Life beyond Schopenhauer: considering the Met's *Tristan und Isolde* and Brahms's *Vier ernste Gesänge*

This essay and the accompanying recording of Brahms's Op. 121 are offered in memory of American conductor John Nelson on the first anniversary of his passing on March 31, 2025. Some of the remarks on Brahms were first made in a pre-concert lecture prior to a performance conducted by John Nelson of the Brahms Requiem in 2011, which was also the work that he directed in his final concert on March 23, 2024.

I.

Rarely in living memory has an opera production been as eagerly anticipated and engendered as much comment (both in the mainstream media and in the blogosphere) as the New York Met's new ***Tristan und Isolde***, with Lise Davidsen and Michael Spyres in the title roles, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin and with stage direction by Yuval Sharon. I hope that readers expecting a review will not be disappointed if I say that, having followed *Tristan* via the March 21st broadcast rather than live, I do not feel authorized to offer one. Nor do I have any desire to react in print to the sometimes heated reactions that the production has sparked on the part of some who insist on comparing the singers (one of the main protagonists being a good friend of mine) with great Wagnerians of the past. I will only say here that I found the broadcast truly compelling, while acknowledging that a part of the enjoyment was due to the Met's use of body microphones and sophisticated audio engineering. I take note of the many commentators who found the balance in the house (or rather in some *parts* of it, according to Joshua Barone in the *New York Times*) seriously skewed in favour of the orchestra; as one who has both worked on the music staff of a large opera house (the Bastille in Paris) and on the production side of audio recording, I can echo the remark of novelist and critic Garth Greenwell in a fascinating extended review on his Substack: 'what a difference a mixing board makes!'

My principal interest in Greenwell's highly perceptive piece in the context of the present article is however philosophical rather than purely musical, my attention having been drawn to it by its enigmatic and provocative title "An Opera Against Life". This partly relates to Greenwell's largely negative evaluation of Yuval Sharon's production and particularly the set, in which the singers found themselves in a huge tunnel and 'scoured, antiseptic spaces', viewed by Greenwell as 'hostile to human drama'. One may or may not share this assessment; what is more interesting, in my opinion, is his deeper discussion of the 'rapturous beauty' of the work itself as being '*not on the side of life*'. This goes to the heart of things, in that Greenwell is referring to the overwhelming influence on Wagner's *Tristan* of the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, 'philosopher of pessimism'.

As Greenwell notes, what makes the opera/music drama so radical, perhaps 'unassimilable' even 160 years after its first performance, is not just its novel musical language. A parallel shock is generated by its central Schopenhauerian idea, rooted in Oriental philosophy and unforgettably expressed in Isolde's *Liebestod*. We are not simply dealing here with the affirmation that human suffering and the impossibility of earthly fulfillment can only be transcended in death. In itself, this is a relatively familiar notion and one not incompatible with the broad lines of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Wagner's radicality rather lies in breaking with that tradition in *Tristan* in the way that he conceives redemption from the world's ills, if indeed the word 'redemption' can be used at all. Isolde's death for love becomes an ecstatic release in which individual consciousness dissolves, drowned in the universal cosmic breath, the Nirvana-like *Welt-Atems wehender All*. The *Liebestod* constitutes both an apotheosis and an *extinction*, which is why Greenwell can say that *Tristan* is ultimately not a life-affirming opera.

Where Greenwell's reaction to Yuval Sharon's production becomes particularly intriguing is in relation to his controversial ending, in which Isolde gives birth to Tristan's child, who is left in King Marke's arms as the opera comes to a close. On one level, Greenwell admits that this innovation is both dramatically implausible

(given the implicit timeframe of the action) and a betrayal of Wagner's whole philosophical concept: 'The opera is supposed to sink to an ending, not suggest a rebirth'. And yet, paradoxically, he sees it as 'the production's single inspired choice', not least because of its emotional appeal, enhanced by the fact that the soprano Lise Davidsen has recently given birth to twins. Greenwell's praise for Sharon is admittedly tempered by the suggestion that his 'sabotaging' was intended to make things more palatable for the Met's telecast audience. At first glance this might sound like an accusation of intellectual cowardice or capitulation to sentimentality. Yet in spite of this, the reviewer appears to see Sharon's decision to conclude *Tristan* with new birth as a justified rebellion against Wagner-Schopenhauer, sacrificing conceptual coherence *in the name of life*.

This is of course Greenwell's personal take on the ending, but it is revealing to the extent that it appears to testify to an instinctive reluctance, doubtless shared by many, to accept Schopenhauer's bleak worldview in its full pessimistic force. Western civilization has admittedly known a certain penetration of Asian philosophy since the 1960s, particularly in its consumer-friendly New Age adaptations that make some serious practitioners of Buddhism shudder. Yet Western thought remains marked by a deeply ingrained 'preferential option' for life that recoils at the *celebration* of the extinction of individual existence, whatever the degree of artistic sublimity or philosophical argumentation with which the notion may be portrayed.

II.

It is well-known that Wagner ultimately distanced himself from Schopenhauer's metaphysical stance, moving in *Parsifal* to a position closer to Christianity (albeit in a highly personalized conception of it). It is however interesting to see how another reader of Schopenhauer and musical giant of the Romantic era grappled with similar issues of life and death right at the end of the 19th century. Ironically, the composer in question is none other than the arch-opponent of Wagner's 'Music of the Future', Johannes Brahms, whose wrestling with Schopenhauer is nowhere more apparent than in his final published composition, the ***Vier ernste Gesänge*** (*Four Serious Songs*) Op. 121 of 1896.

Born into a practising Lutheran family in Hamburg in 1833, Brahms essentially lost his religious faith – or at least its dogmatic elements - in the 1850s when he came into contact with European intellectual circles during his time with Robert and Clara Schumann. He would later claim that he had already ceased believing in the immortality of the soul at the time of composing his *Deutsches Requiem* in 1867; if this seems hard to reconcile with the ringing affirmations of eternal life found in much of the work, it is certainly true that in his final decade, Brahms made no bones about his agnosticism and the role of Schopenhauer's writings in shaping his thinking. This was encapsulated in a meeting on March 26, 1896 between Brahms and the staunch Catholic Anton Dvorak (whom Brahms greatly admired as a composer), as recounted in 1910 by Dvorak's son-in-law, the composer Josef Suk :

> Then faith and religion were discussed. Dvorak, as everybody knows, was full of sincere, practically childlike faith, whereas Brahms's views were entirely the opposite. '**I have read too much Schopenhauer**, and things appear differently to me,' he said … Dvorak was very reserved on the way back to the hotel. Finally, after a very long time he said: "Such a man, such a soul – and he believes in nothing, he believes in nothing!"[1]

The *Vier ernste Gesänge* are an extended meditation on death, written while Brahms was not only deeply conscious of his own mortality but also of that of Clara Schumann, who died on May 20, 1896, thirteen days after the composition of the song-cycle was finished. In his final years, Brahms's decades-long and complex friendship with Clara was one of his main reasons, if not the only one, for living. He had become, if not exactly

[1] Quoted in McKenna, Daniel Beller, *Brahms and the German Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College, 2005), 31. Emphasis mine.

a misanthrope, certainly a famous loner, who occasionally gave voice to despair at his unwanted solitude, as Clara's daughter Eugenie Schumann recalled in her memoirs:

> Once, during the last years of his life, he went so far to say in an outburst of moodiness, 'I have no friends; if anyone tells you he is my friend, don't believe him!' We were speechless. At last I said, 'But, Herr Brahms, friends are the best gift in this world. Why should you resent them?' He looked at me with wide-open eyes and did not reply.[2]

It is not hard to find a resonance between such episodes and the brooding intensity of much of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, in whch there is frequently a sense that Brahms is deliberately seeking to go as far as he can in his negativity. The texts of the first two songs, *Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem Vieh* and *Ich wandte mich*, are particularly provocative, as the composer was well aware: in relentlessly emphasizing the futility of earthly existence, they could conceivably have been penned by Schopenhauer, but are in fact drawn from the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes. Brahms nonetheless took a certain irreligious delight in openly describing his songs as 'godless' (and even feared that they might be censored in Catholic Austria). The prominent Brahms researcher Nicole Grimes has recently shown comprehensively, on the basis of a study of the composer's own Biblical readings, how he systematically omitted any reference to the deity in choosing verses for his Op. 121 songs.[3] It is therefore understandable that much Brahms scholarship should have seen the *Vier ernste Gesänge* as metaphysically pessimistic, if not downright nihilistic. And it is undeniable that Brahms reaches his most Schopenhauerian moment midway through the second song, as the author of Ecclesiastes affirms that it is better never to have lived than to witness the evil being committed with apparent impunity in the world.

With the third Lied, *O Tod*, things however become more ambiguous. After a severe opening much in the style of the first two songs, stressing death's bitterness for those in the prime of life, there is a turn to the major in the second half of the piece. Death is now portrayed as a source of comfort and release for the suffering.[4] Had the cycle ended here (and Brahms scholars since his first biographer Max Kalbeck are agreed that songs 1-3 were conceived separately from n. 4), the ending would be indecisive, with the listener left uncertain as to how to interpret Brahms' intentions. It would still be possible – at least theoretically - to assimilate the comforting tone of the final lines of *O Tod*, despite their Biblical origin, to a Schopenhauerian notion of death as a liberating dissolution into the void of the *Weltall*. According to such a reading, the song-cycle, stripped of its finale, would indeed be a thorough-going deconstruction of Judeo-Christian hope, made all the more subversive by its Scriptural quotations.

From a biographical perspective, such an interpretation of the *Vier ernste Gesänge* would indeed seem to fit well with Brahms' own recorded statements on religion. There is nonetheless a major stumbling-block for such a view: the overarching trajectory of the cycle itself, and above all the final song, *Wenn ich mit Menschen- und mit Engelzungen redete*, a setting of the Apostle Paul's famous hymn to love in 1 Corinthians ch. 13. It is perhaps not merely being provocative to call the last of the *Vier ernste Gesänge* Brahms's own *Liebestod*, on the condition of understanding 'love' as Pauline 'charity' rather than as Wagnerian sensual union. Its central section is emphatically not about death as Nirvana, with the dissolution of individual personality. Instead, eternal life is evoked as the apotheosis of 'I-Thou', face-to-face relationship (to employ the categories of the great Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas): *Wir sehen jetzt durch einen Spiegel, in einem dunkeln Worte, dann aber von Angesicht zu Angesichte.* (*Now we see through a mirror, darkly, but then face to face*). In her *Liebestod*, Isolde sings of her delight at the prospect of being 'unconscious' (*unbewußt*), but in Brahms's

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[2] Schumann, Eugenie, *The Schumanns and Johannes Brahms: the Memoirs of Eugenie Schumann* (New York: the Dial Press, 1927), p. 156

[3] See Grimes, Nicole, *Brahms's Elegies: The Poetics of Loss in Nineteenth-century German Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 184-189.

[4] This concept of death as final healing – a familiar trope in Lutheran thought, expressed musically in Bach's *Komm, süßer Tod*, had already been explored by Brahms not only in the *Requiem* but also in the songs *Todessehen* Op. 86 n. 6 and *Auf dem Kirchhofe* Op. 105 n.4.

Op. 121 n. 4,any 'cloud of unknowing' is ultimately and eternally dispelled: *Jetzt erkenne ich's stückweise; dann aber werd' ich's erkennen, gleich wie ich erkennet bin* (*Now I know in part, but then I will know just as I am known*).

It might be objected here that Brahms's setting of I Corinthians 13 does not necessarily imply his endorsement of Pauline theology. It is true that Brahms was not averse to radical re-interpretation and occasionally flagrant distortion of Biblical texts for his own purposes. This even extended, disturbingly, to political instrumentalization in the case of his *Triumphlied* (1871) op. 55, in which the 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' of Revelation ch. 19 is clearly not Christ but the Kaiser(!), lauded as the unifier of Germany. However, as regards the finale of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, there is no sense of irony or mis-appropriation of Biblical language in Brahms's quotation of the Apostle's letter to the church in Corinth. His choice of text was not a matter of external necessity, and if his intention was to turn Scripture on its head, leaving nothing but 'distilled Schopenhauer', then it is safe to say that he failed miserably.

It seems far more reasonable to conclude that Brahms's decision to conclude Op. 121 cycle optimistically stemmed from a reflex which was both artistic and philosophical, turning the work into a progression from darkness to light. Here Brahms's life-affirming move is perhaps not dissimilar to that of Garth Greenwell in praising the 'rebirth' at the end of Yuval Sharon's *Tristan*, despite its intellectual betrayal of Wagner's Schopenhauerian intent. Contemplating death (as more than a mere abstraction, as he would die a year later), Brahms mobilized the author of Ecclesiastes in order to peer into the abyss of inexistence, seen for what it is in the starkness of the first half of the cycle. The composer subsequently pulls back from the brink, however, in what might be called a 'life-impulse', returning to whatever residues of his Lutheran heritage may have survived the assault of modern philosophy's criticism of religion. Agnostic though he may well have been, Brahms refuses to cross the line to full-blown atheism; being in many ways the most conservative of Romantics, he moreover clearly feels the need to contain his doubt *within* a familiar Scriptural framework, providing him with a sense of psychological and cultural security.

This reflex may have been triggered not so much by resistance to Schopenhauer's pessimism in all its fullness as by a negative reaction to Nietzsche, as Nicole Grimes interestingly notes in a chapter of her study *Brahms's Elegies* entitled "The Last Great Cultural Harvest: Nietzsche and the *Vier ernste Gesänge*¨. Immediately prior to composing his Op. 121 cycle, Brahms had been reading Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*, an all-out attack on Christianity written one year before the philosopher's mental breakdown. Whatever sympathy Brahms may have had for some aspects of Nietzsche's critique, he reacted with bristling exclamation marks to his statement that Germany should be blamed for having rescued Christianity's credibility via Luther's Reformation. Grimes suggests that this was a bridge too far for Brahms the German patriot and cradle Lutheran, concluding that his refusal to follow Nietzsche could well have been the stimulus for Brahms's final return to his childhood Luther Bible for inspiration. He rounded off the Op. 121 songs with Paul's affirmation that 'these three remain – faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love', and it is certainly striking that in doing so, Brahms was quoting precisely the three theological virtues on which Nietzsche had poured scorn in ch. 23 of *The Antichrist*.

Further evidence in support of Grimes's hypothesis is provided by Brahms's final work, the eleven Chorale Preludes for organ op. 122. He told his friend and posthumous editor Eusebius Mandyczewski that his work on these was an exercise in 'penitence and regret' (*Buß' und Reu'*[5] - an allusion to Bach's St Matthew Passion); while too much weight ought not to be given to this comment, it is beyond dispute that Brahms set chorales

[5] Kalbeck, Max, *Johannes Brahms*, vol. 4, p. 468. The tone of Brahms's remark to Mandyczewski is a casual, almost joking one, but this should not be taken as an indication of a lack of serious engagement when composing the organ chorale preludes (or possibly re-working older material). Brahms was famous for the flippant and sometimes deliberately ridiculous descriptions of some his deepest works, notably telling Hans von Bülow that his Symphony n. 4 was made up of a 'a few entr'actes that were lying around' and speaking of the *Vier ernste Gesänge* as *Schnaderhüpferl*, a term 'usually associated with decidedly unserious yodelling in Bavaria' (Grimes, *Brahms's Elegies*, 182).

on texts of an unimpeachable Christian orthodoxy. Furthermore, there is a surprising focus on chorales related to Jesus, whose name is famously absent from the libretto of the *Deutsches Requiem*, and there is no sense of the unremitting bleakness of the first two of the Op. 121 songs, with all but one of Brahms's settings ending in the major mode.

Perhaps the most interesting reaction to the finale of the *Vier ernste Gesänge* remains that of Max Kalbeck, writing in 1915. As Brahms's biographer, he was fully aware of all his 'godless' remarks and attestations of agnosticism in later life. Faced with the final song, which seems to contradict these by pointing to life beyond Schopenhauer, Kalbeck refuses to attempt a resolution of the paradox offered by the inclusion of this 'uplifting song of resurrection' (*erhebende Auferstehungslied*[6]) within the death-laden cycle. Instead, he says that Brahms reaches the point where artistic instinct and mysticism take over from positivistic science and philosophical reasoning. Both of these had played a major role in the loss of faith of the European intelligentsia and its reduction in Brahms' own circle to 'cultural Protestantism' (*Kulturprotestantismus*), but they do not have the last word in Op. 121:

> The rational philosopher has bumped up against the limits of empirical science and human cognition, and now the mystic and the ecstatic, the artist and the poet, overcomes these things in a flight of fancy *(Phantasie)* […] glowing with zeal, the Apostle seizes the word for his vehement sermon, which falls like fire from Heaven.[7]

Musical works involving text, if they are not to be mere propaganda of any ideological sort, must ultimately be more than one-to-one translations of verbal concepts. Otherwise, their musical dimension simply becomes redundant. Kalbeck knew this, and so did Brahms. Dvorak may have come away from his final meeting with him with the feeling that he 'believed nothing', but Brahms' *music* in Op. 121 and 122 certainly 'believes', despite its author's professed unbelief. Especially if we are talking not merely of music as notation, but as of music as human communication with the listener through sound, an aural experience that tells its own story and which cannot be reduced to a transcription 'without remainder' of the composer's volition. Whatever Brahms may or may not have thought conceptually about the 'message' of the *Vier ernste Gesänge* remains shrouded in mystery, and that is perhaps part of the work's appeal. He may not share *Tristan und Isolde*'s interest in exploring 'sublime madness' and other extreme psychological states, but that does not mean that Brahms's music is so hyper-rational as to exclude all intuitive elements and the life of the emotions. There is an enduring enigma to the song-cycle, which does enough to provide the listener with food for being agnostic about the composer's agnosticism. In theological terms, Brahms's final songs might be said to inhabit an uneasy but gripping Holy Saturday. They are caught between the inescapable reality of death and a resurrection that is held up artistically as a possibility, even if the composer seems embarrassed to talk about it outside the safe confines of his music. If 'meaning' in Brahms ultimately eludes the grasp of biographers and musicologists, this serves as a reminder that when it comes to universal existential questions, there are (thankfully) some issues that no amount of historical research or purely intellectual analysis can resolve.

Peter Bannister, April 4, 2026

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The recordings of Brahms's Vier ernste Gesänge linked to in the text, sung and played by the present author, were made at Les Arches Musicales, Cluny. Transept Music Productions 2026.

[6] Ibid., p. 445
[7] Ibid., p. 452, quoted in Grimes, Nicole, *Brahms's Elegies*, p. 205.