JOHANNES BRAHMS
1833-1897

Chorales, Op 122
5. *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* (Array thyself, my soul, in gladness)
10. *Herzlich tut mich verlangen* (My heart is filled with longing)
11. *O Welt, ich muß dich lassen* (O world, I now must leave thee)

Brahms's profound relationship with Robert and Clara Schumann has been the subject of lively debate. Within that relationship was musical passion above all, followed by the three friends' favorite "pastime" of composing counterpoint in the style of Bach. As Brahms aged and the Schumanns died, it seems apparent that Brahms became more reflective on matters pertaining to death and finality yet inclining toward hope and confidence, from which complex reflection Op. 122 was probably borne. It is not exaggerating to say that these chorales are the finest of their genre since master Bach himself. They are also Brahms's final published opus number and are among the last notes ever wrote, knowledge of which makes the gentle fading away of the eleventh and final piece that much more poignant.

Fugue in A-flat minor

It is sometimes surprising to remember that one of the most romantic of the Romantics came closest to a full emulation of Bach's counterpoint. With the Fugue in A-flat Minor, Brahms created an ingenious exercise, where only two or three melodic strands are combined in countless permutations and inversions. But the real genius proves itself time and again in works such as this, where such strict compositional control still yields profound music that is as artistically valuable as it is schematically successful.

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24
transcr. Rachel Laurin (1961-2023)

Transcribers and performers of non-organ music at the organ are faced with an inherent and abiding challenge: decisions must constantly be made between making a piece sound at the organ the way it did in the *original* instrumentation or allowing the organ to play the piece on its *own* terms. With Rachel Laurin's admirable transcription of Brahms's landmark variations from his solo piano original, these tensions are multiplied. First, Brahms was always composing orchestrally, even in his piano music. His treatment of themes and his use of the piano's full compass and dynamic range are telling in his ever-escalating trek toward composing his monumental first Symphony later on. This creates an even greater level of tension in Laurin's organ transcription, where the organ is now being treated orchestrally, pianistically, *and* organistically. Second, in these twenty-five variations and fugue,

Brahms was using a Baroque theme and its restrictive short form, plus the relatively restrictive Fugue model, in which to cast his own Romantic musical statements. The results are astounding, and this work stands as a masterpiece for a twenty-eight-year-old composer. Third, there are brief tensions in executing ornaments such as trills and grace notes in Handelian style vs. Brahmsian style. Fourth, there is a happy personal tension represented in my decision to learn this piece several years ago, in which I gave myself this fleeting opportunity to "play the piano" in public once again.

The theme and most of the variations are each only a single page long. But Brahms does not just compose a set of variations and leave it at that. He organizes the variations into small groups or "suites," if one will. Each variation is briefly characterized below (by me), and suggested groupings (also mine) are indicated by line breaks:

Handel's theme: From a keyboard suite. In B-flat. In two parts, each repeated. Variations follow suit with repeats.

Variation 1: jaunty version of the theme; fairly close to the original
Variation 2: lyrical; gently chromatic; leads without pause into next:
Variation 3: quiet but increasingly capricious
Variation 4: martial, with off-beat accents

Variation 5: in B-flat minor; haunting
Variation 6: in B-flat minor; distant
Variation 7: sudden fanfare; leads without pause into next:
Variation 8: a "cooler" fanfare, with *ostinato* underneath

Variation 9: pompous; a French *ouverture*-style introduction to this "suite"
Variation 10: sudden surges and ebbing, with frequent manual changes
Variation 11: lyrical, with Mozart-ian rocking motion; leads without pause into next:
Variation 12: halting and charming
Variation 13: in B-flat minor; heavy, thudding
Variation 14: the happiest (and hardest) of all; leads without pause into next:
Variation 15: thrilling fanfares (my favorite variation)

Variation 16: flowing and fragmented
Variation 17: a little faster; expectant
Variation 18: very flowing
Variation 19: early dance consort style
Variation 20: thick, syrupy
Variation 21: in G minor; the only variation not in B-flat; a flurry of notes, gone in a near-instant
Variation 22: charming *musette*; the calm before the storm:

Variation 23: the finale begins; expectant, surging; leads without pause into next:
Variation 24: sixteenth-note increase of previous; leads without pause into next:
Variation 25: a final fanfare

Fugue: based on tiny fragments of Handel's theme, converted into near-constant sixteenth-note motion for twelve pages