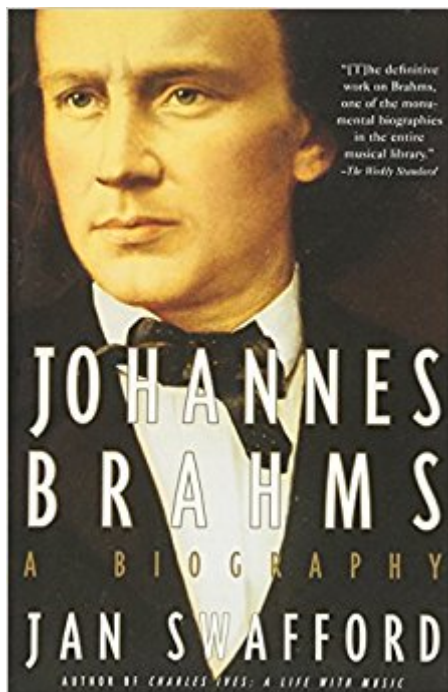


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Johannes Brahms: A Biography



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book "This brilliant and magisterial book is a very good bet to...become the definitive study of Johannes Brahms."--The Plain Dealer
Judicious, compassionate, and full of insight into Brahms's human complexity as well as his music, Johannes Brahms is an indispensable biography. Proclaimed the new messiah of Romanticism by Robert Schumann when he was only twenty, Johannes Brahms dedicated himself to a long and extraordinarily productive career. In this book, Jan Swafford sets out to reveal the little-known Brahms, the boy who grew up in mercantile Hamburg and played piano in beer halls among prostitutes and drunken sailors, the fiercely self-protective man who thwarted future biographers by burning papers, scores and notebooks late in his life. Making unprecedented use of the remaining archival material, Swafford offers richly expanded perspectives on Brahms's youth, on his difficult romantic life--particularly his longstanding relationship with Clara Schumann--and on his professional rivalry with Liszt and Wagner. "[Johannes Brahms] will no doubt stand as the definitive work on Brahms, one of the monumental biographies in the entire musical library."--London Weekly Standard
"It is a measure of the accomplishment of Jan Swafford's biography that Brahms's sadness becomes palpable.... [Swafford] manages to construct a full-bodied human being."--The New York Times Book Review

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Customer Reviews

The brilliant biographer of a quintessentially American, prototypically modern musician (Charles

Ives) proves just as masterful in probing the life and art of a 19th-century German composer. Writing with passionate clarity that perfectly matches the genius of Brahms (1833-97), Jan Swafford traces the emotional wellsprings of this secretive man's music without trivializing art into mere autobiography. A composer himself, Swafford understands and lucidly conveys Brahms's unique position in musical history: beloved by many, emulated by few, the triumphant yet melancholy heir of a tradition coming to an end in his lifetime. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A definitive work about one of the 19th century's most influential classical music composers. Books coming out in anniversary years too often don't live up to the subject they celebrate. Such is most definitely not the case in Swafford's biography of Brahms, published on the 100th anniversary of his death. This is an exceptionally well written chronicle of this musical master, an extraordinary work, guaranteed to inform and entertain classical music aficionados and tyros alike. That Swafford (Charles Ives: A Life in Music, 1996) had no easy task is clear. Where some leave long paper trails, Brahms, hoping to let his music rather than his personal life be the legacy on which later generations judged him, destroyed countless personal documents, letters, and music scores he deemed unworthy or compromising. But where Brahms was exceptionally careful--he even signed his name "J. Br" to thwart hungry autograph seekers--those around him were not, notably Clara Schumann. A brilliant professional pianist, Frau Schumann, who was married to composer Robert Schumann, was the love of Brahms's life. In their decades-long relationship, they exchanged hundreds of letters, many of which still exist despite Brahms's attempts to get them returned. The letters are simultaneously touching revelations of their relationship--likely never consummated--and perceptive journals of an exciting musical era. Swafford uses the correspondence and other research to paint an exhaustive picture of that era and of Brahms himself. What emerges is a stimulating view of a living paradox, a misogynist who used women as his muse, a generous spirit whose barbed tongue often alienated his best friends. In between, Swafford cleverly uses some 64 musical examples to illustrate Brahms's many musical developments. For readers of Swafford's biography, Brahms's Lullaby will never sound the same. (16 pages of illustrations, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I cannot begin to tell you what a lovable man Johannes Brahms was. This thought came to me three quarters of the way through this excellent biography. Brahms, a curmudgeon with his friends, but

only occasionally. Impatient with pushy fans, but rarely with simple acquaintances. Loving son. Devoted confidante of Clara Schumann over a span of forty years on and off the concert stage. A major part of his character is summed up in those statements. He began his career playing his own compositions in concert (he was an excellent pianist but not the best). Usually he appeared onstage with another performer, often with his close friend the violinist Joseph Joachim, or with Clara Schumann in two-piano arrangements of his works and those of Robert Schumann. Clara Schumann's technique at the keyboard was superior to his own as it was to almost everyone else's except Liszt's. He trusted her musicianship and listened carefully to her suggestions about his compositions as they were being created. More or less unsettled during his twenties and thirties, he changed with his forties, establishing himself finally in Vienna. There his needs were minimal, his demands almost non-existent: a tiny, cluttered bedroom and parlor on the fourth floor of an apartment house, meals in a coffee house, his laundry and dusting provided by the elderly landlady. This remained his home for the last twenty-five years. Yet these decades brought enormous fame, public affection, and financial rewards, his Hungarian Dances gaining worldwide popularity as did his Lullaby. The monumental works, too, were more and more demanded by serious audiences of every continent. This biography shows us a truly admirable human being whose moods were generally mild and fleeting, a man lacking in cupidity, devoted to his mother, reverential toward his father and generous to family members. Invariably kind to children. A man with few enemies and despising few people, chief among them Franz Liszt for his "meretricious" music and Anton Bruckner for being an inveterate attention seeker. His warmest attachment as a young man, and into old age, was first to Clara Schumann, and then to her daughter Julie, who, however, had no such interest in him and married elsewhere. This disappointment found expression and resolution only in music, the center of his emotional existence. His ambition was to create a body of work worthy to rank with that of Mozart and Beethoven. Yet he always recognized that public taste would move beyond the classical, beyond Mozart and Beethoven and himself. In his usual philosophical way he accepted the inevitable, that such masterpieces would never be written once he was dead. And they never were. For an understanding of the nature and life experiences of this commanding figure I recommend this biography. It flows easily and interestingly, sometimes with real humor. Someone like me, who knows nothing about music, not even the names of most instruments, can simply skip the many pages analyzing his works. But anyone who loves the Academic Festival Overture or his Hungarian dances (which he enjoyed composing as much as he enjoyed listening to that type of music in the Viennese cafes), or certainly anyone who admires his monumental compositions will appreciate this biography of a great man, the last of his kind "when music was in its glory."

I have listened and loved the music of J. Brahms since I was about 7. Since I am 63 now, I can say that I've listened to most of his published works many times over. In addition, I have played quite a number of his piano works for decades. Yet despite all of that experience, I found this book revelatory. Brahms, as the author points out, makes for a difficult subject. He made it clear that he was not interested in detailed biographies of his life. He destroyed most of his letters and notes. Moreover, he was someone who made it difficult to get to know. Even Clara Schumann, his lifetime companion, said that she really never truly knew Brahms the man ... the human being. Yet Swafford does an outstanding job to bring this enigmatic person to life. We can almost get a sense of this garrulous, generous, disarming, rigid and brilliant man as a living breathing human being. Brahms' music is so well crafted that sometimes it's rather difficult to possess the key that unlocks the underlying complexity of its musical form. But this book does a very good job and giving the reader that key, as long as the reader is willing to invest the time and energy to listen to the music with the purpose of "hearing" the complex musical structures that underlie the all but perfectly seamless melodies and harmony that represent its surface. After reading several of the reviews here at , I came to realize that Swafford did not have access to some of the historical materials while putting together this book and that it suffers on account of their omission. These materials suggest that Swafford fails to present an accurate description of Brahms' early years. The economic deprivation described in this book may have been over-stated. It also seems likely that the book makes too strong a case for linking his experiences playing in Hamburg's rough waterfront bars as a child with his relationship struggles with women as an adult. Nonetheless, I very highly recommend this book for anyone who wants to learn more about classical music of the late romantic and the life of one of its greatest composers.

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