

Tom Service poses the question: Love him or hate him – what's the trouble with Brahms?

Johannes Brahms stands alongside Bach and Beethoven as one of the three great 'B's of German music. He was admired and loved by everyone from Elgar to Schoenberg and Hubert Parry even wrote an elegy for Brahms. Now the popular image of this composer is of a crusty, effulgently bearded traditionalist: a loner who wrote self-consciously serious and heavy music. But if you look at photographs of Johannes Brahms as a young man, the contrast is startling. With his flowing Franz Liszt-like hair and his clean-shaven good looks, this is really a beautiful young man. He was really a kind of matinee idol of German Romanticism. And his journey from poor musicians' household in Hamburg to eventual national greatness was a long and hard one. The composer Robert Schumann hailed him as the future of German music and the heir of Beethoven; so it's no surprise in a way that with all that expectation and pressure on his shoulders, it took him 15 years to write his first symphony and that he destroyed in bouts of self-criticism much of the music that he wrote.

Brahms's works take the tradition and techniques of everyone from Heinrich Schütz and Johann Sebastian Bach, and all of the great German and Austro-German composers who came after them all the way through the 18th and early 19th centuries, and refashions all of that in his own distinctive romantic idiom; you hear that in the symphonies, the concertos, the chamber music and the songs. His largest and still arguably most popular work, the ***German Requiem***, is bold and startlingly innovative; that's one of the alchemies of Brahms's music in the ***German Requiem***. History places him as one of the most widely performed and loved composers of all time. But, and there always is a but, as his fame and influence grew, so too did his critics: Wagner was fiercely dismissive, Tchaikovsky called him a talentless... he called him talentless, put it that way. Benjamin Britten really loathed Brahms's music

and George Bernard Shaw called him a 'leviathan maunderer'. Even today, Brahms is still something of a 'marmite composer': you either love him or hate him. More than 50 years ago a French novel and film put all this very simply: ***Aimez-Vous Brahms?*** 'Do you like Brahms?' or 'Do you love Brahms?' Whatever you feel about him, you're not going to be indifferent about this man and his music and in this iWonder Guide we're going to find out why.