl Nielsen met in 1891, the ageing lion he described with such insight: "Brahms is of medium height, very squarely built, stands steadily and firmly on the legs and makes the impression of having great strength. He is very short-necked and a bit stopping, and if one sees him from the back, the head sits between the shoulders and the back is slightly rounded. His expression changes during the conversation, and now the eyes have a sarcastic, nearly vicious glance, now they become infinitely hearty and good. Much is said about his nasty tempers, and I can quite believe he could be frightfully biting, but then there are so many aggressive people, and I'm certain that it's only to that sort he gives the whip".

The D minor concerto, however, was begun in 1854, and it shows that Brahms's main characteristics were fully formed very early. It shows, firstly, the great individuality and power of his style and, secondly, the enormous strength of the discipline with which he applied himself to the larger problems of construction. His style was complete in his earliest published works and its fundamentals did not change throughout his life; what he did develop consistently were its polish, its clarity, and its architectural mastery. Compared with the B $\flat$  Piano Concerto of some twenty years later, for instance, this work does show a certain youthful looseness of form. Only the comparison, however, makes it seem so, and in purity, richness and sheer intellectual strength it far surpasses any other contemporary works. It can still stand beside Beethoven without embarrassment.

The tragedy it expresses in its first movement is, as is well known, connected with the attempted suicide of his great friend Schumann, an event that affected Brahms profoundly. His first intention was to write a D minor symphony, and he wrestled with sketches for a long time before discovering that much of the writing was really a new and exceedingly massive piano style. He also attempted to turn the work into a sonata for two pianos, but it eventually appeared in its present form in 1859. Its first two performances were flat failures; a typical criticism described it as "'three-quarters' of an hour of labouring and burrowing, straining and tugging – a product of hopeless desolation and aridity carried to its grave". Nevertheless its recognition as one of the greatest and most noble masterpieces in its field came slowly but surely.

From the outset Brahms shows that his intention is to compose a concerto in the great classical tradition of Beethoven and Mozart, in which the long orchestral *ritornello* assumes cardinal importance. Not for him were the debased and truncated devices by which lazy virtuosi made themselves works for display. And in changing the idea from symphony to concerto he achieved a feat that is rarely understood – he succeeded in turning a symphonic exposition into a vast and completely convincing orchestral *ritornello* whose function became diametrically different from that it was at first intended to have. Only a master of the first order could have pulled this off on such a huge scale. Brahms was already in that rank at the age of twenty-six.

Over the whole tragic, stormy first movement hangs a calm spaciousness that relates the tragedy to larger, objective issues. This, too, is the mark of greatness and maturity, and it ensures the poise and serenity of the fine slow movement, which Brahms himself described as a *Benedictus*, at least in its descending first theme. After this, determined energy characterises the final Rondo, with its muscular yet dignified themes and the wonderful length and cogency of its sentences. At the end of the whole work one is left with an impression of the exhilaration that comes of mastering a tragic problem, and musically what remains most strongly in the mind is the remarkable sureness with which Brahms controls and shapes sentences as long and grand as Milton's.

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### String Sextet in B $\flat$ major, Op. 18

In chamber music Brahms was happiest with a few extra instruments to satisfy the ripeness of his imagination and to give full rein to his generous polyphonic skill. So the mastery of the two string sextets is undisputed even where Brahms's quartet writing is called into question. This one, the earlier of the two, was done in 1859-60, when Brahms was 26, after the second of the two orchestral serenades (A major); these two pieces surpass anything else he was doing during this period. The B $\flat$  sextet is, moreover, an accomplishment, far beyond any of his contemporaries at his age.

This is clear from the outset, in the rich flow of the parts and the gorgeously self-assured dignity of the music – self-assurance without pretention, with the ability to see distances ahead; we are content to place ourselves in the hands of such a guide, sure of his clear sight and his knowledge of the terrain. From time to time there is a feeling of poetic mystery as the music shifts into foreign harmonic regions. The part-writing is as clear as it is rich.

The D minor slow movement is one of Brahms's most successful ventures into the Hungarian territory that so fascinated him, and Haydn before him. It is a magnificent set of variations on a theme started off by the first viola. Three variations increase in elaboration and animation; then come two in D major, the first beautifully fulsome and the second gentle, and a return to the minor brings back the theme.

A vigorous F major scherzo follows, with a faster trio in the same key (another Hungarian touch?), the tempo of which enlivens a coda. The easy-paced finale is a comfortable Brahmsian rondo with episodes of increased but never hectic activity, and always there is a sense of plenty in reserve. Again the control of the six-part texture is marvel-

lously effortless, and the reserve of energy facilitates a quickened ending that does not sound whipped up.

File copy concert programme note.

Quintet in F minor for strings (conjectural reconstruction of the destroyed manuscript by Sebastian H. Brown, made from the Pianoforte Quintet, Op. 34, and the Sonata for 2 pianos, Op. 34b.) (Stainer and Bell.)

Mr. Brown's work is remarkably convincing; not having heard his string quintet version played and having been able to study it only from a set of parts (no score) I must perforce reserve any committing judgment. But it is astonishing how much of the texture is cleared by this reconstruction, and I would be ready to believe that in performance it would reveal far more vital detail than do either of the extant and authentic forms of the work: I hope there will be frequent opportunity of checking this observation. On paper the advantages do not seem to lie entirely with the case for a string quintet, however, and it is difficult to contemplate sacrificing the piano in many instances. In the piano part Brahms has an infinitely greater chance of treating the bass in a free and muscular way than is possible on the cello, which cannot descend below the low C. What is magnificently rhythmic on the piano:—



becomes, when reduced to these terms on the string instrument, merely insipid: —



Another striking instance of the same phenomenon is shown by the following examples:

(a) pianoforte (left hand)



(b) two 'cellos



Here the pianoforte, in my opinion, has it: its clear ringing power is vastly preferable to the shuffling effect in the transcription. There can be no doubt, either, that Brahms makes wonderful use of the contrast between piano and strings, and many of his strokes in this connexion enhance the vividness of the structure in a way impossible in a string quintet. The opening of the *coda* of the first movement (*Poco sostenuto*), for example, though clearly the purest kind of string writing, gains marvellously in freshness when it is a piece of comparatively isolated string texture in the work for strings and piano, thus emphasizing the start of the *coda* in a very pointed way; in his symphonies Brahms provides many similar cases of what might be called "architectural orchestration". And the return of the piano with its disturbing urge to violent action is incomparably more incisive than the strings could be, simply by virtue of its utter contrast in tone colour. It may be that the real reason for Joachim's and his colleagues' failure to grasp the work in its string form was that its immensely expansive and fundamentally leisurely processes did not make themselves clear without some much more vivid tonal contrasts to drive home their points. Possibly this work eventually became a piano quintet for the same reasons that what was originally intended to be a symphony became the D minor Piano Concerto; in both cases the expansiveness of the thought demanded constant contrast and relief for the ear. It could be replied to this that the String Quintet has already made a good effect in actual performance: but that is not necessarily an honest answer, for Brahms's style (and, indeed, the actual music) are now familiar, there have since been things of far greater difficulty for the listener, and there is no longer any need to fear a lack of comprehension. The case is therefore different in practice, though not basically so aesthetically. Subject to my possible correction by the hearing of an actual performance, I would venture to assert that the Piano Quintet would appear more close-knit than the String Quintet, that the greater variety of its tone colourings would give it greater flexibility and power. Though there are many passages where the strings alone score over the mixed combination, it remains possible to find as many and perhaps more points where the reverse is true. That Brahms's disappointment in the original version when he heard it played was so great as to make him destroy it may not have been due to a bad performance. He must have heard many of his works ruined in first performances: fortunately he refrained from such drastic action in most other cases. We may therefore presume that he had good reason for altering the present score. This is not to deny Mr. Brown's illuminating piece of scholarship; on the contrary he has clearly made a profound study of the scoring of this work and great respect is due to him for the painstaking care with which he has accomplished the task. I do not, unfortunately, know the version for two pianos; it would be a good thing to hear all three versions within a short space of time. Here is an obvious job for the B.B.C. Third Programme, or, even better, for the recording companies, who could give us the chance to ruminate (in terms of actual sounds) on the matter. Why are they not scrambling to record them all? (The question is purely rhetorical.)

from *The Music Review*, February 1949, pp. 73-74



### String Sextet in G major, Op. 36

Although this, the second of Brahms's two string sextets, was mentioned by the composer as early as 1855 (quoted, indeed, in a letter to Clara Schumann), it was not published until eleven years later. It is probable that the work was not finally completed before 1865. The rich texture of a string sextet would be expected to appeal to Brahms, not only because he loved fullness of harmony, but because he revelled in the chance to produce an elaborate polyphonic fabric, strongly disciplined into a highly organized form. He takes complete advantage, of course, of the sensuous possibilities in the use of two of each stringed instrument, and this creates a tendency towards expansiveness. But Brahms was also the architect; this music is as finely constructed as any of his works that are written for less luxuriant resources, and the great variety of colour displayed in the sextet is never allowed to dominate for its own sake. Melodic beauty, too, is made to serve the structure rather than to rely upon merely beguiling the listener – though anyone who wants to enjoy only the sheer beauty of the sound will find himself easily able to do so.

The first movement is of great breadth – a kind of anticipation in certain respects of its counterpart in the later Second Symphony [in D major, Op. 73], firmly outlined, in a leisurely tempo, seemingly easy-going, full of warmth. Its opening also looks backward – to Schubert, and perhaps to his G major quartet [D887]; but this music is without the inner unease of Schubert's masterpiece, and Brahms is clearly taking enormous pleasure in manipulating harmony, polyphony, and the instrumental possibilities. An added reminder of the Second Symphony is the gentle coda (*Un poco sostenuto*) into which all this richness subsides. In the next movement (in G minor) Brahms reverses the usual functions of scherzo and trio – the former is relaxed and even indolent in its motion, while the latter is much quicker and full of lively syncopations. The *Poco adagio* begins in E minor, with an expressive theme of somewhat Hungarian character, accompanied by rich cross-rhythms; on this Brahms writes five variations of a highly elaborate nature, the third and fourth becoming very vigorous. The last variation is a gorgeous translation into E major, and it drifts into a quiet coda, having banished the minor for good. The finale combines much energy with an easy tempo; it is a very individual movement, with quietly swinging themes contrasted with soft, multitudinous, almost insect-like activity.

Programme note for a 1969 concert.

### Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor, Op. 60

Brahms's style did not change throughout his career. The same basic habits are to be found in his early piano sonatas as pervade his late works, such as the Fourth Symphony [in E minor, Op. 98] and the Clarinet Quintet. What did develop, however, was his power of discipline and his mastery of texture and tonality, which resulted in a deep refining process and an increase in expressive range. It is well-known that Brahms destroyed a very large proportion of what he wrote; thus, when his self-criticism led him to revise and so rescue an earlier work, one must treat the result with even greater respect than might be normal. This C minor Piano Quartet is such a case.

Originally, this work was sketched in the key of C# minor, then laid aside. Soon afterwards, in 1861-2, Brahms wrote the two piano quartets in G minor and A major, Op. 25 and 26. Clearly, he must suddenly have understood that he was on the wrong track, that the C# minor piece was false to the medium. In a flash, perhaps, it came to him that the only way to integrate this very difficult combination of instruments was to diffuse its texture contrapuntally; that is precisely what he had missed in the first attempt, and one can still see this in the first page or so of even the final revision of the work as it now stands in C minor. It is illuminating to compare this essentially orchestral page with the corresponding passage in the G minor quartet, where the texture flows evenly and naturally and is the purest chamber music, or with the sunny and freely expansive opening of the A major, in which the first entry of the cello shows at once Brahms's new and exciting grasp of the whole problem.

The C minor Piano Quartet was finally finished in 1875 and, despite its much earlier origin, it is a work of striking terseness and power, shot through with introspective conflicts. Brahms has not altogether eradicated his first clumsiness in handling texture, and piano and strings are not always perfectly balanced and contrasted, the former sometimes seeming lumpish and the latter like forlorn substitutes for orchestral strings. But these flaws may also be excused or explained as part and parcel of the work's inner emotional condition. Its dark, restless conflict forbids smoothness and polish and creates hesitancy. Of the three piano quartets that Brahms approved for publication this, though it is the latest, is the least "accomplished". It is without doubt, however, the most disturbing, emotionally, and the somewhat lesser mastery it displays is deeply bound up with the dark and tentative self-searching it expresses with such poignancy.

No work of Brahms begins with a more gloomy introspection than this. A hollow unison C seems to open a dark cavern, within which sepulchral phrases are heard. As if this were not enough, the tonality at once sinks further to B $\flat$  minor (a very bold stroke so early in the movement) and an even darker, deeper cavern yawns beneath us. The tragic quality of this music is such as to lead many performers to forget that the movement is plainly marked *Allegro non troppo* and to play it *andante*. Soon, however, the real *allegro* character asserts itself with the first *forte* and the opening theme is given a more virile determination. It expands into active, restless subsidiary ideas which move towards E $\flat$ , where Brahms lets the piano play one of his noblest tunes, consolatory, strongly and tenderly masculine. Its quiet close, however, gives way to a turbulent development which consists of two cumulative processes, and the moment of recapitulation is magnificently half-hidden behind clouds of tonal dust raised by an explosive climax. As so often with Schubert, Brahms completely alters the key-structure of his recapitulation which becomes a vital, constructive memory rather than a mere device for symmetry. The second theme begins now in G (the dominant, unusual at this point), but never achieves a triumphant statement, as it did before. Its continuation merges into conflict and, after a somewhat stormy coda, the movement falls to a soft, dim close.

The second movement is a scherzo, one of a genre typified by the more famous one in the F minor Piano Quintet, Op. 34. Here, however, the utterance is more elliptic, the rhythms less predictable, the tonal organisation at once wilder and more subtle. Instead of a middle section that throws out a grandly exultant tune in the major (as in the quintet) this movement has a melody that heaves itself about, ostensibly in G major, but strongly inflected with tonic and subdominant minor. Its sway is precarious and it soon gives way to a stormy return of the main material of the movement.

If one had not heard the two previous movements, one would imagine for the first sixteen slow bars that the *Andante* belonged to a cello sonata. The whole of the long theme (not, perhaps, one of Brahms's finest because of a rather weak half-close in the middle, in the manner of Spohr) is given to the cello, then to the violin, and it is no less than twenty-six bars of slow time before the viola enters! This movement sings gently, in elegiac mood, with two clearly differentiated ideas besides the main tune, both of these permeated by quiet rocking syncopations. The key is E major, the same relationship with C minor as Beethoven explores in his Third Piano Concerto [in C minor, Op. 37], but here Brahms gives it a different point. In the Beethoven Concerto the point is simply the mystery of the contrast (it is rammed home in the finale). Here, however, Brahms achieves a very real pathos by emphasizing E $\flat$ , for there is in all the other movements an unobtrusive but definite contest between G minor and major (the operative notes being E $\flat$  and E $\natural$ ). The slow movement's insistence on E tilts the balance in favour of major in the finale, though there are sombre doubts until the end.

The last movement is probably the finest in the work, and it shares something with the finale of the Third Symphony. Again Brahms leaves a long opening theme to one string instrument, in this case the violin. At one point the first movement of Beethoven's C minor Symphony seems dangerously close, so Brahms goes off with an impressive wrench into crotchet triplets to dispel the suspicion! The second group has two themes, the second being a choral[e] interspersed with cascades on the piano that may or may not have been inspired by Chopin's C $\sharp$  minor Scherzo [Op. 39] (remember that the original key of this quartet was C $\sharp$  minor). The movement eventually reaches a turbulent climax and falls into a kind of final twilight, with pathetic contradictions of minor and major. A determined gesture at the very end decides upon the latter.

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### Piano Concerto No. 2 in B $\flat$ major, Op. 83

Brahms refused to have anything to do with the current fashion in writing concertos; most of his contemporaries were "dispensing" with the "superfluities" of the so-called classical form, and omitting the usual opening orchestral *tutti*. This was not good enough for Brahms who realised that the smaller-scaled work resulting from such a practice was, in fact, no real concerto, but a debased form of *sinfonietta* with a part for a solo instrument. Many composers who took up this idea with enthusiasm were, of course, virtuoso pianists or fiddlers who were only too grateful to escape the task of writing a long stretch of orchestral music unrelieved by their own personal display, and their excuse for

this evasion was that a concerto had no need of such a long “introduction” as Mozart and Beethoven usually gave it.

Now this shows a serious misunderstanding. Mozart’s purpose in starting a piano concerto with a long passage for orchestra alone is introductory only in a very limited sense – the sense that there is yet one more thing of overwhelming importance to come (the solo instrument in all its glory). But a true introduction is something that heralds the real action of a play, a book or a piece of music; it is relevant, but it has no part in the action itself. In a great concerto by Mozart or Beethoven, the orchestral *tutti* (or *ritornello*, as it is called) is intimately bound up in the music’s action, which gathers momentum from the very first note. When the solo enters, ideas of its own are introduced, and these displace many of the ideas that the orchestra has already given out; the great fascination of the form lies in this subtle contest between solo and orchestra, a contest in which themes, keys, textures and rhythms are all manipulated with miraculous skill. The greatest master of this art was Mozart, who achieves marvellous subtleties in the recapitulation, blending the opening *ritornello* with the soloist’s own matter in a way that no-one has equalled since. All this Brahms understood, and he knew that to throw out the *ritornello* in the first movement was like trying to build a cathedral without buttresses. To him most of the concertos written by his colleagues were not cathedrals, but jerry-built shacks.

With all this in mind, no-one need be surprised that Brahms wrote bigger concertos than anyone before him; this B $\flat$  concerto of 1881-2 is the largest of the four he composed (including those for violin and for violin and cello). Not only are its individual movements on a huge scale, but there are four of them instead of the usual three. The writing for the piano is extraordinarily massive and brilliant, yet it gives the soloist few opportunities to show off his skill for its own sake; Brahms compels him to submit to the larger issues, and he is a soloist only in so far as he is in a minority of one. He makes up for this by diving very deeply into the technical resources of his instrument, and Brahms’s mastery of grand composition is such that, no matter how brilliant the pianism, it remains integrated in the texture of a magnificently unified canvas.

The first movement opens with a noble horn theme answered by the piano. “What”, you ask, “is all this talk about an opening orchestral *tutti*?” But this is a true introduction, in which the resources (soloist and orchestra) are displayed as *dramatis personae*. Then follows the real *ritornello*, a great flood of rich and varied orchestral tone, a procession of thoughts powerful and tender, stormy and serene. When the piano at length joins issue the full vastness of the design can be seen ahead, and there is not space enough here to describe its many ramifications. One moment that cannot be missed is the inspired *reprise* – the return to the recapitulation; below the softly gleaming piano part, the solo horn floats in like some deep-coloured ship under the Milky Way.

Brahms’s tongue-in-cheek explanation of the fiery second movement was that the first movement was “so harmless”. A musical reason is that the *Andante* is in the same key as the first movement, and would lose its effect were it not for the interruption of this *Allegro appassionato*, with its D minor mood and its shining D major middle section. The slow

movement opens with a beautiful cello solo, and is one of Brahms's broadest and deepest structures. Is it uncharitable to suspect that an unconscious reason why Brahms helped to suppress poor Schumann's Violin Concerto [in D minor] is that its slow movement anticipated this theme most poignantly?

Concerning the gay finale, one cannot do better than quote Tovey ..... " ... it is perhaps not misleading to say ... 'we have done our work – let the children play in a world which our work has made safer and happier for them'."

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### Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op.115

Most important works for clarinet have been written for particular players, and Brahms's late quintet was done in 1891 for Richard Mühlfeld, for whom he also wrote a trio and two sonatas. Together with Mozart's it is generally felt to be the most significant of clarinet quintets, and the fact that both works happen to end in variations gives us the opportunity to put them in the same concert. As already remarked, Brahms's variation-finale is akin, not to those in Mozart's Clarinet Quintet [in A major, K. 581], but those we find in his minor key works, where they distill the essence. There is something more than usually natural in Brahms's return at the end to the matter of the first movement – it is not like one of those romantic devices whereby a composer crudely resorts to a motto-theme to cover a loss of moment. Instead we feel as if it has been there all the time. Like Mozart, Brahms takes care not to give undue prominence to the clarinet, and interest is evenly shared between the instruments. But Brahms had a rare understanding of the instrument, so (as with Mozart) every time it stands out there is scarcely anything else in the world but four other entranced players. The character of the whole work is nobly elgtrolled, deeply and intelligently elegiac.

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### Six Piano Pieces, Op. 118

Brahms put some of his last and most concentrated thoughts into piano music, and Op. 118 ends with the loneliest and most isolated piece of music he ever wrote. All of them are intimate, but none so disturbingly as this. The first is impassioned, but ends softly in the major to prepare for the second, one of Brahms's gentlest and best loved thoughts. The energetic Ballade has a quiet middle section in the remote key of B major; it, too ends *piano*, in anticipation of the rhythmically subtle and mysterious F minor Intermezzo. This ends in F major, so ushering in the songlike Romance; like the G minor Ballade, this has a contrasting section (marked *Allegretto*) in a distant key, now D major. This is a key-relationship at least twice exploited by Beethoven (in the F major Bagatelle from Op. 33, and in the scherzo of the Pastoral Symphony). The gentle calmness of this Intermezzo does not prepare the listener for the alienation of the E $\flat$  minor piece, at first numbed, then precipitately protesting.

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