Taking Stock

Tom Service and Dr. Caroline Rae discuss issues around Brahms’s music and personality

Tom Service: Caroline, quite a lot of the criticism about Brahms from those great composers who really haven’t got on with his music, like Tchaikovsky who called him a talentless… something we can’t really say now. Or Benjamin Britten who is said to have played the whole of Brahms through to discover if he was still as bad as he thought he was, and that’s the conclusion he came to every time he played through Brahms. Quite a lot of it is about the idea that Brahms can’t let his music naturally be itself; instead of letting a melody go its own way or be itself, he has to interfere with it, he has to fragment it, or create little motifs, little music, you know, that in some way this is an unnatural, self-consciously serious composer. What’s your answer?

Caroline Rae: Well first of all, I don’t think one could possibly criticise any composer for being a master craftsman. When one thinks of the way Brahms handles his melodies and how he invents them, what he does with all the intervallic relationships, I mean like the 4th Symphony being based on all those falling thirds, I mean it is deeply important and of course that influenced later composers such as Schoenberg and so on. But Brahms was a great melodist, so when one thinks about these criticisms, well first of all, I think they tell us more about the composers who were delivering the criticisms then they do about poor Brahms. I mean, we can understand Tchaikovsky more, Wagner who also bad-mouthed Brahms, Mahler did, of course the critic George Bernard Shaw did as well. But with the composers it tells us about
them, you know, you know an animal by what it eats. So it’s always very interesting when composers decide to distance themselves from the music of others, but actually one of the most revealing things I think that Tchaikovsky said about Brahms was something he described when they had dinner together. In fact I think it was Tchaikovsky, Grieg, and Brahms, they were all together. And eventually I think Tchaikovsky and Brahms managed to get on reasonably well from what I understand. But first of all in this dinner party, apparently Brahms appropriated the strawberry jam, and he refused to share it with anybody, which I see a bit like appropriating the great melodies; you know Brahms was full of great melodies. So he appropriated the strawberry jam and nobody else got any. And then after the dinner there were some entertainments of magic tricks, and these were all described in Tchaikovsky’s memoirs; and what’s most revealing to me, Tchaikovsky and Grieg and a group of others sat down and they were entranced and entertained by the magic tricks. Brahms was so fascinated, he interrupted the proceedings after each trick and insisted that the person explain and demonstrate exactly how it was done. So that perhaps tells us a lot about the way Brahms thought about the intimate workings of his music.

**Tom:** Caroline, you’ve called Brahms ‘poor Brahms’ – why do you pity him?

**Caroline:** Well, because I just have the feeling that he was probably a very nice person. I think he was probably rather shy in some ways. He hid himself behind this mask of reservation, of reserve which might have promoted certain views about him being a dry and academic composer, but when you
listen to his music and the sort of effusive expressivity of it and it's so personal, I mean those late works are some of the greatest gems we have in Western music.