

## Brahms as Wordsmith\*

«**I** really wish I could be able comfortably to answer your valuable letter. But letter-writing is so little my thing that this time too I must console myself with an eventual meeting in person and then chatting to our hearts' content».<sup>1</sup> Brahms wrote this to Carl Reintaler, *répétiteur* and conductor of subsequent performances at the premiere of *A German Requiem* in Hamburg in 1867. But it was not at all the chore of putting words together on paper, which made Brahms “uncomfortable”. Saying so was a bit of finesse on his part. What made him uncomfortable was the question Reintaler had delicately put to him: why is Jesus Christ not mentioned by name in the *Requiem*, when he is patently the premise for the consolation this wonderful work gives to those in mourning for the dead?<sup>2</sup> Brahms ducked the question with splendid equivocation, and Reintaler was far too respectful to press. It does not appear that the matter was ever raised in conversation.<sup>3</sup>

Brahms was in fact an active and energetic wordsmith. He summed up the increasingly factious musical scene in Vienna over the next decades with the lapidary judgment, «I don't like us». (It is more incisive in the quirky German: «Wir gefallen mir nicht».)<sup>4</sup> In the early 1880s the tensions between (Wagnerian-) Brucknerians and Brahmsians were scalding

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\* I am grateful to the late Maestro Stephen R. Gerber for interesting me in this letter of Brahms's, grateful to Zdravko Blažeković for advice, to Carl Skoggard for being my editor and discussing the issues, and to Reinhard Oertli as well for discussion, also to David Brodbeck, William Horne, and Konrad Klek for their generous encouragement.

<sup>1</sup> STYRA AVINS, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 353. I have altered her translation in order to spotlight Brahms's actual dis-comfort. She translates *mit Behagen* “easily”, which is not wrong. Literally it means “with comfort”.

<sup>2</sup> See RONALD KNOX, *Brahms and His Religion*, «Il Saggiatore musicale», XXII, 2 (2015), pp. 215-249. The question and the letter are discussed at length.

<sup>3</sup> Reintaler would have told his daughter, who was devoted to preserving the full record of her father's encounter with the great man and was in contact with Max Kalbeck, Brahms's biographer.

<sup>4</sup> ROBERT HAVEN SCHAUFFLER, *The Unknown Brahms*, New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1936, pp. 86, 189-192, 213-222 *passim*. Brahms liked to note that the word *Tonkünstler* meant “potter,” ceramic worker, since *Ton* actually means clay as well as “tone.” He was twitting the Right in its crusade to remove such cosmopolitan Greco-Roman terms as *Musiker*, *Musik*, *Komponist* from the language and replace them with more genuine German national ones (*Tonkunst*). He ostentatiously preferred his Latin title *Doktor* to the German *Meister*.

again.<sup>5</sup> He received a letter, which put him far more poignantly on the spot than the letter from Reinthaler had. He could not dodge responding, certainly not by pleading a difficulty he had with words. His correspondent knew him too well.

She was Elisabeth von Herzogenberg (née Stockhausen), who had become his piano student in 1863, when she was a beautiful blonde sixteen-year old. Her photo was on his desk for decades, the only one of a woman.<sup>6</sup> Even better perhaps, she possessed a remarkable musical sensibility and was able to write down complicated passages she had just heard for the first time. Brahms treasured her opinion of his music and understood she was the kind of listener he wanted most.<sup>7</sup> She was the kind of listener, however, who was being replaced by more passive, less tutored audiences transfixed by the magical, not to say narcotic orchestral surging in post-Wagnerian musical style during the last decades of the century.<sup>8</sup> Brahms's musical world seemed under threat or in decline.

Elisabeth wrote an earnest, importunate letter requiring Brahms to pronounce clearly and finally to her whether there wasn't really something to be said after all for Bruckner's music... Bruckner's music! Brahms detested Bruckner's music.<sup>9</sup>

Elisabeth and her husband were in Leipzig where, amid an enthusiastic audience, they heard the Bruckner 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony (WAB 107) under Nikisch.

Revered Friend,

[...] Our friend Hildebrand will have brought back our greetings to you and recounted how upset we were over the Bruckner, which is to be forced on a person, and how we resisted compulsory vaccination. We had to put up with bitter taunts and insinuations that we are not capable of sensing the power of music where it does not appear in fully finished form and of recognizing talent which, even if not completely developed, nevertheless is present and entitled to demand sympathetic acknowledgment. It's not polished final products

<sup>5</sup> MARGARET NOTLEY, *Lateness and Brahms, Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, § 1.

<sup>6</sup> R. H. SCHAUFFLER, *The Unknown Brahms*, cit., pp. 272-273.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Compleat Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms*, edited by Leon Botstein, New York, W. W. Norton, 1999, p. 186.

<sup>8</sup> LEON BOTSTEIN, *Brahms and His Audience: The Later Viennese Years 1875-97*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, edited by Michael Musgrave, London, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 51-75. "Magical"/ "narcotic" are Botstein's terms; Max Kalbeck paraphrased Brahms's description of Wagner's music as «beating down the mind with a knout while unchaining the senses...» («den Geist knebelnde, die Sinne entfesselnde Kunst») in MAX KALBECK, *Johannes Brahms*, Tutzing, Hans Schneider, 1976<sup>2</sup>. R. SCHAUFFLER, *The Unknown Brahms*, cit., p. 185: Major Desjouxiaux «fell out of grace» with Brahms because he went to Bayreuth and heard the *The Ring* and *Parsifal*. Brahms thought him naive: «If you want to drink poison and not die, you have to have the antidote in your bag; and you don't have it yet!» («Wenn man Gift trinken will und nicht sterben, so muss man das Gegengift im Sacke haben; und Du hast's noch nicht!»).

<sup>9</sup> *Contra* S. AVINS, *Johannes Brahms*, cit., p. 619: «But despite the efforts of their respective followers to denigrate the music of the other... Brahms, unlike his friends, was not impervious to some of Bruckner's gifts». This is litotes; Brahms's contempt was vehement in private, as we shall see.

which are the most interesting things in art [we were admonished] but the hidden driving force behind a work, regardless whether that force succeeds completely or only imperfectly in attaining expression. That sounds perfectly fine theoretically, but in practice the question always is precisely what value we sense in this “driving force”, and if that is not high, then we can only take a negative, rejecting stance toward the work in question and calmly let the scorn of being Philistines be heaped upon us, Philistines who only recognize beauty when it comes in their own [party’s, Brahms’s party’s] colors. How we longed for you, for your broad back which could cover us and for one sound word from you which, with its deep living roots of experience is worth more than all the theorizing of clever people and the instinctive reaction of simple people! Who knows, perhaps you’d side with us simple ones – and I earnestly ask you to tell us so, with just a word, it would do us such good. Injustice in artistic matters is for people like us not less blameworthy than in humanitarian ones, and it pulls us down to be like narrow, ungenerous, anxious bystanders so afraid of overvaluing [new art] they fail to do justice to it.

Forgive this useless seeming letter, which could nevertheless only be written to you, for who apart from you could possibly have the answer we seek [?] Thanks again for the songs! – If Bruckner had written *Die Kränze* or *Die Liebende schreibt* or *Die Abenddämmerung* [Brahms’s op. 46/1, op.47/5, and op.49/5] I would look into this symphony six times over again to see whether some little solid gold coin wouldn’t turn up; but someone who was capable of the one, couldn’t have committed the other.

Farewell, forgive your nagging friend, but do answer even if only one word [underlined by her].

In old and new devotion,  
E. Herzogenberg<sup>10</sup>

She offers the standard apology for Bruckner, the one she heard, perhaps not for the first time, from acquaintances in the audience who reproved her lack of enthusiasm for the

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<sup>10</sup> «Verehrter Freund, [...] Unser Freund Hildebrand wird Ihnen unsere Grüße hinterbracht haben und Ihnen erzählen, wie aufgeregt wir hier waren über den Bruckner, der einem mit Gewalt aufgenötigt werden sollte, und wie wir uns sträubten gegen den Impfwang. Wir mußten uns bitter Stichelreden gefallen lassen und Insinuationen darüber, daß wir nicht fähig seien, die Kraft herauszuwittern, wo sie in unvollkommenem Gewande in die Erscheinung trete, und ein Talent zu erkennen, das, wenn auch nicht zur vollsten Entwicklung gelangt, doch vorhanden und berechtigt sei, sympathische Anerkennung zu fodern. Nicht die fertigen Resultate seien das Interessanteste, sondern die hinter dem Kunstwerk verborgene treibende Kraft, einerlei, ob es ihr ganz oder unvollkommen geglückt, sich zum Ausdruck zu bringen. Das hört sich theoretisch recht schön an, aber praktisch handelt es sich immer wieder um die Wertschätzung eben dieser treibenden Kraft, und wenn die keine hohe ist, so kann man doch nicht anders als sich ablehnend verhalten und das Odium des Philisters, der die Schönheit nur erkennt, wenn sie gerade seine Farben trägt, gelassen auf sich nehmen. Aber wir sehnten uns nach Ihnen und nach Ihrem breiten Rücken, der uns decken konnte, und einem gesunden Wort von Ihnen, das mit seinem lebensstrotzendem Untergrund von Erfahrung mehr wert ist als alles Theoretisieren der Klugen oder die bloßen Instinkte der Einfältigen. Aber wer weiß, halten Sie’s mit uns Einfältigen, und das bitte ich Sie ernstlich nur mit einem Wort zu sagen, es würde uns sehr wohlthun. Die Ungerechtigkeit auf künstlerischem Gebiete ist für unsereins doch nicht geringer anzuschlagen als auf menschlichem, und es drückt uns dazustehen wie engherzige, ungeneröse und ängstliche Merker, die vor lauter Angst zu überschätzen, keine Gerechtigkeit mehr walten lassen. Verzeihen Sie diesen, Ihnen wohl unnütz scheinenden Brief, der aber doch nur Ihnen geschrieben werden konnte; denn wer hat, außer Sie [sic], die Antwort die wir suchen. Dank nochmals für die Lieder! –wenn Bruckner *Die Kränze*, geschrieben hätt’, oder *Die Liebende schreibt*, oder *Abenddämmerung* [all songs of Brahms’s, of course] dann wollt’ ich mir die Symphonie sechsmal anschauen, ob nicht doch ein verborgenes Goldstückl herausfallen müßte; aber die Sache liegt wohl so, daß, wer das Eine könnte, das Andre nicht mehr verbräche! Leben Sie wohl, seien Sie nachsichtig mit Ihrem Quälgeist, aber antworten, wenn auch nur ein Wort. In alter und in neuer Ergebenheit, E. Herzogenberg» (Leipzig 5. Januar 1886), MAX KALBECK, *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Heinrich und Elisabeth von Herzogenberg*, Berlin, Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1908<sup>2</sup>, p. 47.

music. Could she not perceive its deep driving power («treibende Kraft») beyond its unpolished, not fully realized state? This is the Romantic Age, of course, and lack of polish is not a damning fault, she fully recognizes («das hört sich theoretisch recht schön an»). But here the underlying driving force appeared to her to be not worth much.

She has answered the question and rehearsed her answer to Brahms. If this is her genuine response, then isn't the matter settled? Why is there a tone of badgering in her letter?

She perceives, of course, that he and Bruckner are antithetical, «someone who was capable of the one could not have committed the other» (the verb for committing a crime or an indecency or even just a *Dummheit*). Nevertheless, she is saying, in the most flattering way possible, that Bruckner does *not* have to be as good as Brahms to have some value still (not a gold coin perhaps), something of value which she is failing to find.

This pains her. For the appreciation of music, of art, is not just a matter of taste and opinion. There is a moral dimension to it. She shudders at the thought of possibly being, in her repugnance, unjust or even ungenerous to Bruckner. This is the Romantic Age. Such a failure to be open-minded and open-hearted seemed hardly less heinous to her for being in an aesthetic, artistic matter than in any other human affair. It is a magnificent thing she is saying.

Can we possibly imagine anyone in the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century or today sensing that not to like a musician's music, an artist's art, is a weighty act, full of grave personal responsibility, not merely some possible, perfectly acceptable personal preference? That was the Romantic Age.

She knows and avows she knows that Brahms's understanding of music is vast and wise, indeed infallible. He is her rock, her refuge. She delicately cites a bit more of the reproof she suffered in Leipzig – that she is a partisan in music [a Brahmsian partisan] who only sees beauty when decked in the colors of her party [Brahms's]. It is a mortifying thought to her.

She had started her letter with the regret, really the wish, if only Brahms had been there with her and her husband that evening to take the blows on his «broad back» and approve her rejection. They had not known what to say. He would have. But then she continues to write and (beautifully) to ponder the issue. By the end, as she goes thinking on and on, she is inadvertently putting Brahms on the spot, lovely, ingenuous, fine musical spirit that she was.

She is demanding that he pronounce. She is no longer interested in his ratification or defense of her opinion. That is what the passage on treating her (and her husband) as “simpletons” is about. What she is beseeching Brahms to do is to “tell her the truth of the matter”! Is there value in Bruckner’s music that she is simply not able to discern, yes or no? For if there is, she will work to learn to find, understand, and appreciate it. (We certainly hear that in her voice!)

Moreover, she anticipates that he is reluctant to do this. She understands that she is putting her friendship with Brahms, which she cherishes, under strain, putting it to a test. «Please forgive your nagging *Quälgeist*», she pleads, but then she does not relent: «answer [imperative], even if only one word».

It is not his support she now wants. It is no longer a question of «don’t you agree... tell me if I’m wrong?» Then she would not have to put him on the spot, and the matter could silently pass. She has talked herself around to seeing the question now as one of morality and of truth. She must insist that Brahms declare the truth to her.

This is the demand Brahms will not confront. He will not say yes, there is value in that music, and he cannot say «maybe, you should look into it for yourself, I don’t want to tell you what to think», though this is what his translator thinks he is saying.<sup>11</sup> He cannot himself pronounce the “no” ex cathedra, as it were, and become Elisabeth’s oracle on this matter as she wants. It is one thing for him to joke about being music’s “antipope” in Vienna (music’s *caput mundi*), it is something else for him literally to step into the position of leader (and therewith, founder) of a literal “Brahmsian [anti-Wagner-Bruckner] Party”.<sup>12</sup> This is a line he struggled to the end of his life not to cross. He cannot lose Elisabeth, whose friendship he cherishes as much as she his, but he cannot satisfy her and be her sage, not on this matter, not on the matter of Bruckner. What he can do is become her follower, and it is to this end with (delightful) care and skill that he manipulates the conversation.

Here is Styra Avins’s translation, the standard one now:<sup>13</sup>

Most Revered Lady,<sup>14</sup>

I understand: You have allowed Bruckner’s symphony to surge over you, and now when

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<sup>11</sup> S. AVINS, *Johannes Brahms*, cit., p. 618.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Notley refers to Brahms’s «self-protective reticence», M. NOTLEY, *Lateness and Brahms*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> S. AVINS, *Johannes Brahms*, cit., p. 619.

<sup>14</sup> This sounds laughably stilted in English, but she had addressed him as *Verehrter Freund* first, which was not stilted since it only acknowledges that he is a world-famous composer and she an adoring fan as well as good friend. That is the context for Brahms’s turning the compliment back at her.

people lecture you about it, you don't trust your recollection and its impression on you. You may safely do so, anyhow; your wonderfully delightful letter says clearly and distinctly all there is to say – or what one has said oneself, and wished one had said so well. You won't mind, will you, that Hanslick is also of the same opinion and read your letter with all due reverence and pleasure? Incidentally, a symphony and a quintet by Bruckner are in print. Try to get a look at them to steel your sentiments and judgement – me you definitely don't need.

Everything has its limits. Bruckner lies beyond them, one cannot make head or tail of his things, one cannot even discuss them. Nor him as a person. He is a poor deranged man whom the *Pfaffen* of St. Florian have on their conscience. I don't know whether you have any idea what it means to have spent one's youth with the *Pfaffen*. I could tell you such stories about that and about Bruckner...

Together with a Philistine here, he takes care of the teaching of composition! Apart from that, the Wagnerians and other riff-raff present him as a ludicrous figure, that is, they play fast and loose with him when four-hand arrangements of his symphonies are played, etc.

Ah, such ugly things one shouldn't even discuss with you!  
Highly vexed and deeply devoted and with warm greetings  
your

J. Br.<sup>15</sup>

Brahms makes a splendid opening, «I understand....». He offers himself as a wise guru, just as she wanted. But he deliberately misunderstands, falsifying the terms of Elisabeth's quandary. He is making it out that she and her husband had felt initial revulsion against Bruckner's symphony, but then found themselves lectured at by estimable people in Leipzig and have now lost confidence in the accuracy of their first impression. We have

<sup>15</sup> «Verehrteste, Ich begreife. Sie haben die Symphonie von Bruckner einmal an sich vorübertosen lassen, und wenn Ihnen nun davon vorgeredet wird, so trauen Sie Ihrem Gedächtnis und Ihrer Auffassung nicht. Sie dürfen dies jedoch; in Ihrem wunderbar hübschen Brief steht alles klar und deutlich was sich sagen läßt – oder was man selbst gesagt und so schön gesagt haben möchte. Sie sind doch nicht böse, daß auch Hanslick dieser Meinung ist und mit aller Andacht und allem Vergnügen Ihren Brief gelesen hat? Übrigens sind eine Symphonie und ein Quintett von Bruckner gedruckt. Suchen Sie sich einen Einblick zu verschaffen, Ihr Gemüt und Urteil zu stählen. Mich brauchen Sie gewiß nicht. Alles hat seine Grenzen. Bruckner liegt jenseits, über seine Sachen kann man nicht hin und her, kann man gar nicht reden. Über den Menschen auch nicht. Er ist ein armer verrückter Mensch, den die Pfaffen von St. Florian auf dem Gewissen haben. Ich weiß nicht, ob Sie eine Ahnung davon haben, was es heißt, seine Jugend bei den Pfaffen verlebt zu haben? Ich könnte davon und von Bruckner erzählen. Hier besorgt er mit einem Philister ... zusammen den Kompositionsunterricht! Sonst benutzen ihn die Wagnerianer und anderes Gesindel als Popanz, d.h. sie treiben Schindluder mit ihm, wenn seine Symphonien vierhändig gespielt werden usw. Ach, von so häßlichen Dingen soll man mit Ihnen gar nicht reden! Höchst verdrießlich und tiefst ergeben und herzlich grüßend Ihr J. Br.», M. KALBECK, *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel*, cit., p. 53, and Id., *Johannes Brahms*, cit., III, p. 408, footnote. By the early 20th century, when Kalbeck was publishing Brahms's letters and putting together a huge Brahms biography, Bruckner had fully entered the canon, and Brahms's condemnation of the music had been overturned, as Kalbeck ultimately expressed it, by the *Superarbitrium* of History. Kalbeck's first reaction, however, was embarrassment at his maestro's misjudgment, not equanimity, and his first recourse was to suppression (his word, «Der im Briefwechsel Brahms-Herzogenberg [1906] von mir unterdrückte Schluß des Briefes...»). He suppressed the end of Brahms's letter to Elisabeth of 12 Jan. 1885 containing Brahms's withering assessment of Bruckner as composer and man. He then bethought himself better and produced the suppressed part in a footnote to the biography containing a number of other anti-Bruckner utterances by Brahms found in other sources and memoirs, M. KALBECK, *Johannes Brahms*, cit., III, p. 408, footnote. The original German had to be pieced together from two printed editions a good half dozen years apart. Kalbeck made no change to Elisabeth's missive.

already heard the thesis of the “lecture”: perceive the “driving force,” not the “unpolished state.” Elisabeth had already disposed of it and not at all lost touch with her initial reaction. Nonetheless, Brahms needs to re-evoked that moment because it was then – coinciding with the beginning of her letter – that what Elisabeth only wanted (and regretted not having) was Brahms’s support for her opinion. Well, he’s here with that now!

«You have [had the Bruckner symphony] surge over you». «Surge over you» sounds fun to us. In our lifetime, we like the experience of music surging over us. We are heirs of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Wagner-Bruckner “music of the future” and enjoy and want to be engulfed. We are that future of *Zukunftsmusik*. Brahms was not.

The verb he used, *vorübertosen*, however, does not really have the natural majesty or exaltation of our word “surge”. Instead he is “reminding” his friend that she had had Bruckner’s music storm, crash, bang, roar, and rage in front of her, more clatter than the grand swelling of ocean waves (the way an actual Bruckner-lover might have put it). *Vorübertosen* makes the event both destructive as well as inscrutable, maniacal, and it is the perfect choice of just a single word to transport Elisabeth out of her moral quandary back to her first unmitigated displeasure with Bruckner *while only agreeing with her*.

«Your wonderfully delightful letter says clearly and distinctly all there is to say – or what one oneself would like to have said and wished one had said so well». Brahms is referring to himself, of course. Instead of pronouncing, he congratulates Elisabeth on having already pronounced better than he ever could. He apologizes for showing the letter to Hanslick, who read it with «all due reverence and pleasure». Hanslick was the principal music critic of the leading (liberal, *bildungsbürgerlich*) newspaper of Vienna. Hanslick’s complete agreement should certainly put to rest any anxiety of hers that she might have been straying from good judgment. Then Brahms points out that two scores of Bruckner’s are already in print (Quintet in F-major, WAB 112 and Symphony no. 3 in D-minor, WAB 103).<sup>16</sup> She should peruse them... to “steel” (*stählen*), steel her afore-mentioned admirably astute rejection of Bruckner’s music.

Notice that half the letter, the first two of four paragraphs, are devoted to telling Elisabeth what happened to her, what she experienced, suggesting that a kind of disorienting post-traumatic reaction to the post-symphonic “lecturing” and all that *Vorübertosen*

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<sup>16</sup> Avins translates Brahms’s *Übrigens* as «Incidentally», as if Brahms were just giving incidental information. This makes him sound disengaged, but, on the contrary, he is telling Elisabeth she does not need to rely solely on her memory of her first impression: just take a peek inside those two scores and you will plainly see again how dreadful Bruckner is. *Übrigens* should be translated “moreover” or “furthermore” here.

had set in: «as a result you don't trust your memory or impression». If this were true, Brahms would not have had to devote the two paragraphs to telling her; she would have told him. Brahms is, of course, not rehearsing her experience, but rewriting it. His final wise charge (look into the two scores) is to steel herself against sliding again into the self-doubt he tells her overtook her on that occasion. It is to steel herself in her rejection of Bruckner's music without his deliverance of the authoritative word, *no*, there is no gold coin to be found anywhere there: «...me you definitely don't need» is the master stroke!

The translator has done well to carry over the word *Pfaffen* from Brahms's original. Styra Avins tells us in a footnote that it is «a mildly derogatory term for Catholic clerics».<sup>17</sup> But how mild or severe really depends on Brahms's own sense of it, for instance, in remarks taken down by Richard Heuberger.<sup>18</sup> When the anti-Semitic Karl Lueger was elected vice-mayor of Vienna, Brahms was equally scathing toward anti-Semites and *Pfaffen*: «Now it's happened and along with this we'll have *Pfaffen*-management [of the city, *Pfaffen-Wirtschaft*] too. Were there an anti-*Pfaffen* party, that would make some sense. But anti-Semitism is insanity».<sup>19</sup> There is nothing "mildly" derogatory to the word in Brahms's mouth. It expresses sheer disdain.

Brahms's anti-*Pfaffen* vehemence, while authentic and deep (as we shall further see), also serves a strategic function in managing his letter to Elisabeth. It serves as an apology for Bruckner, why his music is incomprehensible and abominable. The *Pfaffen* have rotted his brain. He is a deranged man, «a poor deranged man», *ein armer Verrückter*, and *tosen*, the root of the verb *vorübertosen*, is just what a *Verrückter* can be expected to do, to rage and bang incoherently. Elisabeth need not reject Bruckner's music with revulsion: she may reject it with pity and compassion in her heart! It's not that poor man's fault.

On the basis of her translation, Avins is wrong to declare that Brahms «declined to provide [Elisabeth] with any anti-Bruckner ammunition of his own». To be sure, the first thing Brahms has done is not to add, but to subtract her doubts whether she is being fair. He scotches them. Her initial rejection of Bruckner, he tells her, represents as fine and clear

<sup>17</sup> S. AVINS, *Johannes Brahms*, cit., p. 619.

<sup>18</sup> Avins considers Heuberger a reliable witness, *ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> «Jetzt ist es da und damit auch die Pfaffenwirtschaft. Gäbe es auch eine 'Antipfaffenpartei', das hätte noch Sinn. Aber Antisemitismus ist Wahnsinn», RICHARD HEUBERGER, *Erinnerungen an Brahms*, Tutzing, Schneider, 1976, p. 82. See WALTER FRISCH, *Musical Politics Revisited, Brahms the Liberal Modernist vs. Wagner the Reactionary Conservative*, «The American Brahms Society Newsletter», XIII, 1 (1995), pp. 1-3: 3. Bruckner said he was not anti-Semitic, but he was president of the second, newer Wagner Society in Vienna, the one which refused admission to Jews. See MARGARET NOTLEY, *Brahms as Liberal: Genre, Style, and Politics in Late-Nineteenth-Century Vienna*, «19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music», XVII, 2 (1993), pp. 107-123: 111. Brahms shared with his Jewish friends a certain abhorrence for the incoming *Galizianer* (lower-class Eastern Jews).



and true a musical judgment as ever can be: «all there is to say» (as if that were all she had said). Then he brings in Hanslick. Brahms tells her, her anti-Bruckner sensibility has brought her to the top, has brought her [up] to himself and Hanslick (at the top of Parnassus). How much more effective is this in steeling her first impression!

And there is yet more ammunition Brahms adds, for he supplies a genetic theory why Bruckner's music is incomprehensible and grotesque. We don't have to revile the man, just the music. (Brahms does use one judgment, though, for both man and music, essentially "unspeakable").<sup>20</sup> Brahms is a forceful *epistolographe*, and he is in control of this exchange, not really standing aloof or declining to wade into the clash, but not the leader of his troops.

In her introduction to her translation of the letter, Avins proposes that Brahms himself was not the settled and acerbic "denigrator" of Bruckner's music he actually was, but that the antagonism was really on the part of rival subaltern followers of the two great composers.<sup>21</sup> That Brahms directed "at least one" commission to Bruckner «and obliged the new director of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* to perform his music» does not alter the picture we get from Brahms's own words, though it does tell us what the new director thought the situation might be.

Bruckner was the senior composition professor at the Vienna Conservatory, and Brahms a leading musical light of the city and of the *Gesellschaft*. Brahms found the public scurrility of the reviewing and counter-reviewing distasteful, but he was venomous in private. That he was «in sorrowful attendance» at Bruckner's funeral, he explains in his own words, «I will be next».<sup>22</sup> We must not think of Brahms as readily uncivil or churlish in public. (He could get drunk).<sup>23</sup>

What was wrong with Bruckner's music exactly? Elisabeth has perhaps not been decisive enough in telling us. Clara Schumann, also writing to Brahms, makes the case more

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<sup>20</sup> Avins translates «one cannot make head or tail of his things, one cannot even discuss them. Nor him as a person». But *hin und her* does not mean "head or tail", it means "back and forth". There can be no two sides to evaluating Bruckner, Brahms is expostulating, getting hotter under the collar: this is not even something one can debate about. Not only is Bruckner's music unintelligible, the whole phenomenon of it and the man himself are an enormity beyond words, «kann man gar nicht [darüber] reden».

<sup>21</sup> See footnote 9 *supra*.

<sup>22</sup> MICHAEL MUSGRAVE, *A Brahms Reader*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 106. Bruckner was nine years older. Brahms demurred from passing judgment on the early music in Vienna of Hugo Wolf or young Gustav Mahler, which he also found perplexing. M. KALBECK (*Johannes Brahms*, cit., III, p. 409, footnote) reports, definitely secondhand, he said he lacked the proper feel or understanding for what the next generation was up to.

<sup>23</sup> The *contretemps* with Karl Goldmark, RICHARD SPECHT, *Johannes Brahms, his Life and Work*, English translation by Eric Blom, London, Dent, 1930, pp. 185-186. Brahms had certainly been drinking.

precise: «with you one thing develops wonderfully out of the other». Of Bruckner's *Third*, she wrote in the same letter: «Ja, a horrifying piece (*greulich*es Stück), nothing but patches one after another and much bombast, moreover, even impudent length, *unverschämte Länge*».<sup>24</sup> (The characterization *unverschämt* was extremely harsh in good 19<sup>th</sup>-Century society, and we cannot forget that it was Robert who coined the beautiful expression, heavenly length, *himmlische Länge* for Schubert's music).

Music lovers today may easily fail to understand that Brahms's famous description of Bruckner symphonies as «boa constrictors» was not an act of Romantic naturalistic appreciation, but sheer scorn.<sup>25</sup> He was referring to the lump or bulge of orchestral elation passing barely digested (without development, proper *Durchführung*) lumping slowly down the symphonic alimentary canal. It is a vivid image, verbally too clever, perhaps, by half, but it has been accepted as authentically Brahms's.<sup>26</sup> (It lacks the authority of Clara's grand vituperation, *unverschämte Länge*.) The complaint in the boa constrictor metaphor is that the music is grotesquely unintelligent and unproportionate, the boa a monster.

Many of Brahms's anti-Bruckner utterances are second-hand reports, as Avins points out.<sup>27</sup> But the letter to Elisabeth we have been examining is definitely not, and I think it legitimates one of the most intricate, interesting word-play barbs of Brahms's.

For the denunciation of monstrous unproportionateness is hammered away at again in a short tirade of 1895 noted down by Dr. Heinrich Groeber. What makes it seem plausible that Brahms himself framed the utterance is that its force draws from a fierce, not to say difficult and dense anti-*Pfaffen* pun like nothing we ever see in Elisabeth, Clara, Hanslick, or other fine or rude Brahmsians.<sup>28</sup>

It begins defensively, «his piety – that's his business, it doesn't concern me». The next sentence can only be opened out gradually: «But these willful [sudden, arbitrary, unsupported] alterations of dimension (*Meßvelleitäten*) in the music are disgusting to me,

<sup>24</sup> Clara Schumann, *Johannes Brahms, Briefe aus den Jahren 1853-1896*, edited by Berthold Litzmann, Leipzig, Breitkopf & Haertel, 1927, II, p. 296 (15 Dec. 1885).

<sup>25</sup> M. KALBECK, *Johannes Brahms*, cit., III, p. 409 footnote: «Glauben Sie denn, daß ein Mensch unter dieser unreifen Masse auch nur das Geringste von diesen symphonischen Riesenschlangen begreift...».

<sup>26</sup> CARL DAHLHAUS, *Nineteenth Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, p. 271.

<sup>27</sup> S. AVINS, *Johannes Brahms*, cit., p. 618.

<sup>28</sup> We remember that Kalbeck was reluctant to face Brahms's anti-Bruckner sense at first, see footnote 15 *supra*. The second-hand reports he thereafter then attributed to Brahms must have seemed to him unavoidably authentic.

quite repugnant. He [Bruckner] hasn't a clue about musical coherence, no idea about orderly musical build-up».<sup>29</sup>

*Meßvulleitäten* is a pun. *Velleities* is a word we have in English too, and it means the mere haphazard, unstructured wishing or wanting, say, of a child with no sense of turning wish into purpose and putting purpose to effect (which suits Brahms's estimation of Bruckner). But the German is not at all a proper technical or musical term, and it really does not mean «velleities of dimension, velleities of scale», from pianissimo to blasting fortissimo (*tosend*) and back again without intelligible motivation, for that would be *Maßvulleitäten*, if anything. It is not a pre-existing word. Brahms is coining a term and making a pun on it at the same time! The grotesque mismanagement of musical dimension (*Maß*) in Bruckner's music is a consequence of his *Pfaffen* piety, "Meß-", pun on the word for "[holy] mass."

In this light, a turn of phrase in his letter to Elisabeth is a pun as well: «Everything has its limits. Bruckner lies beyond them, one cannot make head or tail of his things...».

There are limits, boundaries, intelligible lines or borders, and why is Bruckner oblivious of them? «Bruckner liegt jenseits». Brahms could have more concretely said, Bruckner goes over the line, stands on the other side of the border, those necessary, elementary principles of musical discourse; he is ignorant, disregards them, whatever. Note that "beyond" is an adverb here, not a preposition.<sup>30</sup> As adverb it is common in German as an allusion to heaven. «Bruckner lies beyond», lies [in the great] beyond. Of course in Vienna in 1895 everyone knew that Bruckner was not dead. Why is Bruckner unspeakably oblivious of the lines of coherent musical discourse? Because his brain is already dead and gone to heaven: that's what the *Pfaffen* have done to him.

#### NOTE

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<sup>29</sup> «Seine Frömmigkeit – das ist seine Sache, das geht mich nichts an. Aber diese Meßvulleitäten sind mir ekelhaft, ganz zuwider. Er hat keine Ahnung von einer musikalischen Folgerichtigkeit, keine Idee von einem geordneten musikalischen Aufbau», M. KALBECK, *Johannes Brahms*, cit., III, p. 409 footnote.

<sup>30</sup> Avins's «lies beyond them» obscures the pun. As a preposition, *jenseits* does not have any other worldly connotation whatsoever. But in a letter excoriating the effect on Bruckner's brain of the *Pfaffen* of St. Florian, that adverbial allusion (without prepositional object) was not accidental.