Viewpoint

Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music

J. PETER BURKHOLDER

Johannes Brahms is a modern of the moderns, and his C Minor Symphony is a remarkable expression of the inner life of this anxious, introverted, over-earnest age. We venture to express a doubt that this work demonstrates its author's right to a place beside or near Beethoven.

Boston Daily Advertiser, 18 January 1878.1

Brahms has traditionally been portrayed as a conservative engaged in a rear-guard action against the forward march of music. There have been attempts to change this picture, notably Arnold Schoenberg’s article “Brahms the Progressive” and a recent essay by the cultural historian Peter Gay in a volume on German modernism.2 Their arguments that Brahms should be considered a musical progressive and therefore a modernist composer are provocative, as revisionist history must be, but remain incomplete through a failure to recognize the full dimensions of modernism in music. Far from needing to be saved from the back benches of progress, Brahms can be characterized as the most modern and indeed the most imitated of composers of the latter nineteenth century, the composer whose approach to music has become most typical of later generations of composers. Brahms is the single most important influence on twentieth-century classical music—not in the way it sounds, but in how we think about it, how composers think about it, how music behaves, why it is written, and how composers measure their success.

Histories of the music of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have almost universally explained the stylistic changes which characterize this period as the results of stresses within the musical language itself. Harmony and melody, which had traditionally both depended upon and helped to create the feeling of being “in a key,” were often used in the later nineteenth century to undermine that feeling for emotional or dramatic effect, and standard histories have viewed this development as decisive, speaking of the “breakdown” or “demise” of tonality as if tonal music suddenly ceased to be composed, played, or understood.

This so-called “breakdown” is described as “inevitable.” According to this view, composers in the generation which included Mahler, Schoenberg, and Scriabin had no choice but to proceed toward total chromaticism, along a path mapped out for them in tonal music as far back as Bach and Mozart.3 Among late nineteenth-century figures, Wagner is preeminent in such histories, which view the prolonged dis-

Notes for this article begin on page 82.

19th-Century Music VIII/1 (Summer 1984). © by The Regents of the University of California.
sonances, delayed resolutions, and yearning chromaticism of Tristan und Isolde as harbingers of the coming collapse. Brahms is typically bypassed as a conservative in a progressive epoch, fighting a losing battle for “classical” musical values and forms in the face of growing nationalism and programmatic. Since tonality’s Götterdämmerung, according to this account, it has become impossible to write serious tonal music, and twentieth-century composers have ever since been stumbling in the dark, seeking new ways to arrange pitches in their music. A recent popular biography of Alban Berg summarizes what it calls “the catastrophe” in a single sentence: “Tonality’s demise was inevitable, yet it has left such a gap that the whole of 20th-century music has been a quest for something satisfying to take its place.”

This view is, at best, only partially true. Yet it has become virtual dogma, the accepted, apparently satisfactory explanation for how we think of as “modern music” came to be written. This dogma concentrates the interest of scholars and critics on the evolution of pitch relationships above every other element in the music and obscures other modernist trends which do not involve pitch manipulation. In particular, this emphasis on the evolution of musical technique, divorced from an understanding of the contexts for which music was being created, obscures the real crisis in music composition during this period, a crisis not of musical language but of purpose.

Schoenberg’s defense of Brahms in “Brahms the Progressive” is couched in purely musical terms, emphasizing his “contributions to an unrestricted musical language” based on irregular phrasing, harmonic innovation, motivic saturation, and avoidance of repetition—a language that clearly influenced Schoenberg’s own. Peter Gay follows Schoenberg’s lead, as he seeks to resolve the apparent paradox between the reception offered Brahms’s works in the nineteenth century, when they were seen as difficult and intellectual, and what he imagines their current reputation to be: sweet, sentimental, and Romantic. Our view of Brahms is the result of long familiarity, Gay argues: “The radical innovations in harmony and rhythm that Schoenberg discerns in Brahms’s work have been absorbed into the mainstream of taste with the passage of time; what once mystified and alienated listeners now lies comfortably, almost lazily, in our ear.” Having redeemed Brahms as a difficult modernist as well as a conservative follower of Beethoven, Gay is ultimately led to an understanding that modernism is not so divorced from tradition as it is usually pictured, not so much a creation of something new out of the void as a selective reinterpretation of available elements from the tradition, including the present as well as the near and distant pasts.

Gay is clearly on the right track here, as that synthesis of elements from past and present is certainly what Brahms was after in his music, and what Schoenberg was as well. But in revising our ideas of modernism, he is not revisionist enough: like Schoenberg, he fails to escape the realm of musical language to consider music in its social context. He does not stop to ask why “mystifying” and “alienating” listeners is almost a given for modern music, even while using this aspect of the early reception offered to Brahms as an argument for Brahms’s modernism. Nor does he consider that, while the music of Brahms, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky—the first generation to be labelled “modern” in our modern sense of the word—is no longer considered “modern,” the music of the following generation, of Schoenberg, Ives, and Stravinsky, has remained “modern,” “mystifying,” and “alienating” since its creation seventy-five years ago.

I want to redefine modernism in music and to begin the modernist movement in music with Brahms. Modernism in music is not identical with progress in musical techniques. To treat the history of music in our century as merely a series of innovations, as is not uncommon, is to trivialize the music and our experience of it in the concert hall while elevating innovation itself to the level of an absolute. What is most important about the music of the past hundred years is not its innovations but its air of crisis, and that crisis has to do primarily with the relationship of new music to past music, the music of the concert tradition. I wish to define “modern music” as music written by composers obsessed with the musical past and with their place in music history, who seek to emulate the music of those we call the “classical masters,” measuring the value of their own music by the
standards of the past. “Modern” is an apt term for this music, for both composers and listeners conceive of it in relation to the music of the past and are self-conscious about its modernity. The legendary difficulty and sense of “alienation” of modernist music follows naturally from this obsession with the past. Modern composers are more concerned with value in an absolute sense, with judging music against an abstract ideal, than with accessibility or direct communication with an audience in the present.

The source of modernism lies not in increasing chromaticism, indeed not in the musical language at all, but in music’s changing social function. In the century from Mozart’s mature works to those of Brahms, the public concert changed from a platform for the presentation of recent works by living composers to a museum primarily for the display of works of art from previous generations. While Mozart wrote to please all the members of his audience from the unschooled listener to the connoisseur, virtuoso composer-performers of the early nineteenth century sacrificed the musical values esteemed by connoisseurs for the sake of immediate and spectacular appeal. In reaction, serious musicians turned back to Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, and even J. S. Bach, challenging the ephemera of the virtuosi with what they regarded as “classic” music, masterpieces by master composers which had enduring value. As a new seriousness entered the concert hall, the concert began to resemble a museum show, complete with explanatory notes and the start of what we know as “music appreciation,” the art of listening as a learned rather than culturally native activity. That part of the audience which sought to be entertained rather than improved by music was no longer welcome in the concert hall, and entertainment music—what we now think of as “popular” music—took refuge in music halls, nightclubs, and “pops” concerts. Only tutored listeners, the intellectual heirs of the eighteenth-century connoisseurs, remained in the concert halls.

The music that was played there, whatever its original purpose, was understood to be, or to aspire to be, “classical.” Older works were performed not as aristocratic entertainments, as they may have been originally intended, but as masterworks tested by time and deserving admiration and study for their own sakes. New works specifically written for the concert hall museum were expected to perform the same function as the masterworks already there enshrined. Each work, old or new, was a museum piece, and had to meet three basic requirements in order to qualify for the permanent collection: (1) it must visibly participate in the tradition of serious art music; (2) it must have lasting value, rewarding rehearsals, study, and analysis, becoming loved as it becomes familiar; and (3) it must proclaim a distinctive musical personality, different enough from the other works in the collection to justify its inclusion while not so radically different as to exclude it entirely.10

It should be stressed that the creation of musical works of lasting value had never before been the only, or even the primary, goal of composition. Only in the nineteenth century did the connoisseur’s appreciation of music for its own sake, apart from any rituals of church, court, or commerce, become the norm for listening to concert music. The sense of crisis in music from the latter nineteenth century through our own time was provoked by this ideology of music as an art practiced for its own sake and heightened by the simultaneous intensification of competition, as living composers found themselves crowded out of the concert hall not only by the music of the two previous generations, but also by the rediscovered music of the Renaissance and Baroque. The crisis was in part one of style: as early music became better known, the choices of what music to play and how to compose became progressively wider, until what the pieces in the concert had in common was no longer a shared style but only a shared status as enduring classics. In reaction to such a diversity of sound and approach, the musical language common to nineteenth-century composers began to splinter into individual dialects, and the rapid and dramatic changes in style which characterize the past hundred years have resulted from this fragmentation of the common musical language rather than from stresses within the language itself.

Brahms, born in 1833, matured just as the transformation of the concert hall into a cultural museum was in its final stages. The concert music he heard and the piano music he studied as a boy included both the revived “classics” and the
contemporary virtuosi—Thalberg and Herz as well as Bach and Beethoven. After meeting both Liszt and Schumann in the early 1850s, Brahms denounced the avant-garde "New German School" around Liszt and turned to an emulation of the classics, guided in part by Schumann. From his youth through his old age, Brahms collected and transcribed older music, studying the formal and contrapuntal techniques and manner of setting the German language of his greatest predecessors. His own works reflect this study: the choral music draws on models from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, including Palestrina, Eccard, Schütz, Handel, and Bach, while the instrumental music takes as its most prominent models Schumann and Chopin from his teachers' generation, Beethoven and Schubert from the previous one, and the great German composers of the eighteenth century.

Brahms regarded these predecessors as useful models for his own music but understood them to be solving intrinsically musical problems in ways that were new to him. He was not interested in them as historical figures—as musicologists and cultural historians are interested in them—but as musicians, as one composer is interested in the work of a colleague. He saw that they had something to teach him, and he was interested in what he could learn from them, seeing the musical problems they had solved as contemporary ones.

Brahms's thorough knowledge of the past allowed him to recreate old forms, from the familiar sonata to the virtually forgotten chaconne, and invest them with the same organic approach to form which Mozart and Bach had demonstrated. For all his study, there is nothing academic about Brahms's music. It sounds like no other music—sounds, in fact, more distinct from his contemporaries than the music of anyone else writing at this time. And this distinctiveness was precisely the result of the great wealth of his influences and his willingness to mix them freely, integrating procedures from vastly different traditions into his own new works.

An example of this is the famous chaconne finale of the Fourth Symphony from 1885. The most obvious model for it is Bach's Chaconne for solo violin, which Brahms had transcribed in 1877 for piano left hand; the two pieces have a great deal in common. Both are finales of multi-movement works; both are in a minor key in a slow triple time; the variations in both are grouped in pairs; each chaconne has three sections, the middle one in the parallel major key; within each section, there is an increase in rhythmic activity; the sections are articulated by a reappearance of the opening idea and texture; the bass line and principal tune are freely varied; there are even certain details of figuration that the two pieces share, such as dotted rhythms, bariolage, and a tendency for motives to begin just after rather than on the downbeat.

But there is a second model for this movement, less obvious though certainly as important: Beethoven's Eroica, the first and one of the few other symphonies whose finale is a set of variations. The bass line of both variation sets is first presented in the middle and upper registers, only later being placed in the bass; both movements are in three sections, including a suggestion of a sonata-form development and recapitulation; within each section, the rhythm gradually intensifies; and both movements close with a faster symphonic coda, which begins with a recall of the movement's opening, then develops the thematic material in a new way, divorced from the rigidity of the theme's recurring eight-measure phrases.

In a more general way, Brahms borrows melodic grace, ornament, and chromaticism from Mozart and Chopin, orchestral ideas from Schumann, and part of his conception of the chaconne from Couperin. The result is pure Brahms. By choosing two strong but very distinct and unusual works from different eras of music as his principal models, Brahms avoids mere imitation; his own voice is recognizable, even when his debt is most obvious. This movement is a prime example of a piece written for the concert hall museum: modelled on the important classical composers, it visibly participated in the tradition they represent; its value is enduring; its beauties are revealed best by familiarity and close study; and its personality is distinctive. It seems at once traditional and fresh, ancient and forward-looking. Written to continue the musical values of Schumann, Beethoven, and Bach, its aspiration to the label "classic" is unmistakable.

Other examples of Brahms's synthesis of two
or more alien styles are not hard to find. Imogen Fellinger has pointed out that his variation movements from the Variations on the Theme of Handel (1861) through the finale of the Fourth Symphony rely both on the model of Bach’s variations, where continuous melodic invention ornaments an unchanging bass, and on the model of Beethoven, whose variations treat harmony and rhythm as the equals of melody. Both of these models, like Brahms’s mature variations sets themselves, are worlds away from the simple variations on a melody that are typical of nineteenth-century composers and, indeed, of the younger Brahms. Brahms’s studies of Baroque counterpoint and fugue led him to introduce contrapuntal effects into genres where learned counterpoint is foreign indeed, such as the waltz and the Lied. Virginia Hancock has documented Brahms’s interest in collecting and studying early choral music and its effect on his own choral works, which frequently use techniques adapted from both Renaissance and Baroque models.

Among the most interesting of the recent studies of Brahms’s relationship to his models is a paper read at the International Brahms Conference in Washington in 1983 by David Lewin, who presents several examples of his dependence on earlier music. In the opening measures of the C-Minor String Quartet, op. 51, no. 1 (1873), for instance, a thematic “sentence” characteristic of middle-period Beethoven (where “a motivic model is stated, repeated, developed, and liquidated, leading to a cadence”) is juxtaposed with a long dominant prolongation characteristic of Mozart. Lewin offers several specific models for these procedures from both composers. He even goes so far as to suggest that Brahms may have known contemporary theories of Franconian mensuration and may have applied them in his Intermezzo in E minor, op. 116, no. 5, juxtaposing the old rhythmic modes with nineteenth-century dissonance treatment. As Lewin comments, “A more far-reaching dialectical synthesis of musical contradictions, extending over a broader historical period, would be hard to imagine.”

What is most radical about Brahms’s music is that he faced head on the problems of writing for a concert audience familiar with the music of the past, the problem that has been the principal concern of serious composers since his time. The requirements of composition had become paradoxical: composers sought to write new music that would find a place in a tradition of steadily aging immortal masterpieces, demanding of each piece that it visibly participate in that tradition while proclaiming its own distinctiveness. Brahms’s solution, as Lewin points out, was dialectical, addressing not only the opposition of old and new musical styles and techniques, but also, even more importantly, the tension between emulation and originality. Brahms simultaneously established his place in the tradition and achieved his distinctive musical voice by his selective reinterpretation of existing music, intensifying, combining, and transforming what he valued in the musical tradition. It was in his borrowing that his originality lay, and in his plundering of the past for its treasures that his new riches were forged.

This kind of dialectic within music approaches a species of criticism, as if Brahms were writing in his music a commentary on his own experience as a musician, or indeed, given his wide knowledge, a rumination on the entire previous tradition of music. Writing about Brahms’s integration of the special features of Schubert’s sonata movements into more traditional forms patterned after Mozart and Beethoven, James Webster has observed that through this juxtaposition “Brahms himself provided a secure foundation for analysis and criticism of Schubert’s forms.” The same is true for Brahms’s other uses of existing music as a source or model for his own. Brahms’s music presents itself to us on two levels: for the naive listener, as an independent musical work in abstract form, and for the connoisseur, as a gloss on a particular work, style, genre, or technique. Heard in this second way, Brahms’s music embraces all he knew of previous European musical history within it, a summation that is both awesome in its scope and incomprehensible without an understanding of the past that is being evoked. To experience Brahms’s music fully, one must come to know as much about music as Brahms did—and that is no small task.

In its dialectical nature, in its role as criticism, and in its seeking not to displace the classical masters but to join them, Brahms’s music
has served as the most important model for composers of the past hundred years, challenged only by the influential avant-garde movements after the Second World War. Modern composers have faced the same paradoxical requirements as did Brahms and have arrived at the same solution, achieving their originality through the intensification and transformation of ideas learned in their study of existing music. Like Brahms, modern composers select their own past, providing a gloss on the musical traditions they encompass, and their music derives a large part of its expressive meaning and historical significance from its evocation of the listener’s previous musical experience. And, like Brahms’s music, theirs speaks particularly to the connoisseur, the ideal listener who understands the web of allusions that is the core of modern music.

Each modern composer of distinction has taken a unique path, sharing with his peers only the nature of the problem and the model of Brahms’s dialectical solution. Mahler, for instance, drew together the Austrian symphonic tradition from Haydn through Bruckner and Brahms, and widened his net to include military music, bird song, folk song, and other kinds of music familiar to his audiences and laden with social or emotional significance. Schoenberg claimed all the great composers of the German tradition from Bach to Reger as his teachers and credited himself with writing “truly new music which, being based on tradition, is destined to become tradition.” The dialectic between the old forms and new syntax is especially resonant in Schoenberg’s serial works. He reinvents sonata form in the first movement of his Fourth Quartet, including a polarity of “tonic” and “dominant” areas for his first and second theme groups, “modulatory” transitions, a recapitulation “in the wrong key,” and a “second recapitulation” in the “tonic” in a Beethovenian coda. Into the Piano Suite, modeled on the keyboard suites of Bach, he integrates an intermezzo, the quintessential element of Brahms’s late sets of pieces. Through the evocation of these tonal forms in his new musical language, Schoenberg completely absorbs the tonal tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, just as in his account of the progress of music he seeks to characterize each stage of his work as the culmination of all that had gone before.

The neo-classicism of Stravinsky, Hindemith’s neo-Baroque music, and Carl Orff’s neo-medievalisms are all transparent reinterpretations of the past in modern terms, and the meaning of their music, both intellectual and emotional, is almost entirely dependent on the listener’s knowledge of the style or particular works being glossed. Similarly, an understanding of the new serial music of Babbitt depends on intimate familiarity with the music of the Second Vienna School, and Rochberg’s summation in his recent quartets of the entire German stylistic tradition since Mozart gains its unique rhetorical power from his insistence on writing music that is both new and original in styles his listeners will identify with individual past composers from three different eras of music history. For both Babbitt and Rochberg, in very different ways, the tension between emulation and originality has reached a new level.

Even composers outside the central German orbit have followed the Brahmsian model, achieving originality through selective reinterpretation of existing music. Bartók’s mature music combines the elaborate art forms of fugue and sonata from the classical tradition with the rhythmic complexity, ornamentation, and dissonance of peasant music from southeastern Europe and Turkey. This has two perhaps unexpected results, which highlight the role of Bartók’s music as dialectic and as commentary. First, in the same way that Brahms’s combination of ideas drawn from Bach and Beethoven drew those two composers into a new relationship, the process of synthesizing two musical traditions seemingly so disparate as peasant music and concert music makes clear their common dependence on motivic organization, orientation around a tonal center, and fundamental scales and intervals, features which Bartók takes pains to emphasize. Second, Bartók’s obvious respect for his sources, along with his demonstration of the links between peasant song and classical masterpiece, has helped to establish the value and importance of east European folk music, just as Brahms’s sponsorship of Eccard and Schütz helped their cause. In a similar way, Ives in his Second Symphony proclaimed the unity of his own musical experience by celebrating the distinct contributions of both European and American music within a single work, paraphrasing American hymn tunes and popular songs for his themes, using traditional sonata and ternary forms while in-
introducing novel key relationships, borrowing transitional passages from Brahms, Bach, and Wagner, and at one point transforming part of a Bach fugue into a fragment of “Camptown Races.”

The list could go indefinitely. Each of these composers, from Mahler to Rochberg, has written music which focuses on the dialectics between old and new styles and between emulation and originality, music which takes music itself as its subject matter. In the process of developing his own musical language through the rapprochement of contemporary techniques with older materials, each composer creates a kind of musical criticism presented in strictly musical terms, exposing hitherto unsuspected relationships between apparently unrelated musical traditions or ideas, or extending the contributions of past composers in new directions. The more familiar one is with the music used as models, the more exhilarating this criticism in music can be. But criticism is rarely read as often as the literature it critiques, and this has been the fate of much modern music as well. If to experience Brahms’s music fully one must know what Brahms knew about music, and if the same holds true for Schoenberg, then to experience Babbitt’s music—which cannot even be approached without an understanding of the music of the Schoenberg school—will be an impossibility for all but a very few.

Here is where something has been lost. While Brahms’s music could be experienced on two levels—naively or as a self-conscious critique of past music—with a few exceptions modern music has lost its ability to make an appeal to the naive listener. Modern composers have been less interested in writing music which is grateful to perform or accessible to their audiences than they are in writing “good music”—music which intrigues and excites the learned connoisseur, music worthy of comparison with the masterpieces of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, music whose lasting value will earn a place in the permanent collection. Following the model of Brahms as they have understood it, composers from Reger to Wuorinen have measured their success in terms of the absolute quality of their music, not in terms of its immediate or wide appeal. Like Brahms’s music, also, their music is self-consciously “modern,” reflecting on the tradition of art music and seeking continuously to renew it.

However, unlike the music we still think of as “modern,” despite its advancing age, Brahms’s music has attained both classic status and great popularity. Brahms recognized and solved yet a third dialectic in his compositions, beyond the oppositions of the new with the old and of emulation with originality. This is the tension between the present and the future—the requirement that a work demonstrate lasting value, rewarding frequent hearings and becoming more loved as it becomes more familiar, and yet at the same time have enough immediate appeal to move the listener to seek out a second hearing. It is on this paradox that most modern composers have fumbled. Like Mozart before him, Brahms invested his music not only with hidden beauties for the connoisseur, but also with a strikingly beautiful and emotionally appealing surface containing enough familiar features to orient the untutored listener. Through a familiarity Schoenberg’s music can never win, Brahms’s modernism has lost its bite: by the end of his life, his music was as firmly established in the concert hall museum as that of his models Bach and Beethoven. Only a few composers since Brahms—notably Mahler and Debussy—have achieved the same synthesis of immediate and lasting appeal.

Brahms’s fundamental importance for the music of the past one hundred years is this: he has provided the model for future generations of what a composer is, what a composer does, why a composer does it, what is of value in music, and how a composer is to succeed. For composers as diverse as Debussy and Ives, Bartók and Boulez, Britten and Crumb, Stockhausen and Shostakovich, it has proven impossible to escape from the idea of composition incarnated by Brahms.

In this respect, the “music of the future” has belonged not to Wagner but to Brahms. It is the change in the orientation of serious music, the change in the purpose of composition, which has been of greatest importance, rather than the changes within the language of music itself. The music that resulted from a confrontation with Wagner, from Strauss to Debussy, evolved a new language where orchestral color, striking dissonant chords, new scales and modes, and characteristic rhythmic patterns assumed increasing structural weight and the old founda-
tions of tonal centers and thematic repetition gradually lost their importance. This process was relatively untroubled, and it has had almost nothing to do with modernism. When new resources were called into play for programmatic, pictorial, or coloristic reasons, there was no potential limit for the evolution of the musical language or for its comprehensibility. Even works which transcended tonality, such as Stravinsky’s early ballets, found enthusiastic audiences, and the full repertoire of twentieth-century musical devices from primitivism to electronic effects has become standard fare in scores for radio, movies, and television. The new musical language developed by Wagner, Liszt, and their followers has had an impact on every kind of music from Muzak to jazz, yet what has determined the course of the music we call “modern” is the influence of Brahms. While Wagner and Liszt provided new musical tools, Brahms helped establish the framework for using those tools, and his assumptions concerning what music is and does have been played out in succeeding generations.

Thus, it was Brahms the traditionalist rather than Wagner the revolutionary who created and confronted the central problem for composers of the twentieth century: the integration of a progressive musical language with an allegiance to the tradition of Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. There are no Wagners now, except perhaps composers of movie music—I am thinking here of the contemporary American Gesamtkunstwerk called Star Wars and the music for it by John Williams. But there are hundreds of Brahmses, composers who look to the classical music of the past as source and measure of their own “classical” music and who seek, in the words of our anonymous reviewer from the Boston Daily Advertiser, “a place beside or near Beethoven.”

Earlier versions of this article were read in February 1983 as part of a series of lectures and concerts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison celebrating the anniversaries of Brahms and Webern, and in September 1983 at a meeting of the Midwest Chapter of the American Musicological Society on Chicago.

NOTES


3See for instance Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, 2nd edn. [Englewood Cliffs, 1974], p. 32: “The growth of equal temperament, chromaticism, and modulation had made possible the historical rise of functional tonality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and destroyed it in the twentieth; thus tonality contained within itself from the start the seed of its own destruction.” This presumption of the development of total chromaticism as an inevitable result of what had come before can be traced to the self-justifications of Schoenberg and his circle, if not earlier, reflecting both a sense of crisis and an attitude of personal martyrdom in pursuing a path against one’s own will. Compare Anton Webern’s discussion of the “paths that led unavoidably to twelve-note composition” (p. 43) and his claim that Bach’s music “sowed the fatal seeds” of tonality’s ultimate dissolution, that in “Bach’s chorale harmonizations tonality was dealt a severe blow” (pp. 36–37), in “The Path to Twelve-Note Composition” and “The Path to New Music,” pub. together as The Path to the New Music [ed. Willi Reich, trans. Leo Black [Bryn Mawr, 1963]], or theodor w. Adorno’s summary of the “exhaustion” of past musical resources in an “irreversible” process of history (“Inherent Tendency of Musical Material,” Philosophy of Modern Music, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster [New York, 1973], pp. 32–37).

4Schoenberg characterized the rise of atonality as an inevitable development almost as soon as it happened, commenting in the program notes to the 1910 premiere performances of his piano pieces, op. 11, and George songs, op. 15, that “it seemed a good thing to point out...that I am being forced in his direction not because my invention or technique is inadequate, nor because I am uninformed about all the other things the prevailing aesthetics demand, but that I am obeying an inner compulsion, which is stronger than any upbringing: I am obeying the formative process which, being the one natural to me, is stronger than my artistic education.” Quoted in Willi Reich, Schoenberg: A Critical Biography, trans. Leo Black [London, 1971], p. 49. See also Leo Treitler’s discussion of historians’ treatments of twentieth-century music, in “The Present as History,” Perspectives of New Music 7/2 [1969], 1–58, particularly his insistence that historians have adopted Schoenberg’s own view of his place and importance in history (pp. 38ff).

Karen Monson, Alban Berg [Boston, 1979], p. 65. Compare Webern’s language in “The Path to Twelve-Note Composition” [see n. 3]: “Today we shall examine tonality in its last throes. I want to prove to you that it’s really dead” (p. 47). “With all this we approach the catastrophe... music by Schoenberg that’s no longer in any key” (p. 48).

5“Brahms the Progressive,” p. 441.

6Schoenberg’s regard for Brahms as a model for his own music is clear, for instance, in comparing Schoenberg’s discus-
The current reputation Gay attributes to Brahms may be the popular one; it is certainly not the reputation Brahms enjoys among musicians, who have had time to absorb Schoenberg's view.

Examples of such a treatment are not hard to find. Recent texts on music since 1945 by Reginald Smith Brindle (The New Music: The Avant-Garde Since 1945 [London, 1975]) and Paul Griffiths (Modern Music: The Avant-Garde Since 1945 [New York, 1981]) concentrate solely on the avant-garde, as their titles indicate. Peter Yates, author of one of the freshest looks at modern music (Twentieth Century Music: Its Evolution from the End of the Harmonic Era into the Present Era of Sound [New York, 1967]), deliberately excludes from his study composers "whose compositions, however valuable, did not contribute to musical evolution" (p. xiii).

Even the best general histories of twentieth-century music, those by Eric Salzman and by H.H. Stuckenschmidt (Twentieth Century Music, trans. Richard Deveson [New York and Toronto, 1969]), devote space almost exclusively to the new musical styles and approaches developed by composers from Schoenberg and Bartók to Cage and Stockhausen, while the twentieth-century music that is heard most often in the concert hall—including Sibelius, Rachmaninov, Ravel, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Gershwin, Copland, Britten, and others—is treated only briefly, if at all.


While the Bach Chaconne for solo violin is the apparent model for a great many details of structure and motive, Brahms’s chaconne bass itself has a different source. According to Richard Specht, Brahms adapted his bass line from the final choral ciacona of Bach’s Cantata 150 ("Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich"), doubling its length and introducing a chromatic passing tone. Several years before composing his last symphony, Brahms reportedly played this choral ciacona for Hans von Bülow and suggested the appropriateness of its bass for an orchestral chaconne. (See Richard Specht, Johannes Brahms, trans. Eric Blom [London, 1930], p. 270.) Although Bach’s cantata provided the model for the bass line, there seems to be no other resemblance of melody, figuration, texture, or structure between the choral ciacona and Brahms’s chaconne.

The parallels in figuration seem quite deliberate. The opening stately dotted rhythm of the Bach Chaconne appears in the fourth variation of the Brahms, at the point where the chaconne ostinato finally takes its rightful place in the bass, and the next several variations all correspond exactly in figuration to variations in the Bach.


See Ludwig Misch’s discussion of counterpoint, canon, and diminution in Brahms’s Lieder, in "Kontrapunkt und Imitation im Brahms’schen Lied," Die Musikforschung 11 (1958), 155–60. As Fellinger points out in "Brahms und die Musik vergangener Epochen," (p. 151), op. 39, no. 16, is a waltz in invertible counterpoint for piano four hands, the finale of a set of waltzes inspired by the model of Schubert.


"Brahms, His Past, and Modes of Music Theory," to be published in Brahms Studies, ed. George Bozarth (forthcoming). My thanks to Walter Frisch for furnishing me with a copy of Lewin’s text.

"Schubert’s Sonata Form and Brahms’s First Maturity [1]," this journal 2 (1978), 20.

In an article on “influence,” Charles Rosen discusses several passages in Brahms which gloss particular works of Beethoven and Chopin, and comments, “This sort of allusion is like the modernized quotation from Horace practiced by poets of the time of Pope. It created an intimate link between poet and educated reader, composer and professional musician—and excludes the ordinary reader and listener. It also acknowledges the existence of a previous Classical style, an aspiration to recreate it, and an affirmation that such a recreation is no longer possible on naive or independent terms. The control of style is now not merely willed but self-conscious.” See “Influence: Plagiarism and Inspiration,” this journal 4 (1980), 96. One might add that such music not only admits its dependence on earlier music but to a certain extent proclaims its superiority, implying a deeper level of understanding than the text it serves as a gloss, as well as demanding a better listener to catch its meaning.

While modernist composers seek to continue the tradition of art music and claim a place in that tradition, avant-garde composers reject the past, reject the conception of the concert hall as a museum, and call for their listeners to forget musical history and take part in the present moment. Their music does the same, celebrating sound itself in the present moment and rejecting old teleological ideas of music as organic growth, sounding architecture, or emotive speech. There are, of course, composers in the twentieth century who are neither modernist nor avant-garde, and others who may write music in both streams. This issue is more fully explored in my article “Museum Pieces,” pp. 129–32.