

Aimez-Vous Brahms?

Tom Service and Dr. Caroline Rae discuss Brahms in popular culture, especially in France.

Tom Service: It is French culture that in a way comes up with the distillation, if you like, of the Brahms problem. A novel, a film, 50 or so years ago: ***Aimez-Vous Brahms?*** Do you love Brahms, do you like Brahms? What's the significance of that?

Caroline Rae: The Françoise Sagan novel, of course the first one ***Bonjour Tristesse***, was very famous and then this one followed. 1959 I think the novel is. But it's a question that has lots of baggage that comes with it. The question encapsulates a number of issues, where Brahms is equated with a sort of traditionalism, so we've got that old vexed question cropping up there, traditionalism, sort of proper behaviour, something that the female protagonist might reject, but simultaneously being equated with romantic love. And that's very interesting, the way that this is portrayed in the adaptation of the novel, in the film that followed in 1961. And in sections of this film you have what for me is a strange dislocation, because you have famous images of Paris – you know the Champs Élysées, and the Place de la Concorde, and the Eiffel Tower – but not accompanied on the soundtrack with the music that we might expect to hear if we're in Paris, but with bits of Brahms's Third Symphony; so that sets the scene for the sort of unrequited love and solitude and yearning. But even more than that the score itself for that film was written and assembled by Georges Auric the composer we associate with Les Six and

Auric also arranged bits of Brahms and one of the I think absolutely fascinating aspects of that film is the chanson '*Quand tu dors pres de moi*'.

Tom Service: 'When you sleep next to me'...

Caroline Rae: Which is sung by Yves Montand, and it's a typical French chanson in that sort of cool, jazzy French way that we all know and love. But, what's the melody? It's that big theme from the slow movement of the third symphony. So the French have totally appropriated Brahms and made him their own.

But there's another element to it which I find really quite fascinating. The novel (1959) and the film (1961), it wasn't very long ago that we had the German occupation of Paris and these are still sensitive issues now, let alone back then when it was even closer; and of course Brahms was one of the official composers along with Mozart, Schubert, Brahms – the fact that they were so actively promoted by the occupying powers of course doesn't mean they're not great composers and it's great music, but it's how they were used or misused at that time, which made them, at certain times very problematic for French composers and French audiences. So the fact that Brahms is being sort of rediscovered and appropriated in this way in this film I find actually hugely interesting from the French point of view.