

CHRISTOPHER LEVENSON

COUNTERPOINT: A POEM FOR JOHANNES BRAHMS

Allegro

That Fall, my first job, teaching high school
in the east of Holland after a colleague sold me
my first LPs, yours was the chamber music
that drifted to me like woodsmoke across the meadows,
a music of longing restrained,
intransigent as stone. I felt I had always known
where you were coming from: like a distant shower
slanting across the horizon I have unconsciously
grown into it, like an inheritance.
Much later I learnt about
your childhood home in Hamburg, though nothing remains
of your birthplace: in the last war, firestorms cauterized
your childhood habitat. One generation away
from open country, as a teen you were drawn to folksong,
compiled your own catalogues.
With mentors, teachers, friends predicting greatness
and the first moves away from family, on tour with Joachim,
then staying with the Schumanns, you became itinerant.
Though a dutiful, loving son, in vain your mother
tried to lure you back at Christmas, promising eggnog, Marsala,
or sent you knitted socks, you were seldom at home.
Instead from en route, “in great haste”—
“I don’t write letters, I answer them”—
you scribbled postcard regrets for non-attendance
and lodged with friends in Berlin, Prague, Baden-Baden.
So often in transit, you became

a virtuoso of Baedekers railway schedules.
 With so much left to discover,
 between the lines, in station waiting rooms,
 you never contracted a full-blown case of letters.

Though denied the longed-for post in Hamburg, you could not let go,
 and yet, as you said to Clara after the second rebuff,
 with the road not taken to domesticity,
 “One wants to have ties and a livelihood
 that makes a life into a life and one is afraid
 of loneliness. Activity in lively union with others
 and lively social relations, family happiness—
 what human being
 doesn’t feel a longing for that?” Slowly, however,
 Vienna enveloped you and when the call finally came
 you were too settled with friends and your lakeside summers
 to move again. Though even then, with at last a fixed address,
 your travelling trunk and valises stood under the window,
 packed, ready for instant use.

Adagio

So much subjunctive, autumnal—hopes, wishes, desires.
 As the mist, lifting
 above the harbour, halfway down the mountain,
 hints at tentative brightness, resolves
 in a resurgence of shapes—church spires and houses—
 slowly re-emerging as if from a dream,
 so you, leaving home, created a tentative balance.

Hermann Levi saw in you
 “the image of a pure artist and man,”
 yet one who could with Agatha abandon
 the certain hope of marriage and family,
 preferring a chosen solitude, continuity
 through art alone.

In Clara Schumann you found early
 a kindred spirit, a love (as she said,

“I love him as a son, so tenderly”)
 that interwove both your lives.
 Though constant, sustainable,
 for you it was never enough.
 No one outside could sense
 how much you shared.

Four decades long your melodies intertwined
 with hers, your first auditor.
 With her interests at heart, in mind, in memory,
 she flowed into waiting scores,
 as hidden sustenance, aquifer.
 When she lay dying
 you came with your *Four Serious Songs*,
 a funeral offering, telling her daughter, Marie,
 “Those eyes when they finally close will close
 so much for me.” Indeed,
 the mists came down once more:
 after such loss less than a year remained.

Scherzo

For me you are both twin and distorting mirror.
 Though you scorned formal evening wear,
 preferring to wander around without collar and tie,
 for some big occasions you grumpily dressed up
 like one of the seven dwarfs,
 then enjoyed it after all.

Trickster and acrobat, liking banter and practical jokes
 with Liesl and Henry, you were fifteen times called upon
 to be a godfather, and always a hit with children,
 giving Widmann’s little daughter piggyback rides
 through the streets of Zürich and at times caught,
 caught up in snowball fights.
 With your own first publications
 you could not get used to seeing
 “these children of nature dressed so respectably.”

Saturated with kindness
 towards children and animals,
 you were at ease with the local peasantry,
 who saw you as one of their own.
 On holiday, always an early riser,
 a German Triton blowing the French horn,
 you skinny-dipped in the mountain lake
 when no one else was around.
 Likewise, you fed the stove with letters,
 covered the tracks of your hidden kindnesses.
 Yet what I admire in you most
 amongst the laughter in even the lightest song,
 trace elements of grief encroaching on
 slow-motion darknesses.

Allegro

“Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras”
 (For all flesh is like grass)

Music unseals the secret labyrinths
 where hopes and fears lie hidden, fugitive,
 and releases the sea within
 to heal the silent and the dispossessed.
 After your mother’s death and the *German Requiem*,
 you gathered grass by the sheaf, to store and restore,
 to blend with memories and foreshadowings.

Yet despite the “eternal note of sadness”
 in Vienna you were at ease.
 Though honours came, even Cambridge’s offered
 Doctorate could not tempt you
 into a Channel Crossing. You remained yourself,
 acknowledged master, settled at last among
 admiring friends, mindful of family,
 secretly generous to those in need.
 No lover of metronomes,
 disdainful of cliques and flattery,

you remained yourself, somehow balancing
lament and jubilation,
solitude with the need for company,
a Stammtisch at the Roten Igel.

Then after too long a break
through the *Double Concerto*
you made your peace with Joachim,
restoring harmony, recommended Dvořák
to your own publisher (you wrote to Simrock,
“You know I do not lightly recommend”),
admired Verdi, who like you was a child of the people,
had known early hardship, was self-taught, had little time for theory.

in your last years hearing Richard Mühlfeld play
the clarinet entranced you out of retirement
into a final surge of enthusiasm,
lured you into new tones, sadness and gaiety
lovingly intertwined. As I grow older
your clarity endures, and I love hearing afresh
those disembodied voices
on my pacific shore and am at peace.