



The Genius of Johannes Brahms

by

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“. . . a musician would inevitably appear to whom it was vouchsafed to give the highest and most ideal expression to the tendencies of our time, one who would not show his mastery in a gradual development, but, like Athena, would spring fully armed from the head of Zeus. And he has come, a young man over whose cradle Graces and Heroes stood watch. His name is Johannes Brahms”

In this way, Robert Schumann, himself a genius in his art, introduced Brahms to the musical world in his famous article, “Neue Bahnen”, (New Paths).

Despite criticisms that his genius is dwarfed by the towering and uninhibited talent of his predecessor, Beethoven, Brahms’ characteristics as a musical genius are worthy of study in the light of his strength of character, inner development, and fruitful years as a composer.

What was in Brahms that allowed him to compose works that have clearly stood the test of time? The understanding of how geniuses such as Brahms display such profound expression has always been shrouded in mystery. Much research has been done, notably by Lombroso and Ellis. However, these studies have focused mainly on the issue of insanity in genius and have not provided adequate explanations for inspiration and creativity in genius.

Another theory, advanced by R. M. Bucke treats the issue from the standpoint of psychology. He believed that the human mind is developing towards a new kind of consciousness. At this higher state of mind, man’s present faculties will be more advanced. In addition, man will have developed several faculties which are now at a very rudimentary level. Thus, the man of the future will display a higher receptivity to intuition and inspiration, be more creative and imaginative, have greater intelligence, show greater compassion and have a greater degree of self-motivation and self-discipline.

The history of genius is filled with striking examples of spontaneous outflow of whole compositions in poetry, music, art, literature and scientific discoveries from the hidden depths of the mind. Pandit Gopi Krishna attributes these experiences to the evolution of the brain and an actual biological mechanism within the body.

This power, according to Gopi Krishna, is present in every human being, lying dormant in most, but in the case of genius, aroused. Further, this phenomenon is responsible for the characteristics displayed in the life of a genius, i.e., extraordinary talent, capacity for learning, a high moral nature, sense of oneness with a higher power or mystical experience, personal magnetism and often disturbance. The genius, according to this theory, is one in whom the attributes of the future man are partially awakened. Thus, the genius will show some but not necessarily all of the qualities mentioned.

The more evolved brain is also a more sensitive instrument. This greater sensitivity requires a person possessing such a brain to maintain a carefully balanced lifestyle for the healthy operation of the mind. Any imbalance of lifestyle will disrupt the capacity of the brain and the mind may be distorted to varying degrees. Such distortion is manifested by aberrations ranging from extreme psychosis to mild eccentricity. Since most geniuses were prone to unbalanced lifestyles, to one degree or another, we see the combination of mental disturbance and genius quite frequently.

Brahms was a genius. This can be easily observed in a study of his personality, creative life, and his own comments on inspiration. The importance of his music can be judged by the amount of attention it has commanded. This attention has changed greatly in character over the years. In Brahms' day, his music was judged against a background of a virtual battle between two schools of musical thought; the conservative tradition-oriented school and the new music of Wagner and Liszt who were initiating new forms and ideas in music. Brahms' music was considered the foremost representative of the conservative school and was consequently thrust into the forefront of the battle. As a result, Brahms' music was not very popular. It was criticized as being difficult to understand, uninspired, lacking in elegance, unintelligible, dry, and so on. Many of his pieces were ignored for years.

Modern listeners, however, have developed new tastes and do not usually level such criticisms against Brahms. He is now one of the most popular of all composers, rivaling the popularity of Beethoven. His orchestral works are among the most frequently recorded and performed. Many of the works that were coldly received and subsequently ignored in Brahms' day have become a staple in the classical repertoire.

The creation of these works is the result, according to the theory described earlier, of a brain operating at a higher level. In Brahms, like most other geniuses, we find ample evidence to prove this theory. He was a child prodigy capable of playing in public at the age of ten. This situation, however, may have been responsible for the many inhibitions for which he has been so criticized. Brahms spent his teens playing in the "red light" district of Hamburg's slums. Here he was exposed to a way of life which appeared to color his feelings about women all of his life. He had a great appreciation for their beauty but established no real relationship. Even his one "great love", Clara Schumann, the widow of Robert, was a painful experience in which the inhibited Brahms couldn't, or wouldn't, find fulfillment. Hans Gal, in his *Johannes Brahms: His Work and Personality*, may have summed it up best:

"The real world of an artist is that of his phantasm. Experience in imagination is far more essential than experience in reality. A longing that is never fulfilled may act all the more intensely on the level of artistic creation. Handel, Beethoven, Schubert, and Bruckner lived in celibacy, just as Brahms did. The reasons may have been different in each case; there are paradoxes of all kinds in the realm of creative achievement and the process of sublimation through which they come into being defies analysis. For this reason the entire line of questioning is fundamentally futile: The work of art and its transcending truth are all that matters."

These early experiences do not appear to have hampered Brahms' flow of creativity which began very early and remained undiminished through most of his life. Having published his first compositions between the ages of 18 and 20, his work came in rapid succession. The years from his mid-40's to his 60's were the most fruitful and except for failing health (he contracted cancer of the liver and died at the age of 64), his creative energy and inner growth continued until late in life.

His personality is rife with the contradictory qualities attributed to great geniuses. He selfishly allowed nothing and no one to encroach on his artistic life. Violinist, Josef Joachim, a close personal friend, described him thusly:

"Brahms has two personalities; one predominantly of childlike genius . . . the other of demoniac cunning, which, with an icy surface, suddenly breaks forth in a pedantic, prosaic compulsion to dominate. All he craves is to indulge without interference in his music and his faith in a more sublime world of phantasy and his manner of keeping all the unhealthy situations and imaginary suffering of others at arm's length borders on sheer genius."

Yet Brahms was a humanitarian; his generosity extended to friends and family alike. When the money he earned proved to be far in excess of his simple needs, he gave most generously to needy musicians, usually donating his funds anonymously. In one instance, Brahms received a financial gift from an English admirer. Touched by the kindness of the gift, he immediately donated the money to various causes. In another instance, Brahms was responsible for a grant to Anton Dvorak when he was still a struggling, obscure composer. He enthusiastically introduced Dvorak to his publisher who in turn commissioned Dvorak to write. The result lifted Dvorak out of financial insecurity and gave him encouragement to continue his career.

The personal magnetism or charisma widely attributed to great mystics or geniuses was also apparent in Brahms. Swiss writer, Josef Victor Widmann, described Brahms at the age of 33 as having a gigantic personality because of his talent and personal appearance:

“His whole presence, however, seemed suffused with power. The broad, leonine chest, the Herculean shoulders, the mighty head which he occasionally threw back with an energetic toss while playing, the pensive well-formed forehead radiant as if by some inner illumination and the Germanic eyes which sparkled a miraculous fire from between their blond lashes - all betrayed an artistic personality which seemed charged to its very finger tips with the power of genius.”

All through his life, Brahms possessed an enormous energy which permitted him productivity in many areas. Most of his energies were spent as a composer, conductor and performer, but he also had time to transcribe his larger orchestral works to piano solo or duet. He wrote accompaniments to folk songs and orchestrated some of Schubert's works. He proofread much of his own work and was a joint editor of compilations of works by other great composers. Brahms, himself, in a conversation with George Henschel, celebrated concert singer, composer and conductor, said:

“There is no real creating without hard work. That what you would call invention—that is to say, a thought, an idea—is simply an inspiration for which I am not responsible, which is no merit of mine. It is a present, a gift, which I ought even to despise until I have made it my own by dint of hard work. And there need be no hurry about that either. It is like the seed corn: it germinates unconsciously and in spite of ourselves.”

In comparing the traits of Brahms to other geniuses, two notable items become apparent. First, Brahms' mental health was, on the whole, better than most. He did not suffer such difficulties as severe manic depression as did Schumann or the extreme megalomania of Wagner. His main problem on a personal level appeared to be his inability to relate to others. His love for children was legendary yet he was capable of outrageous rudeness to his peers. Some say his musical genius lacked the soaring ecstasy of other composers. Burnett James in his *Brahms: A Critical Study* attributes this to Brahms' Northern German ancestry, the early harsh experiences in the Hamburg “Lokale” and the Clara Schumann relationship:

“With Brahms it is true that his music was his life. Maybe that is true of any great artist, but with Brahms, whose outward existence was comparatively smooth and uneventful, it appears especially so. Yet even that may be a partial illusion. An uneventful life, yes; but at the deeper level he, too, met and had to face the raw edges and harsh realities of human life as all have to who do not decline the gambit altogether and hide behind some protective shell or artificially erected barrier, either social or personal, and likely both, for the human mind shrinks from the ultimate test and burden of total creative freedom and must cover its tracks at some point or other. Brahms was certainly not guiltless in this respect; he often tried to hide behind something or other; to take evasive action in life and art; to pull down the shutters and turn away from the final clearing of the windows of perception. That is why he must always stand a little below Beethoven, who at the last count, shirked nothing but offered the whole of himself upon the cross of tragic consciousness. Brahms, after early traffickings with the infinite which turned out to be more apparent than real in the end, was like his other hero Bismarck, a master of the limited objective and the judicious synthesis.”

The other major point of comparison with other geniuses is the powerful and vivid inspirations that Brahms experienced. This is the most outstanding feature of Brahms' extraordinary mental abilities and an indication that, although religious forms and dogma held no meaning for him, Brahms was guided by Christian ethics and felt that the same power that enabled Jesus Christ to work his miracles inspired truly great composers. He describes an experience to Arthur Abell in *Talks with Great Composers*:

“To realize that we are one with the Creator, as Beethoven did, is a wonderful and awe-inspiring experience. Very few human beings ever come into that realization and that is why there are so few great composers or creative geniuses in any line of human endeavor. I always contemplate all this before commencing to compose. This is the first step. When I feel the urge I begin by appealing directly to my Maker and I first ask Him the three most important questions pertaining to our life here in this world—whence, wherefore, whither? I immediately feel vibrations that thrill my whole being. These are the spirit illuminating the soul-power within, and in this exalted state, I see clearly what is obscure in my ordinary moods; then I feel capable of drawing inspiration from above, as Beethoven did. Above all, I realize at such moments the tremendous significance of Jesus' supreme revelation, ‘I and my Father are One’. Those vibrations assume the forms of distinct mental images, after I have formulated my desire and resolve in regard to what I want—namely, to be inspired so that I can compose something that will uplift and benefit humanity—something of permanent value. Straightaway the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God, and not only do I see distinct themes in my mind's eye, but they are clothed in the right forms, harmonies and orchestration. Measure by measure, the finished product is revealed to me when I am in those rare, inspired moods, as they were to Tartini when he composed his greatest work—the Devil's Trill Sonata. I have to be in a semi-trance condition to get such results—a

condition when the conscious mind is in temporary abeyance and the subconscious is in control, for it is through the subconscious mind, which is a part of Omnipotence, that the inspiration comes. I have to be careful, however, not to lose consciousness, otherwise, the ideas fade away.”

Later in the same book, Brahms describes these experiences further to Abell and Joseph Joachim who was also present:

“I always have had a definite purpose in view before invoking the Muse and entering into such a mood; and as I pointed out to you before, contemplating what Goethe, Milton and Tennyson said stimulated by fantasy to a powerful degree. Then when I felt those higher Cosmic vibrations, I knew that I was in touch with the same Power that inspired those great poets and also Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. Then the ideas which I was consciously seeking flowed in upon me with such force and speed, that I could only grasp and hold a few of them; I never was able to jot them all down; they came in instantaneous flashes and quickly faded away again, unless I fixed them on paper. The themes that will endure in my compositions all come to me in this way. It has always been such a wonderful experience that, I never before could induce myself to talk about it—even to you Joseph. I felt that I was, for the moment, in tune with the Infinite, and there is no thrill like it. I can understand why the great Nazarene attached so little importance to this life. He must have been in much closer rapport with the Infinite force of the Universe, than any poet or composer ever was, and He, no doubt had glimpses of that next plane, He called ‘Heaven’.”

The experiences recorded by Abell show a strong element that can be compared easily to the experiences of many mystics. Others who have recorded experiences comparable to Brahms are Pascal and Blake, illustrations of which are found in Bucke’s *Cosmic Consciousness*.

The case of Johannes Brahms clearly illustrates some of the possibilities of the human mind and what can be expected from the use of these capabilities. In particular, Brahms’ music shows the crucial role of inspiration in works of genius. These inspirations were for Brahms an opening of a new channel of perception which is almost totally unknown to most men and women. This new channel of perception was a source of ideas for his compositions. The result was the creation of works that have an eternal value in the treasury of human achievements.

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