Clara Schumann's 'grey pearl': the final piano works of Johannes Brahms

It is commonly agreed that the four collections of piano pieces Op. 116-119 represent the pinnacle of Brahms's writing for piano, the much-loved fruit of a late flowering of his work after it had seemed momentarily that he had gone into retirement in 1890 at the (early !) age of 57. The stimulus for his return to composition came from an unexpected direction, given that his most recent muses – and romantic interests of this most celebrated of musical bachelors - had been young female singers: the contralto Hermine Spies (1857-1893) and the Italian mezzo-soprano Alice Barbi (1858-1948).[1] Now it was rather 'Fräulein Klarinette', whose instrumental possibilities he discovered thanks to his encounter with the clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld, who sparked a new bout of creativity. It was for Mühlfeld that Brahms wrote his Op. 114 Clarinet Trio and Op. 115 Quintet during his summer stay in 1891 in Bad Ischl, a fashionable Imperial resort town not far from Salzburg. It was also here in 1892 (Op. 116-117) and 1893 (Op. 118-119) that he wrote the 20 piano pieces on the present recording (although some may have dated from an earlier period).

The first person to hear the second set was the remarkable pianistic prodigy Ilona Eibenschütz (1873-1967). Born in Budapest as the thirteenth and youngest child of a Synagogue cantor, she made her international debut at the age of 9 and subsequently studied with Clara Schumann in Frankfurt, meeting Brahms for the first time when she was 13. Like him, Ilona and her family spent their summers in Ischl (where the 'Waltz King' Johann Strauss also resided, with other sojourners including Gustav Mahler and the conductor Arthur Nikisch), and Brahms had lunch with them weekly. In a fascinating BBC radio talk given in 1952, Ilona Eibenschütz read out her 'Recollections of Brahms' that she had written under her married name Mrs. Carl Derenburg for the *Musical Times* in 1926, illustrating her remarks with musical examples. She related how the composer shared with her 'a few exercises' (the Op. 118 and 119 collections) that he had recently written:

> He just tried the pianoforte, and then began to play – the G minor Ballade, Intermezzo, Rhapsodie in E flat; in fact, all the Clavierstücke, Op. 118 and 119! He played as if he were just improvising, with heart and soul, sometimes humming to himself, forgetting everything around him. His playing was altogether grand and noble, like his compositions. It was of course the most wonderful thing for me to hear these pieces, as nobody yet knew anything about them. I was the first to whom he played them.[2]

Ilona would go on to perform Op. 118 and 119 in London in 1894 and later included movements from them in a 1903 Gramophone & Typewriter recording that she made in Paris. While her unique connection with Brahms makes these audio documents of historic importance, it needs to be noted that Clara Schumann, writing to the composer on February 1, 1894, distanced herself from her brilliant student's interpretation:

> In London they are writing very searching criticisms about the new pieces which Ilona has played. Much of what they say is very good, although it is hardly possible, after only one hearing (particularly in a large hall) to understand all the subtlety, depth and greatness of them. Moreover, between ourselves, I do not believe that Ilona understands them as they need to be understood. She goes too quickly over everything.[3]

There can be no doubt that Clara's own shadow looms heavily over these piano pieces. There is no space here to go into detail about the complexity of her relations with Brahms over four decades; it suffices to say that his final piano works helped to bring about their definitive reconciliation after a conflict which had threatened the friendship which meant more to Brahms than any other. For all his frequent partying, famously garrulous behaviour and flippant remarks in Vienna and Bad Ischl[4], Brahms was essentially a loner.

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[1] Brahms told Ignaz Brüll that she was the only woman whom he considered marrying in his mature years, with Brüll himself hypothesizing that he may well have proposed unsuccessfully to her, the bone of disagreement being Barbi's wish to have children. See Clive, Peter, *Brahms and His World: A Biographical Dictionary* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 17-20.

[2] Ilona Eibenschütz (Mrs Carl Derenburg) "My Recollections of Brahms" in *The Musical Times*, July 1, 1926, p. 598-600;

[3] Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms, p. 248.

[4] Brahms's legendary insult-laced humour led the critic Julius Bauer to call him 'the greatest *Schimpfoniker* in the world', *schimpfen* meaning 'to curse'), an epithet which greatly amused the composer. See Clive, *Brahms and His World*, p. 25-26.

In 1894, he misanthropically remarked: 'I have no friends ! If anybody tells you he is my friend, don't believe him!' More serious still was a confession the following year that bordered on despair:

> Apart from Frau Schumann I'm not attached to anybody with my whole soul! And truly that is terrible and one should neither think such a thing nor say it. Is that not a lonely life! Yet we can't believe in immortality on the other side. The only true immortality lies in one's children.[5]

This quote indicates the extent to which it was Clara Schumann's friendship, perhaps more than all the many public honours bestowed to him, that gave Brahms a sense of meaning in the final years of his life. This was especially acute given his deep awareness of his mortality, with no consolation either in thoughts of an afterlife (even if Brahms' attitude to religion was a complex one on which scholarship is not unanimous) or of his descendants, of whom he had none. The fact that a serious and apparently intractable disagreement had arisen between Brahms and Clara immediately prior to the composition of the Op. 116 and 117 piano pieces (centred around her displeasure with his editorial role in publishing a revision of Robert Schumann's Fourth Symphony without consulting her) was therefore a source of great pain to both sides.

Here it should be emphasized that, although Brahms is normally regarded the most conservative of Romantics (especially in the 1890s when his anachronism was palpable in the artistic world of the *fin-de-siècle*) it should not be assumed that he was a stranger to strong emotions and that they did not influence his work. It would be more accurate to say that he confined emotional outpourings to his music as a cathartic safe haven – where his classicizing tendencies and compositional rigour moreover kept them on a short leash. When speaking, he would frequently bury his true sentiments under layers of irony and sarcasm in order to keep them out of the public gaze, yet they did not escape the attention of perceptive observers, among them his future biographer Max Kalbeck. In Bad Ischl, Kalbeck once caught sight of Brahms in the forest, staring into the distance in a state of apparent possession, his eyes lit up like those of a wild animal[6]; on another occasion, he heard him composing in his home on the Salzburgerstrasse to the accompaniment of 'the strangest growling, whining, and moaning (*ein befremdliches Knurren, Winseln und Stöhnen*[7]), which at the height of the musical climax changed into a loud howl'. The sound was so bizarre that Kalbeck thought that Brahms had acquired a dog(!), but on opening the door to the piano room, he found the composer alone, his beard wet with tears.[8] Although Kalbeck's account gives no date for this strange incident, it is understandable that the more recent biographer Jan Swafford should have linked it to the composition of the last piano pieces at a time when Brahms was not only affected by his strained relations with Clara Schumann but also by a spate of deaths around him, above all that of his sister Elise.

In any case, the news of the appearance of Brahms' Op. 116 and 117 triggered a desire on Clara's part for reconciliation with the composer, to whom she wrote on September 27 :

> Unfortunately, on the occasion of your last visit, I was unable to rid my heart of the bitterest feeling that it harboured against you… But enough of this ! Nothing makes me more miserable than these disputes and explanations. Am I not the most peaceable person on earth ? So let us, dear Johann, let us strike a more friendly note, for which your new pianoforte pieces, about which Ilona has just written to me, afford the best opportunity, if you will only take it. Greeting you with the same old affection, I am, Your Clara.[9]

In her diary, she wrote in November 1892 that the new works had

> proved a real source of delight - full of poetry, passion, sentiment, emotion, and having the most wonderful effects of tone… interesting from beginning to end. In these pieces I at last feel musical life stir again in my soul […] As far as fingers go, these things of Brahms's are not difficult, except in one or two places, but the soul requires fine interpretation, and one wants to know Brahms well in order to render them as he meant them to

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[5] Quoted in Swafford, Jan, *Johannes Brahms: a Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), p. 600.

[6] 'Seine Augen starrten geradeaus ins Leere und leuchteten wie die eines Raubtieres, – er machte den Eindruck eines Besessenen' (Kalbeck, Max: Johannes Brahms, vol. 3 (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1913), p. 247.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See Swafford, p. 579-580.

[9] Litzmann, Berthold (ed.), *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms 1853-1896*, vol. II (New York: Vienna House, 1973), p. 212.

> be played. I have been studying them with great affection, and I believe that I play them as he would wish. How they make one forget much of the suffering he has caused one.[10]

At their final meeting in October 1895, according to her daughter Eugenie, Clara played Brahms the *Romanze* Op. 118 n. 5 and the 'E flat major' Intermezzo (which may either have been Op. 117 n. 1 or, if Eugenie's assignment of the piece to Op. 118 is correct, the tragic E flat minor Intermezzo that ends the collection, which nonetheless seems less likely):

> A little while after she had finished, Mamma was sitting sideways at her writing-table; her cheeks were gently flushed and her eyes shone as though illuminated by a light from within. Brahms, who was sitting opposite to her, was evidently touched with deep emotion. 'Your mother has been playing most beautifully to me,' he said.[11]

This moving scene serves to underscore the essentially *private* nature of these final piano works. There are admittedly moments when Brahms adopts the grand manner, such as the three *Capricci* of Op. 116 nos. 1, 3 and 7 or the *Rhapsody* that concludes Op. 119, and he mentioned at one point to his publisher Simrock the idea of turning some of the pieces into an orchestral suite. The pervading tone nevertheless remains one of intimacy, attaining at times to an unparalleled sense of melancholy. Nowhere is this more evident than in the B minor *Intermezzo* Op. 119 n. 1 with its memorable and harmonically daring cascades of descending thirds. Initially, Brahms sent it to Clara with some trepidation on account of these 'discords' (to his conservative ear, which had never accepted the experimentation of Liszt, Wagner or the young Richard Strauss), almost apologizing for them:

> These may be all right and quite explicable, but you may not perhaps like them, in which case I might wish that they were less right but more pleasing and more to your taste. It is exceptionally melancholy, and to say – "to be played very slowly" is not sufficient. Every bar and every note must be played as if *ritardando* were indicated, and one wished to draw the melancholy out of each one of them, and voluptuous joy and comfort out of the discords.[12]

Happily, the composer's fears proved unfounded. In two letters of June 1893, Clara first described her delight in the 'bitter-sweet piece which, for all its discords, is so wonderful', then employed a metaphor which, in its very simplicity, perhaps captures the essence of this evergreen music as well as words can:

> I almost require a treasure-chest to keep all the jewels I have received from you, and now comes this further exquisite addition. They are pearls. The one in B minor which I received the other day is a grey pearl. Do you know them? They look as if they were veiled and very precious.[13]

Four years later, both Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms had left this world. The Op. 116-119 collections stand as a testimony both to their long friendship and to their stature as giants of 19th century music. If they can be regarded as the final representatives of a 'classical' Romanticism that was already the product of a bygone age in their own lifetimes, their artistic legacy remains a timeless one.

Peter Bannister, March 2026

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[10] Litzmann, Berthold, *Clara Schumann an artist's life based on material found in diaries and letters*, translated by Grace E. Hadow, Vol. II (London : MacMillan / Leipzig : Breitkopf & Härtel, 1913), p. 420.
[11] *Memoirs of Eugenie Schumann* (New York: Dial Press, 1927), p. 172.
[12] *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms*, vol. II, p. 230.
[13] Ibid., p. 230.