

NICOLE GRIMES, *BRAHMS'S ELEGIES: THE POETICS OF LOSS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY GERMAN CULTURE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). ISBN: 9781108589758, 292 pp, £75 (hardback).

Nicole Grimes's important new book on Brahms explores what she calls the composer's 'Elegies', a group of works in which Brahms confronted 'weighty philosophical and existential issues' (p. 5), foremost of which is 'the question of how humanity could come to terms with the harshness of reality and humankind's ultimate fate—death' (p. 1). Much of Brahms's music has, of course, often been received as somewhat elegiac in tone, having an 'autumnal' or 'belated' quality, looking back longingly at a vanished age of musical classicism. But deepening—and in some respects departing from—the often-clichéd understanding of this term applied to his music, Grimes concerns herself with Brahms's interaction with the wider idea of classicism and the more specific notion of the elegy as theorized by Friedrich Schiller. Rather than focusing on the composer's well-explored instrumental works, she turns instead to his slightly less familiar choral and vocal pieces in which we can see Brahms engaging with literary history and the wider German intellectual tradition, including both visual art and philosophy. Grimes argues that:

In order to fully appreciate the context in which these compositions were created, and to gain an insight into their rich poetic resonance, one must come to terms with the whole literary and philosophical movement that surrounds Brahms's Elegies and the aesthetic sensibility they espouse (p. 3).

Three 'elegiac' compositions form the heart of Grimes's account: the *Schicksalslied*, Op. 54 (1871); *Nänie*, Op. 82 (1881); and *Gesang der Parzen*, Op. 89 (1882). Significantly, all three works set texts by classical figures in German literary history: Friedrich Hölderlin, Schiller, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe respectively. Moreover, as Grimes observes, all three texts consciously draw on classical antiquity, corresponding to the German obsession with ancient Greece in the century and a half following Winckelmann. What is idiosyncratic to these works, however, is that the pessimistic tone of the texts—in particular the ostensibly bleak endings of each—is surmounted by apparently 'anomalous' musical endings that instead show Brahms taking the opportunity 'to end with consolation, reconciliation, or a hope of some kind' (p. 206). This is music that, in short, 'whilst grappling with issues central to the human condition, ennobles, edifies, and uplifts' (p. 249).

Thus, in her reading of *Schicksalslied* (chapter 1), Grimes interprets Brahms's major-mode ending as a response to the circular, or, more precisely, spiral spiritual journey traced by the eponymous protagonist of Hölderlin's novel *Hyperion*, from which this poem stems, despite the fact that the poem's text, taken out of context, would seem to

end on a note of despair.¹ To interpret the peculiar fusion of circular return—the return of the blissful opening music at the work’s close—alongside the progressive tonal trajectory traced from E-flat major to C major, Grimes productively turns to M. H. Abrams’s reading of the ‘circuitous journey’ in literature and philosophy of the time (one of the best examples of which is in fact Hölderlin’s novel), as well as Constantin Behler’s notion of ‘nostalgic teleology’, gently debunking some of the more far-fetched formal analyses offered of this work in the process.

Chapter 2 moves forward a decade to look at Brahms’s choral setting of Schiller’s *Nänie*, a lament for the passing of beauty, the tragedy that ‘Auch das Schöne muß sterben’. Here, Grimes weaves a contextual web around Brahms’s creation by not only exploring the resonance of the Schillerian elegy for Brahms’s work, but pointing to the importance of the composer’s friendship with the painter Anselm Feuerbach, famous for the Winckelmannesque poise of his classical aesthetic. These are combined with intertextual comparisons with the music of Beethoven and the composer’s own *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Op. 45. The various literary, visual, and musical contexts uncovered here provide a rich context for understanding Brahms’s neglected work.

Chapter 3 subsequently turns to the setting of Goethe’s *Gesang der Parzen* from the following year, 1882. Whereas in her opening chapter Grimes sought to integrate the understanding of *Hyperions Schicksalslied* with its novelistic origins, in this chapter, conversely, she is at pains to distance Brahms’s understanding of Goethe’s poem from its ostensible source work—the drama *Iphigenie auf Tauris* that occupied the poet in the 1770s and ‘80s. There are good biographical reasons for this move; indeed, rather than Goethe’s reworking of Euripides’ tragedy, the classical inspiration for Brahms here is, curiously, a copy of the larger-than-life bust of the goddess Juno that the German poet displayed in his house at Weimar, which serves as a springboard for Grimes’s wide-ranging discussion.

In contrast to the previous three classical elegies, the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121, are based on biblical texts and form a supplementary example of the Brahmsian elegy that is treated in the book’s following chapter. Brahms and Nietzsche are rarely linked, with the latter’s famous comments on the composer in *The Case of Wagner*—as exhibiting ‘the melancholy of impotence’—being partly responsible for the sense of antipathy between the two figures’ worldviews. However, it turns out that Brahms read several works of Nietzsche’s and was stimulated (and perhaps a little provoked) by some of the philosopher’s polemics on Christian religion. Grimes makes a

¹ Remarkably, Grimes appears to be the first scholar actually to have read the source work before commenting on the Brahms setting!

fascinating argument here, namely that the agnostic composer's return to the Luther Bible as a textual source in Op. 121 may have been stimulated by a reading of Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*. One suggestive piece of evidence is Brahms's typically ironic and seemingly incongruous description of these self-styled 'serious songs' as *Schnaderhüpfeln*,—'a Southern German term meaning harvesters' revels' (p. 163)—which resonates with Nietzsche's dismissal in *The Antichrist* of Martin Luther as having 'robbed Europe of the last great cultural harvest' (p. 171). In Grimes's account, the *Vier ernste Gesänge* offer a last great cultural harvest for the composer—they are practically his last work—and a further instance of the elegy, in which the pessimism of the first three songs is redeemed by the consolation of the final song, 'Wenn ich mit Menschen- und mit Engelszungen redete'.

Offering one last case study in the aesthetics of belatedness, the fifth and final chapter moves beyond the composer himself to the elegiac reception of Brahms, in particular the brief comments left by Theodor Adorno.² Using a series of 'analytical vignettes' devoted to the handful of specific pieces named by the Frankfurt thinker, Grimes argues that in some of his chamber music finales, Brahms uses 'the rhetoric and gesture of classical form to critique that tradition' (p. 232), most of all in his deferral of cadential closure to stages of the generic form usually considered 'after the end'. The irony here is that this was already an extremely common strategy in the music of earlier nineteenth-century composers, so Brahms's critique turns out to have been doubly belated. In tracing 'Music's Return to the Land of Childhood', this chapter fittingly transforms Brahms's Elegies into reception history's own elegizing on Brahms.

In keeping with her conviction that 'the spiritual struggles that may be discerned in these works are intricately bound up with Brahms's treatment of form' (p. 207), Grimes moves expertly throughout this volume between close analytical engagement with the music, biographical details (including examination of Brahms's manuscripts and library holdings), literature, visual art, philosophy, and cultural and political history. The only minor blemishes in an otherwise exemplary work of scholarship are a few slips that might have been picked up in proofreading. The most unhelpful of these is the confusion of tables in chapter 5, in which Table 5.4 does not show a formal outline of the C minor Piano Trio, Op. 101, as stated in the caption, but rather offers a variant of the work already represented in Table 5.3, the A-major Violin Sonata, Op. 100. Also slightly confusing is the text on p. 299, which describes the finale of Op. 101 as being 'the only sonata-form movement on Adorno's list of ideal finales' despite the

² Grimes offers a new translation of Adorno's short 1934 text, 'Brahms Aktuell', in an appendix.

fact that the previous example of Op. 100, also named by Adorno, had been analysed as just that. As ever, it seems churlish to point out such details, but Brahms himself was an avid collector of illicit parallel fifths in the music of his distinguished predecessors, so in this case a little pedantry is perhaps not altogether inappropriate.

In the grander scheme of things, however, Nicole Grimes's monograph serves to affirm two major points: firstly, it offers a convincing demonstration of a style of humanistic scholarship that deftly weaves together musical analysis, archival study, literary and art criticism, and cultural history; and secondly, it advances a larger claim about Brahms's position within a tradition of 'aesthetic humanism' running throughout European modernity. 'Brahms's modernism', writes Grimes in the book's conclusion, lies in his 'philosophical sense of reflection, which places him along a continuum of aesthetic humanism that runs from the writings of Schiller, Goethe, and Hölderlin right up to the present' (pp. 248–9). In this same spirit, Grimes's scholarship offers a valuable, generous, and similarly self-reflexive furtherance of this common cause.

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