Brahms the progressive; Schumann the visionary
Transcript
Date: Wednesday, 25 April 2007 - 12:00AM
Tonight is the last part in the series of concerts that have explored the music of Brahms and Schumann, and also have taken a look at the music of Joseph Joachim and Clara Schumann, Robert Schumann's wife. Tonight's talk is a little bit about their legacy, but before we look at the different ways they have actually influenced the musical world, we need to look a little bit at the personalities of these two very famous and, in different ways, very great composers.

Robert Schumann, by all accounts, was a highly strung, very neurotic individual; deeply insecure and quite volatile, but highly inspired. He had great creative bursts of energy where he would write lots of music, then he would get very depressed, and was not able to write anything, but then he would have another one of these creative urges and he would write a whole series of songs or a symphony. He was very volatile, which is the opposite of Brahms, who was a master craftsman and very consistent; someone who was very unflappable as a person and a great pianist. So the personalities of these two individuals were very different.

Clara Schumann was a great source of strength to Robert Schumann, and in fact the start of their relationship was one of the things that really instigated a lot of Schumann's finest music.

I was looking through some correspondence of Schumann this morning, and Robert Schumann was actually quite a late developer, whereas Brahms was a very talented young man. He was a fantastic pianist and a very talented composer at a very young age. Robert Schumann was a much later developer. When he was a young man, he was actually considering being a poet or a musician. His family thought both careers were totally inadvisable, and so he studied law at university and qualified as a lawyer. It was only after these studies that he began to consider whether he should either go into music as a composer and a performer or whether he should write poetry. One of the insights I think we can take from the correspondence with his mother about this dual interest in both music and poetry is that it is poetry that really inspires a lot of his music. Schumann was a very prolific writer of art song and the poetry that he chose - Heine, Goethe, Schiller, all these great German poets, very much inspired his style of music.

Robert Schumann's legacy to the musical world is an interesting one. The idea that music could actually be poetry was a highly romantic concept, and perhaps Robert Schumann's greatest innovation was the creation of the miniature; the short one-minute piece, like his famous piano piece 'Dreaming'. As you know, it is two minutes long and it is very famous, partly because lots of people can play it, and in fact, in the 19th Century, people would have played that kind of music at home. One of the reasons why Robert Schumann's legacy was assured in the 19th Century was that by the middle to late 1800s, many people, middle class people, had pianos in their homes, and a lot of Robert Schumann's music was written for children or for amateurs to play in the comfort of their home. It is this type of piano miniatures that kept his name alive after he had died despite dying young, only in his early forties.

This idea that music could be poetry is a very romantic concept, and it was one that Robert Schumann championed with these small pieces. Perhaps because he was a great miniaturist and great at writing songs and chamber music, people have misunderstood his symphonic contribution. Many people have considered his symphonies to be badly orchestrated. However, having said that, one of the most successful of his pieces, in fact the most famous piece, that was widely performed in the 19th Century was the Piano Concerto, which Clara Schumann championed long after his death. Clara Schumann indeed did very much to keep Robert Schumann's name alive, by performing his music across Europe well into the 1880s, long after Robert Schumann died, in the 1850s. So there were high profile people that were out there promoting his music, both the public forms like the Piano Concerto, and the more intimate world of the piano music. In many ways, the 19th Century saw the emergence of the great romantic piano virtuoso, and so Robert Schumann's piano music was taken up by this new wave of people. With the emergence of a new middle class due to the industrial revolution, you saw many more public concerts rather than concerts in private homes or royal palaces, and you begin to see music by Schumann, things like the great piano pieces, becoming part of the mainstream of what we now consider to be popular public concert-going. Robert Schumann was one of the first composers to be championed in that kind of way, but he was very lucky really that his wife was such a great pianist, because otherwise, his
Robert Schumann, during his life, was more famous and influential as a critic and writer about music rather than as a composer. During the 1830s and '40s, his writings about music in the Neue Zeitschrift for Music were very widely read in Germany and highly influential on the new music of that time. His judgement was absolutely impeccable as he was able to spot real talent. He was also fairly accurate about composers that people no longer play anymore. His opinions were quite extreme. If you are a composer or a performing musician, you are going to have strong opinions about what you like and what you do not like, and that comes across in his writings. But perhaps the biggest contribution his writing made was spotting the talent that Brahms had and publicly endorsing that in an article in 1853. He actually wrote in this article that the music of Brahms was to give expression to his age in an ideal fashion. 'He really thought that Brahms' music encapsulated that particular period of time in 1853. In fact, during 1853, the syphilis that Schumann had began to take its toll and he attempted to commit suicide by throwing himself into the Rhine. After this point, he was basically in a mental institution until he died a few years later. But it was Clara Schumann and Brahms, who he had recently met, who put together all his music. They actually destroyed some of the music that they did not think was so worthy, particularly the things that he had written while he was in an asylum. There was a complete edition of Robert Schumann's music that Clara Schumann and Brahms worked on which was published by Breitkopf & Härtel, the famous German publishers, in the 1860s, and this did very much to establish the Robert Schumann cannon. So he obviously owed a great debt to Brahms for this, but likewise, Brahms owed a great debt to Robert Schumann for pointing out that his music was a way forward to a new type of German music. What is easy to forget is the fact that in the 1850s and 1860s, Germany was politically moving from a series of principalities and small nation states into a unified country which came in 1871, under Bismarck.

So one of the problems that Brahms had at the time, was he was seen to be the leading hope for German music - this is what Schumann was saying - but he was also associated with the idea of a German composer. What does German-ness mean? What does a national composer encapsulate? In Brahms, you have a composer that is really looking back all the time and creating something new out of previous Germanic music. The two biggest influences on Brahms' style are Beethoven and Bach, and indeed, music even earlier, like Buxtehude who was a composer before Bach, but it is all German music. What Brahms is doing is taking some of the ideas and concepts in this music and moulding it into something that is quintessentially German by being linked to the great history of Germanic music. It is something new and fresh that has credibility given to it by sounding like it is coming from the past. Unlike Wagner who was trying to create something that was completely new and bold and was making a splash. You could never say that of any of Brahms' pieces. He was not trying to create something that is new and on a completely different metaphysical and philosophical level, but this is what Wagner was doing. Brahms was deliberately writing music that was very much linked to a much earlier tradition of music making.

What is interesting about Brahms himself as a person was he was one of the first composers to avidly collect manuscripts of previous composers. I recently found out that he actually owned the manuscript score of Mozart's G Minor Symphony. He also was given as a present by a rich patron the manuscript score to Haydn's Sun Quartet, and he had very many of Beethoven's sketches that were given to him. So he was not just a composer and musician; he was very interested in the tradition and heritage of music, and particularly German music.

But this is where the problem has lies, because he is very much seen as a classicist and someone that is trying to re-invent the Germanic classical tradition. It was later on, in 1890 when Brahms was a very old man, that he began to become acutely aware of his place in posterity, and he destroyed a lot of his sketches and indeed actually destroyed a lot of pieces that he did not think were worth publishing or might damage his reputation. So he was very much concerned with making sure that what he left behind was what he wanted people to hear. But if you look at pieces like the finale of the First Symphony, rather like the finale on the Violin Sonata I am playing today, they actually sound a little bit like the tune from Beethoven 9, so you can actually hear that link directly.

But why was Brahms called a progressive, and what is the connection between Brahms and the music that was to follow? Schoenberg, who was the arch-contemporary composer of the 20th Century along with Stravinsky, wrote a very influential article called 'Brahms the Progressive', and in it he talks about Brahms as if he was someone who was trying to break boundaries with music. It is an interesting article because Schoenberg says that what Brahms does with his form and the way that he uses musical motifs is actually highly original.

This sounds quite general, but if you take the Violin Sonata that I am going to play, the amount of material that he uses in the first movement is very little. The opening four bars of the piano introduction basically contains all the material for the whole of
the first movement. So what Brahms does is he takes an opening theme or melody and he continuously extends it by continuous variation. So after you have heard the piano play the introductory melody and the violin comments, there is a role reversal, and the violin has the melody and the piano comments, but already, the music is starting to be varied and it is different. Every time you hear the same material, it is different. This is something that enables Brahms to create formal structures, that are incredibly innovative and they are not dictated to you by some kind of mould in which he can put the music. If you take the music of Mendelssohn, the formal structure is very classical so you know that you are going to have two subjects in the exposition, development, and re-capitulation and coda, but in Brahms, this is much more a complex relationship because he was continuously spinning one idea and generating new material from it. This is one of the aspects that Schoenberg was commenting on, that this was the kind of new way of writing classical music. It is all in classical music composers which as Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart, but Brahms is taking it a step further, because the harmonic language and the orchestration of the music is romantic and not classical.

The other thing that Brahms did, and Schoenberg talks about, is his treatment of rhythm. If you listen to baroque music, particularly Bach, it is actually incredibly funky. There are lots of syncopations, there is lots of dissonance, and this dissonance is often used in an asymmetrical way. In Brahms, he does exactly the same thing. In the A Major Sonata, going back to this piece that I am going to play later, it is in three-four time, so the possibilities are fairly limited about where the main emphasis is in the beat. Obviously the first beat in a baroque piece would be the most important. If it was a sarabande in the baroque style, the second beat would be the most important. But what Brahms does is he will have elements of sarabande, so you will have some bars where the second bar is stronger, and he will have elements of waltz, so you have the first beat strong and the second and third beats weak, and then to add to this, he also creates asymmetrical phrasing by adding two bars together and turning that into a three-two bar. So instead of having 1, 2, 3 - 1, 2, 3, you have 1... 2... 3. If you combine this, and make it much more complicated, you have a rhythmical web which, combined with harmony, makes this music incredibly intricate and actually very interesting to listen to, because it's not just about melody and accompaniment. It is not just about harmony - it is also about harmonic rhythm and the actual interplay between the two things. Schoenberg points out that this is actually a new way forward for music.

Brahms' legacy is an interesting one, and I think Clara Schumann has to take a lot of credit for this. She was obviously a rock for Robert Schumann and helped him to compose, but she was also a rock to Brahms as well. Every piece that Brahms wrote, from 1853 onwards, until Clara Schumann died in 1896, he sent to her for approval before he would have it published. Every idea he had about a new project, he would write about to her and get her feedback. So she obviously profoundly influenced the way he wrote and also the way he thought about his music, and was obviously his confidant about musical matters for a very long time. Clara Schumann, once Robert Schumann had died, played a lots of Brahms' music abroad. She visited London I think 17 or 18 times, which was a lot for those days when there was not Ryanair or British Airways.

So his legacy is an interesting one. On the one hand, he is seen by some German and foreign composers as a conservative classicist. Tchaikovsky said, 'This music sounds like mud.' He absolutely hated Brahms' music. He thought he was a shambolic orchestrator and he did not like any of his melodic material. The contemporary composers that Brahms knew that really appreciated his music were people like Dvorak and Grieg. In Britain, he was hugely influential in Britain, on composers like Stanford, Parry, Elgar, and Vaughan Williams. In Finland, he was a huge influence on Sibelius as well. The reason for this is he was a great symphonic writer - he wrote four marvellous symphonies - and the symphony is the ultimate public form for absolute music, because you can play a symphony in the Albert Hall and 6,000 people can turn up. You cannot play a Brahms' Violin Sonata in the Albert Hall, because no one will be able to hear you. So Brahms' public reputation rests chiefly on his public music - i.e. the symphonies, the German Requiem and the two marvellous piano concertos. Some of his critics said that he was a glorified writer of chamber music and the symphonies and larger scale works reflect his great passion for chamber music, but I think really his public reputation, and enduring popularity has rested on these big public works. Although that is not to say that there are not huge riches in the other music he wrote, because some of the finest music he wrote was chamber music.

Going onto contemporary composers, people from the 20th Century, he was a huge influence on the Second Viennese School, but not so much because he was symphonist. People like Vaughan Williams and Elgar were inspired by Brahms' symphonies and so wrote symphonies. If you listen to Elgar's First Symphony, it sounds like Brahms' First Symphony. The orchestration is quite similar, and some of the melodic material sounds like Brahms could have written it. But what Schoenberg, Webern and Berg were interested in was the kind of processes that Brahms was using in his music, rather than the idea of writing a symphony, which obviously Brahms kept alive. Wagner just wrote operas. He wrote one symphony and I can tell you that it is not worth listening to - it is a terrible piece - but his operas are fantastic, and that was considered to be one way forward, to write a total artwork. Wagner's legacy, I think, very much rests with Hollywood: the idea of the total artwork is exactly what a
feature film is, where you have acting, music, and the whole spectacle of it in one place. That is one of Wagner's many legacies. But Brahms’ legacy was to keep the symphony alive, so that is one aspect, and also to create new possibilities for continuous variation in music, and this is something that you find particularly in the music of Schoenberg and Webern. Webern’s music is very spare and very minimalist in a way - there are hardly any notes, and most of his pieces are very short. Brahms was the inspiration for having to have very economical means to develop a form, and it could be any length. So that perhaps is one of Brahms’ contributions to 20th Century music. Also, composers like Ligeti, he’s written a horn trio which is highly inspired by Brahms’ music, and even Milton Babbitt, who’s a very mathematical composer, says that Brahms was a huge influence, but this is about process rather than the actual form of the music.

I think the greatest thing that you could say about any composer would be that their music is being played now, and a lot. Brahms’ music, by the 1890s when the time he was an old man, was being played everywhere, which was a huge achievement. If you look a hundred years earlier, the only music that was actually performed was contemporary music. By the time Brahms was an old man, people had begun to revisit earlier music. In Germany this began with Mendelssohn when he revived Bach’s Matthew Passion, and composers and performers began to revive music from the past. Someone like Bach, as soon as he was dead, people forgot about his music, and it was kept alive basically in people’s education because they had to learn the preludes and fugues and the inventions to learn how to play the piano or the harpsichord, but a lot of his greatest music was completely forgotten about. For instance, some of the manuscripts for the Violin Partitas and Sonatas of Bach were actually found in a cheese shop in Poland - people were wrapping up food in them. So that was the attitude of people towards old music. But Brahms really represents one of the first composers who was able to benefit from this historicism and also Schumann as well - they both benefited a lot from the emergence of a new type of audience for music, and this new audience was interested in music that was coming from a tradition, whereas a hundred years before, there was not a tradition, because what was played was what was written for that particular occasion. This is one of the monumental shifts that occurred in the 19th Century.

The other one that is worth talking about is the emergence of conservatoires, because up until the first conservatoires emerged around the 1780s and 1790s - the Royal Academy of Music in London was in 1821 - there was no formal training for musicians. Orchestras were just a bunch of people that rolled up on the day, did not rehearse anything properly, and just read through whatever was put in front of them. When Paganini came to London on his famous tours, he literally put the music out on the stand before the concert and everyone had to sight read, and then he had take the music off the stand and disappear. But Brahms represents one of the first composers whose music was properly rehearsed, and he insisted on proper rehearsals and proper standards. One of the reasons why there is such a rich orchestral tradition in Germany today is partly because of the 19th Century, the emergence of conservatoires - the professionalisation of music, if you like - and this benefited Brahms’ and Schumann’s music a lot, because people were able to hear it en mass for the first time. People were able to play it in their homes - Schumann’s piano music was played a lot in the home. Brahms’ music is more complex, but was performed very widely.

Also, just before we finish, Brahms was actually the first musician to be recorded by Thomas Edison. I think it was the fifth or sixth ever recording ever made. You cannot hear very much as it is incredibly scratchy, but one thing that is preserved on this very early recording is his voice, which was very high-pitched, but his piano playing, unfortunately, you cannot hear very much.

So during the course of his long life, he had basically seen the emergence of a different type of music that has developed such a lot from Beethoven’s day, but he had also seen the emergence of a new way of professional music making and a new audience for music. He had also participated and seen the future of music with recordings, which obviously made all of this romantic repertoire so popular in the 20th Century, and that is probably the greatest legacy to us all, is the fact that this music is so widely played now. So I very much hope you enjoy the concert.