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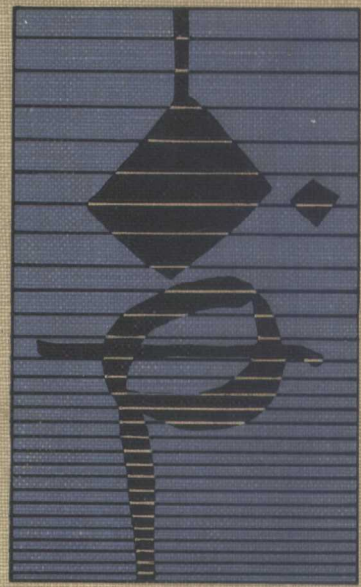
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Brahms's Choral Compositions and His Library of Early Music

Virginia Hancock



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Studies in Musicology

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Brahms's Choral Compositions and His Library of Early Music

by
Virginia Hancock



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Ann Arbor, Michigan

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Early Music Study and Performance in the Life of Brahms

Johannes Brahms was born in 1833, four years after Mendelssohn's revival of the *St. Matthew Passion*. He died in 1897, shortly before the close of the nineteenth century. Thus he lived and worked throughout the period of the great nineteenth-century revival of interest in early music, and he himself contributed substantially to that revival.

As a child in Hamburg, he was given a thorough classical piano and theory training by his teachers, Friedrich Cossel and Eduard Marxsen, and his first solo concert contained a Bach fugue—an unusual choice in that period of virtuoso performances.¹ Nothing is known about the repertoire of his first choir, a small men's chorus which he conducted in Winsen in the summer of 1847, except that he wrote two pieces for it, one of which showed "a feeling for independent part-writing."² However, it is certain that his interest in early polyphonic music had already begun to develop before April 1853, when he left Hamburg with Eduard Reményi on the concert tour which resulted in Brahms's friendships with Joseph Joachim and the Schumanns. By this time he had already copied out works by Palestrina, Corsi, Durante, and Lotti which he kept in his library all his life.

Robert and Clara Schumann and their friends encouraged Brahms not only in his composing and playing, but also in his interest in early music.³ Schumann had carefully studied the keyboard works of Bach, and also had a high regard for Palestrina and his Italian followers which had developed during his days as a student in Heidelberg, when Anton Thibaut, the author of *Über Reinheit der Tonkunst*, had been one of his law professors. He had rehearsed works by Palestrina, Lasso, Lotti, and Bach with his chorus in Düsseldorf, and had a good-sized collection of early music in his personal library, including a number of the important earlier nineteenth-century collections.⁴ After Schumann's breakdown and hospitalization in February 1854, Brahms moved to Düsseldorf to be with

Clara and to stay with the children when she was away on tour. He spent a large part of his time in Schumann's library, first organizing it,⁵ and then studying and copying material from it. By early 1855 he was systematically studying counterpoint on his own, reporting progress in writing "all possible sorts of canons" to Clara;⁶ and in February 1856 he embarked on a cooperative program of contrapuntal study with Joachim, who was never as enthusiastic about the project as Brahms, but who faithfully evaluated the large amount of material that Brahms sent to him, and cheerfully paid his fines when he failed to produce his own share of music.⁷ Brahms later destroyed most of his counterpoint exercises along with a mass of sketches and other unpublished material, but his earliest surviving choral works belong to this period.⁸

The exchange of counterpoint studies was broken off by Schumann's death in July 1856 and never really revived, though Brahms and Joachim discussed the possibility occasionally for another several years. However, Brahms continued his own investigation of early music. During a trip to Switzerland made with Clara Schumann, two of her children, and Brahms's sister Elise shortly after Schumann's death, he spent some time in the monastery library at Einsiedeln, where he copied out a number of keyboard works by Frescobaldi. Once he had returned to live in Hamburg, he made considerable use of the city library, patronized the second-hand bookshops, and renewed his friendships with members of the city's musical establishment who shared his interests and encouraged him to use their private libraries as well as helping him add to his own.⁹

In 1857, Brahms's appointment as choral conductor to the small court at Detmold provided him with a practical reason for the diligent study and accumulation of choral repertoire. He held the position for three consecutive autumn seasons, each time earning enough in a few months to support himself for the rest of the year and enable him to devote his time to further study and composition. During the 1857 season, he concentrated on a cappella works (see Appendix 1), while in his second season he tackled two Bach cantatas. In Hamburg, meanwhile, he had begun to direct a ladies' choir, for which he composed a number of pieces and also arranged works by other composers (see Appendix 1). Throughout the years in Detmold and Hamburg, with the help and advice of such friends as Joachim, Clara, and Julius Otto Grimm added to his own experience, Brahms was acquiring practical knowledge in all areas of choral music—repertoire, directing, and composing for voices.

One of the reasons Brahms stayed on in Hamburg until 1862 was that he hoped to be chosen as the new director of the Philharmonic concerts there. When, in the middle of his first visit to Vienna for the 1862-63 winter season, he learned that his friend Julius Stockhausen had been

chosen instead, his disappointment was severe. However, he had had a considerable artistic success in Vienna, had made a number of good friends, and had enjoyed the opportunities the city had to offer, including the two excellent music libraries, the Hofbibliothek (now the Nationalbibliothek) and the Archiv of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (also known as the Musikverein). Therefore, when he was offered the position of director of the Wiener Singakademie for the 1863-64 season, he accepted enthusiastically and returned to Vienna with high hopes.

Although Brahms was happy in Vienna and eventually settled there permanently, the Singakademie proved to be a disappointment, since his attempt to put into practice his ideas of what an ideal choral society should be met with resistance on the part of both the members of the society and the public. His first performance, which included the first Viennese performance of Bach's Cantata 21, "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis," as well as works by Beethoven and Schumann (see Appendix 1), was a musical and critical success. By the second, however, the charm of novelty had worn off; and a largely a cappella program consisting of early music by the composers Schütz, Gabrieli, Rovetta, and Eccard, with works by Beethoven and Mendelssohn as the only more up-to-date offerings, inadequately prepared by the chorus and badly performed by the poor instrumentalists who were all that the Singakademie could afford to hire, was altogether too dismal for press and public alike, especially at the beginning of the carnival season. Clara Schumann wrote to Brahms urging him to attempt a more gradual transformation of Viennese musical taste:

Unfortunately I have heard that your second concert didn't go well, that the chorus wasn't enough prepared—why didn't you put it off? Then I heard that you had done the sort of old sacred pieces that people in Vienna don't like—is that true? Surely you did other things as well, and then one or two such old pieces could perhaps be pleasing!¹⁰

The situation was made worse by the rivalry of the Singverein of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, a larger, more competent, and far better financed group, which moreover had a large orchestra available for its concerts. Thus when the Singakademie performed sections of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* as its third concert under Brahms within a few days of the Singverein's *St. John Passion*, the contrast was not at all flattering to Brahms. He improved his standing slightly with his last concert of the season, which he was persuaded to make up entirely of his own works; but although he was offered a three-year renewal of his contract, he decided to give up the position, and in future to undertake such a responsibility only on his own terms.

During the next several years, Brahms traveled a great deal, but he always returned to Vienna, where he became more and more settled. He continued his studies in the Hofbibliothek and the Archiv of the Musikverein, where the librarian, C. F. Pohl, became a close friend. The great success of the *Deutsches Requiem* meant that, from about 1869 onwards, Brahms could support himself entirely by composing, and no longer needed to appear as a performer—either pianist or conductor—unless he chose to. He was briefly tempted in 1870 to become the director of the Orchesterverein of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, but decided not to on the grounds that he really wanted a choir to direct as well.¹¹ In 1872, however, he was persuaded to accept the position of musical director of the Gesellschaft, with responsibility for both the chorus (the Singverein) and the orchestra. He held this position for three years.

As had been the case when he conducted the Singakademie (and probably also the Detmold choir, although for that period we have far less information), Brahms was only a qualified success in this new position. His musical taste was too severe for the bulk of the Vienna concert-going public of the 1870s, and he was firmly opposed to the practice of performing new works simply for their novelty value.¹² He demanded too much work from his amateur singers: almost his first official act was to double the number of rehearsals and to institute section rehearsals. He also found the political and organizational responsibilities of such a post uncongenial. His performances were, nevertheless, generally well received, and he successfully introduced a number of Bach and Handel works to Vienna, along with occasional smaller pieces of early music and several of his own choral works (see Appendix 1).

In 1875 he gave up the position at the Musikverein, and from then on he only directed other conductors' choirs and orchestras, almost always in performances of his own compositions. In this later part of his career, he took more of a scholar's (or a pedagogue's) than a performer's interest in early music, although in 1879 he devoted a large amount of time to realization of the figured basses of the Italian duets and trios for Chrysander's edition of the complete works of Handel.¹³ He continued to greet each new volume of the Bach collected edition with enthusiasm, reading through it carefully; and when Philipp Spitta's edition of the complete works of Schütz began to appear in 1885 he was equally delighted,¹⁴ studied and marked the volumes with his usual thoroughness, and copied out a number of passages of particular interest (A130, 21-24). He also copied one of these Schütz fragments into the collection of counterpoint examples which he himself entitled "Oktaven und Quinten" (A132). This collection, which illustrates Brahms's long-continuing interest in the study of counterpoint, particularly in cases where the strict rules might be con-

sidered to have been broken, contains examples by composers ranging from Victoria through Bach and Beethoven to Bizet.

Brahms's last compositions for chorus were the three motets Op. 110, probably written in the summer of 1889.¹⁵ He participated in the establishment of both *Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst* (1892) and *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Oesterreich* (1894), but did not live long enough to receive many of their volumes. His last compositions, the eleven chorale preludes for organ Op. 122, were completed in 1896 and published in 1902, several years after his death. They show clearly that his long involvement with early music continued to bear fruit to the end of his life.

What is meant by the phrase "early music" in the context of Brahms's life and career? For him, as for most of his contemporaries, the earliest music of real interest was that by composers of the middle and late Renaissance in Italy and Germany—men such as Isaac, Senfl, Palestrina, Lasso, Eccard, and Praetorius. Although work on still earlier periods of music was going on throughout Brahms's life, his library shows no evidence of any concern with it. "Early music" was considered to end with the music of Bach and Handel, whose more up-to-date German contemporaries such as Mattheson and C. P. E. Bach would be included only insofar as their writings helped to illuminate the older tradition.¹⁶

Brahms's interest in early music seems to have been considered at least unusual, if not actually eccentric, by most of his contemporaries. It is true that his strong historical bias is also shown by the character of his interest in the music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert; the scholars Pohl, Nottebohm, and Mandyczewski were among his best friends in Vienna, and he came into contact with Otto Jahn in Bonn during the 1850s while Schumann was hospitalized there. However, the music of these composers was part of the living Classic-Romantic tradition, and was accepted by performers and audiences alike. The value of early music was still a matter for debate;¹⁷ and in order to hear such works, enthusiasts had first in many instances to prepare their own editions, next to convince performers to try them, and then to drum up audiences prepared to listen to and perhaps even appreciate their esoteric efforts.

One of the outgrowths of Romanticism was the awakening and subsequent development of historical consciousness in music as in other areas. At first, old things had a purely antiquarian appeal, but the simple collector's instinct deepened into a further urge toward study and classification, and finally toward actual revival, either for re-creation in performance or for assimilation and eventual use in the process of new creation. We can see this sequence at work in the young Brahms of the 1850s: at first he bought old books and copied pieces of old music mainly

because they *were* old; then, encouraged by Schumann but also compelled by his own instincts, he undertook a more systematic collection and study; and finally he put his new knowledge into practice in contrapuntal exercises and compositions. Although these works may have originated as attempts to duplicate an antique style, they persistently show the composer's individuality.¹⁸

By the early 1850s, the period of Brahms's developing awareness of pre-Classical vocal music, the revival of Bach's oratorios and cantatas was well under way, although performances were still fairly rare events. Handel's oratorios hardly needed reviving, since they had been maintained in the English choral repertoire, and by this time had found their way back into active German musical life. Composers of earlier periods were also receiving an increasing amount of attention: the publication of sacred works by Palestrina and his Italian contemporaries and followers was accelerating under the sponsorship of the Catholic church; and the composers of the German Renaissance and of early Baroque Italy and Germany were beginning to be known, largely through the enormous efforts of Carl von Winterfeld.¹⁹

Most composers of choral music in the first half of the nineteenth century were not especially affected by these developments. Those such as Schubert who wrote fugal sections in their masses at the traditional places were participating in the unbroken *prima prattica* tradition transmitted through the Viennese codifiers of counterpoint, Fux and his successors, rather than receiving ideas directly from Palestrina and other composers of the late Renaissance. E. T. A. Hoffmann, on the other hand, did feel himself to be inspired by Palestrina as the exemplar of the pure a cappella ideal of religious music;²⁰ his passionate, mystical enthusiasm is far removed from the Cecilian movement's later adoption of Palestrina as the model of unsullied, unsecularized Catholic music. From neither viewpoint were composers able to write successful imitations of Palestrina. Opera and oratorio composers occasionally used techniques consciously derived from early music to establish an archaic or religious atmosphere for a scene—for example, Schumann included a canonic chorus in the death scene of *Manfred*—but such uses for dramatic effect were by no means new.

Mendelssohn was the only composer of this period who made an important effort to write choral music which belonged to the earlier tradition in both genre and style,²¹ and is thus the only one up to mid-century whose choral works could not have been produced without the influence of the early music revival. Like the others, however, he apparently felt that techniques from the older style were suitable for use only in serious music; he helped to meet the needs of the proliferating amateur

choral societies for lighter music by writing simple, tuneful pieces in homophonic style. Thus the old distinction between *prima* and *secunda pratica*, developed through the Classic period into a contrast between contrapuntal (often sacred) and homophonic choral styles, was perpetuated in the contrast between serious works, which could contain learned devices adopted from the old music, and light pieces which taxed the abilities of neither composers nor singers, and which were produced in great quantity. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that one of the principal reasons a substantial amount of early vocal music was in circulation in handwritten copies, and an increasing number of such works was being published, was that good amateur choirs were hard pressed to find music that was really satisfying to sing.²²

Brahms's career as a composer, while it came after the initial rediscovery of Bach and Palestrina, coincided with the further spread of interest in their music and the widening of that interest to include the study, publication, and performance of works by other Renaissance and Baroque composers. During the second half of the nineteenth century, this tendency, in combination with nationalistic fervor and enthusiasm for folk music in Brahm and a number of his fellow German musicians, resulted in a particular interest in specifically German early music like the polyphonic *Lieder* of the Renaissance and the compositions of Heinrich Schütz.

Brahms was unique among the important composers of his time in his interest in early music and in his expert knowledge of the developing area of music history. He was also, for his time, a uniquely prolific and successful composer of choral music which has continued to hold an important place in the repertoire in almost all of the main categories of choral composition—large and small, sacred and secular, a cappella and accompanied. Only in the areas of liturgical music and compositions for male chorus is his contribution to the repertoire of no special significance. It seems reasonable to conclude that there must be some causal connection between these phenomena; and, indeed, this conclusion is reached by nearly all writers on Brahms who have given any serious thought to his choral writing, among them Spitta, Hohenemser, Evans, Kalbeck, Niemann, Geiringer, Kross, James, and Beuerle.²³

The thesis of the present work is that some aspects of the Renaissance and Baroque attitudes to choral music, together with actual techniques of composition, had an influence on Brahms's thinking that helps to account for the high quality and success of his choral writing. An attempt will be made to demonstrate the existence of this connection and illustrate some of its effects by examining first the works of early music which Brahms himself knew and studied, and then his own choral compositions.

It is clearly of great importance to such a study to establish with reasonable confidence *which* works Brahms gave his attention to. In addition to his efforts in the field of early music performance, he amassed a considerable collection of Renaissance and Baroque music, much of which he copied himself, and also a number of books and journals on the subject. It is certain, of course, that he was acquainted with any piece which he himself copied or performed, and it can usually be assumed that it was of some musical value to him for it to be worth the effort. There is also the evidence of the many marks that he made in his books and printed music; sometimes these annotations are cryptic or illegible, but often it is possible to learn his opinion of a particular statement or musical idea. These kinds of evidence are particularly important in the case of a composer like Brahms, who was as a rule reticent about what he considered significant in music.²⁴ It is therefore fortunate that his library survives, essentially intact, in the Archiv of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. The examination of Brahms's collection in the field of early music forms the core of the present study.

Early Music in Brahms's Library

The Collection in the Archiv of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde

Beginning in his youth in Hamburg, Brahms was a passionate collector of books and music. When he had money, he spent it to add to his library, and when he did not, he copied music out by hand and thus continued to increase the size of his collection. As he grew older and more successful, he was able to buy the things he wanted, including a number of important manuscripts; he had no further need to copy music himself, unless it was available only in libraries or he wanted to make brief extracts for some reason. As a successful composer, he was also often presented with gifts for his library by grateful enthusiasts or by ambitious authors or fellow musicians. After his death, his very large collection was eventually left to the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, according to his wishes.¹

Brahms's library has been described by various writers,² but only the non-musical part of the collection has been carefully catalogued.³ He himself kept a catalog for more than thirty years;⁴ and although the information it contains is far from complete, as a private record of the accumulation of his library it is an exceedingly interesting document. Brahms kept his catalog in a large notebook; unfortunately it was carelessly rebound in the library at some time, and the pages were trimmed so that some words at the edges are cut off. Starting from one end of the book, the reader finds nonmusical books arranged by author on pages headed by letters of the alphabet. If one turns the volume over and starts from the other end, he finds music and books about music arranged in a similar way, except that some composers receive their own pages before the general entries under their letters of the alphabet—Joh. Seb. Bach and Beethoven, for example. A number of entries were clearly made at the time the catalog was first laid out, since they are in the same ink and the same handwriting as the letters which head the pages;⁵ later entries appear below and between the original ones, and often spill over onto

empty pages that face less-used letters of the alphabet. After the main alphabetical section, there are further pages of lists of autographs (both musical and nonmusical, including a number of letters), other handwritten music, and dedications. Finally, after several blank pages follows a twelve-page pencil list of loans of books and music to Brahms's friends, begun in January 1879, with each item crossed out as it was returned. Brahms seems to have stopped making entries in this volume in 1888, which is the last date of any newly published work that appears in it.

Brahms later revised and recopied this catalog.⁶ Like the earlier version, the new one is laid out so that music and nonmusical material can be approached from opposite ends of the volume. However, autographs and other handwritten materials are included in the main alphabetical list instead of being separated, and there are no lists of dedications or loans. Works published up to 1897, the year of Brahms's death, are included. The musical portion of this revised catalog was published by Alfred Orel in the 1930s⁷ with an introduction but no further information on the items in the list beyond that supplied by Brahms himself. In this version of the catalog there is often even less bibliographic detail than Brahms provided in his original list.⁸

The compilation of an adequate catalog of Brahms's complete holdings of music and of books on music is beyond the scope of this investigation. Such an undertaking would be complicated by the fact that his music collection is not separated from the general holdings in music in the Archiv, nor is there a separate section of the card catalog which lists this material. (In the book collection of the Archiv, there is a separate shelf area for the material from Brahms's library; furthermore, his books about music are shelved apart from the nonmusic books which have been catalogued by Hofmann.) However, the present writer did attempt to locate and examine all of the items listed in Orel's catalog (Brahms's revised catalog) that might have relevance to the subject of early music. They are described in later sections of this chapter.

A few items from the Orel catalog are missing from the Archiv, and at this time it is not known whether they have perhaps been mislaid, or whether Brahms himself might have given some of them away.⁹ Also, Brahms in his informal will said that after his death his friends should be allowed to choose items from his library for themselves, with certain exceptions and in consultation with Simrock and Mandyczewski.¹⁰ This provision may account for the absence of all four of the collections of early music edited by Franz Wüllner which Brahms certainly owned.¹¹ If such requests were made and honored, no record of actual removals from the collection is now available. In at least one case it seems that a request was denied: Chrysander asked for a work by Reinhard Keiser