Katie Derham explores Brahms’s life and times

Katie Derham: There are two positions you can take on Brahms. You either find him impossible, like the composer Darius Milhaud…

Interviewer: Now, Brahms, you really detest Brahms.

Darius Milhaud: Oh, he bores me to death. It’s so thick in the orchestration and so thick in the line, and when it sounds good, it sounds like Beethoven.

Katie Derham: Or like cellist Paul Tortelier, you feel his music touches the sublime.

Paul Tortelier: You know anything more beautiful? As beautiful perhaps, but not more.

Katie Derham: Brahms was born in 1833 in a poor district in the port of Hamburg. He was a promising young pianist and earned his money playing in bars and brothels. This statue has Brahms peering down at a female muse. Now, in later life he was considered something of a misogynist who frequented prostitutes. He never married, although apparently he came close a few times. Though Brahms had a deep respect for the past, he was always troubled by the shadow of his great predecessor Ludwig van Beethoven.
Overawed, it took him more than 20 years to write his first symphony, only for it to be dubbed ‘Beethoven’s 10th’.

Brahms was a handsome, beardless fellow when he made the inevitable move to Vienna, the city of Beethoven and Schubert. But it seems everywhere he lived has since disappeared. This is where Brahms first lived in 1862. Well, not here exactly – this building can’t be more than 50 years old. And this is where he lived in 1866, I think. And in 1869 he took rooms at this hotel, but it’s changed a lot. And this is the site of his final address – he had an apartment four floors up: well, at least there’s a plaque. He’d look out of his window at this glorious building, the Karlskirche. He liked to walk from his apartment across a bridge that has also long since vanished, to arrive where many of his greatest works were performed, the famous Musikverein.

But Brahms also enjoyed the lighter side of the city, the Prater, the woods, and he was very fond of the popular music of the day. One of his closest friends was none other than the ‘Waltz King’ himself – Johann Strauss II. In fact, when Brahms was asked by Strauss’s wife to autograph her fan, he wrote a few notes of the Blue Danube, and the comment, ‘Alas, not by Brahms’.

When Brahms died in 1897, the city of Vienna gave him the most splendid funeral. Thousands of people lined the streets as his coffin was brought from his apartment to this cemetery, the Zentralfriedhof, and so here, facing his great predecessors, Beethoven and Schubert, lies Brahms, side-by-side with Johann Strauss.