

Eric Sams

Brahms and his musical love letters

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"Nothing introduces you a heroine like music. Here she comes!"
(SHERIDAN: *The Critic*)

Brahms claimed that all he ever learned from Schumann was chess. But that sounds like a prepared defence. They were really allies. Brahms had good reason to call himself "Kreisler Junior", as he did not just in adolescence but in mature manhood; he wrote more musical letters than anyone save his admired master.

Among his earliest (and finest) works was the fairly absurd exercise, set by Schumann, of contributing a scherzo on F-A-E to the violin sonata written for Joachim ("in expectation of the arrival of a friend" says the dedication). Those letters stood for Joachim's supposed motto, *Frei Aber Einsam* (free but lonely). But that odd idea could fully as easily be attributed to Schumann (alias Florestan and Eusebius), who was still as fascinated as ever with mottoes and themes; indeed, more than ever, because much of what his devotees took for amiable eccentricity at this time (1853) was often in fact already evidence of mental breakdown.

Whatever F-A-E may have meant to Joachim, it seems to have meant much to Brahms, as man and musician. For if that sonata movement is indeed based on those notes, then the technical possibilities of a new compositional device are being exploited with a brilliance and subtlety of which few mature masters would be capable-least of all poor ailing Schumann, whose own movements were so feeble in comparison. The position at the chess-board is not recorded. But at the keyboard one lesson was enough; and the expressive symbolisms of chess and music are close kin. Each has themes and variations, tensions and resolutions in space and time; each has its infant prodigies and born masters. As soon as Brahms learned his musical letters, they became part of his lifelong language. Perhaps F-A-E had a sequel in the A minor string quartet op.51 no.2, 20 years after. His own counter-device of *Frei Aber Froh* (free but happy) seems to have made sound sense (to him at least) for over 30 years, from the First Serenade to the Third Symphony.¹

Some of the earlier examples are strikingly Schumannian. Thus the young Brahms wove the notes B A C H into (of all things) a cadenza for a Beethoven piano concerto;² and referred to Gisela von Arnim as G# E A (*Gis/e/la*).³ The musical letters of his own name, B A H S, were incorporated into a friend's 21st-birthday tribute;⁴ and it has been plausibly suggested that this idea also forms the subject of Brahms's own contemporary A flat minor organ fugue.⁵ Such musical letters bear the stamp of Schumann; and like his were soon being addressed to a girl-friend, Agathe Siebold in Göttingen. There she was pursued by Brahms one summer, but later disappeared from his life. In escaping him she was transformed into music, and now lives on, like a classical legend, in the guise of ex.1, from the first

Ex. 1 A G A H E

Ex. 2 5 times

Ex. 3

movement of the string sextet op.36. This music means⁶ AGA(T)HE; ADE-adieu, Agathe: a long farewell which took seven years to complete, and which seems to resound as forlornly as Echo herself through all four movements. Perhaps that is a hallucination. But ex.2 is there for everyone to see and hear,⁷ in the vocal quartet op.44 no.10. The ad libitum piano part begins with just those notes. played five times over

¹ Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (1912), i, 98ff

² Kalbeck, op. cit., I, 256

³ *Briefe an Joachim* (1908), I, 132

⁴ Kalbeck, op. cit., I, 170n]

⁵ Schauffler, *Florestan* (1945), p. 291n.

⁶ according to Max Kalbeck, who was well placed to know; op. cit., I, 331

⁷ as Hans Gal points out; *Johannes Brahms* (1963), p. 96

Ex. 8



The musical score for Ex. 8 consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line with a melodic phrase consisting of a series of eighth notes, some beamed together, and some with slurs. The middle staff is a piano accompaniment in treble clef, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking, followed by a forte (*f*) dynamic. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef, providing a harmonic foundation with chords and moving lines. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

After that, any further use of the motto-theme might fall flat. Yet it might still be recognizable thus, as when no.5, *Trennung (Separation)*, sings of the pain of parting ("Das Scheiden tuet not") ; or even when transposed a tone down. This could explain why those folksong-style 6ths come sidling sidelong into a setting of classical Greek metre, *Der Kuss* op. 19 no.1 (ex.9).

Ex. 9



The musical score for Ex. 9 is a short melodic phrase in bass clef, 3/4 time. It begins with a half note followed by two quarter notes, then a half note, and ends with a quarter note. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Ex. 10



The musical score for Ex. 10 is a short melodic phrase in treble clef, 3/4 time. It begins with a half note followed by two quarter notes, then a half note, and ends with a quarter note. The key signature has two flats (Bb, Eb).

Or perhaps the phrase might have been imagined as a kind of musical acronym, with each note beginning a bar, just as initial letters can start up ideas (as F,A,E are used nine times in the second paragraph of this essay). That might be how *Ständchen* op. 14 no.7 began. It ends, like all the others, in loneliness and separation: "doch ich muss ziehn allein". Or take the phrase another tone down. Might that melody not have been the true first line of the masterly *Ein Sonett* op.14 no.4 (ex.10)? For Brahms could apparently write his musical letters at any pitch of intensity. Agathe is named as literally in the sextet op.36 as in the comparatively trivial duets op.20, e.g. *Weg der Liebe I (Love will find out the way)* written for her in the autumn of 1858 (bars 26-8 and three parallel passages, bars 54-5 and 60-1) *Die Meere (The seas)*, also from op.20, was dated 1860; but still the words sing "my heart knows no rest", and still the notes sing her name.

We are left in little doubt of Brahms's motives in writing such music. He seems to have written musical letters just as Schumann did; naturally, unselfconsciously, expressively. And if to Agathe Siebold, a summertime's idyll, then surely also to Clara Schumann, a lifetime's idol?