Brahms and Nineteenth-Century Painting

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After the death of Johannes Brahms in 1897, Hamburg and Vienna, respectively his birthplace and his adopted home, commissioned monuments in his honor. Rudolf Weyr’s 1908 monument for the Ressel Park in Vienna (plate 1) and Max Klinger’s sculpture (plate 2), dedicated exactly one year later in the Musikhalle in Hamburg, each gave concrete expression to radically different conceptions of the composer.

Weyr’s depiction is true to life and detailed. Brahms, seated, is dressed characteristically as a distinguished cosmopolitan citizen of the nineteenth century. He conveys the gravity, contemplative earnestness, and self-discipline associated with a Brahms who, in the words of a Viennese critic writing in 1900, was “no revolutionary, but rather was weighed down with the baggage of the entire spiritual musical feelings of three centuries; like a fortress, protected by a barricade of classical musical forms.”

Weyr exploited the traditional vocabulary of public monuments. Comparable nineteenth-century Viennese tributes to Beethoven (1880) and Goethe (1900) were didactic in intent. The cultivation of a sense of reverence within the citizenry represented a form of cultural patriotism. Weyr placed Brahms high above the viewer, within a massive, plain architectural base, on a throne, as an object of adoration.

Nevertheless, the Viennese passerby was also made to recognize the familiar and the nearly contemporary: Weyr’s Brahms remained an individualized depiction of a specific, individual nineteenth-century citizen. But the famous neighbor had also become an immortal.

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1 A program booklet, which contains the history of the project and its financing as well as an essay by Max Kalbeck, was published for the unveiling ceremony. See Zur Enthüllung des Brahms-Denkmals in Wien. 7 Mai 1908 (Vienna, 1908).

The neoclassic figure of the muse of music [placed at a distance underneath and to the left], strumming on a lyre (symbol of Orpheus) decorated with a Greco-Roman tragic mask, marked the symbolic transformation of status without visual idealization.

Weyr's aesthetic was self-consciously conservative; it eschewed any association with Joseph Maria Olbrich's novel and nearby Secession building of 1897, Otto Wagner's more recent architecture in the city, Jugendstil, Klimt, or the 1908 Kunstschau, which featured the young Kokoschka. In his sculpture, with its unadorned base and painstaking symmetry, Weyr, Vienna's leading academic sculptor, then sixty-two years old, connected Brahms directly to the reigning ethos of the Vienna in which they both had felt at ease. The choice of Weyr as the sculptor revealed an explicit intent to evoke the world of the mid-century Ringstrasse and its celebration of the values of Bildung, culture, refinement, and the historical.

In Hamburg, Klinger sought to capture the romantic grandeur of Brahms. He surrounded the standing figure with evocations of turmoil and boundlessness. The base acts like the frame of a photograph, implying space beyond. Brahms is clothed in drapelike forms that emerge expansively from below, then spiral upward, dominating the space around the viewer, like nature.

Figures clasp directly onto him, in sleep, yearning, and affection. A young cherubic figure has its arms around him. The head of an older man is resting at his feet. The vectors of Klinger's expressionist realization are dynamic, uncontained by any plea to conventional symmetry. The composer is depicted as ageless, facing forward. His face is recognizable, but it is not entirely true to life. It combines youthfulness with old age.

Klinger's figure confronted the viewer without historical markers of time and place. The focus was inward, toward an imaginary, indeterminate, but intense and intimate center. Klinger's symbolic signature for Brahms was his idea of the organic. His vocabulary in the Brahms monument was clearly modernist, in stark contrast to the historicist interior of the Musikhalle. Here was Brahms the "progres-

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3When one compares Klinger's Brahms with Klinger's Beethoven statue from 1902, one realizes that Klinger's conception of Brahms studiously avoided references to Classicism. Klinger was an apostle of the modern within the art world of German-speaking Europe. His work formed a bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His somewhat more historicist and refined Beethoven was the centerpiece of the controversial Beethoven exhibit at the Vienna Secession in 1902, for which Klimt painted his famous friezes and Mahler conducted an arrangement of part of the Ninth Symphony.
sive," the visionary who had inspired Klinger since the 1880s. Klinger captured the view of the composer expressed at the fin de siècle by the American critic Philip H. Goepp, who wrote:

At once an austerity and a mature, fully developed originality appear . . . the muse of Brahms seems truly Pegasusian . . . you do not see the paling lines of older masters' influence. From the beginning he seems to have his God-given manner, like a later Zeus-born hero of song. . . . There is a giant power, a reposeful mastery without strain. . . . The manner of his writing is the result of his poetic personality . . . there is . . . in the originality of his melodic thought . . . a primal fragrance of motives in the pure crystal of spontaneous form, that is like organic growth.4

The cultural controversy articulated by these two turn-of-the-century depictions of Brahms concerned not only musical aesthetics but also the visual arts. The passion for art, for painting in particular, during the late nineteenth century, especially in Vienna, nearly rivaled that for music among educated classes. In Brahms’s immediate milieu, the interest in collecting, visiting museums, and traveling to see art was particularly high. Among the well-used books in Brahms’s personal library were Jacob Burckhardt’s Cicerone and The Culture of the Renaissance in Italy.5 Seeing and hearing, as activities within discrete and social groups in history, bear close comparison. The experiences of listening, playing, and remembering can be penetrated by examining the analogous experiences of looking at individual paintings and visiting exhibits and distant architectural sites.

Three important contemporary artists—Anselm Feuerbach, Arnold Böcklin, and Klinger—were either associated with or often compared to Brahms. They offer contrasting occasions for close scrutiny of nineteenth-century music—and Brahms’s music in particular—within the context of the visual arts.6 Writing to Viktor Widmann in 1894, after praising his friend Julius Allgeyer’s just-published biography of Feuerbach and describing his reaction to a collection of Böcklin prints and to Klinger’s work, Brahms commented, “Indeed, these three fill one’s heart and home, and certainly it is not a bad time in which we live where one can be glad of three such figures. . . . I notice with what luxury we live and how carelessly we judge.”7

Even though Brahms’s friendship with Feuerbach was close and his admiration, at the end of his career, for Klinger explicit, the aesthetic, ambition, and career of Böcklin provide the most compelling analogy to Brahms’s life and work. In his analyses of Brahms’s music, Max Kalbeck consistently employed the imagery of Böcklin’s canvases. Arthur Smolian wrote in 1901: “Within the overall arena of artistic creation in his time, Arnold Böcklin as painter and Bjönstjerne Björnson as poet were by far most comparable and equivalent, and also in such a comparison there appears again a gathering together of three great B’s.”8 Brahms had a Klinger etching of one of Böcklin’s landscapes hanging in his music room in Vienna. In contrast to Wagner, Brahms evinced no great admiration

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6Kalbeck, Johannes Brahms [rev. edns. Berlin, 1913–22] III, 394–95 (Third Symphony) and IV, 28–29 (C-Minor Trio, op. 101); and Arthur Smolian, “Zur Einführung,” in Johannes Brahms, Kammermusik, vol. I [Leipzig, 1901]. Smolian (1856–1911) was a critic based primarily in Leipzig. His view is interesting considering the fact that he also wrote on Wagner and had ties with Bayreuth. On Björnson see Georg Brandes, Moderne Geister. Literarische Bilder aus dem XIX Jahrhunderts [Frankfurt, 1901], pp. 417–74. Brandes, writing in 1882, echoed, perhaps unwittingly, the traditional Brahms-Wagner contrast in his Ibsen-Björnson contrast in which he wrote that Björnson was “a prophet, the passionate announcer of a better time to come . . . a spirit of reconciliation who wages war, without bitterness. It shines like an April sunlight on his poetry.” Ibsen, in contrast, was the violent revolutionary whose work was cast in shadows (p. 462).
for the lionized historical painter Hans Makart (1840–84), Feuerbach’s nemesis in Vienna.9

The way audiences perceived music (e.g., the expectations of the concert public), the role and historical place of the artist, and commonplace conceptions of meaning and beauty as they related to nineteenth-century music—in particular that of Brahms—all become clearer when parallel issues in the visual arts are considered. But the context provided by Vienna needs to be taken into account so that these issues of aesthetics and culture are not construed artificially as autonomous of politics and society. In Brahms’s Vienna, cultural controversies resonated with social and political significance.

II

Owing to massive immigration and the expansion of the city limits, Vienna was three times as large when Brahms died as when he first arrived there.10 But the change that came over Vienna was not merely demographic. The 1860s saw the triumph of liberalism in city politics and in the monarchy, including the extension of freedoms and rights. A concurrent economic boom in Vienna was visible in a physical transformation—the creation of the Ringstrasse—perhaps more impressive than the rebuilding of Paris.

The systematic and syncretic expression of modernity that emerged in the new architectural face of Vienna was the self-conscious assertion of historical progress and synthesis. The sense of the modern found expression in an eclectic historicism, in adaptations of Classical, Renaissance, and Baroque forms. One could profitably compare Brahms’s creative adaptation of Baroque and Renaissance models (particularly in his a cappella choral work) and his reworking of classical forms and compositional procedures with the innovative use, during his own lifetime, of historical models by Vienna’s nineteenth-century architects, from Theophil von Hansen to the young Otto Wagner.

The vitality of the 1860s and 70s projected into prominence a new generation of civic leaders, mostly professionals and men of commerce, including Nikolaus Dumba, Franz Egger, the families Todesco, and Ehprussi, whose success eventually earned some of them aristocratic titles. The civic and economic boom strengthened the lure of Vienna’s educational institutions with which Brahms was associated directly or through patterns of friendship: the academies of art and technology, the university, and the conservatory. A new social elite emerged, made up of enthusiastic amateurs and patrons of music and painting.11

The Viennese milieu Brahms entered and learned to love was this new and decisively upper-middle class, a Grossbürgertum distant from the high aristocratic traditions of the city. Brahms’s cosmopolitan friends were proud of their achievements in science and art. Brahms’s world coincided with the membership of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (on whose board he served and as whose concert director he had been in the 1870s). The Gesellschaft represented a cross-section of two elites: on the one hand, the families of professionals, musicians, academics, writers, and men of business and commerce; on the other, enlightened representatives of the aristocracy.

Between 1873 and 1897 a dramatic political shift away from liberalism helped define the Viennese world of aesthetic and cultural politics. Brahms’s friends remained the committed political liberals who, like Theodor Gomperz (and later Freud, who translated John Stuart Mill for Gomperz), professed an explicit admiration for the English traditions of thought and politics.12

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9Kalbeck, Brahms II, 409. If one compares the photographs and the catalogues of Klinger and Böcklin, the painting turns out to have been Böcklin’s “Frühlingstag” (Spring Day) from 1883. See H. W. Singer, Max Klinger’s Radierungen, Stiche und Steindrucke (1909, New York, 1978), pp. 134–35, 69 [plate no. 328]; and Rolf Andree, Arnold Böcklin. Die Gemälde (Basel, 1977) p. 447 [plate no. 374].

10See A. L. Hickmann, Wien im XIX Jahrhundert (Vienna, 1903).


12Gomperz described an evening at Billroth’s home in 1893, at which many of Brahms’s friends were present, including Exner and Hanslick. Gomperz proudly calls them all, including Brahms, “readers and connoisseurs of my Greek Thinkers”; see Robert A. Kann, Theodor Gomperz. Ein gelehrtenleben im Bürgertum der franz-Josefs-Zeit (Vienna, 1974), p. 248; see also Gomperz, Essays und Erinnerungen (Stuttgart, 1905).
Despite Brahms's personal admiration for Bismarck, he never associated himself with Viennese Christian Socialism or Austrian Pan-Germanism. Richard Heuberger reported Brahms's disdain for the new radical anti-Semitism of Georg von Schoenerer and Karl Lueger.\(^\text{13}\)

Brahms's closest friends in Vienna included Goldmark, Brüll, Epstein, Gomperz, Faber, Ehrbar, Wittgenstein, Grünfeld, and Hanslick—individuals who either were actually Jews or, despite religious conversion, were still considered such by anti-Semites. Daniel Spitzer, the great Viennese satirist of the *Neue Freie Presse*, wrote a biting and affectionate column describing Brahms in Ischl in 1889: the composer's eating habits were used to poke fun at the provincial Viennese gossip about his taste for the company of Jewish friends.\(^\text{14}\)

Brahms's clear alliance with liberals and established Jewish families in Vienna is especially relevant to the aesthetic politics of the city. The Brahms-Wagner division, the Brahms-Bruckner conflict, and the Makart-Feuerbach rivalry had roots in the social and political divisions that developed during the 1870s. Bruckner, for example, was a rural provincial Austrian with deep links to a new Catholic conservatism. His social circle did not overlap with that of Brahms. Hugo Wolf's vitriolic attacks on Brahms in the 1880s had decisive political overtones. Brahms was associated with a liberal establishment that seemed at odds with a new, radically conservative movement that sought to establish a political and cultural alternative to the cosmopolitan liberal conceits of Vienna's cultural, literary, and academic elite.\(^\text{15}\)

The new antiblack radicalism had its populist aspect, which Wagner exploited, particularly in his call for a new and more rooted audience, one independent of precisely the kind of educated urban elite with which Brahms was associated in Vienna. When Brahms's friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg suggested in 1885 that the E-Minor Symphony was too subtle and compact to communicate to any but a small world of "smart and knowledgeable" people and might not reach "the people, that wander in the dark," she was expressing concern about a real division in the contemporary audience. The power and greatness of Brahms's score might be apparent to those who were like "explorers and scientists... users of microscopes," but not to those "simple music lovers" who wanted merely to relax and feel the emotion and beauty of the music while listening, i.e., to the broad and often younger audience to which Wagner had already appealed successfully.\(^\text{16}\)

Brahms came to represent the aesthetics of a foreign, ironically "modern" antitraditionalism associated with modern commerce, science, university life, and parliamentary politics. Although the cliché has been to link Brahms with the conservative, and Wagner (and his admirers, Wolf and Bruckner) with the "music of the future," the social mirror of this aesthetic division presents the reverse. Brahms's aesthetic of classical continuity was linked with the belief in scientific progress, social emancipation, the modern nation state, and the transformation of traditional ways of life.

In Vienna, what made Wagner (and Makart) so appealing—in addition to the evident innovativeness and genius (which Brahms freely admitted and admired)—was the regressive appeal to premodern myths of community and heroism and (in Wagner's case) a polemical (if disingenuous) attack on the instruments of modernity, including capitalism, the contemporary city, and modern journalism. Brahms marveled at modern and changing Vienna. He carried with him from Hamburg a healthy regard for trade and commerce (as seen in his friendship with Arthur Faber and Viktor Miller zu Aichholz) and admired science and technology. He coveted his contacts with music historians who were in the forefront of modern schol-

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\(^{13}\) Brahms did display, however, strong antipathy for the growth in the numbers of immigrant Eastern European Jews in Vienna, a sentiment shared by Vienna's older and politically liberal Jewish community. This is evident in the remarks recounted by Richard Heuberger in *Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms* (Tutzing, 1971), p. 82.


arship, and with university professors such as Billroth and Exner. [Brahms once was astonished at the respect accorded by common Italians in Rome to Theodor Mommsen, the great historian—a phenomenon he doubted would have occurred among Germans. 17]

Wagner, on the other hand, allied himself with the rarified world of Bayreuth, Venice, the fantastic castles of Ludwig II, and a race-based German nationalism foreign to Brahms’s patriotism. What gave Wagnerism in Vienna its reputation as the ideology of the new and future was its critique of progress, science, and liberalism. It became the instrument through which a younger generation challenged the domination maintained by its elders—a hegemony that appeared intellectually bankrupt and neither economically nor politically effective in the light of the economic and political crises after 1873 in Vienna and the monarchy.

The contrasts can be seen in differences in tastes in the visual arts, and in the enthusiasm Brahms and his friends—Feuerbach, Billroth, and Hanslick among them—had for Italy and its landscape, which they associated with classical antiquity and the Renaissance. The late nineteenth-century liberal intellectuals and the Deutsch-Römer group of German painters extended Goethe’s spiritual pilgrimage to Italy to their own lives. 18 Wagner’s adopted past was Teutonic. Insofar as an Italian past existed for him, it was connected through the tradition of Liszt to religiosity and mysticism and not antiquity or Burckhardt’s Renaissance. Bruckner drew no inspiration whatsoever from Italy.

When Brahms scholars note with uncanny regularity that the Brahms-Wagner conflict was more about disciples and the polemics of cultural politics than about music, they are indeed right. Even where fundamental aesthetic issues were at stake, as in the Bruckner case, the social and political dimensions of the conflict were decisive. The divisions represented segments within Viennese public whose antagonisms deepened and rendered extreme what otherwise might have remained a serious matter of aesthetics. The irony of the Brahms-Wagner debate remains in the reversal of social and aesthetic connotations, particularly on the matter of progressivism and conservatism.

III

The aesthetic questions that preoccupied painters of Brahms’s generation derived in part from the debate over the nature of Classical and Romantic art that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The debate was set largely by Johann Joachim Winckelmann in his Thoughts on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks of 1755. Winckelmann’s opening words, “good taste,” indicated that his concern was both the creation and the perception of art. “The only way for us to become great,” he wrote “and indeed—if this is possible—inimitable, is by imitating the ancients.” Classical art possessed for Winckelmann “a noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur, both in posture and expression.” He argued that

if the artist . . . lets the Greek rule of beauty guide his hand and senses, he is on the surest route to successful imitation of nature. The concepts of totality and perfection which he discovers in the nature of antiquity will refine and give concrete shape to the diffuse concepts he abstracts from the nature of today: he will learn to combine the beauties he finds in it with ideal beauty, and, with the help of the sublime forms which are constantly present to him, he will then be able to legislate for himself.

For Winckelmann, artists must express their ideas using “reason,” in either the allegoric or the poetic—an admonition intended not only for the artist, but for the “connoisseur” (Kenner) and “mere amateur” (bloße Liebhaber). 19


18 For the best discussion of the German-Romans, see Christoph H. Heilmann, “In uns selbst liegt Italien”: Die Kunst der Deutsch-Römer (Munich, 1987).

The answer of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century to this neoclassic ideology was directed at Classicism’s ideal conception of beauty. For the Romantic, totality and perfection were not a static synthesis. Perhaps the most trenchant critique of Winckelmann and neoclassicism was made by Hegel. Although Hegel agreed that in the Classical era there had been a unique symbiosis with the spirit of the age and external nature, he argued that the concept of imitation and a stable logic of good taste were untenable since the career of reason in history was progressive. The classical aesthetic ideal of totality and perfection, by necessity, dissolved through implicit deficiencies in classical religion and society.

For Hegel, beauty was contingent on history. The stable “totality” of the aesthetic ideal of Classicism devolved into an aesthetic imperative for modernity, “the double totality of (a) subjective being in itself and (b) the external appearance, in order to enable the spirit to reach through this cleavage a deeper reconciliation in its own element of inwardsness.” Romantic art, for Hegel, represented the conflict between a subjective “spiritual” realm and the empirical external world, freed from any superimposed idealization. The conflict between artist and nature, between aesthetic impulse and external reality—the consciousness of a tension—framed the character of Romanticism. The absence of such tension in antiquity was no longer relevant to the modern artist.

The emancipation of the spirit and its “elevation” to itself were, for Hegel, the “fundamental principle of romantic art.” “Inner subjectivity” was the goal to be achieved by the artist and the viewer. Romantic art celebrated “depth of feeling” (Innigkeit) which, through the work of the artist, was emancipated from the object depicted. The object became the mechanism, in painting, for the real subject of Romantic art: subjective expression defined as a “perception of itself alone, or as a musical sound as such, without objectivity or shape.” Therefore, Hegel concluded, “the keynote of romantic art is musical, and if we make the content of this idea determinate, lyrical.”

The German painters of the nineteenth century struggled with the seemingly contradictory imperatives of Classicism and Romanticism. Realism was redefined to include the dialogue between artist and the object of perception. Like Goethe, many looked to Italy—to its heritage and landscape—as a reaction against Romanticism. At the same time, the painters of the mid-nineteenth century acknowledged the primacy of the subjectivity and the inwardsness of the lyrical. They sought inspiration from a different Italy, not that of Greco-Roman culture but medieval and early Renaissance painting. The most dramatic consequence of the struggle to reconcile the divergent pressures of Classicism and Romanticism was the emergence of the Nazarene painters, primarily Friedrich Overbeck (1789–1869), who sought both to achieve an inner spiritual content to painting through religion and to recapture an alternative Classicism comparable to that of pre-Raphaelite painting.

IV

Of the three German painters linked with Brahms, it was Feuerbach who sought most intensely to follow the stringent aesthetic of Winckelmann and yet achieve, with Classical restraint, the lyric content of Romanticism without giving excessive weight to subjective inwardsness. He followed more the traditions of the Nazarenes than those of Romantic painters such as Moritz von Schwind (1804–71), who embraced the folk and northern historical and mythological traditions with which one can associate Carl Maria von Weber, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and later Wagner. Feuerbach, like Brahms, sought to utilize the external forms of Classicism to express a contemporary inner sensibility. But Feuerbach’s success was limited, despite the seductive luminosity and beauty of his canvases. The paintings retained, perhaps too strongly, the external calm of Winckelmann without the dynamic tension.

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suggested by either the religiosity of the Nazarenes or the ideology of Romanticism.  

Feuerbach was an unlikely companion for Brahms. His personality— with its weakness for money and luxurious clothes— was more akin to that of Wagner in its intense desire to escape from the drab respectability of middle-class style.  

Like Wagner, Feuerbach was vain and a fanatical polemicist on his own behalf. Only Feuerbach’s deep loyalty to his stepmother and a few friends recalled characteristics of Brahms’s personality.

Feuerbach had a brief three-year sojourn in Vienna as a teacher in the 1870s, during which he alienated most of his colleagues, railed against the philistine Viennese taste, and believed himself to be the object of conspiracies. Feuerbach sought to unmask the fraud of Makart, Vienna’s leading painter. He could not even get along with those who might have been allies, such as the architect Theophil Hansen, for whose design of the Academy of Fine Arts Feuerbach had been chosen to paint ceiling and wall murals. Although Brahms had warned Feuerbach about coming to Vienna, the disappointment was severe.

But when one looks at Feuerbach’s work, Brahms’s enthusiasm becomes comprehensible. Feuerbach utilized classical narratives (and only a few religious ones) as subjects, not as allegories. The paintings achieve a stillness and intensity together with an elegant and remarkable virtuosity of draftsmanship. Feuerbach’s neoclassicism is evident in the execution of drapery, and the near-sculptural clarity of figures. The use of color is focused but restrained, forcing the eye to notice form and composition. A conception of surface and depth is achieved in which the inner sensibility is stressed; hence the clear foreground/background structure and the avoidance of evident ornamental or decorative elements, particularly in the use of color.

The figures never look at the viewer, but are caught in contemplation. The time depicted is unspecific; there is little motion or direction. The stillness is profound, particularly in the Iphigenia series, derived from Goethe’s tragedy, and the ricordo di Rivoli [1867] [plate 3]. Feuerbach used nature as background—as a bucolic, benign, neo-Renaissance frame. He captured the intense contemplativeness of his subjects within the structure of a classical grace and calm. The dramatic is, so to speak, contained in the frame of the painting and frozen. Feuerbach also avoided the maudlin and sought, successfully, to evoke the lyrical. By using the classical

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Plate 3: Anselm Feuerbach, Ricordo di Tivoli, 1867.
and the idealized poetic as subjects, he avoided any hint of vulgarity.

Indeed, Feuerbach, using anticlassical models of beauty—his mistresses Nanna Risi and Lucia Brunacci—generated the sensibility of ideal beauty through a realism that hinted at contemporaneity. Although the narrative turned away from the viewer and also from active narration, it suggested a lyric, albeit submerged, subjectivity. Feuerbach generally avoided historicism’s use of subject matter that re-created a seemingly realistic image from the recorded past. By using myth and poetic subject matter, and by eschewing historicist illusionism, Feuerbach evoked the timelessness of the lyrical.

It was Feuerbach’s rejection of historicism—the use of the narratives of the past to re-create the historical—that distinguished his work from that of Makart. Feuerbach’s contempt for Makart paralleled Brahms’s differences with Wagner. [Makart was one of Wagner’s favorite and most admired painters.] Feuerbach saw in Makart, and others in the school of historical painting in which Makart played a key role (such as the two great personalities of the Munich school of historical painting Karl von Piloty [1826–86] and Franz von Lenbach [1836–1904]), the failure to penetrate the surface of realism, a technical impotence to realize figures and construct forms, and a blindness to the true nature of classical beauty.

Nineteenth-century historicism and neoclassicism, despite overlaps, are too often confused. The cheapness of Makart’s strategy—the use of mere monumentality and color for effect and to startle the viewer—inspired Feuerbach’s ire. What Makart lacked was the capacity to evoke, through painterly means, both the ideal of beauty and the subjective expressive power of the external reality he sought to depict in the name of realism. The work, through its subject and execution, became trivial. It was essentially vulgar and pandered to “the military and unsatisfied women. . . .” Raphael would say: “Psyche, where art thou?” Feuerbach’s critique took on the precise vocabulary and perspective of Brahms’s supporters who attacked Wagner. Wagner, it was argued, reduced the musical to a handmaiden to excite the superficial feelings of the viewer. By pandering to the decorative and the sensual, Wagner played to a crowd of dilettantes and philistines.25

Upon Feuerbach’s death in 1880, the Viennese writer Ludwig Speidel wrote:

None of his contemporaries solved more beautifully the great painterly problem of the present, to marry drawing and composition of style with the lure of color; no one transcended more deeply the onessidedness of contemporary trends as he, in that he utilized the experience of the ancients, and in addition, as the ancients themselves, adhered to nature.26

This might not have been an inappropriate assessment of Brahms’s struggle to command normative notions of musical form and technique and avoid superficiality of effect through coloristic means.

What distinguished Brahms from his friend, however, was the composer’s clearly more powerful originality and Romantic impulse. When compared with Brahms, Feuerbach’s work is tame and far too neoclassical. Its relationship to the viewer is distant and deracinated. We sense a cool aestheticism, a restraint whose imperative goes beyond the self-conscious imitation of classical models. The expressive subjectivity and the directional engagement of the audience in Brahms are absent from Feuerbach’s work.

It was no accident that Brahms chose a Schiller poem to set to music in his Nännie, op. 82, written in 1880 as a memorial to Feuerbach. The intense yet formal beauty of the work, the neoclassic vocal writing, the symmetry, and the wholly classical imagery employed by Schiller resulted in a musical evocation of the idea that, despite the inevitable death of beauty and perfection, in the memory of lamentation there remains the triumph of the aesthetic over the common. In this work, Feuerbach’s struggle to embody the static classical ideal of the moment of the beautiful, the contemplative, finds its superior musical equivalent.27

V

Feuerbach came to suspect shortcomings in his painting, particularly when he encountered Böcklin, his younger contemporary. Böcklin in turn regarded Feuerbach’s work as having failed to go beyond the decorative. He wrote, “Feuerbach aspired to a great deal, but did not always grasp the essential issue . . . what is lacking is the main thing, life itself!”28 Despite such criticism and the poor relationship between the two painters, the Feuerbach-Böcklin contrast can be placed alongside a comparison between Ludwig Spohr and Brahms in order to illuminate the difference between the struggle with neoclassicism in early musical Romanticism and in Brahms’s music.29

Brahms visited Böcklin’s studio in 1885, where he saw the painting Centaur at the Village Blacksmith.30 The two men had much in common. Both admired Italian Renaissance and Classical art. Both were influenced by the aesthetic perceptions of Burckhardt. Both resisted French influences and were profoundly—and self-consciously—German artists. Not surprisingly, both found little response in France for their work and for their form of neoclassicism.31 Böcklin, like Brahms and unlike Wagner and Feuerbach, delighted in modernity. He was, among other things, a serious tinkerer who devoted considerable time trying to realize the dream of human flight in airplanes. Like Brahms, Böcklin died as the most revered and successful living German artist of his medium, explicitly ranked with the Classical masters.32

As Giorgio de Chirico pointed out, Böcklin’s work bears little true resemblance to Wagner and Wagnerism:

While in Wagner everything is undetermined, everything moves and remains unclear, while in Wagner, the power to conjure up the cosmic is based on undefined and inaccessible sounds, the metaphysical power of Böcklin rests, from the start, always on the precision and clarity of a phenomenon clearly established from the beginning. He never painted fog, or outlines whose edges are obscured. Exactly in this are both his classicism and greatness to be seen.33

The comment aptly fits Brahms. Böcklin was reputed to have said that the object of painting was “to touch the eye, without having to explain or describe the effect with words”; to evoke a “felt impression,” like instrumental music, without having to “render anything explicit.”34

The aesthetic ambition of Böcklin’s work can be understood, as Christoph Heilmann has argued, through the credo of one of his admirers, the leading neo-Hegelian aesthetician Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807–87). Vischer was a friend of Paul Heyse, a writer whom Brahms particularly admired and who was also a friend of Böcklin.35 Vischer wrote that the object of painting was “to communicate with nature and tradition . . . so that we become one with the whole eternity of our inner world . . . which we possess more than the ancients, although once again naively, so that we can become objective human beings as they were.”36

Böcklin transformed the classical subject matter. His paintings draw on classical myth, but their narratives unleash a novel and often imaginary psychic dynamic. In their execution, the paintings display a vigorous quality that challenges the flatness of the surface and static frame of the painting. Nature is used as a force

28A student of Böcklin reported that Feuerbach doubted the value of his own work when confronted with Böcklin’s paintings; see Eberhard Ruhmer, “Böcklin-Standort und Ausstrahlung,” in Böcklin-Darmstadt, p. 44.

29On Brahms’s view of Spohr, see Gal, Johannes Brahms, pp. 35–36; an even more apt comparison might be a Mendelssohn-Brahms comparison, except for the fact that Feuerbach and Mendelssohn cannot be regarded as equivalents, given Mendelssohn’s far greater achievement.

30Andree, Arnold Böcklin, pp. 478–79.


33Andree, Arnold Böcklin, p. 47.

34Hevesi, Alt-Kunst, p. 500.

35See the number of well-used books by Heyse in Brahms library; in Hofmann, Die Bibliothek, pp. 52–53.

reciprocal to the figures, not as background but as the medium of expression of the painter. The use of light and color is neither decorative nor realistic, but suggestive of an inner attitude. In this sense Böcklin prefigured German expressionism.

In traditional subjects, including landscapes but primarily mythological or poetic subjects, the Hegelian separation between man and nature is evident, as is the subsequent transformation of both through their interaction. Böcklin's legendary paintings entitled *Isle of the Dead* symbolized the parallel tension between dream, imagination, and external reality. The intense interior emotion captured by Böcklin permits the viewer to contemplate analogous, nearly autobiographical, sentiments. The scenes are not symbolic, but suggestive, so that in the process of seeing, the viewer experiences a parallel contemplative sensibility.

In contrast to Feuerbach's work, the distance between viewer and object is closed; the viewer enters empathetically into a subjective confrontation with a scene, an event, a struggle, a moment, an experience. Therefore the mythology, until the paintings made at the very end of Böcklin's life, is also stripped of violence. Böcklin's famous paintings of Tritons and Centaurs possess a pacified, aestheticized, if not highly erotic, version of danger and evil (plate 4).

But it was the transformation of nature through painterly vision, the reworking of traditional forms and compositions, and the consistent depiction of dynamic sentiment—the internal consciousness of the subject with a hint of the subconscious—that appealed to Brahms. The observer was drawn into this subjective experience and could re-experience it as well. Both Brahms and Böcklin eschewed decoration and conventional narrative. The evidence of passion.

Plate 4: Arnold Böcklin, *Im Spiel der Wellen* (In the Play of the Waves), 1883.
and the extension of the Romantic use of light and color in transforming what one can see were accomplished by Böcklin in a new fashion, all contained within an unmistakable debt to classical models and a conception of nature as forum for the contemplation of inner subjectivity. This was comparable to Brahms’s use of harmony, his development of small motivic cells into large expanses, and his clear utilization of variation where the object remained recognizable. Brahms’s capacity to inspire in the listener diverse senses of space and depth, as well as the defined but explosive emotional content of the larger musical narrative, mirrored Böcklin’s impact on his audience.

Tradition is used by Böcklin and Brahms dialectically to demarcate originality. Memory of previous models is evoked upon hearing and seeing. The result is an acute awareness of experience and time and the essential subjective distinctiveness of the object of contemplation. Böcklin’s use of tradition permits the viewer to engage in parallel inner reflection and not become prisoner to the illusions of realism or the lure of theatrical or dramatic narration. The object of art has as both its content and its purpose the extension of highly individualized subjective reflection. These qualities were evident in the two paintings we know Brahms knew, particularly the image he hung on his wall. In these several senses Böcklin was as distinct from the historical painters, particularly Piloty, Makart, and his more direct rival Lenbach, as was Brahms from Liszt and Wagner.37

The concentration on aesthetic perception and subjective feeling and contemplation, finally, reflect a depoliticized conception of the function of art. The retreat from historical realism or from genre painting and conventional realism mirrored a particular conversation with an educated audience. Böcklin’s use of myth, as Brahms’s of established formal models, counted on the capacity of the viewer or hearer to be able to transform the vision of the tradition and follow the subjective reformulation by the artist. The object of this exchange was the transcendence of reality and the everyday, a journey into Vischer’s “eternity of our inner world.” Inner subjectivity had become not only the object of art, but its implied subject. Art had become an act of psychological fantasy through the external medium of a personalized, mythologized Classicism and expressionistic landscape painting.

VI

It was ultimately Klinger’s work that achieved this effect most successfully for Brahms himself. Here the entire content of the image is subjective and psychological experience. Through Klinger, one can approach the intense Romanticism of Brahms’s work framed by an overt debt to Classicism. As Brahms wrote Klinger in 1893, “Seeing them [Klinger’s images] it is as if the music resounded further into eternity, and everything that I might have wished to say was said, more clearly than music can, and still so filled with secrets and foreboding.”38 In that telling reference to secrecy and foreboding, Brahms alluded to the power of music to be content-free in the ordinary sense, yet communicate the deepest and most hidden sentiments. Particularly as a public art form, the capacity of music to speak to and trigger the unending sensibility of intimacy, without threat of revelation, reflected Brahms’s own uncanny merger of external formalism and internal expressiveness and specific originality. For Brahms, Klinger showed that “all art is the same and speaks the same language” despite the fact that visual art, through its relation to perceived nature, was on the surface more precise than music. Brahms, without success, sought to convert the more conservative Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim to his enthusiasm for Klinger. Hanslick also could not be won over, despite Brahms’s advocacy.39

37Lenbach’s portraits of Wagner and Bismarck are particularly well known.


Klinger, a follower and passionate admirer of Böcklin, executed four works directly connected with Brahms. The first was the 1880 cycle *Amor und Psyche*, which was dedicated to Brahms. In the 1880s Klinger designed the covers for Brahms’s song collections ops. 96 and 97. In the early 1890s, Klinger did his *Brahmsphantasie* cycle, which appeared in 1894. Last, Brahms reciprocated by dedicating his op. 121, the *Four Serious Songs*, to Klinger, who designed the first edition for Simrock.40

Contemporaries such as Brandes (an author Brahms admired) saw in Klinger a Romanticism, a gift for fantasy combined with a narrative realism, a naturalism that betrayed a keen eye for the psychic and realistic detail of experience. What attracted Brahms, however, was Klinger’s Böcklin-like mixture of the subjective experience with nature: the placement of the emotional contemplative experience within a framework that altered both the character and the meaning of the recognizable.41

But unlike Böcklin, Klinger attempted to achieve a musical effect through art. Not only did he deepen the psychological and make it the overt subject; he also worked in series of images, which individually and together recounted a narrative whose subject was more the inner transformation of feeling than the actual sequence of events. Perceived time was placed in a dialectic with fictional sequences. Each of Klinger’s images involved the psychic, open-ended subject of the human imagination. Every landscape explicitly suggested the inner state of the artist and his audience. In this, Klinger sought to achieve an effect parallel to the hearing of music.

Klinger’s *Brahmsphantasie* captures the suffering within the moment of experience.42 Multiple layers of distance and sentiment are conveyed, much like the multiple layers of perception available to the listener in the dense but comprehensible surface of Brahms’s work. The shift in mood in Klinger’s work is analogous to the contrasting sections in Brahms’s *Schicksalslied*, op. 54, which inspired Klinger. In the Prometheus series of *Brahmsphantasie*, Klinger utilized the narrative moment in a dynamic manner, engaging the viewer in the subjective response rather than in the content of the narrative (plate 5). The concentration on psychic states permitted contemplation by the viewer that sparked, as in music, a re-hearing and the re-creation of a fragmentary and variable sense of memory and the passage of time.

Klinger reached toward symbolism, depicting the contrast between the world of the gods and the natural world by using contrasts of light and dark. The restrictive medium of black and white allowed a greater intensity of response. Brahms’s appreciation for Klinger’s control of small detail and its relationship to the development of visual contrast and form over the span of a composition mirrored his own prejudices regarding compositional strategy. The dual effect of virtuosic detail and sharply delineated form in both Brahms and Klinger was intended to evoke the deeper, larger, and central sentiments of life without losing specificity or deteriorating into clichés.

In those images in which music played a direct role, Klinger evoked the impact of Brahms’s music. The combination of mythic images, landscape, and realistic portrayals of nineteenth-century scenes permitted him to capture the imaginary processes he believed music to evoke. In “Accorde” (see plate 6) and “Evocation,” Klinger realized four dimensions of communication, each with a specific temporality and time clock. The player depicted in modern dress, seated at a piano, possesses an immediate audience, implied and realized, both in the picture and outside it. This is the first exchange. Second, the “depicted” music unlocks for the viewer and spectator within the picture a vision of subjective imagination. That dream world is realized, permitting the viewer to witness a narrative within the imaginary world. In that world, the mythical, the classical depiction of muses, and the powers of nature are affected by the music. They are transformed and set in motion. The modern sensibility, through art,
Plate 5: Klinger, "Entführung des Prometheus" (Abduction of Prometheus) 1883, from Brahmsphantasie, op. 12 (Leipzig, 1894).

Plate 6: Klinger, "Accorde" (Chords) from Brahmsphantasie.
reaches the eternal realm and enters it on an equal footing.

Last, the viewer is permitted to look beyond, through music and image, into the idealized motion and stable horizon of nature and space. In this fourth dimension, the particular and the limitless are combined. The consciousness of modernity, of the present, is merged with that of a tradition of aesthetic discourse and the passage of historical time. The modern artist pierces through to the expanse that only inner subjectivity permits, one divorced from realism or nature. That expanse, within the framework of recognizable imagery and formal procedures, is derived from Classicism, but is cast with a modern, dynamic, painterly, nearly organic style. The appropriation of Classical and Romantic elements is made possible by Klinger for the viewer through the medium of depiction, with the effect of music as the linking subject.

In Klinger's transcendence of narrative and realism, one can appreciate the strategy within Brahms's formal conservatism, as well as his evocation of tradition. The Romantic impulse transcends the neoclassical. The technique of this transcendence forced both Brahms and Klinger to innovate in the realization of musical and visual space and to play on the expectations and memories of their audience. The modern and the normative—the subjective and the absolute—are reconciled in a distinct originality that permits an autonomy of fantasy on the part of the viewer, independent of the specific subject matter.

Brahms's reaction to Klinger mirrored Klinger's to Brahms. In contrast to the work of Wagner or Makart, the audience of Brahms and Klinger is permitted, in part because of the prototypic character of the overt debt to prior models, an independent subjectivity—a flight of imagination that transfigures the specific narrative itself. Their strategies included both the miniature and the monumental: the work of art as intimate, secret exchange, and as public collective engagement in which the personal as well as the heroic could still be experienced. In contrast to the work of Wagner and Bruckner, the monumentality is never distancing. No effort is made to remythologize the listening experience and turn it against the necessities of ordinary experience.

The inner vision becomes accessible, in Brahms and Klinger, within the framework of home, concert hall, and gallery, from any perspective chosen in nature, and from the vantage point of shared psychic experience rendered self-reflective through art. Neither the dwarfing religiosity of Bruckner nor the heroic theatrical fantasy of Wagner are required. A nascent trust is created between the educated individual of the nineteenth century and the artist. The transcendent flight into the inner experience is the gift of art from two artists—Brahms and, to a lesser extent, Klinger—without any effort to falsify pain, complexity, or suffering.

These were two great artists who did not sense the need to betray their middle-class compatriots; to deny their sensibilities; or to assume the self-aggrandizing station of superiority by virtue of their artistic gifts. Yet the music of Brahms is in no way glibly affirmative. It does not, as Klinger so effectively portrayed, flinch from the pessimistic, the tragic, the contradictory, and the ambiguous.

In Brahms one can witness one of the few nonpuerile confident triumphs of the urban, educated middle class in the late nineteenth century. Audience and artist from that milieu, without defensive apology to either aristocrat or aesthete, thought they could take their place with the ancients, in Winckelmann's terms, as equals—as artist, connoisseur, and amateur. Brahms's followers, whether Reger, Zemlinsky, Schoenberg, or Schenker, could replicate neither his confident engagement with the existing audience (even its elite constituents) nor his unrelenting demands on their habits of listening. Nor could they share Brahms's faith that, without sacrificing his aesthetic ambitions, he would be understood and followed into the farthest reaches of inner experience, in the concert hall, at home in the city, or in the countryside—all within the complex and troubled patterns of work and private life of the late nineteenth century.