Brahms the progressive

JOHN NATION

Lebanese-Hungarian pianist **Nada** explores the unique challenges and qualities of Brahms' piano music

Nada: 'Brahms pioneered the first truly symphonic piano sound'

Many pianists find Brahms' music challenging: a typical response to his piano works is fear mixed with respect.

Such apprehension is often blamed on Brahms' extensive chordal writing and its demands on the hands. In my view, however, this betrays an unconscious misunderstanding of the composer and his personality. It takes an epiphany for Brahms' music to reveal its magic, profound clarity and strong emotional impact. Only then can you fully enter the composer's world.

Brahms is a hugely important figure of the Romantic era, standing alongside Bach and Beethoven in the canon of great composers. His solo piano catalogue, aside from the piano concertos and chamber music, represents an important aspect of his compositional output – ranging from large-scale sonatas and variations to the ballades, waltzes and later collections of fantasies, intermezzos and capriccios. Much less well-known are his *Hungarian Dances*, arranged for solo piano by the composer, plus a book of studies and other pieces published after his death. Why, then, is Brahms' music so daunting for pianists, and why is so much of it still in the dark?

A significant proportion of his legacy remains largely unknown, including orchestral scores with choir, sacred and secular choral music, several chamber music pieces and most of his organ compositions. Perhaps it still requires more time for Brahms' music to reach the attention of the general public and be fully understood. Speaking of his violin concerto, Brahms himself said: 'It will take 50 years before it ranks along with Beethoven's.'

The repertoire of most concert pianists will include, if any Brahms at all, the Third Sonata, *Handel Variations* and some of the intermezzos and capriccios from Op 117 and 118. Intermediate players might try out his Rhapsodies Op 79 or some of the Waltzes Op 39. Less often still will they venture into the Klavierstücke Op 76 or *Paganini Variations* – the latter described by Clara Schumann as 'witches' variations. They are conceived in sets of short etudes that place enormous physical demands on the pianist, requiring mastery of the keyboard in its most complete aspects. These are some of the most technically difficult pages of piano music ever written.

Through studying and playing Brahms, I have come to understand the reasons behind his writing. For example,

I believe the energy needed to play his music results from the fact that Brahms was extremely strong, physically and mentally. This is something he demonstrated throughout his life until the final weeks before his death. He continued to walk home, sometimes for as long as an hour, despite suffering from terminal cancer.

Many of the technical requirements found in Brahms' piano music, such as wide jumps across the keyboard – often in arpeggio figures, sometimes in fast broken chords, octaves and broken octaves – necessitate athleticism and total control. Further difficulties are found in double notes divided between the hands, which demand finger independence and dexterity to articulate multiple melodic lines. All of this must be achieved effortlessly so the music breathes naturally.

Many people do not realise that Brahms was slender in his youth and remained fit for most of his life. It was only in the 10 to 15 years before his death that he became the big man of the late portraits. I will never forget playing chamber music with other musicians who believed that a big sound is needed to play Brahms because he was so big! It made me smile as I tried to convince them this was not true: the writing is big because he was so strong. Indeed, paradoxically, he was actually a small person and never considered tall.

In 1853, the young Hannes would show the Schumann children his athletic skills by jumping, trapezing, bicycling and walking. He loved to take long walks in nature and often biked through the beautiful German countryside, exploring and dreaming at the same time. When Clara or Robert Schumann listened behind closed doors at night to the young man practising on their famous Graf piano (he eventually inherited this instrument in Vienna), it seemed like two people were playing the piano. If the door accidentally opened, Brahms could be seen alone, fully absorbed in his playing.

This image of 'two people playing' reflects the symphonic proportions of Brahms' piano music. He was an extremely strong human being with a deep musical soul. His signature style was already apparent at a young age, and he created a lasting legacy in terms of his unique sound. He brought this to every genre he explored, regardless of the vehicle for which he was writing.

Indeed, the symphonic dimension is apparent from his early piano music, including the sonatas which Robert Schumann admired. The proportions and organisation of Brahms' compositional ideas in the sonatas transcend the instrument and beg for a larger medium, so Schumann encouraged the young composer to write symphonies. Brahms finally completed his first symphony in 1876, having worked on it for almost 14 years. He first found his voice as a piano composer, then expanded into writing for orchestra.

Brahmsian piano technique was inherited from his predecessors in the Romantic era, particularly Chopin and Liszt. A deep understanding of Brahms' musical intentions and physical movements is required to play his piano works.

During the early 1800s, Chopin and Liszt explored amazing innovations in piano technique. Chopin extended dexterity and made seemingly impossible demands on the hands, such as speedy crossing of fingers (Etude Op 10/2), extensions of hand arpeggios (Op 10/1), extreme lightness (Op 25/1) and very fast double notes (Op 25/6). Liszt added extra dimensions by forcing the pianist to control much more of the keyboard. Examples include brisk octaves and chords (*Transcendental Etude* No 8, 'Wilde Jagd'), loud arpeggios mixed with octaves (*Transcendental Etude* No 7, 'Eroica'), transcriptions with innovative textures (*Grandes études de Paganini*), and so much more.

To play Brahms' music, it is important to have surpassed the techniques and innovations of both Chopin and Liszt. Brahms places many additional demands on the performer. There is more chordal writing and contrapuntal interchange between the two hands, often for the sake of harmonic balance or melodic dialogue. This adds richness and complexity to the piano writing and brings new dimensions to the sound. Then there is the famous Brahmsian rhythmic coupling of triplets with duplets, and other difficult figures divided between the hands to create symphonic effects – for example the *Paganini Variations* Book 2, Etude No 10 and *Hungarian Dance* No 1 in G minor.

Another frequent feature of his keyboard writing is quick jumps to distant notes (Sonata No 2, the rondo of the First Concerto, *Paganini Variations* Book 1, Etude No 5 and the *Rondo after C M von Weber*). He also makes use of the glissando in octaves, first introduced by Beethoven in the *Walstein* Sonata (1804). This technique was seldom employed because of its difficulty, which few pianists were able to master. It requires a very strong hand – one more accustomed to holding several notes at once rather than the thin and delicate hand demanded by Chopin's light and elegant compositions, or the nervous energy needed to breeze through Liszt's hectic virtuosity. Even composers in the 20th century shied away from writing octave glissandi, so this remains a special effect in the virtuosity bag of very few pianists.

By bringing these new dimensions to piano writing and technique, Brahms pioneered the first truly symphonic piano sound. Large and rich became the signature qualities of Brahmsian piano technique but also came to define the sound for all his works, whether for piano or any other instrument or ensemble. **IP**

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