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Brahms’s Piano Exercise Mode and the Politics of Friendship (excerpt)

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Author
Serbanescu-Martin, Theodora

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The following three chapters form an excerpt from Theodora Serbanescu-Martin’s undergraduate music honors thesis, “Brahms’s Piano Exercise Mode and the Politics of Friendship.” Please find a summary of the complete work in the last section of Chapter One from Part One.
PART ONE: BRAHMSIAN PIANISM, INNIG VIRTUOSITY, AND THE AESTHETICS OF EFFORT

CHAPTER ONE — BRAHMS AND PAGANINI: A MISMATCH?

I

German or Italian? Virtue or Virtuosity?¹ Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Brahms’s *Paganini* Variations have endured a reception dogged by a banal rhetoric of binaries. “It seems to me,” wrote the American art critic James Huneker in 1899, that the pièce de résistance of the Brahms piano music is the Paganini Variations; those famous, awesome, o’ertoppling, huge, fantastic, gargoylean variations erected, planned and superimposed by Brahms upon a characteristic theme of Paganini.

Brahms and Paganini! Was ever so strange a couple in harness? Caliban and Ariel, Jove and Puck. The stolid German, the vibratile Italian! Yet fantasy wins, even if we brewed in a homely Teutonic kettle. Brahms has taken the little motif — a true fiddle motif — of Paganini, and tossed it ball-wise in the air, and while it spiral spins and bathes in the blue, he cogitates, and his thought is marvelously fine spun. Webs of gold and diamond spiders and the great round sun splashing about, and then deep divings into the bowels of the firmament and growling and subterene rumblings, and all the while the poor maigre Paganini, a mere palimpsest for the terrible old man of Hamburg, from whose pipe wreathed musical smoky metaphysics, and whose eyes are fixed on the Kantean categories.

The diabolical variations, the last word in the technical literature of the piano, are also vast spiritual problems. To play them requires fingers of steel, a heart of burning lava and the courage of a lion. You see, these variations are an obsession with me.²

By this time, distinctions between the Italianate and the Germanic, surface and depth, play and work, were longstanding tropes of mid-century anti-virtuosity critiques, voiced influentially by Robert Schumann and, later, Eduard Hanslick, to name a couple. And, as Dana Gooley notes, the increasing dominance of “symphonic” values in self-consciously serious concert venues at


the expense of instrumental virtuosity was one of the stories of the nineteenth century whose consequences are still with us. For Huneker, then, “maigre Paganini” merely flirts with some manuscript paper, while the “terrible old man of Hamburg” scribbles all over it with his corrective quill, elevating its flimsy substance into something more commensurate with his smoke-wreathed Kantean metaphysics. Huneker gives us an early version of the stereotype of the “serious bearded Brahms,” whose music, as Anna Scott observes in her 2014 dissertation Romanticizing Brahms, is considered today antithetic to “the canon’s more virtuosic warhorses and quixotic rhapsodies,” and whose “restrained, stoic, portentous and modestly powerful” style demands interpretations shaped by the “aesthetic ideology of control,” largely a construct of twentieth-century performance practice. Yet this modernist version of Brahms surely counts among its ancestors even Schumann’s famous “Neue Bahnen” of 1853, which set up the inevitable eclipse of the “not-so-serious” Brahms (if there is such a thing), and made later works such as the Paganini Variations so hard for generations of musicians and critics to grasp.

Indeed, there was no Brahmsian pipe (or — perhaps even more emblematic — no weighty Teutonic beard) when a charming, svelte 29-year-old Johannes began work on these variations. This young heartthrob was, as his Schatzkästlein des Jungen Kreislers diary reveals, more often drifting away in Novalean dreams than keeping his eyes fixed on Kantean categories. And most importantly, the ostensibly serious North Germany was excitedly

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planning, for the first time in 1862, to relocate to charming Vienna. Four years later, following his first performances of Op. 35 in Basel and Winterthür, journalist, literary critic and amateur singer Josef Viktor Widmann describes him like this:

[Brahms]... immediately gave the impression of a powerful individuality, not only by means of his mighty piano-playing, which cannot be compared with even the greatest of merely brilliant virtuosity, but also through his personal appearance. It is true, the short square figure, the almost straw blond hair, the jutting lower lip which lent the beardless youth a slightly sarcastic expression, were conspicuous and hardly prepossessing peculiarities; but his entire aspect was permeated by strength. The broad lion-like chest, the herculean shoulders, the mighty head at times tossed back energetically when playing, the contemplative, beautiful brow glowing as if by an inner light, and the Germanic eyes framed in blond lashes and radiating a marvellously fiery glance, they all betrayed an artistic personality brimming to the very fingertips with genius. There was also a certain confidence of victory in his countenance, the glowing cheerfulness of a spirit happy in the execution of his art, and without turning my eyes from the young master who gripped the keys with such power, there came to mind Iphigenia’s words on the Olympian gods...

No other image of Brahms captures his muscular strength (and beardlessness!) quite so poetically. And even though Widmann’s snapshot of monumental strength is incongruent with the better-known descriptions of Brahms’s supposedly awkward pianism, it is worth noting how the inevitable “merely” appears in conjunction with the “brilliant virtuosity” of his contemporaries. Even in the 1860s, it seems, Brahmsian virtuosity was a precarious thing — a rhetorically contorted turning-inward of the “mere” virtuosity Brahms’s contemporaries would


overly embody. In Widmann’s eyes, Brahms doesn’t just sweat; his “contemplative brow” glows “as if by an inner light.” From his body flows not empty dazzle, but fiery German Genie.

Brahms’s Teutonic seriousness, deep and intellectual, cannot be fully externalized; his is an innig virtuosity. For all that, it is still a kind of virtuosity. Indeed, Widmann divides his analysis equally between the Brahmsian geistig and muscular corporeal. To present-day piano students, routinely exposed to the myth of the powerfully serious, weighty Brahms, it may seem surprising that there was not only a time when Brahms was clean-shaven, as Figures 1 and 2
prove, but that he had the body of an “Olympian god,” and performed not awkward “spirited sketches” of difficult pieces, but played with a “certain confidence of victory in his countenance.”

But to recover a Brahms ohne Bart, to use Jan Swafford’s playful term, is only a first step towards reclaiming the virtuoso Brahms. Using the Paganini Variations, Brahms’s most technically daunting solo piano work, as a point of departure, I seek here to prove that Brahms’s pianism rivaled that of the greatest pianists of his day, and to reconsider the arguments of scholars as various as Roger Moseley, Charles Rosen, and Bernard Sherman, who have, to varying degrees, reinscribed the idea that Brahms’s pianism was “awkward.” To do so, Part One aims to reconstruct the Brahmsian body, and to position his “innig virtuosity” amid the range of more familiar Romantic bodies and virtuosities. This will involve, in Chapter One, further examining the reception of Op. 35 (and in the process correcting two widely accepted but erroneous facts about the conception and earliest performance of the piece). Although my argument has many points of contact with recent attempts by scholars and performers to revise the dominant image of the “serious bearded Brahms,” I do not aim only to reconstruct an alternative interpretive aesthetic or “historically performance practice,” as Scott does when she infers how Brahms would have played from her valuable synthesis (and duplication) of various early recorded account of his works. In Chapter Two of Part One, I also want to understand, via

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8 For a complex analysis of Brahms’s performances of his own pieces, including his Second Concerto, (and his friends’ review of their “sketchiness”), see Roger Moseley, “Between Work and Play: Brahms as Performer of His Own Music,” in Brahms and His World, ed. Kevin Karnes and Walter Frisch (Princeton University Press, 2009), 137-166. Moseley’s argument about Brahms pianism — the most nuanced to date — does work against the stereotype that Brahms was not a good pianist, but, because it focuses on late (post-beard) performances and on Brahms’s somehow dwindling virtuosity, further reinstates the stereotypes.

9 Swafford, xiii.
accounts of Brahms’s teaching and practice, how the Brahmsian body was expressed and formed at the keyboard, and, crucially, to explore the friendly and unfriendly relations between different pianistic bodies across historical eras, which have encountered one another through Brahms’s music.

Rarely has anyone besides Huneker shared the belief that the Paganini Variations are the “pièce de résistance of the Brahms piano music.” David Dubal, in his dictionary of pianists, Art of the Piano, describes Op. 35 as “uncharacteristically Lisztean,” and certainly does not identify with Huneker’s version of a Brahmsian synthesis of German-serious and Italian-superficial. Professional pianists today do not often record the piece, but when they do, it shows up on labels that also include pieces in the vein of Stravinsky’s Trois mouvements, which make up the “transhistorical,” borderline unplayable “virtuosic one percent.” Indeed, Op. 35 has long been marginal within Brahms’s piano output, in part because of the apparent incompatibility of the devilish violinist and pipe-smoking intellectual: “Lisztean” is the most common adjective applied to the piece, and seeks somehow to explain its virtuosity. Brahms biographer Karl Geiringer even calls the variations “one of the only examples [in Brahms] where the virtuosic presides over the spiritual.” The work is either an anomaly or an accident, and must be effaced or defended.

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11 Most commonly, the piece is recorded along with other pieces of the See, for example, Yuja Wang’s 2010 CD — perhaps appropriately titled “Transformation” — which includes the Stravinsky, as well as Ravel’s La valse, another expected “warhorse” in this “virtuosic 1%” category. Additionally, see Alexander Gavrylyuk’s more recent 2015 recording of the piece, which is paired with a healthy conglomeration of Liszt. Alternatively, Jean-Yves Thibaudet’s version from 1996 is placed alongside Schumann’s Symphonic Etudes.

Yet, to the extent that Op. 35 has received attention from pianists and scholars since the nineteenth century, it is the very strangeness of its extreme technical challenges — an ineradicable knottiness or perhaps a borderline unplayable quality — that has exerted most fascination. Most importantly, it is the pianists who have interacted with the piece first-hand who puzzle over this. As Dubal puts it, Op. 35 is “one of the most subtly difficult works in the literature” — and the mix of near-impossibility and subtlety of its challenges is what kept Huneker, also a pianist, deeply preoccupied with the piece. As I learned the piece myself, I experienced similar puzzlement, and wondered why Brahms would write something that is borderline unplayable, and that seems to be meant as borderline unplayable. I want to argue that Brahms’s “innig virtuosity” constructs and reconfigures mind and body in ways that contrast with more recognizable and institutionally successful models of pianistic virtuosity, which owe much to Liszt’s — and perhaps even more importantly, Louis Ehler’s — examples. I will suggest that the near-impossible physical demands of Op. 35 not only call for the greatest bodily discipline, but also bring about and make necessary — as a consequence of their very impossibility — the supplementary realm of the imagination. Difficulty is thus a central element of Brahmsian poetics.

II

Perhaps because of its difficulty, Op. 35 was rarely performed publicly in the nineteenth century, even many years after its publication. Meanwhile, the few pianists who did perform the piece did not convince the public of its worth — maybe because its virtuosity was too innig to dazzle the broader public, but still too outstanding not to raise red flags for conservative

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13 Dubal, Ibid.
critics? One of the rare Op. 35-playing pianists was Heinrich Barth, whose London performance (on a recital alongside Joseph Joachim) on 6 March 1880 prompted this response from The Musical World, which was at this time busily advocating for a more austere concert culture, including the abolition of encores:

The solos which elicited the so-called encores on Monday were, for Herr Barth, a selection from twenty-eight variations on a theme of Paganini, the work of Brahms; and, for Herr Joachim, the great Chaconne of Bach, frequently played by him with ever-increasing power and effect. Brahms’s Variations were a novelty at these concerts, and, therefore, commanded a certain amount of attention. We must decline to regard them in the light of a revelation. By means of his Variations for four hands on a theme of Schumann, two orchestral Variations on a melody of Haydn, and the Variations on a Handelian subject for pianoforte solo, Brahms was already known as a master of that form of composition. The work introduced by Herr Barth tells us nothing more, and it is, perhaps, not necessary for any composer to go beyond the strict line of demonstration in this matter. In point of musical interest, and apart from considerations of mere constructive cleverness, the Variations played by Herr Barth will not greatly increase the repute of their author. A few are charming, but the majority do little save illustrate the accumulation of difficulties to which modern “virtuosity” invites composers who are in the mood for nothing higher. Herr Barth accomplished well a task none the less arduous because self-imposed. He played with freedom and accuracy, showing the perfect command of the key-board which the nature of his theme made a sine qua non. How his efforts were rewarded has already appeared (emphases mine).14

Thus, the critic concluded that Op. 35 was not as successful as Brahms’s earlier variations because its treatment of form was superficial. Brahms had no need to further his reputation as master of the variation form; if anything, he spoiled it by graffitising this lofty genre with a dazzling “accumulation of difficulties” interesting only to a composer “in the mood for nothing higher.” Brahms regresses to a primitive version of the variation: to a genre that belonged to the same dubious category as potpourris and opera fantasies — genres that, as anti-virtuosity critics

lamented, merely catered to the tastes of dilettantes — but also, as we will see in Chapter Two, that Brahms frequently performed in youth.

Seven years later, pianist Tobias Matthay performed the variations in London once again:

Another pianoforte recital was given by Mr. T. A. Matthay, which cannot be said to have eclipsed its above-mentioned predecessor [Max Pauer’s matinées at Prince’s Hall]; for, although a very considerable amount of manual dexterity, as the result of much assiduous labour, was shown — as may be guessed from the selection of such enormously difficult pieces as Brahms’s Paganini Variations, besides works by Rubinstein, Liszt, &c — there was an absence of that intensity of expression and that firmness of touch and manipulation of the keyboard which are required to impart charm and interest to an otherwise meritorious performance. From the foregoing it will be inferred that delicacy is the pianist’s chief excellence; indeed, his jeu perlé is distinguished for evenness and brilliancy of execution, and the elasticity of his wrists is remarkable; but his almost unceasing sotto voce whisper, unrelieved by needful accentuation, which is not unlike a dreamy improvisation, or the accompaniment to a song— necessarily leads to monotony and weariness. The least satisfactory performance under these circumstances was that of the Chopin section of the programme, the best that of Nicolò’s vivacious and effective Tarnelle, Op. 13, and of the concert-giver’s own “Three Vagaries,” dedicated to Liszt, being obviously written with a view to the performer’s own idiosyncrasy, and containing much graceful writing.\footnote{Anon, “Concerts. Pianoforte recitals. Pianist Tobias Matthay: Brahms, Paganini Variations.” The Monthly Musical Record, Vol. 7, no. 196 (April 1, 1887): 92, RIFM.}

I want to dwell for a moment on Matthay’s “assiduous labour” — and its apparent sublimation into his diaphanous playing style. Matthay is the only late nineteenth-century pianist, other than Barth and Ella Pancera, whose performance of Op. 35 we know of through reviews, and his choice of the Paganini Variations would perhaps have been especially charged — not only because of the extreme technical challenges of the piece, but because Matthay was, through them, exhibiting a piano technique that he had defended and elucidated at length in his The Fore-Arm Rotation Principle (later incorporated into his 1932 tutor The Visible and Invisible in Pianoforte Technique). Indeed, Matthay’s pedagogical works amounted to a series of polemics
against the predominant Germanic methods from the 1850s, such as those popularized by Sigismund Lebert and Ludwig Stark, which argued for the importance of endurance drills and individually strong fingers. Matthay, by contrast, stressed that all real practice involved analyzing the mental and physical causes of technical problems rather than affectless “mind-
numbing drill and calisthenics.” The aesthetic consequences of this holistic approach of technique is surely behind the uncomprehending review of Matthay’s delicate performance of Op. 35 in London — the perceived absence of “intensity of expression” and “firmness of touch.” Yet, as we will see later in Chapter Two of this part, Brahms’s own technique seemed, in some important respects, consistent with Matthay’s new pianistic ideal. Given the scant evidence for any public performances of the variations in the nineteenth century (and the fact that they struck a reviewer as “novel” even when Barth performed them in London some twenty-five years after their publication), it seems that Brahms’s composition presented challenges that could be surmounted only by an elite few — and appreciated by fewer still.

Might the Variations have been some kind of musical-pedagogical experiment, then, rather than a work intended for public performance? The earliest reviewer of the piece did not seem to think so. Writing in 1866, the critic (possibly Selmar Bagge) of the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, concluded precisely the opposite — that this work demanded performance to make sense at all:

We come to acquire independent editions for the piano only through more and most recent composers. First we mention two rather peculiar [merkwürdig] booklets of variations by J. Brahms: Two sets of variations on the very same theme by Paganini op. 35 (press of Rieter-Biedermann, 1 Thaler each). They too hold the title “Studien für Pianoforte” and place themselves in the instructive domain [instruktives Gebiet]. Indeed the composer seems to have set himself and others, who come close to him in technical training, the most difficult exercises one can set today [die schwierigsten Aufgaben haben stellen zu wollen, die man heute stellen kann]; there might be few musicians who might stand up to those difficulties and surmount them with artistic calm. How great the value of these booklets as a composition, as a work of art, is, we do not dare say today, since we want to listen to them properly executed first. That they are highly ingenious and interesting, we don’t have to assure the connoisseurs and friends of Brahms’s muse [Brahms’schen Muse]. Perhaps it is the lack of calm and simple variations in both sets (of which each consists of 15

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variations) that provides the whole thing with a rather heavy brilliant and virtuosic character, which, by the way, as we may think, might vanish, if four hands on one or two pianofortes took part in the execution. We want to recommend such an arrangement.\textsuperscript{17}

 Accordingly, the reviewer puzzled over Brahms’s successful attempt to “set the most difficult exercises one [could] set at this time” (regarding them similarly to Huneker, who wrote that they seemed like the “last word in the technical literature of the piano”), and worried that only few pianists, who “come close to him in technical training,” could attempt these contributions to the “instructive domain.” His proposed solution to this — a four-hand arrangement of the piece — is indeed practical, but therefore incongruent with the piece’s aesthetic. It is possible that the impracticality and extreme elitism of Op. 35 — its selection by physical and mental comportment — was the whole point.

III

One of the elite Brahmsian few was Carl Tausig, who was the composer’s good friend, and well known as a “disciple” of Liszt. “I am very satisfied to have been the first to introduce the Variations to the public,” wrote Tausig to Brahms in 1867;

in the first place, I had the devil of a time with them, and I am glad that they have caused such a commotion. Everybody considers them unplayable, yet secretly they nibble at them, and are furious that the fruits hang so high…\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Anon, review of newly published musical works: A. Instrumental Music (Continuation), Publications for solo piano: Beethoven, Cadenzas for his Concerti und for a Concerto in D minor by Mozart, Reinecke; Cadenzas for Piano Concertos by Mozart, Beethoven and Bach; Domenico Scarlatti, Piano Sonatas (Chosen by G. Nottebohm), Anthologie Perles musicales; J. Brahms, Variations on a Theme of Paganini, Woldemar Bargiel; Acht Pianofortestücke, op.32; Joseph Rheinberger, Drei kleine Concertstücke (Continuation follows)]. Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, I. Jahrgang, Nr. 7 (Leipzig, 14 February 1866): 56-57. Translation by Sebastian Bolz, 2016.

\textsuperscript{18} Swafford, 265.
Tausig portrayed a world of pianists secretly at work, furiously striving to play the unplayable. He, however, was the ultimate insider who held the key to the secret — and, partly because of this, all histories of the piece have since misleadingly concluded that he was dedicatee of Op. 35. This letter also provides the evidence that Tausig was the one to premiere Op. 35; but it turns out his 1867 performance was not in fact a premiere. Before Tausig “introduced [them] to the public,” Brahms himself was busy performing the *Paganini* Variations all over the place in the previous two years.

Here is an excerpt from a letter Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann in 1865, when he was on tour in Switzerland,

As far as I know I have only written to you once from Switzerland? Or else more? Well, it was quite an unsettled time, dearest Clara, and you know how easy it is for me to let things slide. Now I’ve been here since yesterday, so this morning at Levi’s I’ll tell you in detail how well I have fared.

As a matter of fact, far beyond my expectations in every regard. Above all, what pleases me most is that I really have the talent to be a virtuoso. The only thing I am
completely dependent on is the piano I have, if it is good I play with the greatest comfort and best of ease. The bigger the pieces, the better. I have twice played the Fantasy Op. 17 and twice the Paganini Variations, besides that, organ pieces (D minor), among others. I have brought about 1,800 francs with me!

How warmly people have received me you can see from the fact that after the first concert in Zurich, where I performed the D Major Serenade, several friends of music (particularly Dr Lübke, Prof. Billroth and Wesendonck) organized a private
concert on Sunday morning so that they could also hear my Concerto and the A Major Serenade. They hired the orchestra, sent telegrams all over the place so that the parts, etc, would be certain to arrive, and anyone who took an interest in it was allowed to attend without further ado. So I first rehearsed the Concerto with the orchestra, and Kirchner conducted it for me, then to finish, the Serenade. The musicians were exceedingly devoted to me, so that the whole affair was most agreeable.

I had a beautiful Erard, the personal property of Hug, which also trekked to Winterthur along with Hug and a tuner, and in the end gave thanks for the honour, having cost nothing; Hüni, whom I needed for the orchestra, was just as obliging, in short, people have spoiled me thoroughly!

My Horn trio here on Monday, Tuesday in Mannheim: A Minor Quartet by Schubert, Fantasy by Robert Schumann, and my A Major Quartet. […]

Did you get my letter (about the concert in Basel) in Berlin? I don’t understand the calendar, but the concert was on the 19th, after all, and you ask about it on the 28th! I had surely written straightaway to Berlin that I had earned 800 francs, etc. etc.??

Now, the first Zürich concert Brahms refers to — which included, besides the Paganini Variations, Schumann’s op. 17 Fantasie, Brahms’s op. 33 Magelone Lieder, a Bach Toccata (probably the organ toccata in D Minor), Schumann songs, and Brahms’s own First Quartet — happened on 25 November, as the first program from Figure 5 informs. In the McCorkle catalog, this concert is listed as the premiere of the Paganini Variations, but this is incorrect. Brahms mentions the Variations early in the letter I quoted, and does not describe the repertoire from the first Zürich concert but of the pieces from the second, on 26 Novemeber, which probably took place at the Wesendonck residence (or possibly the Kasino). It is clear, in other words, that Brahms’s two performances of the Paganini Variations happened before the first two Zürich concerts — probably in Basel, from where he sends Clara the letter that seems to have disappeared, as we learn at the end. More recent evidence from Renate and Kurt Hoffmann’s


comprehensive catalog of Brahms’s performances points indeed to Basel, and to 12 June, as the premiere of Op. 35 — two years before Tausig’s “introduction to the public” in 1867.21

To be sure, Brahms’s first performance took place at the Riggenbach-Stehlin residence in Kettenhof, meaning, that it was not exactly a “public premiere,” as Tausig calls his own performance. Still, one should be wary of imposing too rigid a distinction between “public” and “private” onto Brahms’s nineteenth-century performance culture. As Paul Berry has shown,

Figure 6: Josef Widmann, Sketch of Brahms playing Op. 35 in Zürich on 29 November 1865. As in his literary description, he portrays him “glowing as if by an inner light”

Brahms would often perform, with varying degrees of formality (with or without a printed program, for example) new pieces either at friends’ homes or at other private residences before

publishing them. Just because the pieces were not yet published did not necessarily mean the performances were trials for testing out their potential appeal (for that, Brahms sent manuscripts in the mail to his friends and asked for opinions, even though he often did not take care to listen to them). Instead, such performances are meaningful because they document Brahms’s deployment of new music for the purpose of sociable entertainment. Most valuable in the case of Op. 35’s private premiere is the apparent conception behind Brahms’s programming, which included his Quintet Op. 34, again his First Quartet Op. 25, and, most suggestively, some Strauss waltzes. The addition of Strauss seems to indicate an aesthetic conception guided not by North German seriousness but by the small-scale sociability — yet also quasi-aristocratic “eliteness” — of the liberal Viennese salon. Given this, is Op. 35, then, not just musically “sociable,” but even exclusive?

Clara Schumann may have thought so. In Fall 1863, shortly after Brahms sent her the variations he had completed by then, she sent back this ambiguous reply:

Thank you very much indeed for the witch variations [Hexenvariationen]. I started practising them most eagerly. But they don’t seem to be suited for playing in public, the combinations are too surprising, and laymen would not enjoy them the first time of hearing. I think it will be necessary to insert some with more simple harmonies, and then one (I mean the listener) would not find them such an effort. Just think this over.

These were variations for an elite, unsuitable for a wider public — as Matthay’s and Barth’s performances two decades later seem to demonstrate. And only Brahms’s own performances of the piece rivaled the success of Tausig — the most charismatic and successful of nineteenth-

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century virtuosos. At this time, Brahms was beginning to feel that his worth as pianist equaled his substance as composer: “what pleases me most is that I really have the talent to be a virtuoso.” Indeed, as Roger Moseley has observed, Brahms expressed a considerable “relish” for monumental technical difficulties: “The bigger the pieces, the better.” It seems likely that the Variations were a particular expression of Brahms’s self-developed piano technique — that they transcribed something of his unique skills and affinities. Matthay’s technique might have been in some ways similar to Brahms’s, but his level of “intensity” was apparently incomparable. Only Tausig’s came close. For all that, Alan Walker has claimed that anyone who has studied Tausig’s inventive piano texture will not be surprised to learn that they helped to stimulate Brahms in the composition of his virtuoso “Paganini” Studies. It was well known that Brahms liked to banter his friends, and having heard that Tausig “knew all about piano playing” made a good-humored attempt to cut the young pianist down to size by showing him some keyboard configurations that, he felt sure, would be unfamiliar to him. Somewhat crestfallen, Tausig had to admit that he found them to be quite new, but he quietly resolved to get his revenge by creating some unusual technical combinations of his own and then challenging Brahms. The next time the pair met, Tausig played them for Brahms and was gratified to see the composer nettled. To his to-ing and fro-ing went on for some time, until Brahms went to work with a will; which is why we have the two books of “Studies on a Theme of Paganini,” op. 35.

Walker subsequently rehearses Kalbeck’s widely circulated remark that Op. 35 is a “monument of their friendship.” To be sure, if the Paganini Variations were inspired by Tausig’s “inventive piano texture[s],” one wonders how, as Walker claims, Brahms was also writing in a manner

24 For a glowing review of Brahms’s Zürich performances, which included the Paganini Variations, see Werner G. Zimmermann, Brahms in Der Schweiz: Eine Dokumentation (Züriich: Atlantis-Musikbuch-Verl., 1983), 23.

25 Moseley, 143. He reads Brahms’s emphatic execution of a passage from his First Concerto — when he lifted his hands high up in the air — as an example of his “relish for difficulties.” For my own interpretation of this passage, see the second part of this chapter.


27 Walker, Ibid. For original story, see Max Kalbeck, Johannes Brahms: 1862-1868, vol. 2 (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms Gesellschaft, 1922), 40.
that would feel unfamiliar to Tausig. In any event, Tausig’s textures, as one can see from his Tägliche Übungen, are unlike those of Brahms’s comparable 51 Übungen. Tausig’s are mainly written on one staff, with hands playing the same notes in unison, where Brahms’s exercises never have the hands do the same thing exactly. Moreover, Tausig’s exercises largely omit slurs, accents, and sforzandi, while Brahms’s are laden with them (with the result that Brahms’s arguably feel more gestural than individually finger-oriented). Brahms often asks the same hand to execute different articulations simultaneously, while Tausig never does. Finally, Tausig almost never employs complex or deliberately confusing rhythms, but Brahms frequently does. Perhaps the only Tausig exercise that seems Brahmsian at all is the following (which Walker calls “Study No. 7”):

Example 1: Tausig, Exercise No. 66 from Vol. 2 of Tägliche Übungen

The octave with an inner third is a Brahms favorite (some of the most difficult sections of his piano music, such as the second variation of the Paganini, for example, or the fugue from the Handel Variations, include this device); also, the combination of the “outer” hand movement of the octave with third, with the “inner” movement that emphasizes the fourth finger’s dexterity, is a particular headache-inducing Brahmsian configuration. It turns out that Brahms gave this
study to Tausig! We know this because when Brahms asked Hungarian pianist and friend Róbert Freund to look his exercises over before he published them in 1893, Freund responded by pointing out its similarity by Tausig, only to have Brahms reassure him by saying that “Tausig took the [“chromatic jest,”]” as Freund called it, from him “together with many other jests. Indeed,” Brahms says, “the copy of the volume which you held in your hand is from that time [the 60s], by a long-gone copyist.”

No wonder that the exercise seems Brahmsian.

Lastly, Walker echoes the received wisdom that Brahms’s Paganini Variations are “Lisztian.” Indeed, Walker thinks that the “resemblance between the two works [Brahms’s Op. 35 and Liszt’s Paganini Etude No. 6] is at times uncanny, and [that] it was close enough to prompt Liszt himself to remark, somewhat drily, ‘I am glad that my variations were of service to Brahms when he composed his; it gives me great pleasure!’”

Yet, besides the obvious resemblances produced by their shared material, none of Brahms’s variations significantly

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28 Walker, 71. The letter that includes Brahms’s remark to Freund, comes from Walker’s own library, and he includes it in a footnote. In regards to the exercises, it is important to note that he wrote them throughout his life, starting in the 1850s, but only published them later, after removing some which he thought were “not musical enough.” Nevertheless, the unpublished few that still remain in manuscript form (at the NYPL) appear in the appendix of all Urtext editions.

29 Walker, 65.
resemble Liszt’s in compositional or pianistic technique or affect. A single gesture in the left hand from Liszt’s eighth variation seems to have found its way into Brahms’s piece, but expressed rather differently:

Example 2a: Brahms, coda from Var. 14 of the Paganini Variations

While Brahms’s passage duplicates the lower voice from Liszt’s left hand, the most innovative and prominent aspect of the variation is nonetheless the right hand’s complicated figuration, where the legato line on top requires the fourth finger to be passed under the third. Liszt marks his passage fuoco, while Brahms adopts one of the markings he uses most often in his piece: piano leggiero. This is as far as the “uncanny resemblances” between Brahms’s and Liszt’s versions go. In this light, Liszt’s “somewhat dry” implication about Brahms’s plagiarism was more likely the reflection of their rivalry. And although Liszt’s statement could, in this sense, be perceived as a reflection of the discomfort he felt from being “threatened” or challenged by

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30 This rivalry might not have existed three years earlier when they met in person for the first time — and Liszt sight-read Brahms’s scherzo, and Brahms supposedly fell asleep while Liszt played his B Minor Sonata. For more information, see Swafford, 66-69.
another composer who was writing variations on the same theme, it would also be simplistic to conclude this, just as it is to believe the implausible but often-recounted story that Liszt was “challenging Paganini” with his own transcription of the caprice.\(^{31}\) While all of these pianists might have engaged in some kind of cross-challenging (the Paganini theme had become, by the time Sergei Rachmaninoff composed his *Rhapsody*, a kind of “testing ground,”) Brahms’s challenge in Op. 35 is primarily one for himself.\(^{32}\) Any pianist who declares (even after some supposed doubt), that they are fit for the life of a virtuoso — as Brahms did at this time — would surely not dedicate so much effort to writing a virtuoso showpiece for someone else. He was, indeed, writing the piece in order to both inscribe the technique of his virtuosic “golden age,” and to capture, through the borderline unplayable difficulties, his hope for an even more idealized version of it. He was writing the piece in order to improve his technique.

IV

So what kind of virtuosity was Brahmsian virtuosity? Alexander Stefaniak has recently argued with respect to Schumann’s piano music that the mid nineteenth century hosted many varieties of virtuosity, of which Schumann himself was acutely aware — and that Schumann was thus by no means the anti-virtuosity conservative he comes across as in Gooley’s and others’ works. Rather, Schumann’s music and criticism, argues Stefaniak, “highlights some of

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\(^{31}\) See Alan Davison, “Franz Liszt and the Development of 19th-Century Pianism: A Re-Reading of the Evidence,” The Musical Times 147, no. 1896 (2006): 33. Liszt had started working on improving his technique at least two years before hearing Paganini for the first time.

\(^{32}\) For another account that incorrectly calls Tausig the “dedicatee” of Op. 35, and which discusses how the Paganini theme eventually became a “testing ground” for composers, see Julian Littlewood, The Variations of Johannes Brahms (London: Plumbago Books, 2004), 105.
the tensions and ambiguities in his and his contemporaries’ thinking about virtuosity.” One might say the same of Brahms. Yet Scott’s argument that the Modernist “aesthetic ideology of control” that has dominated recent performances of Brahms, in self-conscious opposition to flamboyant performances of mere “virtuosic warhorses,” suggests that there is some work to do. The trope of Brahms’s “serious Germanness” has not only characterized him as first and foremost a symphonist (where the largest part of his oeuvre actually consists of vocal and choral music), but has also made compositions such as the Paganini Variations appear riven with contradictions which Brahms himself did not experience. As Stefaniak argues, the “nineteenth-century, middle class view of music as an inward-directed activity” and the extroverted business of performing or composing virtuosic music are not mutually exclusive.

As we have seen, Brahmsian virtuosity was somewhat elitist and exclusive, not easily perceptible by a wider public; at the same time, it was virtuosity supposedly synonymous with virtue, and embodied the activity of private self-improvement. I call this “innig virtuosity,” which I describe as follows: first of all, audiences are unlikely to perceive, or fully apprehend, the difficulties inherent in this music; in other words, it sounds less difficult than it is, because its challenges remain somehow internalized. Second, as I’ve noticed from my own performances of Brahms, piece as immensely challenging as the Paganini Variations require solid physical stillness, as well as a mindset entirely focused and strained to the point where, paradoxically, it becomes relaxed — or else the performance falls apart. Third, pieces of an “innig virtuosity” are allergic to extrinsic stimuli, or to significant awareness of the public: even their most “extroverted” passages require a kind of introverted concentration, and any self-aware

33 Alexander Stefaniak, Schumann’s Virtuosity: Criticism, Composition, and Performance in Nineteenth-century Germany (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 12.

34 Ibid., 6.
attempts to externalize their difficulties only draw away from their successful, both musical and technical, execution. Lastly, a successful performance of a piece that is inwardly virtuosic might not draw the same kind of reaction from an audience as a less successful performance of a piece that is more extroverted in its virtuosity (as, for example, Liszt’s *Dante* Sonata.) Perhaps the most important characteristic of Brahms’s *innig* virtuosity is that its rewards are private: a pianist’s sense of satisfaction after a worthy Brahms performance somehow feels like a reflection of a realized process of self-improvement — much in line with the nineteenth-century view of piano practice as *Bildung*.

The eliteness of Brahms’s virtuosity, which might even suggest that its deepest secrets reveal themselves only to pianists, calls for a new methodological approach — perhaps one that includes components of carnal musicology — to Brahms scholarship. I find Berry’s book to be the most interesting new publication on Brahms because it describes vividly, without ever forgetting to be wary of the hermeneutic process, Brahms’s allusive compositional system, and its intricate networks of friendly and historicist connections. Although some reviews of the book find the “kinesthetic resemblances” Berry quotes as unconvincing evidence for some of the allusions he discusses, I find this to be the most innovative; especially the third part, “Clara at the Keyboard,” exemplifies a type of scholarship that reveals a new, and more accurate version of, an embodied Brahms.35 Berry never truly adopts the approaches of carnal musicology to arrive at his refreshingly elusive conclusions, but I wonder what would happen if Brahms’s music were to be given a body to call its own.

For starters, I would like to attempt to recover — inevitably, without the hope of definitiveness and concreteness — Brahms’s social and private body, and what of its specificities would have enabled his “innig virtuosity.” In Chapter Two of this part, I narrate Brahms’s background as student, performer, and pedagogue in the early years of his career, compare him to Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt — two examples that already complicate the definition of the “quintessential Romantic” pianist — and trace his pianistic influences. In Chapter Three, I use my own experiences playing Brahms’s Op. 35 to look at his different types of “performative” notation, and analyze the “friendly” and “unfriendly” relationships they construct between Brahms’s hands and others’. In Part Two of my thesis, I introduce an example of a Brahmsian exercise-gift — a manuscript leaf containing a Klavierstück in B-flat, which he sent as a gift to his friend and soprano Laura Garbe in 1862 — and discuss the way it captures his physical and metaphorical body, and what it means when it engages in the social and political processes of textualized musical exchange. As I develop my analysis of Brahms’s “borderline unplayable” aesthetic and “innig virtuosity,” I also ask whether all his difficult pieces are meant to be played, and analyze Brahms’s one-piano transcription of the scherzo from Robert Schumann’s Piano Quintet — titled “für Frau Schumann allein,” and intended as a birthday gift for Clara Schumann — as an example of a “silent” work, perhaps more an object filled with unrealizable longing than a piece to be played. Next, I discuss similar issues in Brahms’s Op. 116 Fantasies — which I argue are “hidden exercises” — in terms of a deteriorating body reflecting the political and aesthetic changes of fin-de-siècle liberal Vienna. Finally, I end my thesis with a brief postlude that centers on the Second Concerto, Op. 83 and position the private — its “innig virtuosity” — with the public — its status as a dialogic, chamber-like piece, which comes through most clearly in the Allegro grazioso last movement — not as opposites, but as two sides of the same coin.
CHAPTER TWO — BRAHMS’S BODY AND OTHER PIANISMS

I

English pianist Florence May, who took lessons with Brahms in the 1870s in Baden-Baden, describes his playing with the kind of language that should seem by now familiar — and that anticipates the modern “serious Brahms”:

Brahms’ playing at this period of his life was, indeed, stimulating to an extraordinary degree, and so apart as to be quite unforgettable. *It was not the playing of a virtuoso, though he had a large amount of virtuosity.* He never aimed at *mere effect*, but seemed to plunge into the innermost meaning of whatever music he happened to be interpreting, exhibiting all its details and expressing its very depths. *Not being in regular practice*, he would sometimes strike wrong notes — and there was already a hardness, arising from the same cause, in his playing of chords; but he was fully aware of his failings, and warned me not to imitate them (emphases mine).36

Similar to Widmann’s earlier account, May’s constructs a division between pianists who aim at “mere effect” and those whose playing stems from a deep understanding of the music’s “innermost meaning.” Brahms, of course, fell into the latter category. This division might illustrate Gooley’s remark that North Germans perceived virtuosos’ extravagance as a threat to their local communities, where musical cooperation was highly democratized and musical success was the result of an honest — one might say “virtuous” — acquisition of merit.37 The “wahre Virtuosen” — in other words, the Kapellmeister, who was an intellectual trained thoroughly in all musical aspects, not just the technical — was the ideal.38 Brahms believed in this ideal, and even modeled his alter ego after one example thereof — Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler, who is


37 Dana A. Gooley, “The Battle Against Instrumental Virtuosity in the Early Nineteenth Century,” in Franz Liszt and His World, ed. Christopher Howard. Gibbs and Dana A. Gooley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 82. Although May was not North German, she may have experienced the equally conservative aspects of English musical culture, which Gooley discusses in relation to the early concert “seriousness” from an 1813 Philharmonic Society of London, and of the type I pointed out in my earlier discussion of the *Musical World’s* reviews of Brahms *Paganini* performances.

38 Ibid., 82.
the protagonist of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s 1822 novel Lebensansichten des Katers Murr (Brahms’s favorite).39 For a Johannes Kreisler, there could be no division between the two types of musical activities. Brahms’s early studies do show a split — between training directed at cultivating “virtuosity for virtuosity’s sake,” and studying focused on developing a “deep musical understanding” — but also an ongoing symbiosis. His teachers taught him to attend to each side separately, but ultimately aimed to help him realize that they were inseparable.

In 1840, Johann Jakob Brahms brought a shy seven-year old Johannes to Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel to study piano. Cossel was a pupil of Eduard Marxsen and a decent pianist himself, although he was not primarily a performer. Kalbeck lists, first and foremost, Bach and Beethoven — and following, Czerny, Kalkbrenner, Clementi, Cramer, and Hummel — as the kind of repertoire Brahms would have studied in his lessons with Cossel.40 May also mentions his study of “pieces of the bravura school in fashion at the time” — meaning, things like opera fantasies and potpourris.41 Brahms’s first musical experiences, as we will see, were rooted in this kind of repertoire — one that emphasized “quintessential” early- to mid-nineteenth-century virtuosity, which unapologetically featured the performer, not the musical material; included busy, “fingery” figuration; required physical endurance and high velocity; and catered to the tastes of a broader audience that did not shy away from enjoying flashier affects.42 Nevertheless, Cossel contributes the line that would be quoted for years to come as proof of Brahms’s

39 The 1812 Kreisleriana was the first novel in which Johannes Kreisler appeared.
42 Friedrich Wieck would identify — as he did in his 1832 Caecilia review of Chopin’s “Là ci darem” Variations — that this type of music, belonging to the “newest, savory, perhaps frivolous, but elegant and very tasteful French school” of Herz, Moscheles, and Kalkbrenner, nevertheless inspired “lightweight, graceful, but purely mechanical Viennese style of playing” (quoted in Stefaniak, 82).
inclination to the mind and composing rather than to the body and performing: “It is unfortunate about him; he could be such a good pianist, but he doesn’t want to leave his eternal composing.” And yet, Cossel saw in Brahms equal pianistic potential, and did not give up trying to convince Marxsen (who was at first ambivalent about Brahms’s commitment and talent) to take over the young boy’s musical education. Marxsen recalls,

> With the beginning of the study of theory, a sharp and profoundly thinking intellect appeared, but nevertheless the actual work came with difficulty and necessitated quite a lot of encouragement on my part. ... Nonetheless his talent developed, in my opinion, more and more beautifully and more significantly, albeit for the time being it still brought no large completed work to light. With the news of Mendelssohn’s death (1847) I had already made the remark to trusted friends with the deepest conviction: “A master of the art has gone home, a bigger blooms in Brahms.” Thereafter it went more swiftly with the composing, and much that was excellent in song and instrumental music was created, which appeared later in print. In his 19th year, Brahms, as one was in the habit of saying, went out into the world, equipped with extensive, solid knowledge and qualified as a pianist to satisfy the highest demands of virtuosity.

Notice how Marxsen’s remarkable prophetic declaration about Brahms’s spiritual kinship with Mendelssohn adumbrates Schumann’s “Neue Bahnen” by six years. Marxsen also mentioned that Cossel was “qualified for [teaching] the formation of technique,” which suggests that Brahms’s early instruction focused on building up his pianistic skill, more or less independently of other kinds of musicianship. Also important is Cossel’s claim that he felt inadequate

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43 Ibid., 161.

44 Jaffe, 268-69.

45 Ibid.

46 For more details about Cossel’s teaching, see Kurt Hofmann, “Brahms the Hamburg musician 1833-1963” in The Cambridge Companion to Brahms (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially 9-11. Jaffe remarks that Cossel’s instruction was not “merely” focused on technique or flashy contemporary repertoire (267), but Hofmann’s evidence of Cossel’s few remaining manuscripts of editions he used with Brahms — one of which I will mention in section four of this chapter — confirm that one of the most important things Brahms gained from Cossel was a foundation in physical-pianistic technique.
teaching the young pianist who showed, for his time and context, an unusual interest in composing. The young aspiring pianist-composer needed the already accomplished Marxsen, who was at the height of his success as a symphonist during this time, but who also had a number of difficult piano works under his belt. And while Brahms developed a unique voice as composer during this time and, as Marxsen notes, even came up with material that he used in later compositions, he did not lose his focus on piano technique. It is surprising, then, given Marxsen’s unambiguous conclusion — that Brahms was “qualified as a pianist to satisfy the highest demands of virtuosity” — that later biographers, such as Swafford, have always been happy to reinstate the old idea that Brahms “took to the keyboard more as a duty than as a fish to water.” He writes, “Johannes might become a fine player, even a soloist, but he did not seem likely to develop into a true virtuoso. Something held him back. He hadn’t the fire in the belly.” Even Swafford’s Brahms is the hopeless product of the Modernist imagination, and fails to take into account his early training as a virtuoso.

47 Not only Brahms’s interest in composition, but his interest in the piano, were unusual for a Hamburger who had not even seen such an instrument in his home; his father also reminded him that there was no piano in the Hamburg Philharmonic — thus, that his musical aspirations were impractical for the city. Swafford writes, “In Hamburg, music existed as an amusement incidental to real life. For most of the orchestral musicians and the few composers, music was a job like any other.” Like all other aspects of professional life in Hansestadt Hamburg, music was business-oriented; Hamburg was not an intellectual center for anything, and a journalist from Leipzig even entitled his observations about Hamburg “Musical Doings from the Unmusical City” (11). However, it turns out that the city was not as musically backwards as noted here and in other writings. As Walter Frisch has also remarked in Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation (46, 52), Brahms’s early musical education and the professional opportunities he was offered in Hamburg were not so insignificant. I will argue in part two of my thesis that it was Hamburg’s private, domestic opportunities for music-making that provided Brahms with a rich experience as musician and composer.

48 See Jaffe, 26-33, 258-275.

49 Swafford, 24.

50 Ibid.
Cossel’s or Marxsen’s teachings, however, did not focus only on technique, or, in the case of the latter, compositional skill. Most importantly, as Swafford notes, correctly this time, “Cossel told Brahms to make his fingers express his heart; Marxsen taught him to submit passion to relentless craftsmanship.”51 This idea that the fingers directly channel the heart recalls North Germans’ belief about musical expression that permeated their thinking even as early as 1750s. In his Versuch über die wahre Art Clavier zu spielen, for example, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach writes: “What comprises good performance? The ability through singing or playing to make the ear conscious of the true content and affect of a composition. Any passage can be so radically changed by modifying its performance that it will be scarcely recognizable.”52 He adds, “A musician cannot move others unless he too is moved. He must of necessity feel all of the affects that he hopes to arouse in his audience, for the revealing of his own humor will stimulate a like humor in the listener. In languishing, sad passages, the performer must languish and grow sad.”53 Bach did not perceive skill or technique in a vacuum; execution and expression were inseparable. Brahms not only learned these values from his

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51 Ibid., 31. He goes on to say, “In his maturity, his art would be marked by a reconciliation of elements that would seem irreconcilable had he not resolved them so magnificently, so nearly seamlessly.” In other words, his teachers’ contradictory remarks eventually led Brahms to experience a higher synthesis of opposed elements.


53 Ibid.
teachers, but also studied C.P.E.’s treatise himself in the following decade: he even quotes from it extensively to Clara Schumann in a letter from 25 November 1855.\textsuperscript{54}

Despite the emergence of the Romantic pianist and their “virtuosity for virtuosity’s sake,” the tension between technique as subservient to the music — which I will highlight through brief discussions of Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt — and technique as a special effect in its own right (as in the case of Louis Ehlert and his students, for example, which I will also mention), was never of the same kind. This dichotomy would express itself in Brahms’s own teaching, practicing, and his most difficult piano works, differently than it did for other pianists, such as Clara and Liszt, who were considered the greatest virtuosos of the nineteenth century. Before I can describe Brahms’s early activities as pianist and identify his species of pianism, however, I must sketch Clara’s and Liszt’s own experiences with practicing, and their particular virtuosities.

II

Early in the morning on a summer day in 1866 Baden-Baden, Clara Schumann opened the lid of her ornate Grotrian-Steinweg grand and sat down for the first proper practice session after her latest period of medical rest, which she took due to a returning hand injury. The living room of this cozy cottage home immediately filled with sound, and Eugenie, her daughter, reminisces about these days, which to her were “steeped in eternal sunshine”:

\begin{flushright}
Johannes Brahms and Styra Avins, Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 115-117. After quoting Bach, he writes, “In general, we must give the Bach a thorough reading together!” Although here Brahms copies the third section of Chapter 2 which discusses the Nachschlag, it is clear from his remark to Clara that he would have read the whole treatise — including the section I’ve quoted above. Thus, it is likely that he may have internalized some of C.P.E.’s ideas about musical expression.
\end{flushright}
Directly after breakfast the grand piano was opened and the house flooded with sound. Scales rolled and swelled like a tidal sea, legato and staccato; in octaves, thirds, sixths, tenths, and double thirds; sometimes in one hand only, while the other played accompanying chords. Then arpeggios of all kinds, octaves, shakes, everything prestissimo and without the slightest break, exquisite modulations leading from key to key. The most wonderful feature of this practising was that although the principle on which it was based was always the same, it was new every day, and seemed drawn ever fresh from a mysterious wellspring. Irresistible inspiration, perfect rhythm, such as springs forth souls of only the greatest artists, combined with absolute mastery of technique, made these exercises a wonderfully spiritualised achievement. A distant relative of ours, when she was staying with us, said that she had never believed the story told of Paganini, who made people weep with the playing of a scale; but now that she had heard Mamma practise, she could understand it. I do not think any one could ever have forgotten it who had heard it, even once only; and here were we children hearing it day by day. Though I was still so young, my mind was filled with inexpressible joy and satisfaction, and this had continued throughout my life, to the day when we heard it for the last time. We often pressed Mamma to write down the sequence of an hour’s exercises, but she always said it was impossible to retain exactly this kind of free fantasia (emphases mine).55

Eugenie breathes life into her memory with a vivid description of the switch from silence to sound, from stillness to animation, from the domestic Gewöhnlichkeit of breakfast to the unrestrained, almost violent natural forces of Clara’s practising. Clara was fantasizing, not practicing; she was exploring, not struggling (as she “flew,” everyone else “toiled along”);56; and most importantly, she was free, not constrained. And even though this warm-up routine, always culminating with Robert’s Toccata, was just a “prelude” to her real practising, it did not feel like it. Even in her warm ups, “irresistible” inspiration sprung forth from the “soul” — that “mysterious wellspring” — of this great artist, and synthesized perfectly with “mastery of technique,” so that the exercises became a “spiritualised achievement.” Like Paganini, Clara could elicit emotions from spectators simply by being there, and by handling available technologies or technical devices. “True” musical content — a self-contained work, an idea —


56 Schumann, 94.
did not need to be there for her soul to glisten through. A scale was enough. And when real music was there, it was even better: “She penetrated deeply into the spirit of each work, that they became almost a part of her. They lay enshrined in her soul, and when she drew them forth they seemed to have been newly created.”

Clara could not, however, achieve this perfect union of “subject” and “object” without that “preliminary” practicing part: if she were to begin her day by practicing a “work,” she would have to truncate it or repeat passages unnaturally. Instead, Eugenie tells us, “She never practised in the sense usually attached to the word. I have never heard my mother practice slowly, bar by bar. She had overcome all technical difficulties when she was a child,” and, she concludes later, “at an age when one is not yet conscious of them.”

But was Clara’s early mastery truly freeing, and never constraining? Her father Friedrich Wieck, contrary to common belief, did not subject the young pianist to solitary confinement for hours on end as she struggled with difficult pieces. His pedagogic methods not only championed the avoidance of excessive tension and economy of movement, but also economy of time: she was only allowed to practice for three hours a day, and for every hour she spent at the piano, she had to spend one outside, exercising and getting fresh air.

Nevertheless, Clara experienced the stress of touring from a tender age, and often dealt with hand injuries (as she did right before Eugenie’s snapshot of this particular practice session). These strainng tour schedules required her to cultivate an enormous sense of self-discipline and endurance.

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57 Ibid., 18.
58 Ibid., 18 and 141.
When Eugenie complained at a lesson with her mother in the 1870s that she will never be as great a pianist as her, Clara reminded her, “You forget that I gave my life to music from my earliest childhood.” While music, particularly private practicing, was Clara’s refuge during the periods of depression after the death of her husband and two of her children, she often had to push mourning aside to prevent disappointing audiences — in other words, to sacrifice her inner life to public responsibilities. And even though she did not experience the notoriously compulsive practice routines Robert did, which destroyed his dreams of becoming a virtuoso — or the 12- and 16-hour practicing days of other Romantic pianists like Alexander Dreyshock and Theodor Döhler who, in Gooley’s words, “epitomized their age” — she still felt the inevitable tragedy any young prodigy would: from an early age, her virtuoso lifestyle prevented her from claiming complete agency over her body. Even though she “overcame all technical difficulties” in youth, she did not do so on her own terms; instead of observing her physical presence and molding it according to her individual will, she had to subsume it into the masterworks she was playing in order to serve a higher ideal — and an expectant audience. Clara used to say that “she never felt her fingers while she was playing”; Eugenie concluded that she “could never have thought of fingers” when she heard her and that she had “never heard any comments on her technique.”

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60 Schumann, 146.

61 Schumann, 94 and 97.

62 Gooley, 96.

63 Schumann, 196.
of Schumann’s Fantasie, op. 17]? Undoubtedly because her technique was made entirely subservient to the musical thought and feeling.”

While Clara’s authority on musical interpretation was unchallenged, and eventually won her the title “the priestess,” she was often regarded as puritanical when it came to interpreting and teaching canonical works; her focus on curating these works was perhaps what numbed the feeling in her fingers. She asked Eugenie at one of her lessons, “Do you think Beethoven would go through all these efforts to write these details if he didn’t mean it?” Franz Liszt (and other “anti-conservatory” Romantics) criticized such “Leipzigerisch conservatism,” and more broadly, the teaching methods of the Stuttgart, Leipzig, and Frankfurt schools (the latter of which Clara was full-time principal teacher in 1879) — even though his own rhetoric on textual fidelity was similarly “conservative.” “The priestess” became, for them, “die Göttliche Clara,” a heavily gendered authority figure that encapsulated expressive repression, and “the old school.” Clara was less a free, unrestrained Romantic who practiced (or even performed) according to whim, the way Eugenie’s description might initially suggest, than she was a routine-oriented worker, a busy mother and touring artist whose schedule restricted such moments of fantasy only to the twilight hours:

When she went into her room after breakfast, the first thing she did was to open the piano, one of us dusted it, and it remained open all day. She usually played for an hour after breakfast, and again in the late afternoon towards twilight. This was the

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64 Ibid.

65 Nancy B. Reich, Clara Schumann, the Artist and the Woman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 255.

66 Schumann, 98.

hour when her glorious improvisations revealed to us feelings which she did not put into words. […] But the strains of her music during these twilight hours spoke of all the grief she had borne and the heroism with which she had endured it. She never indulged in grief; she sought and found consolation in music, and when she returned to the family circle she at once shared our interests, and enjoyed what life had to offer her of good and pleasant things.68

This image seems wholly unrelated to the moody and whimsical Romantic virtuoso who still dominates contemporary popular imagination today. Clara, instead, restrained her feelings and never “vented [them] out on her surroundings.”69 A virtuoso, like Dreyschock and Döhler, practiced for hours on end, while Clara stopped after just one, and divided the rest of her practicing into several sessions. A virtuoso, like Liszt, would practice either in solitary confinement and/or forget about his spectators, their feelings — or even time itself — playing into the late hours of the night.70 Clara did not only start the day early in the morning in good German fashion, but also acknowledged her admiring spectators, who sometimes ventured into the room. Eugenie further notes,

I remember a few occasions when I came into the room while she was at work; she asked me to find her the music in order to verify some point or other. We never disturbed Mamma without good cause when she was at the piano, but we knew that we might come in at any time, and that she even liked it. She always gave us a kind glance whenever we entered the room. I used to wonder at the time that she could go on playing so unconcernedly while she talked to us of other things. While she played scales she would often read letters open on the desk in front of her.71

In order for Clara to be able to multitask like this while practicing, her technical proficiency must have been not only uncommonly high, but also wholly internalized. Her fingers did not

68 Schumann, 96-7.

69 Schumann, 94.

70 Apparently Liszt, as J. Q. Davies writes in Romantic Anatomies of Performance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 157, “would enrage the tenants in his building on the rue de Provence by playing the Dies Irae over and over, in countless variations, until dawn. (Eventually the tenants banded together to force his eviction.)”

71 Schumann, 18.
need her full undivided attention; as we’ve already gathered, they knew what to do on their own. For her, practicing could not have been such a straining activity that it drew forth sweat, blood and unwavering concentration. Could she have read through a letter if she was busy wrestling with the piano, as the most quintessentially Romantic practicer would have to?

III

Franz Liszt, one such quintessential Romantic, did wrestle with the piano, as Friedrich Wieck notes in his diary:

We heard Liszt today at Conrad Graf’s who was sweating as his piano did not survive the great duel — Liszt remained the victor. He cannot be compared with any other player — he is unique. He arouses fear and astonishment and is a very kind and friendly artist. His appearance at the piano is indescribable — he is original.\textsuperscript{72}

As the Viennese said, Liszt “goes under [immerses himself at the piano] while Clara raises by.”\textsuperscript{73}

An aesthetic of effort, different than Brahms’s, frames the picture of Liszt sweating at the piano, which today, pianists like Boris Berezovsky — who can get through the Transcendental Etudes in one sitting while his shirt clings to his body not too dissimilarly from Colin Firth’s in his epic portrayal of Mr. Darcy — continue to deepen the wrinkles of that Modernist romanticization still inherent in contemporary listener culture.\textsuperscript{74} Liszt and such disciples are indeed perfectly in line with the Romantic virtuoso of our popular culture, which, for example, the 1991 movie


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{74} See, for example, the following video of his performance of Wilde Jagd: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tw9gj0Fa1M. Or the one of the tenth etude, from the same concert, where he breaks a string and stops playing (perhaps a welcome excuse for a mini-intermission from all the sweating?): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXL4hqY9RCU.
Impromptu captures. In one of the movie’s early scenes, an energetic George Sand (or rather, disheveled Judy Davis) walks through the streets of Paris and glances up, surprised, at an open window out of which streams impassioned piano music. Graceful white-gloved hands close the window as she walks into the building, and the scene switches to a bluish white room inside, where Frederic Chopin (a well-groomed Hugh Grant) is revealed as the body attached to the hand. As he coughs softly and complains that the “sun and dust” are harmful to his health, the camera swivels around to focus on the solid, lightly shadowed three-quarter profile of Franz Liszt (a serious Julian Sands) — the body attached to the music. He interrupts the emphatic lyrical melody and bubbling chromatic chords from the middle section of Mazeppa in order to give his friend a concerned look. Chopin mentions that the air might be better in Angers, where the infamous party where Sand meets him will take place, but quickly encourages Liszt to continue his playing; he doesn’t mean to interrupt the genius with pointless chatter. A cascade of chromatic chords and octaves resumes, and the camera zooms out just slightly to give us a one-second glimpse of Liszt’s hands. The sound abruptly drops as we are banished to the drawing room on the other side of the door, where Marie D’Agoult (the ever fabulous Bernadette Peters), Liszt’s mistress, a new mother, sleeps on a chaise, oddly undisturbed by the clamor. Sand walks in quickly, startling her, and the baby starts to cry. As Sand tries to comfort the little girl, the scene flashes back to the other room where we get a full view of Liszt’s other — right — side in its full glory, while a passive Chopin watches from the corner of the room near the window. “Chromatic glissando,” the possessed artist mutters, “the wings of a butterfly.” Chromatic glissando up. “Or the wrath of God!!” Chromatic glissando down. The scene switches back to the drawing room as Liszt lands on a terrible diminished chord, which
startles George and Marie and prompts them to glance towards the door. Marie laments, “He wakes the baby, then he complains the crying makes him crazy.”

Although Chopin is present in the room, Liszt does not initiate conversation with him as Clara does with her children. The clearest dissimilarity between these two private moments concerns the gendered roles the two pianists adopt: while one welcomes the children into her practice space, the other invades a child’s quiet space with his violent practicing. While Clara is “at work,” as Eugenie says, Liszt plays freely through a proper piece (not just scales), and interrupts the creative deluge only to seek out a new technique — the chromatic glissando (which, by the way, is Tausig’s invention — but that’s another matter). Liszt’s main efforts consist of grappling with the muses, and searching for ways to subject the piano, and his hands,
to reflecting, or embodying, his inner artistic idea (“The wrath of God!!”). Clara’s disciplined routine leaves no room for superfluous eccentricity such as Liszt’s, although Eugenie identifies the improvisatory aspect of her practicing to be the most poignant. When Eugenie and the other sisters, Marie and Elise, asked her to “write down the sequence of an hour’s exercises,” Clara’s apprehensiveness might explain the otherworldly frame of mind she would adopt while improvise-practicing; she just could not imagine transferring that intangible experience to something as concrete as musical notation. Her hesitance could also be viewed more darkly — the result of her “unfeeling fingers,” and the symptom of her constructed, passively acquired — perhaps even oppressive — disembodiment. Eugenie notes that when Wieck visited their home in Baden-Baden sometime in the early 60s, his favorite motif was “My Klara, my Klara, she is the best proof of what my method can produce.” Clara was a product of her father’s method, unlike Liszt, who produced his own; and whereas Liszt gave up or transcended his hands willingly, in adulthood, Clara was forced, from youth, to transcend for music a whole way of life, as her comment to Eugenie suggests. Her unshakable technical foundation, which came with this price, was nevertheless what made it possible for her to sight-read on the spot difficult pieces such as Brahms’s, which, despite being the only ones unfamiliar to her at the time, she gave “the right interpretation at first sight, without preliminary study.” Her body was made a vehicle for the musical work.

In this light, the scene from Impromptu, apart from capturing modern Lisztian stereotypes, also tells of the Romantic musician willing to sacrifice his body to music. The main difference is that Liszt appears to do so antimethodically. While Clara had to work on this daily

75 Schumann, 9.
76 Ibid., 18.
and diligently, “Liszt worked to cancel work,” as James Davies tells in his new account from his book *Romantic Anatomies of Performance.* In his chapter on Liszt, Davies reveals the material effort behind the virtuoso’s process of “transfiguration” and discusses the “terms by which it became possible to speak of “music” without the bodies and instruments that facilitated it.” Eugenie’s remark that “one never thought of fingers when hearing [Clara’s] interpretations” is not too dissimilar to Albertine de la Rive-Necker’s remark that Liszt, while playing, “takes no notice of his hands, which he never looks at.” Indeed, Liszt’s willing disembodiment, and even more importantly, his adoption of the “dead hand” technique, enabled him, as Swiss countess Caroline Boissier writes, to practice octaves for “hours on end, while at the same time reading to avoid boredom”— just as Clara read letters (perhaps to her children.) And as Clara’s scales, in Eugenie’s words, “rolled and swelled like a tidal sea … in octaves, thirds, sixths, tenths, and double thirds,” so did Liszt, as he wrote to pianist Pierre-Étienne Wolff, practice “four to five hours of exercises (3rds, 6ths, 8ths, tremolos, repetition of notes, cadences, etc.,)” every day. Both pianists seemed to practice systematically, but to prompt others to claim that their labor was somehow inconsequential, or even unrelated, to “the music itself.” Although these claims have undeniable political undertones — both Eugenie and Rive-Necker both felt they could (and should) convince an imaginary audience of their artists’ depth and virtue by referencing their lack of concern for hands — it is perhaps more importantly the signifier of what Davies

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78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., 167.

80 Ibid, 155.

81 Ibid., 158.
identifies as our squeamishness in recognizing “handedness” — as if the true test of being an artist is that of denying, or downplaying as much as possible, bodily presence.\textsuperscript{82}

It is no secret that Liszt’s and Clara’s respective labors were visible, and that their practicing efforts had real repercussions, including plenty of hand injuries like the one that kept Clara away from the piano all too frequently. Liszt’s labor has a particularly well-documented history because of the famous switch — the “new discipline” — that both scholars and broader audiences still associate with his encounter of Paganini. Davies, as well as Alan Davidson, however, discuss the flaw in this periodization. In 1831, one year before he met Paganini, Liszt told Countess Boissier and her husband Auguste that he had:

played the piano for years, and was brilliant in concert, and so believed that he was quite marvellous. Then one day, being unable to express with his fingers all the feelings which weighed upon him, he re-examined himself point by point and found that he could not perform trills nor octaves very well, nor even certain chords. Since then he studied his studies again, and little by little completely changed his touch. Formerly, when attempting to express certain tone energetically, his hands stiffened, but now he has banished all stiffness from his playing; from the wrist, he tosses his fingers upon the keys, at times, with force and at times with softness, but always complete suppleness (emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{83}

Liszt, in the end, still had to \textit{work} for his virtuosity, as Clara did; the switch did not happen automatically, and was not the result solely of inspiration. This picture of the Romantic virtuoso, the cinematographic version we’ve glimpsed, as well as Eugenie’s account of Clara’s practicing, define the virtuoso as someone who disciplines their body into expressing an inner musical idea

\textsuperscript{82} This approach would probably be less consequential if it was restricted to aesthetics, but, as Davies comments, “A whole raft of institutions, conservatories, music teachers, and even academic scholarship has long been devoted to this faintly ridiculous idea: that hands have little to do with pianistic expression, interpretation, or “the music itself,” 176. The “disembodied” approach, in this light, also operates at the ethical and political levels. Although Rive-Necker’s and Eugenie’s comments might not seem that dangerous to us now, they could be seen as founders to more troubling future traditions, such as in twentieth-century conservatories.

by way of fantasy, or imagination, but also who, in the process, has to struggle to achieve it (as
the Countess tells, Liszt’s process of reexamination came about because he noticed one day that
he was “unable to express with his fingers the feelings which weighted upon him”). Although
Liszt’s process is supposedly one more self-aware than Clara’s, both are similar, and
incongruent to the simplistic definition of virtuosity as “excess velocity and strength” that
largely dominates public knowledge today. This oversimplified definition, which is one product
of Modernist tradition, applied mostly to nineteenth-century conservatory-trained musicians (of
the type Liszt detested), whose training was dictated by a severe, looming teacher. American
pianist Amy Fay, for example, experienced this with Louis Ehlert at the Berlin Conservatory,
when, she says, he would make her

play [Cramer’s Studies] tremendously forte, and as fast as I can go. My hand gets so
tired that it is ready to break, and then I say that I cannot go on. “But you must go
on,” he will say.” It is the same with the scales. It seems to me that I play them so
loud that I make the welkin ring, and he will say, “But you play always piano.” And
with all this rapidity he does not allow one note to be missed, and if you happen to
strike a wrong one he looks so shocked that you feel ready to sink into the floor.84

While Liszt adopted a similarly intense process (minus the looming teacher) of
disciplining his fingers for hours, he read not only “to avoid boredom,” as Countess Bossier
notes, but probably also to further encourage that disembodiment through distraction. On the
other hand, Clara read letters to herself and chatted with her children during her brief one-hour
exercise routine, so that Eugenie used to “wonder at the time that she could go on playing so
unconcernedly while she talked to us of other things” — but not in order to reach an altered
state of disembodiment, like Liszt, or overembodiment, like Ehlert and his quintessentially
virtuosic students; for her, this multi-tasking practicing was a dialogic act. And while it would
be easy to view it as proof that her training was less straining, we can instead wonder, like

84 Fay, 21-22.
Eugenie, how she accomplished so much and maintained such demanding repertoire in so little time, while also taking care of non-pianistic things. Perhaps her domestic living room practicing, and its comfortable sociability, also played a role in aiding her physical preparation. And as the familiarity softened the impact of this disciplinary routine, the restricted practicing hours strengthened her mental endurance and concentration rather than diminished it, and made it possible, for example, for her to give a recital with just one hour’s preparation.\footnote{Altenmüller/Kopiez, 110.}

Ultimately, for both Clara and Liszt, a transaction from the private practice space to the “public” performance venue seemed to have been at play: while sociable practicing made it possible for Clara to give concerts in settings more “serious” and less dialogic than Liszt’s, Liszt’s strenuous, solitary practicing trained his mind to possess the kind of freedom and confidence a charming musical raconteur would need in order to entertain in public and private performances alike.

IV

To avoid presenting Brahms’s “innig virtuosity” simply as the synthesis of Clara’s and Liszt’s, I must position it, together with theirs, against the conservatory virtuosity — as I would call it, “virtuosity for virtuosity’s sake” — exemplified by Ehlert (and those silent “epitomizers of their age” Dreyshock and Döhler). While Fay’s training focused mostly on strength and velocity — “technique in a vacuum,” I would say — Liszt’s and Clara’s was in line with the ideas of Brahms’s teachers, who taught him, as C.P.E. Bach would have, that “the two sides” — “technique” and “music” — are inseparable. While even Liszt’s and Clara’s practicing routines could not illustrate a perfect symbiosis, they revealed a process of inner struggle that existed precisely because of their desire to synthesize them. Brahms’s “innig virtuosity,” which emerges
in youth, exemplifies this process — as I argue, uniquely — but his early performances
nevertheless seem to have been focused on developing “virtuosity for virtuosity’s sake.”

Table 1. Brahms’s Performances, 1843-1850.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 November, 1847</td>
<td>Hamburg, Saal der Tonhalle</td>
<td>S. Thalberg</td>
<td>a pano duet, with Th. Meyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 March 1849</td>
<td>Hamburg, Logensaal</td>
<td>S. Thalberg, F. Mendelssohn</td>
<td>unidentified work, unidentified works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 March 1850</td>
<td>Hamburg, Apollo-Saal</td>
<td>S. Thalberg</td>
<td>Andante Finale, Op. 44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Indeed, his programs included pieces of a “merely mechanical” sort — the kind anti-virtuosity critics despised, and that Clara wished she had never played in youth.\(^{86}\)

In order to trace Brahms’s training as such a virtuoso, the safest thing to do is to look at his early performances. Brahms’s private debut happened in 1843 at “Zum Alten Raben” in Hamburg and included a Mozart quartet (with Carl Birgfeld, Christian Otterer, and Louis Goltermann), Beethoven’s Quintet Op. 16 (with his father and his musician colleagues), an etude by Herz (which Friedrich Wieck would have deemed “merely mechanical”)\(^{87}\), and other unidentified pieces. This concert’s overwhelming success, to be matched only by the 14 April 1849 concert,\(^{88}\) was the cause of the famous episode that would convince Cossel to recommend Brahms to Marxsen: an impresario sought to take the young pianist and his whole family to America, and introduce him as a child prodigy; he was to have a career as a “true virtuoso,” and his mother and father were ready to leave their Hamburg life behind. Cossel, however, was more skeptical, and viewed this offer as an attempt to exploit Johannes’s talents. He hoped Marxsen would be the savior who would prevent such a disaster — and luckily, he was. Four years later, after settling under his new teacher’s instruction, a 14-year old Brahms would perform pieces as “merely virtuosic” and fiendishly difficult as Thalberg’s *Fantasie über Motive aus “Norma,”* op. 12. But because the 1849 concert including Beethoven’s *Waldstein* is the only

\(^{86}\) See, Reich, 255: “The less I play in public now, the more I hate the whole world of mechanical virtuoso showpieces; concert pieces like Henselt’s Etudes, Thalberg’s Fantasies, Liszt, etc. have become completely repugnant to me… I will play them only if I need to for a concert tour.”

\(^{87}\) For Wieck’s comment on the “merely mechanical,” see footnote 7.

\(^{88}\) A review in the Hamburg *Correspondent* from 2 May 1849, quoted in Hofmann, 18, described Brahms’s playing as “easy and free, the attack generally clean and never overbearing at moments of strongest force, unlike so many present-day virtuosos with a mania for hammering the keys.” Note how the comparisons between Brahms’s “virtuous” virtuosity and that of quintessential key-hammering virtuosos was already beginning.
one of Brahms’s youth, besides his debut recital, that still shows up in biographic accounts today, Brahms’s training as virtuoso through pieces such as Thalberg’s can, as it is, continue to be undermined. Ultimately, his Op. 4 Scherzo and the three early piano sonatas — all difficult, ambitious pieces, which he composed soon after and started performing in 1853 — seem to emerge out of the blue when that was not really the case.

When Brahms joined forces with violinist Eduard Reményi in 1851, the number of chamber works he performed, both canonic and contemporary, started to match the number of solo works he was studying; pieces such as the Op. 30 Beethoven sonatas and several piano duets continued to form a large part of his repertoire throughout the following years, especially as he also started playing with violinist Joseph Joachim and Clara in 1853. Meanwhile, he continued to challenge himself with solo repertoire such as Chopin’s Op. 53 Polonaise, and, most notably, a plethora of Schubert, including his Sonata in A minor (probably op. 42), D Major, D 850, G Major, D 894, and B-flat Major, D 960, as well as his own incredibly difficult two-hand arrangement of a Schubert march (probably D 968 in C Major from op. 121). As Marxsen said, he could “satisfy the highest demands of virtuosity.” An even more surprising example of his virtuosic competence — practically unknown today — comes from Clara’s diary of 25 May 1854, where she tells how Brahms played Liszt’s Sonata in B minor to her:

Liszt fandte heute eine an Robert dedizierte Sonata und einige andre Sachen mit einem freundlichen Schreiben an mich. Die Sachen sind aber schaurig! Brahms spielte sie mir, ich wurde aber ganz elend… Das ist nur noch blinder Lärm — kein gesunder Gedanke mehr-, alles verwirrt, eine klare Harmoniefolge ist da nicht mehr

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89 See Renate & Kurt Hofmann, 24, 31 and 35. Also important to note is Brahms’s interest in Schubert, which did materialize out of thin air. Although his exposure to music increased after he met the Schumanns in 1853, his access to music director Theodor Avé-Lallemant’s library in Hamburg was — as Frisch notes — one of the reasons Hamburg did not provide for him as “backwards” of a music education as generally supposed. Cossel also introduced him to some of Schubert’s Moments musicaux, as well as other short pieces. May notes, “He especially loved Schubert, and I have heard him declare that the longest works of this composer, with all their repetitions, were never too long for him,” 21.
It is unremarkable to read of Clara’s deep hatred of the piece. Brahms supposedly also despised it; the over-rehearsed account of how he fell asleep when Liszt played it for him and the rest of a small audience, including Rémenyi, in June 1853, is still one of the most important entries in the “Battle of the Germans” dictionary. But we actually do not know what Brahms thought; to assume that he would have agreed with Clara is not necessarily incorrect, but it is misleading to conclude that his agreement would have been a reflection of his taste rather than a gesture of friendship. What stands out the most here is the fact that Brahms could actually play through the piece just as Liszt had played through his E-flat Minor Scherzo the year before. The only difference between the two is the audience. While Liszt could do so for “strangers,” Brahms could only do it for friends. May documents Clara’s remark about his moodiness: “She wished me to hear [Brahms] play, but said it was no easy matter to do so, as he was extremely dependent on his mood, and not only disliked to be pressed to perform, but was unable to do justice either to himself his composer when not in the right humour.”

91 Swafford, 168.
92 Brahms did not hate “New German” music. He even remarked, “Whoever has not heard Liszt cannot even speak of piano playing” (Swafford 66). Despite that, he notes in a letter from 7 August 1859 to Joachim, “My fingers often itch to start a fight, to write some anti-Liszts” (Avins, 196). Additionally, Brahms’s only radical move — signing and publishing a declaration of protest against Liszt and the “Musicians of the Future” — seems to unambiguously support his anti-Liszt position. (Wagner and Berlioz were not included among the “accused” here.) However, as Brahms’s youthful musico-political fire lessened with time, he even started telling his friends, albeit in secret, that he “perversely enjoys” the music of ultra-Lisztian Joachim Raff — and, shortly after the publication of his Second Concerto in 1881, sent Liszt a copy of the two-piano version, to which the old master replied enthusiastically in 1885 (calling it “one of Brahms’s very best works”). Although Brahms seemed on cordial terms with Liszt by then, the move of sending old Franz the manuscript to his most technically demanding piece was probably not lacking in at least some half-hidden boastfulness (“This is what I call virtuosity, Franz!”).
93 May, 5.
Chopin, whose dislike for large audiences is by now considered the clearest symbol of his *Innigkeit*, Brahms would only have played his best when surrounded by familiar faces, and even that unpredictably. Additionally, we should recall Brahms’s remark to Clara in the letter I’ve quoted in Chapter One — that “the only thing” he was “dependent on” in performances was the piano he had available. Liszt — and especially his modern-day disciples — would prove their virtuosity’s worth by immediately adapting to any and each instrument at their disposal. That aside, if Brahms’s entertainment skills and adaptability to pianos did not equal Liszt’s, his pianism did.\(^9\) There is no reason to view Brahms’s pianism as inferior to Liszt’s or Clara’s other than for a desire to box Brahms into a category belonging to that unsound binary of “merely virtuosic” and “deeply musical” — the product always of complicated political circumstances, but remarkably always in healthy bloom, despite the historical moment. Nevertheless, Brahms’s pianism demands not necessarily further defense, but rather, an explanation. In the next section I preface my detailed discussion of Brahms’s “*innig* virtuosity” from Chapter Three by delineating his physical movements and, hopefully, re-sketching his pianistic body.

V  

Brahms’s teaching prior to the 70s, which has gone largely undiscussed, and his style of pedagogy in general, will provide the first useful clues for understanding his technique. For example, Brahms’s instruction to 11-year old Minna Völckers (sister of the more well-known

\(^9\) Not to claim that Liszt was always willing to perform for others. Amy Fay notes, “You never can ask [Liszt] to play anything for you, no matter how much you’re dying to hear it. If he is in the mood he will play, if not, you must content yourself with a few remarks.” (Fay, 219). Although Brahms seemed to operate more or less in the same way, Liszt’s more extensive experience with fashionable salon environments — which were not quite as private as Brahms’s performance here to Clara, and other domestic entertainments he took part in — gave him the flexibility to be more open, and perhaps to control his moods better.
Marie and Betty Völckers), which began in February 1861, shows him passing on the values his teachers instilled in him. On a Friday early that year he assigned Minna a Cramer etude, a Bach Prelude from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and the first movement of a Beethoven sonata, all to be learned by the following Tuesday. Czerny also constituted a large part of her instruction. Throughout his life, Brahms would assign this kind of repertoire to students, although his pedagogic approach would soften. His expectations for the young Minna were clearly high, and he was often relentless, as the younger pianist felt “ashamed when Brahms once noted that she had already played the same Bach fugue for him three times.” But later, in the 70s, Florence May would write about her own lessons, “he never expects too much, and does not give much to learn, but is always satisfied with little if one is really trying.” And while Brahms seems to have been assigning the same amount of Cramer with which Ehlert would abuse students like Fay, he also took care to nurture students’ physical well-being and to insist on keeping their movements “natural.” May mentions that “He had always been extremely careful, when selecting music for me to work at, to choose what would develop my technical power without straining my hands, and when I had wished to study something of his had answered that his compositions were unfit for me for the present, as they required too much physical strength and grasp.”

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95 Marie and Betty were two singers in Brahms’s *Hamburger Frauenchor*, who were also part of his private “Mädchen Quartet.” The quartet and *Frauenchor* environment will be the basis of my discussion in the first chapter of Part Two. There I reference Brahms’s teaching to Marie, as well as to Friedchen Wagner, another singer in the chorus, who started lessons with him earlier in 1855 and was the chorus’s founder.

96 Jaffe, 261.

97 Ibid., 262.

98 May, 12.

99 Ibid., 26. Brahms goes on to say that his compositions were “beyond a woman’s strength.” I will discuss his claim in the following chapter in relation to Clara.
Instead of encouraging either Lisztian disembodiment or overworking students in Ehlert-esque ways, Brahms asked his students to notice what was going on with their piano-playing bodies, and helped them figure out what it meant. May recalls, “He not only showed me how to practice: he made me, at first, practice to him during a good part of my lessons, whilst he sat watching my fingers; telling me what was wrong in my way of moving them, indicating, by a movement of his own hand, a better position for mine, absorbing himself entirely, for the time being, in the object of helping me.” Helping Florence improve her piano technique by observing her body’s movements prompted her to continue doing so herself in the future (something Tobias Matthay, who had a similar approach, would have approved of). By the following decade, she was so well-versed in apprising her pianistic movements, and using her awareness to improve her playing, that she became one of the greatest pianists of her time, and the first, besides Brahms and Hans von Bülow, to perform the Second Concerto Op. 83 — a monumental piece.

Brahms’s observation process might bring to mind Eugenie’s point that “Brahms stimulated the intellect,” and that he thought about technique more than Clara, who had internalized it in youth. But does this necessarily mean that Brahms was all thought and no play? His “intellectual” method, in fact, is not too dissimilar from Liszt’s, who, after all, “re-examined himself point by point,” as we have seen, in order to improve his octaves, trills, and so on. Was Liszt not — unlike, perhaps, the “mainstream” pianists such as Ehlert, and his students — operating by trial and error, rather than by principle (by merely playing exercises

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100 Ibid., 10.
from a method, or according to a looming teacher, *forte* and *presto*)? Liszt’s method was not an absence of method but a flexible one based on individual, daily, context-oriented circumstances: he would observe what his hands were doing and, where necessary, fix their errors — which for him meant, work on keeping them relaxed. Eventually, he would get to our *Impromptu* moment and use his new awareness to garner new skills, to cultivate special effects, and to express in unique physical ways his “spiritual” ideas. Brahms — and consequently, his students — worked in a similar way, albeit for different reasons — seeking less a “transformative” experience and more a practical process. Nevertheless, Brahms, like Liszt, also “transformed bodies.” May’s detailed account speaks for itself:

> His method of loosening the wrist was, I should say, original. I have, at all events, never seen it or heard of it excepting from him, but it loosened my wrist in a fortnight, and with comparatively little labour on my part.
> How he laughed one day, when I triumphantly showed him that one of my knuckles, which were then rather stiff and prominent, had quite gone in, and said to him: “You have done that!”
> It may seem incredible, but it is none the less true, that after a very few weeks of work with him the appearance of my hands had completely changed.\textsuperscript{102}

And after her studies with Brahms, before returning to England, she notes:

> I do not mean to assert that my hand was already completely developed from a pianist’s point of view, or my technique as yet fully in my possession. These things were physically impossible; but Brahms had shown me the path which led straight to my goal, and had himself brought me a considerable distance on the way. A cast of one of my hands taken on my return to England, when compared with one that had been

\textsuperscript{101} I’ve referenced Davies’s argument about Liszt’s “antimethodical” teaching, and the faults with believing in it. In the case of Brahms, however, there exist no accepted “disciples” even in the historical imagination. Ludwig Deppe is perhaps the one who comes closest. For an account of his teaching and method — which sound to me very similar to Brahms’s — see Fay, Chapters 24-28. Deppe and Tobias Matthay, whose methods I’ve mentioned in Chapter One, are, to my knowledge, the only pianists-pedagogues who valued the “loose wrist” method, and the hand’s rotating motion to the degree Brahms did.

\textsuperscript{102} May, 11.
done shortly before I left, could not have been recognised as being from the same person (emphasis mine). 103

May’s account of her hands’ transformation is remarkable not only because it shows the efficacy of Brahms’s technical training, but because it captures the imprint and influence of his unique physical presence on her own. His “method of loosening the wrist,” as I’ve mentioned in passing in my discussion of the Paganini Variations’ reception, I argue, is central to his pianism, and consequently, the reason for the “eliteness” of pieces such as Op. 35. Minna also wrote in 1861 that Brahms “placed special emphasis on a loose wrist,” so we know that Florence was not the only one who learned this trick from him. Therefore it is safe to say that Brahms’s focus on a loose wrist technique was central to his teaching — and, because of that, his own pianism. Indeed, the fact that Tobias Matthay, whose own methods valued forearm notation, was drawn to Op. 35, suggests that only those pianists who, like Florence and Minna, learned to “loosen the wrist,” had any chance of performing Brahms’s most difficult works successfully. 104 Because of this, I wondered whether Brahms’s wrist rotation technique originated intrinsically, in order to serve his music, in the same way Liszt’s “dead hand” technique perhaps emerged as a unique tool that conditioned new technical effects he sought, such as hand-crossing chromatic octaves (his thing this time, not Tausig’s.) Eugenie’s account of Brahms’s practicing captures his use of the wrist rotation technique. According to her, her elder sister Marie

reminded him sometimes, ‘Herr Brahms, you really must practise now, or you will not play properly at the concert.’ Then he always got up obediently, went into the music-room with his beloved cigar, and presently we heard the vigorous attack of his two fifth fingers, one at each extreme end of the keyboard, and arpeggios in counter movement through endless modulations followed.

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103 Ibid., 23. Her father also wrote to her mother, “Her hand has an entirely different conformation from what it used to have; it has lost all its angular appearance, and it really is the case, as she says, that her knuckles are disappearing.” 11.

104 Minna would perform Brahms’s Op. 4 Scherzo seven years after starting her instruction with Brahms.
Interesting as this playing was, there was always something of a fight or animosity about it. I do not believe that Brahms looked upon the piano as a dear, trusted friend, as my mother did, but considered it a necessary evil with which one must put up as best one could (emphasis mine). 105

Instead of treating Eugenie’s account as yet another that reinforces the idea that Brahms’s pianism was rough or awkward — that he considered the piano a “necessary evil,” or secondary, to his serious compositional ideas — we can recognize that it documents a slightly older Brahms who was no longer in his virtuosic prime (note: the cigar had appeared). The most important thing to note here is Eugenie’s description of Brahms’s physical movements at the piano, which would have been undoubtedly the same as in the past two decades: her description of Brahms’s “vigorous attack of his two fifth fingers,” despite its simplicity (which makes it prone to overlooking), creates an unambiguous picture of Brahms slamming his hands on the keys at opposite ends, weight tilted to the pinky side, and swiftly rotating them inwards and repeating this circular motion through waves of modulating arpeggios. Meaning, the exercise with which he started his practicing — “obediently,” and by habit — entailed the rotation of wrists. This technique, central to Brahms’s pianism is, to inexperienced pianists unlike May, unfamiliar, and its absence from their playing makes Brahms’s already difficult pieces borderline unplayable. My central argument is that Brahms’s music is not just difficult because of his deliberate obstinacy and aesthetic aims to keep it “elite,” but because it is the result of his particular, unique pianistic technique and body, which are frequently incompatible with — or simply, unfamiliar — to others’. When May asked Brahms later in Berlin “why it was that he composed only such enormously difficult things for the pianoforte, he said that they came to him naturally, and that he could not compose otherwise (‘Ich kann nicht anderes.’).” 106

105 Schumann, 170.

106 May, 26.
Difficulty to him was natural, but his valuation of it points to a different “aesthetic of effort” than Liszt’s — less mystical, less deliberate in its elusiveness. While Liszt’s default was not difficulty, he constructed difficulty in order to “transubstantiate,” as Davies would say, his disobedient fingers. On the other hand, Brahms’s view of the hand, as we will see, was not necessarily so severe: its natural constitution could be, rather than forced into an elevated state of self through superhuman will, used to its advantage.

VI

George Henschel, a singer and one of Brahms’s lifelong friends, provides another account that captures Brahms’s specific movements at the piano. He describes the way Brahms performed a part of his First Concerto — the piano’s version of the first orchestral melody:

Brahms played his Pianoforte Concerto in D Minor superbly. I especially noted his emphasizing each of those tremendous shakes in the first movement by placing a short rest between the last note of one and the first small note before the next. He played like this:

![Henschel's transcription of Brahms's performance]

During those short stops he would lift his hands up high and let them come down on the keys with a force like that of a lion’s paw. It was grand.107

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107 George S. Bozarth, Johannes Brahms, and George Henschel, Johannes Brahms & George Henschel: An Enduring Friendship (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2008), 24-25.
Moseley reads this type of Brahmsian forcefulness as a symptom of his immense enjoyment of “the difficulties of his own music”\textsuperscript{108} — a kind of “aesthetic of effort.” This outward show of difficulty might seem at first irreconcilable with my argument that Brahms’s virtuosity was “innig,” but I will show how that is not the case. Charles Rosen discusses Artur Schnabel’s “Lisztian” version of the octave-trill gesture from the Concerto, which involves both hands and avoids the awkwardly fingered trill in the right hand:

![Octave-trill gesture from the Concerto](image)

Rosen thinks that this is against Brahms’s intentions, and writes, “it was precisely to avoid the brilliant Lisztian sonority that Brahms asked for less effective trills which integrate more easily with the musical texture. There is also an essential aesthetic difference: the Lisztian version is easy to execute and it sounds difficult; Brahms prefers a greater difficulty, partially concealed in order to avoid the appearance of virtuosity.”\textsuperscript{109} While Rosen captures here the spirit of what I mean by Brahms’s “innig virtuosity,” I think he diminishes its complexity by defining it as an entirely anti-Lisztian construction. (He also wrongly identifies Brahms’s call for a “smooth” texture — one of the failings of the Modernist mindset). The “partially concealed” characteristic of the difficulty in Brahms’s original version of the octave-trill gesture is another example, like


\textsuperscript{109} Rosen, 164-65.
the *Paganini* Variations, which, *if attempted “exactly as written,”* causes it to be, as Tausig would say, “virtually unplayable.” This “borderline unplayable” characteristic produces here what I’ve identified as a component of Brahmsian virtuosity — a kind of introverted, even private, satisfaction on the part of the performer who gets it right, who conquers the “unplayable.” This, rather than the outward “relish of difficulties,” constitutes Brahms’s “aesthetics of effort.” Most importantly, the “partially concealed” difficulty is not necessarily, I think, a reflection of Brahms’s stance against Lisztian aesthetics — but a manifestation of the Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler aesthetic and his North German ethics, which encapsulated an inward, solitary struggle for an imperfectly realizable ideal. Furthermore, in this particular passage of “partially concealed” struggle, Brahms’s “*innig*” aesthetic does not have to be a reflection of his desire to *avoid* at the appearance of virtuosity. Although “*innig* virtuosity” in Brahms is antithetical to Lisztian virtuosity, which, as Rosen notes, sounds more difficult than it is, it does not always come in the same form.

Clearly, from Henschel’s description, and as Moseley notes, Brahms did not shy away from showcasing, even exaggerating, his physical movements while playing (he did after all write to Clara in the letter we’ve read in Chapter One, “the bigger pieces, the better.”) Instead of taking this as counter-evidence to my claim that Brahms’s virtuosity is for the most part not “extroverted,” we can recognize it as a different kind of evidence, in line with the one from Eugenie’s account of Brahms’s rotational arpeggio exercising. Brahms’s supposedly exaggerated movements were, besides a reflection of his “relish of difficulties,” a *necessity* for executing this passage; Henschel’s account is another snapshot of Brahms’s wrist technique. In response to his surprise that Brahms “adds” a rest between the dotted whole note and the sixteenth that follows, I have to ask: how *else* could one play this passage? Although many pianists today do
attempt to play the trill without interruption before the sixteenth ("exactly as written"), find it
difficult, and give it up (maybe even adopt Schnabel’s transcription), some do perform it
without a rest, in the process diminishing its monumental force, and distancing it in degree of
intensity from its tutti equivalent. So, why was Brahms lifting his hands so high and slamming
them on the keys, if not “merely,” (to use a charged word), to impress the audience? The simple
answer is that he wanted to gather as much force as possible before striking the keys. The more
complicated answer is that he knew it was impossible to play the octave-trill with the third and
fifth fingers using “inner” energy, starting from the key. The “outward” impulse of energy was
required to stir the fingers into action. Henschel’s “extra rest” accounts for the brief moment
when Brahms would lift his hands: he treated the sixteenth octave as a sort of ricochet note, and
bounced off of it, using the energy from that bounce in order to supply the octave-trill whole
note to follow. Even if Brahms were to have played the passage without lifting his hands so
high, he still would have added a small “extra” rest between the trill and the next note; it is not
possible to play the passage otherwise. It is Brahms’s body language that made the rest seem so
prominent to Henschel — who would not have noticed it otherwise — and that prompted him
to document it. This body language, then, suggest to me unambiguously that he would use a
wrist or forearm rotation technique.

If this “loose,” rotating wrist was the basis for Brahmsian technique, another important
component was a strong and prominent thumb. Since his pieces, such as Op. 35, as we will
shortly see, relied on the wrist rotation technique, this physical looseness needed an anchor to
work. The thumb is the fulcrum of Brahms’s hand. In his lessons with Eugenie, he taught her to
pay attention to it when crossing it under and assigned the following exercises for her to work
through:
This crossing-over cannot be achieved through legato. What is important here is not even necessarily the thumb itself, but the student’s attention to the thumb: as long as Eugenie was thinking of it when shifting her hand to accommodate the position required of the new note the thumb had to play, she would be rotating the wrist. Keeping the wrist locked (or, forcing it to stay in the same position the beginning of the arpeggio asked for), as it progressed, required the hand to stretch unnaturally in order for the thumb pass under the other fingers — something potentially harmful physically — and exactly the kind of thing that Brahms tried to prevent, as May notes.

Further details of Brahms’s approach can even be traced back to Cossel’s teachings — especially from a manuscript of a Study “Allegro,” written out by him and given to Brahms with the comment, “when passing the thumb under, the elbow must remain quite still.” If Brahms internalized Cossel’s advice — and he probably did — the “Allegro” Study further supports the possibility that Brahms expected Eugenie to rotate her wrist when she played the present exercise: if the elbow had to be still, something else had to be flexible in order for the arpeggio to work — and that was the wrist. Notice the accents on the C in the first four-note group — which fall on the thumb — and the next accent, which falls on the third finger: they

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110 Hofmann, 10.
suggest that, while passing under, the thumb was relaxed and did not have to strain. As long as it emphasized or accented the correct note, and thus attracted the student’s attention, the rest of the hand would fall into place naturally, and the gesture would not require straining. Brahms also wrote an exercise that did not make it to the published 51 Übungen, in which he employs the sole use of the thumb:

![Figure 4: A discarded Brahms exercise](image)

Notice here that both extremes of the hand are functioning simultaneously. Although the pianist holds the G with the right pinky and (rather uncomfortably) plays each note of the C major arpeggio solely with the thumb, Brahms does not write legato or add further difficulties; all that matters here is, yet again, the pianist’s attention to the thumb, which helps it fall on the desired keys correctly. This kind of approach is also captured in Friedrich Wieck’s method Pianoforte Studies. Consider, for example, the following exercise: His instructions here capture what I mean

![Figure 5: An exercise from Wieck’s Pianoforte Studies](image)
when I say that Eugenie’s attention to the thumb in her exercise was most important — more helpful than, say, her thinking about rotating the wrist; both in the Wieck and Brahms exercises, the wrist would follow a rotating movement naturally as long as the student was simply thinking about the thumb’s activities.

In summary, we can see from Eugenie’s account of Brahms’s daily arpeggio exercise beginning on the pinky, the thumb-centered exercise he wrote for Eugenie, and this “discarded” exercise, that the anatomy of the Brahmsian hand is split into two, between the “outer” — the thumb and pinky extremes — and the “inner” — the remaining fingers. Brahms’s foremost reliance on the “outer” parts of the hand reveals his trust in the hand’s natural tendencies. His “loose wrist” technique — as opposed to Liszt’s “dead hand” technique — is somehow “healthier,” perhaps, because it derives itself from the hand’s already intrinsic ability to function as a whole unit, and not as a set of individual fingers that, by default, need to be trained into improvement and systematically abused. That is not to say, however, that the “inner” fingers of the Brahmsian hand did not deserve some attention of their own, or that they were secondary in importance to the larger unit of the wrist.

In fact, those “inner” fingers are the only ones that can get a beating in Brahmsian practice. The only condition and prerequisite is that the wrist adopt and internalize that all-important looseness. Brahms, as in anything, wants the best of both worlds — the “natural” sweeping motion of the hand as larger unit, and the dexterity and force of each individually strong finger. Some of the most difficult features of Brahms’s piano music are: the simultaneous employment of these two physical movements, which I’ll analyze shortly; and the quick and frequent switch between types of physical energies, as, for example, in this passage from the Second Concerto, Op. 83:
The passage marked *sempre piu forte*, which continues the most difficult section of the recapitulation beginning earlier at m. 317, requires very quick, immensely difficult bass leaps in the left hand; spiky accents — both agogic and dynamic; and a mostly *senza pedale* texture; all of this overall calls for heroic endurance, and a full-bodied energy where the whole arm operates freely. Because of the many octaves and chords, the passage requires what I call “extroverted” energy: all movement is more or less directed by the hands’ thumbs and pinkies — the hand as a whole unit, which plays rather vertically — and not by the “inner” fingers whose tasks are usually more intricate than this. Measure 326 requires — with absolutely no time for adjustment — a switch in energy, and the hands must adopt an horizontal movement — not for arpeggios
or scale-based figuration (which would be reassuring), but for these notoriously nauseating double trills. These, of course, absolutely demand wrist rotation. At *fortissimo*, they are very difficult to achieve flawlessly (the hand wants so badly to slip off the black keys). Paradoxically, in order for it to work at full-force, the right hand must *relax* at this climactic passage; the wrist, which enjoyed a more or less fixed position in the previous passage, must be free to shake as widely as possible now — loosely, but powerfully. This is “innig” virtuosity.

That other grave difficulty in Brahms’s piano music — the always-changing *mixture* of simultaneously executed “outward” wrist technique and “inward” finger interdependence — comes through, for example, in passages such as the fugue from the Op. 24 Handel Variations, which ask for two different kinds of articulations within the same hand:

Example 1.1: Right hand plays the lower voice legato and the upper staccato

Example 1.2: Left hand plays the upper voice legato and the lower staccato
While the legato voice from one hand can be executed using wrist rotation, the staccato, also in the same hand, requires motion intrinsic to the hand, without convenient “natural” impulses from the thumb or pinky. This would be the only kind of technique that Brahms allowed students to drill. As long as the hand was formed to operate in the sweeping, wrist-oriented way — and he did “transform” students’ hands, as we saw with Florence, to allow this to become a habit — the only thing that would need fixing was the “details,” which could not be practiced by principle, or method, but only in accordance with their context. For this purpose, Brahms assigned his students practicing on their pieces. May notes that Brahms “had a great habit of turning a difficult passage round and making me practice it, not as written, but with other accents and in various figures, with the result that when I again tried it as it stood the difficulties had always considerably diminished, and often entirely disappeared.” The greater the effort in drilling, the easier the piece would sound and feel later.

Unlike Clara, who, as Eugenie says, “never practised in the sense usually ascribed to the word” — never played things slowly or with “extra” accents not originally written in the score — Brahms, and his students, made exercises out of pieces, and, like Clara, also music out of exercises. While Brahms’ end result would be a performance whose smooth surface kept

Example 1.3: Both hands play simultaneous staccato and legato voices at the same time

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111 May, 10.
difficulties from being externalized to the audience — a performance rich in “innig virtuosity” — the process of reaching this mastery would be one filled with struggle. For Brahms, this struggle was not as mystical-transformative as Liszt’s, in whose end result the audience could sense it — but a practical yet satisfying struggle of private Bildung and self-improvement. The intimacy of this struggle, rather than the more public (and often sweaty) Lisztian display of effort, is what constitutes Brahms’s unique “aesthetics of effort.”
PART TWO: BRAHMS’S VIRTUOSITY IN DIALOGUE

CHAPTER ONE — BRAHMSIAN COMPOSITION AND THE FRIENDLY EXERCISE

I

What does the piano exercise have to do with friendship? This question may have never materialized if it weren’t for the following artifact from UC Berkeley’s Hargrove Library:112

Here we see a lost and found object, an incomplete text — or an oddly conclusive fragment. This double-sided leaf — a piano piece in B-flat, perhaps an exercise, written by Brahms around 1862 — is both a musical fragment and a barely identifiable gift. The leaf, folded only in two, bears no title, date, or even time signature. The “piece” it contains is perhaps not substantial

112 Many thanks to James Davies who told me about this MS’s whereabouts. This one-of-a-kind piece currently lives in Berkeley, MS937.
enough to count as something more than sketch, and the inscription on the back, “Auch der lieben Schwägerin,” places the object loosely in the category of the gift, but does little to clarify its specific purpose or occasion. The object begs to be supplemented with a background narrative, or at least a comprehensive explanation — neither of which have been adequately attempted so far (unless Robert Pascall’s abridged account were to count.)\textsuperscript{113} Who was this meant for? And what is it? 

In 1862, Elise Brahms writes to her brother,

\begin{verbatim}
... wir vergehen fast schon vor Schmerzen über Dein Schweigen. Bist Du eigentlich krank oder hast Du schon eine Braut auf der Spur? ... Fräulein Reuter und (Laura) Garbe haben wir zwei neue Duette (aus op. 20) und mehrere Lieder von Dir
\end{verbatim}

vorgesungen. Das ist immer ein großer Genuß für mich… Fräulein Garbe wünscht sich so sehr ein kleines Andenken von Dir, ein paar von dir geschriebene Noten oder noch besser eine Haarlocke. Was sagst Du dazu? Sie ist immer für Spaß…

… we are almost consumed by anguish over your silence. Are you actually sick or do you already have a bride on the way? Fräulein Reuter and (Laura) Garbe have sung for us two duets and other pieces by you. That is always a great pleasure for me… Fräulein Garbe wishes so very much for a small souvenir from you, a couple of notes from you or even better a lock of hair. What do you say? She is always so fun…

If Brahms fulfilled his sister’s wish for a souvenir for “Fräulein Garbe,” this might have been the one. There is, however, no surviving reply to Elise’s request — and no further reference to the “souvenir” — in any of Brahms’s correspondence. The object’s reception is practically nonexistent. Probably for this reason, no exhaustive narrative of its history has been attempted. The inscription on the back, meaning “Also to the beloved sister in law,” is the only previously identified (and barely identifiable) clue in

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Figure 1: Perhaps depicting a scene similar to the party Hübbe describes, this was, according to Drinker, an invitation to an evening “sing” by the light of hurricane lamps arranged in honor of a visit of Joachim’s on 29 March, 1860. Drawn by Henny Gabain, a member of the Frauenchor.

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Elise’s request that links the object to its supposed “owner.” This, we will shortly see, most likely refers to Laura Garbe.

Regrettably we know less about soprano Miss Garbe than about Brahms’s Hamburger Frauenchor, a lively society of young women that met formally between 1859 and 1862. But the history of the Frauenchor holds several under-discussed treasures that might plant Laura into a rich network, and that might spark broader questions about the present object of knowledge. Laura was a member of the roughly fifty-person chorus and also of the “Mädchen Quartet” — Brahms’s elite smaller group consisting of the strongest singers, which also included Marie Völckers, Betty Völckers, and Marie Reuter — who performed Brahms’s smaller-scale songs in more intimate settings. A middle-sized assembly also met with Brahms in the evenings to sing German folksongs and other pieces he composed. Susanne Schmaltz, who was a member of this group, wrote, “I remember one wonderful evening in the early part of the year. We sang as usual a cappella. We stood under a blossoming apple tree in the moonlight, Brahms conducting in the middle.” Brahms may have envisioned more moments of this delectable kind of sociability when he visited Julius Otto Grimm in Göttingen for the short but blissful summer of 1858 and experienced the charms of his Cäcilia Verein and women’s chorus — as well as Agathe von Siebold, his soon-to-be (and short-lived) fiancee with whom he spent those few months.

Brahms’s experience as court composer and director of the Choral Society in Detmold for the Prince of Lippe-Detmold between the turbulent years of 1854 and 1857 (when he frequently returned to Düsseldorf to help Clara Schumann cope with Robert Schumann’s worsening sickness) established a life-long interest in all things choral, and fulfilled his early ideal of the

115 They also met without Brahms until 1863 and their last encounter with him that May.

116 Sophie Hutchinson Drinker, Brahms and His Women’s Choruses (Merion, PA: S. Drinker, 1952), 58.
Kapellmeister role. It is important to note, however, that this ideal was for Brahms less in line with the Romantic hopes he conjured from Hofmann and more professional and political in nature: to have been a “court composer,” as practically all who had come before — Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart, Haydn, Bach — was to have been a musical servant for a royal family.

Detmold, somewhat surprisingly still operating under this old structure, was not as lively as Göttingen; it was a bit too forestry and secluded even for the famously Pinaceae-loving Brahms: 117 he muses in a letter from October 1859, “I am in love with music, I love music, I think of nothing but, and of other things only when they make music more beautiful for me. Take note, I am composing love songs again, not A-Z, but to music. If it continues like this I may evaporate into a chord and float off into the air.” 118 This Herderesque picture contrasts starkly with what Susanne Schmalz writes, and even more clearly with Walter Hübbe’s account of a party organized by Brahms’ Frauenchor in 1859 (see Fig. 1):

A huge hothouse was scantily furnished as a dwelling. Between this and the hill was an enclosed pond situated between slopes planted with vineyards with a grotto at the south side. Above it stood a temple surrounded by trees. This garden was occasionally the scene of pleasant and cheerful meetings. In the summer of 1859, the Frauenchor had a picnic there. The ladies had brought paper lanterns with which the pond was encircled while the gentlemen filled the pauses in the singing with fireworks. The chorus had formed in front of the temple and Brahms often hilarious to the point of unruliness, climbed one of the trees and conducted the singing from

117 See Florence May, The Life of Johannes Brahms, vol. 1 (London: W. Reeves, 1948), pp. 3-5. According to her, Brahms would “rise at four or five o’clock, and, after making himself a cup of coffee, [would] go into the woods to enjoy the delicious freshness of early morning and to listen to the singing of the birds. In adverse weather he could still find something to admire and enjoy.” May summarizes, Brahms “knew that not alone his intellect, but his mind and spirit and fancy, must be constantly nurtured if they were to bring forth the highest of which they were capable, and so he arranged his life that they should be fed ever and always by poetry and literature and art, by solitary musing, by participation in so much of life as seemed to him to be real and true, and above all and in the highest degree, by the companionship of Nature (emphasis mine).” Most notably, when May asked him how she could most quickly improve her playing of a piece, Brahms answered, “You must walk constantly in the forest” — and apparently “meant what he had said to be taken literally.”

there. Finally, the party, in the gayest mood, illuminated by the lighted lanterns, from them went a saying through the village.\textsuperscript{119} Although all of these accounts present vivid pictures of nature, only the Hamburger chorus seems to have been so alive with talk and activity, and to have encouraged the wild Brahms who conducted from trees to come out of his (forcefully conditioned) idyllic compositional headspace.\textsuperscript{120} This happy group, especially the Mädchen Quartet, did not revel in the silent sublimity of nature but rather, writes Marie Völckers, “competed jubilantly with the nightingales of the garden.”\textsuperscript{121} In Brahms’s view of Detmold, nature’s sublimity could be oppressive, and not surprisingly: his evening appointments at the castle, for one, hardly allotted him enough time to change clothes after he came from his extended walks in the forest.\textsuperscript{122} But in Hamburg, where he could enjoy nature on his own terms, and with his friends, the sociability and playful dialogue of the gatherings — unconstrained by the old structures of court life — is what, I want to stress, plays the most important role in revealing the side of Brahms that refuses to fit the imaginary bookends of solitary early-Romantic genius and self-conscious Victorian seriousness. This “middle Brahms” is one who understood the value of dialogic music and who recognized that its origins were to be found in the emerging democratic structure of friendship.

\textsuperscript{119} Drinker, 59. To note: Walter Hübbe’s older brother took lessons with Brahms starting in 1851.

\textsuperscript{120} This Brahms, as Eugenie Schumann writes, also performed “the most daring gymnastics. He hoists himself from right to left and up and down; at last he raises himself firmly on his arms, with his legs high in the air, and a final leap lands him below in the midst of the admiring crowd of children,” in Eugenie Schumann, The Schumanns and Johannes Brahms; the Memoirs of Eugenie Schumann (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 4.

\textsuperscript{121} Drinker, 70.

\textsuperscript{122} Avins, 204.
Whereas the Lippe-Detmold society was politically conditioned and contingent, the Hamburg one emerged entirely as a result of the collaborative freewill of music-loving individuals.\footnote{123}

Some of the latest Brahms scholarship dwells on this — particularly the important role domestic music-making played for Brahms — as, for example, Katy Hamilton and Natasha Loges summarize in \textit{Brahms in the Home and the Concert Hall}: “the concept of music conceived above all for active participation, rather than passive listening,” they write in regards to Brahms’ 1891 \textit{Dreizehn Kanons} Op. 113 (originally composed about thirty years earlier for the Hamburg Chorus) was “deeply important to Brahms. […] He] recognised the distinction between the pleasures of making music and of listening to it; music to be listened to needed to be rich enough to justify a passive engagement, whereas the pleasure of singing the canons was justification enough for a simple musical texture.”\footnote{124} In the same chapter, Hamilton and Loges also write that the pieces Brahms composed for the \textit{Frauenchor} were important to him “as a means of gaining practical experience as a young composer in an amateur context, and as a source of musical material many years later, well after he had ceased to work with the group.”\footnote{125} But this view still contributes to the conception of the \textit{Frauenchor} environment merely as a laboratory — a kind of practical “testing ground,” as it has always been footnoted — that gave Brahms the excuse to experiment with “new forms.” While this is partially true, I still think that the \textit{Frauenchor} merits discussion as a network with its unique culture.

\footnote{123}{Not to claim that friendship is entirely a structure based on “free will” and politically neutral. Later in my thesis, I bring up the meaning of friendship in light of Viennese Liberalism. For background on this, see Margaret Notley, \textit{Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism} (Oxford: e Oxford University Press, 2016).}

\footnote{124}{Katy Hamilton and Natasha Loges, \textit{Brahms in the Home and the Concert Hall}: Between Private and Public Performance (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 15-16.}

\footnote{125}{Hamilton and Loges, 14.}
Thinking of the singing women as Brahms’s musical guinea pigs keeps the troubling hierarchies positioning “professional” above “amateur” and ernste Musik above Unterhaltungsmusik — something we want to avoid. Styra Avins gets closer to the more probable narrative by claiming that Brahms’s “connection to the Frauenchor held the possibility of aiding his career: the wives and daughters of his colleagues sang in the chorus, and most other participants were quite a few who regarded him with fervour, girls who were willing to defend his character against the charge of arrogance, and who would go from shop to shop asking for his music in the hope of developing a market for it.” The Frauenchor was a real society (as Brahms called it, a “little republic”) that presented Brahms both with occasional opportunities for performance and with intimate, often deeply personal, reasons to compose. Brahms did not simply function “within” this environment or context — or, brought his presence into this society of women as a kind of supplement with his own clearly delineated edges, which neatly separated “self” from “other.” Being part of such rich network, or rather, “living in [a sphere],” as Peter Sloterdijk has written, meant “inhabiting a shared subtlety.” If the “sphere appears as a twin bubble,” meaning, that it is a “space of spirit and experience with

126 Hamilton and Loges do carefully set up their chapter to prevent emphasizing these hierarchies: they quote Dahlhaus, commenting that “a differentiation between serious music and music for entertainment was largely a question of perception,” and succinctly remind readers that “the differentiation between “amateur” and “professional” was seldom clear-cut,” 10 and 3, respectively. My only concern is that they skim over the Frauenchor’s story too quickly.

127 Avins, 186-7. Also see Drinker, 40: “The girls had been more than enthusiastic about the Serenade and were convinced that Brahms was not appreciated. They thought that if they went to the music stores and asked for Brahms’ compositions, they could persuade the dealers to keep his works on hand.” Too often have stories like these been brushed off as the “adorable whimsy” of a group of singing “girls.” It is to be noted that these “girls” were in large part mature, practical, action-oriented women. A deeper study of the Chorus — which unfortunately is beyond the scope of this chapter — should include extensive research into their lives, professions, and in some cases, music careers.

128 Drinker, 46.

129 Peter Sloterdijk and Wieland Hoban, Bubbles: Microspherology (Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e), 2011), 45.
at least two inhabitants facing one another in polar kinship” — if human experience is by default a shared experience — Brahms’s activities as composer, especially in the context of his Frauenchor days, would benefit from being viewed as dialogic. In this spherologic-dialogic space, Brahms composed not independently but as part of a collaborative network; composer and performer(s) participated always in a process of exchange — or better yet, one of co-creation. In other words, Brahms was never “alone” when he composed.

The circumstances of the chorus’s early years illuminate this version of the story. In the early 50s, one of Brahms’s principal engagements (and his least favorite) was piano instruction. In 1855, he began teaching twenty-year-old Friedchen Wagner, a highly cultivated socialite from an artistic middle-class Hamburg family who, according to Sophie Drinker, “made Germany the Mecca of musicians the world over.” One day when Friedchen was playing a duet with her cousin G.D. Otten (with whom she was still studying at that time), she met Brahms for the first time. Impressed by her ensemble work, Brahms asked to

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130 Drinker, 10.
replace Otten and play with her himself, and soon after, Friedchen started taking lessons with him. She writes about her time with Brahms, “After [a] lesson, Brahms gave the pleasure of playing for me. We often played Bach’s Concerto for three pianos; his brother Fritz participating. Once, however, I played at Heins’ with Brahms and Clara Schumann. It was Brahms’ suggestion. I was nervous and lost my place. Frau Schumann encouraged me. We were able to continue it and it went off all right. Frau Schumann said that such a thing could happen to anybody. In playing the third piano in Bach’s Concerto, I had to count twenty-three bars rest!” Mess-ups or not, musicians like Friedchen, for whom solitary scales and drab drilling no longer comprised the main part of her musicking — and who could and wanted to engage in sociable music-making — were the kinds of artists Brahms wanted to spend time with. Like any twenty-two year old aspiring pianist and composer, he needed places to play and musical circles — bubbles? — to join.

In 1858, Friedchen writes in her memoirs: “While I was taking lessons from Brahms, I asked him one morning — since my two sisters and I often sang together — to compose folksongs for that purpose, which he was very willing to do.” Brahms, who had already been following his interest in folksong as early as 1854 or even earlier, might have produced for this occasion some of what would be known as the 28 Deutsche Folkslieder. Friedchen and her sisters Thusnelda and Olga began singing some of these, and with Friedchen’s efforts a larger group of young women began to form around them. The official Frauenchor meetings started in June 1859; nevertheless, Brahms had already been composing pieces like his Brautgesang and Ave Maria for women’s voices before — whether for his Detmold chorus, for some of the early

131 Ibid.

132 Drinker, 74.
participants of his forming Hamburg chorus, or even perhaps for Julius Otto Grimm’s Verein, is uncertain. What is clearer is his letter to Julius from Detmold in November 1858, where he exposes the other side of the reality he would capture in the more idyllic October 1859 letter: “As it is, a poor composer sits sadly and alone in his room and conjures up thoughts which are none of his business. And a critic [Julius, who had just given Brahms critical feedback on his Brautgesang] sets himself between two beautiful ladies… I don’t want to picture it any further!” The fact that the composer was fabricating thoughts which were “none of his business” suggests that he had already enjoyed the company of singing women, so sitting “alone in his room” (as he did in Detmold) was no longer enough; what he longed for above all was a larger sphere. More specifically, it is possible that in this letter Brahms expresses his nascent desire to organize a more official group of musical ladies to spend time with and compose for.

As it happens, Brahms’s serious compositional self-development, reflected in the relative solitude of his Detmold activities, and his desire for a fun and sociable environment, merged successfully as he solidified and organized the Hamburg chorus. Even his diligent Latin studies from this time found lighthearted use in the choir’s Avertimento — his “Ten Commandments” of the choir — which Brahms wrote in 1860 in a purposely inflated, archaic style. Laura Garbe, our otherwise enigmatic protagonist, happens to get a whole paragraph to herself:

… As who should say: they shall be there precisely (praecise) at the appointed time. But, on the other hand, whosoever shall so transgress as to make her due reverence and attendance at the society a whole quarter of an hour too late shall be fined 2 shillings (H.C.)

In consideration of her great merits in connection with the Ladies’ Choir, and in consideration of her presumably highly defective and unfortunate constitution (Complexion), a subscription shall now be established for the never enough to be favored (favorierende) and adored (adorierende) Demoiselle Laura Garbe, in

133 Ibid., 15.
accordance with which she need not pay the fine every time, in lieu of which a moderate (moderirte) account shall be presented to her (praesentiret) at the end of the quarter… Brahmssing Laura out and teases her for always being late, but establishes only a “moderate” fine for her “trespasses,” because he counted on her leadership and never allowed rehearsal to begin without her. This unsolicited attention initially upset her, but Clara Schumann reassured her that it would make her famous one day. Ironically, Brahms’s singling out, while unexpected, has not prevented her from slipping through the cracks of history: little else is known about her. And while scourging family archives in Hamburg might generate something of value, even reveal the crucial missing puzzle piece that would effortlessly explain “everything,” the biographical gap remains interesting to work with in its own right. In fact, using this gap — “the absence” — “of the subject as [the] departure point,” as Caitriona Ní Dhuill writes, is one of the possibilities of bringing “anti- and metabiographical approach” to life-writing; ultimately, working with the gap might even “offer some kind of encounter with an absent subject through the mediation of life traces.” I might not be able to reconstruct Laura’s presence, but I might find something of value if I attempt to do it anyway.

In spite or because of this gap, our object of interest gifts us with a different type of question — a more abstract problem that does not ask for, and might even resist, purely factual explication. One might be prompted to follow the example James Q. Davies sets in his article “Julia’s Gift: The Social Life of Scores, c. 1830”: “in the absence of biographical evidence securing the personal significance of Julia’s copy,” he writes, “there is little room for historical

134 Drinker, see 53-55.
135 Ibid., 56.
manoeuvre”; in order to ask what the gift represented for Julia, he advocates instead for the exploration of “gift-giving as commerce.” While this approach works well with Davies’s more reproducible object, I am inclined to contemplate the present one as an object of the type Paul Berry discusses in his book *Brahms Among Friends* — largely because its nature suggests a less commodified and more intimate form of gifting. But because I am faced with a biographical gap of my own, I am interested in exploring the buffer zone between the object’s status as a personal, one-of-a-kind written and inscribed gift, and its puzzling “souvenir” label, which Elise’s letter reveals. The curiously intricate web of social and musical connections that the manuscript encompasses or suggests to encompass enables or at least encourages an attempt at allusive interpretation, or perhaps a knitting together of sparse but crucial fact.

So what about the “gift” tells anything of Laura? The only link between her and the “Auch der lieben Schwägerin” inscription can be found in further correspondence between Brahms and his sister Elise, where he often flirtily refers to Laura as Elise’s “future sister-in-law.” Although in the first quoted letter (from 1862) Elise allows herself to hope that Brahms’s latest silence might be an indication of his finally finding a wife — and her reference to Laura might be, consequently, taken as Elise’s tongue-in-cheek concern over Brahms’s potential “infidelity” to her friend — the flirtiness of the *Frauenchor* milieu suggests that Brahms’s nickname was hardly serious. When Elise writes Brahms in 1875 and reminds him of the time he gave her his tin soldiers to preserve for his “future children,” she advises him to marry soon, or else he would get too old. She warns Brahms about deterioration as follows:


139 Robert Pascall and Agnes Ziffer were the first to make this observation. Except in their concise descriptions, the “piece” has never been discussed before or since.
“Denke Dir, Donna Laura hat sonst das Singen schon ganz aufgegeben, aber in Deinem Triumphlied hat sie noch wieder ihre helle Stimme ertönen lassen…” Laura had mostly given up singing after the Hamburg choir parted in 1863, and her voice was sounding shrill in Brahms’s *Triumphlied*. In another unpublished letter, Elise alludes to the “Schwägerin” joke again and tells Brahms bluntly that Laura was “getting too fat” and, if she were truly to become her sister-in-law, as he always used to say, it had better be soon.

Two things stand out from this loose bundle of information that I’ve presented so far. That Laura, and the other members of the “Mädchen Quartet,” were particularly good singers, is clear, as Brahms organized public performances for them and asked them to sing for Clara, whose ears he valued perhaps the most. Despite this, Laura for one was probably not a singer of equal caliber as Ida Suter-Weber, who performed the soprano solo at the premiere of Brahms’s *Requiem*, or Brahms’s other friends such as Clara von Stockhausen, Julius’s wife: the smaller-scale pieces composed for the Hamburg Chorus were more compatible with her affinities than the statelier, more public *Triumphlied*, which she sang, according to Elise’s letter, less than spectacularly. She and the other members of the quartet may not have had the strongest voices, but certainly embodied the strongest personalities. Evidence from around this time — as when Clara writes Brahms after looking over his Op. 17 and its unique

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142 Drinker, 60. Brahms apparently was “confident enough in their talents to allow Clara to plan an informal recital and invite a large group of distinguished people, including his friends Joseph Joachim and Julius von Stockhausen, to hear them.” For further details about their performances, see pp. 63-75. One thing to note, however — which Drinker doesn’t — is that women’s choruses were starting to participate more frequently in public performance around this time, and so the Frauenchor’s experiences were not entirely an anomaly or the result of Brahms’s unique “trust” in their abilities.
instrumentation: “There must have been a very pretty girl in your choir who happened to play the harp and for whom you composed the piece” — does imply that Brahms always had to have had some sort of romantic incentive when writing pieces that were not particularly practical (it was always a pain to find good horn and harp players for Op. 17) or that were strongly linked to a specific occasion.\textsuperscript{143} But the four singers needn’t have been real romantic interests for Brahms as was Agathe. The Quartet, and a lot of the music it inspired, should be seen as the prime example of musical friendship: it was not the skill, nor the romantic promise of the four women — but, above all, their lively friendship — which inspired so much music and allowed for the many hours of enjoyable music-making.

For this reason, Laura, who was “always so fun,” as Elise writes, must not necessarily have shared any characteristics with Petrarch’s counterpart; the very fact that Brahms could even identify her to Elise as “your future sister-in-law” reveals his lighthearted approach to his relationship with her, and takes the meaning of “Schwägerin” outside of the ambiguous threshold between flirtiness and real romantic attachment. After all, more than a decade had passed when Elise reminds Brahms of the joke. The way she addresses the concept not only suggests — and this gets us to the second point — that Brahms had not kept in touch with Laura, but also clarifies that the “Schwägerin” nickname was an inside joke between brother and sister, and perhaps remained a private thing. Most importantly, Elise’s relationship with Laura was (despite her gossiping) more intimate and long-lasting than Brahms’s. This was in some ways inevitable: while Laura remained in Hamburg, Brahms, after some back and forth traveling between the cities throughout the 60s, finally settled in Vienna in the 70s and became a part of a new sphere of friends. Although he would keep in touch, through writing and in

\textsuperscript{143} For Clara’s letter, see Drinker, 51.
person, with Clara for the rest of her life, old German friends, including Laura and other members of the chorus, were perhaps no longer socially compatible.

After he failed to claim leadership of the Hamburg *Singverein*, and especially after his friend Julius Stockhausen received the coveted job as director of the Hamburg Philharmonic Orchestra — which Brahms had hoped to get (and expected he would, as his friend Theodor Avé Lallement was on the committee and seemed to support him) — he might have felt betrayed by his group of Hamburg friends; this further fueled his desire to explore Vienna, where he hoped the professional opportunities would be more plentiful (and in some ways, he was right, as he received an invitation to conduct the Vienna *Singakademie* in 1863). Drinker writes, “While the members of the Frauenchor were not themselves influential enough to have sponsored him, their families could probably have exerted pressure upon the managers of the Hamburg musical institutions. As it was, he felt too angry to continue his formal association with the Ladies’ Choral Society.”¹⁴⁴ If this seems too extreme, Brahms’s home life in Hamburg at this time was also uneasy, as the relationship between his parents was worsening and leading to ultimate divorce, so all in all, Brahms might have wanted to get away from it for a while.

In this light, it is not surprising that when Franziska Meier, one of the chorus members, wrote Brahms a letter in 1865 asking if he could send her some of the songs they had sung together in Hamburg so she could sing them with her own newly formed chorus in Cuxhaven, Brahms responded less than amiably by claiming (untruthfully) that none of the compositions remained with him, and that he did not know who had kept them.¹⁴⁵ Clearly, whether it was for practical or political purposes, or because he still had mixed feelings and uncomfortable

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¹⁴⁴ Drinker, 72.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 76.
nostalgia about his short-lived choral utopia, Brahms no longer wanted to maintain the same kind of friendly relations with all members of the chorus. In fact, when he first went to Vienna in 1862, Brahms found that several Hamburg friends, including Karl Grädener, had already settled there, and through Grädener, he met the von Asten family, in whose home a new chorus formed. We can perhaps view this as a vindictive act of supplementation, or even sublimation but — especially because the von Asten chorus was formed as a surprise for Brahms after he happened to mention that he missed the Hamburger Chorus — we can view it as a signifier of Brahms’s homesickness. After all, in 1862 he wrote to Clara: “you see, I am rather old-fashioned in most respects and this among others: that I am not at all cosmopolitan, but cling to my native city as to a mother… Now here, where I have so much reason for gratification, I feel, and always shall feel, that I am an outsider.”

Brahms’s full assimilation into Viennese culture would, perhaps, never take place, and people like Hanslick were always eager to make history of it. Alternatively, see the following comment in Swafford, 248: “In Vienna a man like Brahms who felt himself from nowhere, a vagabond belonging to no one, could find a home full of marvelous music and musicians and a strange joie the vivre touched with weariness and despair.” Hanslick would write of Brahms’s Op. 39 Waltzes, which the composer perhaps tongue-in-cheek dedicated to him, “The earnest and taciturn Brahms, Schumann’s true disciple, a northern German, as Protestant and other-worldly as Schumann himself, has written waltzes? A single word solves the riddle: Vienna,” quoted in Lucien Stark, Brahms’s Vocal Duets and Quartets with Piano: A Guide with Full Texts and Translations (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 39. Hanslick warns he listener that they should not actually expect to find “real dance music” in the waltzes, implying that Brahms’s assimilation into Viennese culture would never be complete. To this day, Vienna refuses to accept Brahms as a Viennese composer: there is no Brahms museum, but only a Brahms room in the Haydn House.

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perhaps, fell below the more rigorous German standards). Brahms did not seem to be too
taken with Viennese musical life even by 1864 and wrote, “Though one may be, as I am, quite
unconcerned with all this music-making, one is obliged to breathe the atmosphere and unable
to escape it; for all that it does not always smell sweet.” Nevertheless, acquaintances he made
at the von Asten home, such as Karoline Bettelheim, Ottilie Hauer, Marie Geisler and Frau Anna
Franz (née Wittgenstein) — and with whom he would develop strong friendships at the
Wittgenstein home(s) later on — fulfilled his desires for the kind of musical sociability he was
looking for. Furthermore, Viennese singer Bertha Porubsky, who had already been
frequenting some of the Frauenchor meetings in the group’s later years, and who was in part
responsible for kindling Brahms’s interest in Vienna (she introduced him to “gay, fresh little
songs” from Vienna), joined him again, and after she married Artur Faber became the lucky

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148 See Leon Botstein, "Time and Memory in Brahms’s Vienna," in Brahms and His World, by Walter Frisch
Botstein, that musical “literacy … depended on active skills, not merely the capacity for listening. When
Brahms continually emphasized the need for “proper” learning, the value of hard work, and the
essentials of the craft and technique of musical composition, in the sense of historical models as well as
normative aesthetic imperatives; and when later in life he complained bitterly about the level of
contemporary musical education and training, he was expressing more than his legendary habits of being
critical and self-critical. He was articulating a form of generational and cultural criticism.”

149 Musgrave., 35.

150 Drinker, 80. Brahms’s introduction to the Wittgensteins was basically his ticket into Viennese society,
and constituted the beginning of his new social life in Vienna and its intricate web of acquaintances and
friendships. For this, see Styra Avins, "Brahms in the Wittgenstein Homes: A Memoir and Letters," in
Brahms in the Home and the Concert Hall: Between Private and Public Performance, by Katy Hamilton
and Natasha Loges (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

151 After momentarily parting from the chorus for the first time after the summer of 1859, Brahms writes
to Bertha, “I gladly learn that the Frauenchor still exists as a little republic. Shall I send songs? Gay, fresh
little songs?” and Drinker notes that his reference to the songs was “in memory of the Viennese folksongs
the vivacious Austrian girl had often sung to him.” She also writes that Bertha was “one of Brahms’ many
flames and her pure soprano voice added greatly to her charm,” but again the evidence for this can be
interpreted in various ways and to varying degrees of romantic “seriousness.” For this, see Drinker, 46-47.
dedicatee of the most famous lullaby ever written. Berry’s most comprehensive account of this centers on its meaning as a gift.\textsuperscript{152}

Talking of gifts, what ever happened to Laura’s, and what does it mean in the context of this dynamic time in Brahms’s life, where friendship bubbles were merging, old friends left and new ones took their place? In the absence of detailed biographical evidence about Laura, I have narrated the story of a larger group of people — necessarily presented a narrative of supplementation, proving right Bruno Latour’s claim that to “believe in the existence either of individual or of society is simply a way to say that we have been deprived of information on the individuals we started with.”\textsuperscript{153} We have come to think of “individuals who are “in” a society” — and continue using the false dichotomy of individual vs. society — because of “a discontinuity in the available data.”\textsuperscript{154} Because of this, I have ended up describing Laura, and even, despite my efforts, Brahms, as someone who, as Sloterdijk (despite his theory of inherent duality — and “biune wholes”) would insist, was, like any human, “fundamentally and exclusively the creation of ‘his’ interior and the product of [his] work,” flourishing in the “greenhouse of [his] autogenous atmosphere” — as a small part of a larger whole. But I have not, I hope, fallen into the trap of applying the seemingly “commonsense” conclusion, which Latour discredits, that the “whole is superior to the parts,” and want to emphasize, per Latour, that Brahms’s autonomous agency as composer and musician and friend was constantly in Bakhtinian dialogue with the many voices and presences and bubbles surrounding him in this more comprehensive sphere of Frauenchor culture.

\textsuperscript{152} See Berry, pp. 41-72.


\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 802.
In a sense, the present manuscript is the incarnation of Brahms’s last interaction with Laura — a gift commemorating their friendship, a bubble containing the inscription of their one-on-one relationship. But whereas the simple folksongs with which Brahms kicked off his Frauenchor meetings might sit comfortably in the same category of friendly music-making and exchanges that included the Op. 113 canons, the present manuscript, sent to Laura, does not necessarily enable or suggest the same type of dialogic engagement, and because of this still resists clear definition. To have sent a gift like this to Friedchen, who was indeed a pianist and who would have been able to get through it, was one thing: she could have read it, experimented with it or even expanded her technique with this sample of Brahmsian pianistic exercising, or written something back in return to Brahms; that kind of exchange would have been undoubtedly circular. But to have sent the manuscript to Laura, a soprano who would have never played it, and who would never give Brahms any feedback on its content, was another matter. How was this object even a gift — and was there anything about it that was truly personal or intimate? What of Laura does it tell? What of Brahms? To return to my opening question, what, ultimately, could a piano exercise have to do with friendship?

II

Brahms’s engagement with different kinds of musical production around this time might provide some clarification. Franziska Meier writes in her diary on 29 August 1859:

After our poor director had worked so hard to beat these new things into us, he was besieged by Mme. Peterson to play something for us! He has the reputation of being unaccommodating, proud, arrogant, and disagreeable. O, how can one wrong a person like that? He played some Kreisleriana which I did not know and which he had not played for a long time. The poor man — when he made a mistake, he blushed purple, made an angry face, and shook his head. Then he asked us to excuse his stiff fingers. They would not do what he wished them to do. Avé then asked for the E major Sonata [possibly Beethoven’s op. 109] but
Brahms did not want to play it! “No, that is too mighty for me, it has gone out of my fingers entirely.” “Then play the Symphonic Etudes!” “O, I do not know them well. Should I not better play the Beethoven Variations [op. 35]?” “Yes, just as you like, but do play the Symphonic Etudes.” I found him unusually accommodating. He did play us the 12 Etudes. One could hardly believe it — 12 Etudes!  

Here we find a portrait of piano-playing Brahms, who “blushed purple, made an angry face, and shook his head” when he made mistakes — an image that usually functions as evidence for the well-rehearsed legend of Brahms’s awkward pianism, bolstering his reputation as a misanthrope who hated public performance. Perhaps this also recalls Eugenie Schumann’s account of how Marie Schumann would have to urge Brahms to practice, as he was not usually eager to get to the piano and preferred instead to grapple with his intellectual muses. In Franziska’s account, Brahms was “unusually accommodating” when he played Schumann’s Symphonic Etudes for the Frauenchor girls — meaning, that such events would likely not have happened too often. However, this does not have to mean that Franziska was surprised that Brahms was playing at all; rather, she might have been more intrigued by his choice of repertoire, and probably meant that Brahms did not usually play twelve etudes at once when

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155 Drinker, 31.


157 Marie Schumann urged Brahms: “‘Herr Brahms, you really must practise now, or you will not play properly at the concert.’ Then he always got up obediently, went into the music-room with his beloved cigar, and presently we heard the vigorous attack of his two fifth fingers, one at each extreme end of the keyboard, and arpeggios in counter movement through endless modulations followed. Interesting as this playing was, there was always something of a fight or animosity about it. I do not believe that Brahms looked upon the piano as a dear, trusted friend, as my mother did, but considered it a necessary evil with which one must put up as best one could.” For this, see Eugenie Schumann, 170.
asked. In fact, one-person audiences (like Friedchen Wagner) or just slightly larger gatherings were Brahms’s typical performance environments; already the fifty-person chorus was too large to pass as a “private” group — which might account for the hesitation Franziska notices. Brahms, as Michael Musgrave writes — summarizing all typical narratives — was “rarely at ease as a public soloist and needed the response of a warm audience.” But whether that also meant, as he claims, that he was was “never considered as polished as his great contemporaries, his importance lying rather in interpretation,” remains to be deduced from reviews around this time.

Another reason Franziska’s entry is important is because it serves as a metonym of Brahms’s daily musical schedule from around this time, which does not present vocal and solo music, ensemble and solo performances in compartmentalized ways. Capitalizing on his proficiency in all these areas, Brahms introduced himself to the wider world in Vienna as master of all forms: over the first year and a half after his debut in the city, Brahms “laid very firm foundations in Vienna as an outstanding pianist, a historically pioneering conductor and an idealistic composer of striking historical orientation” all at once. The repertoire Franziska notes in her entry reflects this: the Schumann and the Beethoven, especially the Op. 35 *Eroica* Variations, were not only challenging pieces fit for a virtuoso, but also inspirations for Brahms’s own compositional projects from this time — namely, variation sets, and etudes — or, in the perfectly convenient case of Brahms’s own Op. 35, variation-etudes. As he was studying his

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158 That Brahms would often play for others is supported by several other accounts, including Florence May’s. See Chapter 2.

159 Musgrave, 36.

160 Ibid. Note also how Musgrave problematically assumes the existence of a dichotomy positioning “interpretation” against “the music [itself].”

161 Ibid., 41.
predecessors’ pieces, both compositionally and pianistically, he was writing his own. His public concerts from the time also reflect this, and the reviewers’ comments regard Brahms equally as composer, performer — and later, conductor.

Brahms’s real debut in Vienna took place on 16 November 1862 at the Saal der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, but the first review of Brahms’s playing in the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung from 6 December refers to the 29 November concert as the debut, and for this reason the 16 November concert has been unacknowledged until recently.162 The 16 November concert featured Brahms’s Op. 25 Piano Quartet together with Mendelssohn’s Op. 44, no. 3, and perhaps more importantly Beethoven’s Op. 131 with the Hellmesberger Quartet. Probably because the program did not include any piano pieces that allowed Brahms to showcase his solo virtuoso skills, it has been glossed over as less important than the (unambiguously public) early Vienna concerts for which programs survive (see Figure 3). It is important, however, to note how Brahms introduced himself to the musical world of Vienna — namely, alongside Mendelssohn, whom, as his second teacher Marxsen wrote, Brahms was going to “surpass” (“A master of the art has gone home, a bigger blooms in Brahms”)163 and, of course, Beethoven — specifically, late Beethoven, which Brahms had already emulated with his Hammerklavier-like opening in Op. 1. With this programming move Brahms placed himself in the already congealing tradition of self-conscious historicism that the Vienna Singakademie would encourage — where musicians like Joseph Joachim performed chamber music (especially string quartets), new and old, as part of cultural rituals that allowed them to watch the “linear”


progression of Music History unfold before their eyes. Brahms entered the concert hall first and foremost not as pianist or composer, but as curator, or — exactly as Schumann had

For this, see Robert W. Eshbach’s chapter “The Joachim Quartet concerts at the Berlin Singakademie: Mendelssohonian Geselligkeit in Wilhelmine Germany” in Hamilton and Loges, pp. 22-42.

Figure 3: Brahms’s second and fourth concerts in Vienna

burdened him with his prophecy — as the one responsible for the continuation of the revered tradition.
If his first Vienna performance merely rooted him in history, the following three gave him an opportunity to let the branches of his threefold persona and skills as pianist, composer, and conductor grow: by the time he would accept the conducting post at the Singverein in 1863 he would have already fulfilled his Kapellmeister aspirations. The AmZ refers in the 6 December review (of the 29 November concert) to his established “Doppel-Eigenschaft als Tonsetzer und Pianist,” and, unsurprisingly, describes his (compositional and pianistic) Geist, not skill, as most compelling: “[His] spirit bears, however, less the impression of creative enthusiasm than that of a fine education, and stimulates more than it enraptures.” His pianism too fell in a category somewhere on the threshold of “not merely virtuosic” and “sloppy”: “His interpretation is throughout mature, noble and unmannered, his attack clear and mild, his power manly without violence, and his expression warm without lavishness. The fact that with so many and exhausting performances the highest technical perfection was not given to every measure in execution, may have occasionally touched a nerve, but may also be excused.” In another review from 7 January 1863, a reviewer for the AmZ writes: “One may well overlook the technical negligence of his performance, which, in spite of all the bravura, lacks, or perhaps spurns, the final touch.” Dwight’s Music Journal translated freely from these two reviews, in the process emphasizing the way Brahms deviated from more “typical” virtuoso performances

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166 Ibid., translation my own.

of the time: “The playing of Herr Brahms is not distinguished by that infallible certainty, or that outward brilliancy peculiar to virtuosos; but how high above all such glitter and coquetry (making the impression of inward untruthfulness) stands the modest yet expressive, simple yet artistic rendering of Brahms!” And most notably, the AmZ reviewed his performance from 6 January thus: “Brahms’s spiritual inspiration, which he was able to breathe into his performances, is indescribable; it expresses itself in the uniformly elevated, noble, genuine poetic fundamental tone of the whole, and in an abundance of details which twenty famous virtuosos would not be able to replicate.”

These reviews generally emphasize Brahms’s creative Geist and place him somehow above the “mere virtuosos” whose complicated reception I have contemplated in the first chapter; although his playing is not portrayed as subordinate, its reception still seems to describe it merely as a vehicle for something greater and more inward — or at least more abstract — such as musical ideas. Moreover, a writer in one of the previous reviews dismisses Brahms’s Serenade in D Major for having generated a “tepid” response from the audience — so Brahms’s conducting did not seem yet to be on par with his pianism, let alone his writing. In fact, one might start wondering where Brahms’s interests in leading groups — and especially, in writing vocal music — had gone, and if this was the same man who just a few months earlier directed cheerful singing women as he swung from trees. In June 1863, however — following his new appointment at the Singverein — he started acquiring more recognition

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(notwithstanding the protests of a few) for his directing, and especially, for his daring programming which blended the obscure (never-performed Palestrina, for one) and the entirely new (his own compositions). Furthering his historicist agenda with this kind of work helped Brahms keep track of his (then still-patchy) process of transition from Hamburg to Vienna, even though his association with the Singverein rather than the Singakademie (which was more liberal) caused him still to occasionally yearn for the Hamburg days of sociability. He was having trouble blending his “three sides” as easily as he had in Hamburg at gatherings like the one Franziska described in her diary, and reviews confirming or invalidating his Schumannesque reputation and Beethovenian Geist remained ambivalent and mixed.

A surprising one from Dwight’s Music Journal on 7 March (translated from the Vienna Recensionen) unlike any other questions Brahms’s worth as composer, viewing his early pieces mostly as uninspired ghosts of Schumann’s youthful but more genuinely spirited originals:

In a still more one-sided manner, and yet, again, with not much less power and life, Brahms’s art appeared to aim solely and wholly at taking captive our fancy, and it was but seldom that we felt our minds deeply touched and moved, as we so frequently do with Schumann, for the artist rarely exists completely isolated from the man. […] Even in his wildest outburst, Schumann invariably pays attention to beauty of sound […] while Brahms appears, only too frequently, to take an especial delight in what is positively hateful, in disagreeable passages, in bad doublings of intervals, etc. His material pianoforte style was fond of what was extravagant and wildly eccentric. Even the greatest difficulties written by

170 Drinker, 19.

171 Now would be a good moment to clarify Brahms’s process of relocation. Styra Avins writes about the years 59-62, “His return [from Detmold to Hamburg] marks the start of one of the liveliest and most varied periods of his life, despite an oft-quoted description of the time as one of “withdrawal and study,” a phrase that implies he was readying himself for the move to Vienna. On the contrary, Brahms was vigorously involved in the musical and social life of Hamburg, working hard to lay the foundation for what he hoped would be a lifelong career in his native city,” 185. While this is true, I do still want to argue that Brahms’s attraction to Vienna and his strengthening in Hamburg — especially between 62-63 — were equally strong, and might have pulled him in two opposite directions: as he wrote to Clara, he was homesick when in Vienna, yet as his interactions with Hamburg friends and his professional disappointments show, he was conflicted about leaving and wasn’t sure whether he belonged there anymore.
Schumann, the boldest combinations which he fancies the fingers capable of executing, grow organically from the thought; we feel their necessity as required by the style; we, therefore, willingly admit them; in the compositions of Brahms, on the other hand, we felt, only too frequently, their capricious, purposely defiant, and wantonly, nay, barbarously forced character; sentiment and the sense were opposed to this; for what we found in the way of the mind, fancy and feeling, though, it is true, always keeping us on the stretch, was not sufficiently rich, powerful and profound to compensate for such pretentions (emphasis mine.)

Even though the reviewer identifies the “barbarously forced” characters and “purposely defiant” difficulties as problematic characteristics inherent in the musical structure and less Brahms’s live performance, we might acknowledge them as signifiers of what I’ve termed to be Brahms’s “aesthetics of effort,” and recognize their incomprehensibility as a symptom of his \textit{innig} virtuosity. Outside of this excerpt but perhaps more crucially, the reviewer also notices the “mystical fogs …. so apt to settle on the minds of our northern Fatherland” — that Brahms’s Op. 9 Variations on a Theme of Schumann supposedly reflected — and acknowledges how he had (mostly) outgrown them or ironed them out by the time he wrote and performed the Op. 24 \textit{Handel} Variations. This “maturation” could hint at Brahms’s attempt to assimilate into Viennese musical culture — something he may have tried first with his \textit{con grazia} waltz from Op. 35.\footnote{The markings \textit{con grazia}, and especially, \textit{grazioso}, started appearing only in pieces written after Brahms moved to Vienna and thus might have something to do with Brahms’s “Viennese style,” or his self-conscious labeling of it. I discuss this in a later chapter.}

If by the early 60s when he wrote and performed Op. 24 Brahms “outgrew” his unconcealed inclination towards Schumannesque and Beethovenian emulation and reigned in the overabundance of expression that his earliest works reflected, he was still busy keeping at least the Schumann tradition alive through performance: from the 7 January 1863 \textit{AmZ} excerpt we learn that the reviewer had never heard “Schumann’s compositions” performed “so spiritually, inwardly, and with such emphatic truth” as by Brahms. In the end, it was Brahms’s rendition of Schumann’s \textit{Symphonic Etudes} that compelled Franziska to write about it in her diary. Her
snapshot of the moment captured all that Brahms was interested in or focusing on at that time: the Chorus and its complex environment, perfect for socializing, comfortable for rehearsing, and a bit stressful for solo performance; pieces of the established tradition such as Beethoven’s (including late sonatas); Schumann; and exercises. Brahms’s focus on Beethoven’s own fiendish difficulties from his Op. 35 Variations, as well as the Schumann etudes, reveals that he was most invested in the piano and all its virtuosic glory around this time. That he started writing the Paganini Variations as he was studying these two pieces, and that they not accidentally shared the same opus number with Beethoven’s piece, might make for a glib observation. But the fact that Brahms could rotate between these activities — no matter how chunkily — and that there seems to be no compelling narrative that highlights just one — either the choral or the pianistic — as the more interestingly suggests two principal things, first, that Brahms’s experience at this time was inherently dialectical, and second, that Brahms’s persona is irreducible to a single label.

Despite this, and in light of history’s insistence that Brahms was “less a pianist” and “more a composer,” my polemic defending Brahms’s pianism might seem somewhat useful by now. My efforts in showing how German politics, which fueled anti-virtuosity rhetoric like the kind shown in some of these reviews, created false dichotomies between “virtuosos” and “composers” in the mid- to late nineteenth century, have hopefully helped clarify this kind of Brahmsian reception. On the other side, Brahms’s reputation as “mainly a symphonic composer” would benefit from a corrective, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. For a

173 Brahms and his friends wrote pieces that shared the opus either with each other’s works or works of earlier (mostly dead) composers — most frequently, Beethoven’s. This was the case with Heinrich von Herzogenberg’s Variations op. 23 (which alluded to Brahms’s) and with Brahms’s op. 18 String Sextet (which alluded to Beethoven’s string quartets of the same opus). The first example is one of friendly tribute-giving, the second a mixture between an act of self-conscious retrospection and one of “challenging tradition.”
quick debunking, I would ask readers simply to consider Brahms’s output, which consists of just four symphonies and a handful of other purely symphonic works, and to remember his 354 — 354! — songs, and the fact that his Ein Deutches Requiem came 23 opuses before his first symphony. Besides, to “rewrite” or “reconstruct” the “true Brahms” would be to fall into one of biography’s most inexcusable traps, which, as Jolanta T. Pekacz warms, assumes that “objective truth” exists, or that a self is a definable, quantifiable whole whose unity can be transparently presented.174 I hope that I have been able to stress in this section how Brahms’s musical persona was complex, changeable, and resistant to hierarchical quantification: he was not “more of” a pianist, composer, conductor, but all of them simultaneously. In this context, our original object of knowledge might seem to function conveniently as an accidental dream catcher that captures one scene from this multivalent Brahmsian experience, or as a holographic photograph that switches between showing the different sides of Brahms’s musical persona. Sending something like it — a piano exercise, perhaps — to a soprano might simply have been another instance of Brahms combining, if at least synthetically, the multiple sides — the vocal and dialogic, and the pianistic and solitary — into one multi-dimensional material snapshot of self.

III

This object-gift does, we might have forgotten, does include real music. From the perspective of the narrative I’ve just constructed, its status — persona, maybe? — as gift might seem to take precedence over its musical content, and perhaps treating it as a text with clearly delineated edges would diminish its core personality, and the specificity of its body, whose fragmentary, romantically incomplete meaning seems central to its substance. So far I have

discussed the networks the object — especially its voids — suggests are essential to its completion. And if, indeed, this object is a fragment that was never intended to function as a piece — or more so, if it operated as a private gift — then its very appearance in the standardized *Anhang* of Urtext Editions such as Henle, and its systematic or even perfunctory documentation in not one but two “Complete Brahms” recording cycles, seems to do violence to it.  

Most of all, perhaps, my inclusion of it in this chapter in reproduced, perhaps even commodified form — by way of all the “networky” technological processes involved in this — is antithetic to its substance. It might even start to look like, to use Hermione Lee’s term, a “dead body” that I have placed on the operation table for autopsy. The object’s meaning is, to use more Latour, “fully dependent on its material condition,” and so, applying to it the same old strategies with which other scholars have defended or explained complete “texts” of entirely different material conditions by the same composer would be dangerous: typical hermeneutics might ultimately displace it to a category or genre of musical creations that it doesn’t belong to. Perhaps, leaving objects like this alone and resisting the temptation to supplement them with any kind of narrative seems like the most appropriate thing to do in order to honor their peculiar affective fragmentariness. But in order to understand the complexities of this object’s incomplete physicality, we cannot treat its content as separate from it and must ask how, if at all, that content illuminates or give us clues about the meaning of the “whole,” if there is such a thing.

\[^{175}See the Volume 3:7, Klavierwerke ohne Opuszahl in the Henle collection. Also, see Idil Biret’s and Andreas Boyde’s recordings of the complete Brahms works. Additionally, one might recall Susan Stewart’s that “souvenirs absolutely deny the book’s mode of mechanical reproduction” — and thus, that this is\]


\[^{177}Latour, 802.\]
The “piece” begins abruptly with a fortissimo chord that seems to have no anchor: the lack of time signature, and the rolling arpeggios, which outline B-flat minor but happen to start in first inversion, suggest that this is not really a beginning, but that the manuscript captures an event in medias res. The dotted rhythm at the end of m. 1 is oddly reminiscent of Chopin’s Revolutionary Etude, and especially the tempo that the “piece” tends to want to play itself at strengthens the potential for this allusion. The arpeggios, in both hands, which Brahms notates in the left hand with a 1-4 fingering, function as evidence that supports a claim I have previously made about Brahms’s piano music, that it is, as we might expect by now, based primarily on a wrist-rotation technique: if Brahms makes an effort to prevent the pianist (whoever that might have been, besides himself!) from using their pinky on the lower note of the arpeggio gesture here, it might mean that he wanted that arpeggio to produce a specific effect. Even more likely, if he was indeed writing this only for himself, the fingering captures his attempt at disciplining his own fingers, as in an exercise: the 1-4 option is more careful than

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Example 1: Chopin, Etude Op. 10, No. 12 “Revolutionary”

Most of the time Brahms writes in fingerings less for convenience’s sake and more to force the hand into a specific position, and, therefore, into producing a special effect or affect. This is apparent in the opp. 116 pieces, for example, which I discuss in a later chapter.
the more likely-to-be-attempted 5-4 one, and might even serve to instruct or remind the pianist of something. These four initial measures, overall, capture (similarly to Franziska’s diary entry) another moment from Brahms’s piano-practicing life: they tell the story of him at work, in front of the piano, and do it almost cinematically, since they capture him mid-practice.

If the first four measures sound like Brahms practicing a bit of Chopin, the end of the fourth — specifically because of the accellerando marking, which suggests an upwards surge in emotion — glimpses the moment Brahms would gear off-course and into a more fantasy-like Brahms-land. Already the figuration in the left hand is more typically Brahmsian: at the end of mm. 4, 5, and 6, with a sustained octave with inner figuration, and at the beginning of mm. 5 and 6, with a couple of rolled octaves (which add a bit of texture to an otherwise rhythmically steady environment), and finally, with the passing G-flat tone in m. 6 leading up to the dominant in the next measure. Mm. 7-9 extend into the kind of harmonic lushness that, as it progresses into mm. 10-14 with its thick two against three, becomes unmistakably “the sound of Brahms”; the wave-like arpeggio accompaniment in the left hand supports this, sounding anything but mechanical, and less busy or figuration-like than any matching accompaniment found in Chopin, including the Revolutionary (whose energy is somewhat spikier and still more rapid).

In fact, Brahms could have been documenting here his process of synthesis: this could be his take on Chopin. Ever since the early 50s, when he was still making most of his money teaching largely technical music to students like Minna Völckers, Brahms was invested in the piano exercise. In 1852 he transcribed Chopin’s second etude from Op. 25 in what would later become his 5 Studien für Clavier. Brahms’s transcription is a highly amplified version of Chopin’s wispy, flexible original:
The main challenge in Chopin is intricate, delicate finger training; Brahms’s version, with all its sixths and thirds, is clunky, awkward, and, at first glance, ridiculously difficult — borderline
unplayable, of course. Chopin’s contained baseline invites several new leaps and spans twice as many octaves in Brahms’s version, and his long _molto legato_ line breaks up into smaller groups (Brahms’s sixths and thirds physically prevent the same kind of _legato_). Chopin’s _molto legato_ suggests that heavy pedaling is a no-go, which means that the left and right hands can play their individual articulations easily by _way of finger legato_; this is more difficult to replicate in Brahms, where the left hand’s individual articulation, different than the right’s, would either have to sacrifice itself to the right hand’s markings and allow itself to be blurred by pedal — or, for that matter, entirely disappear. Gloria Biehl writes that Brahms’s Chopin transcription, as well as the other four etudes published in the 50s, were “written in parody” — and that our gift fragment’s style is “more extravagant” even than these earlier etudes. But Brahms’s Chopin needn’t have been a joke; rather, it could serve as another example of his unique _innig_ virtuosity, which he was developing around this time as he was studying so many other brands of pianism. The _leggiero_ marking in Brahms’s transcription is the main clue that supports this view: it suggests that this is not a finger-busting exercise — not a _finger_ exercise at all — but rather, a subtle experiment in wrist flexibility. In this light, it makes more sense to view Brahms’s Chopin as a document that reflects Brahms’s synthetic process of virtuosic self-fashioning and less sense to see it simply as a joke.

Going back to the object-gift, mm. 15-22 deviate from all the previous material by obsessing over the previously chordal dotted figuration and making something new of it, self-consciously, even cheekily; these measures display what Brahms was thinking about around

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179 There are no official recordings of this piece! Everything has been documented, as noted, by pianists like Idil Biret, Andreas Boyde, and Julius Katchen, but I haven’t yet found a recording of the Chopin transcription (save for a rather blurry YouTube video with few views).

180 I found her comment as I glanced at the supporting materials that accompanied the Klavierstück in the Hargrove file.
this time: Paganini! (The 1-3-2-1 motif suggests this). The *più presto* marking at m. 15 signifies another switch, as the *accelerando* in m. 4 had, except this time it serves the opposite purpose: instead of freeing up the music from serious to fantasy-like, it increases the tension and squares it back in. If the first four measures document a Chopin-practicing Brahms and the next eleven capture the way he gets lost in Brahmsian fantasy, mm. 15-22 show him going to Brahmsian work and reigning himself back in with by way of force — and into the most strenuous kind of exercise. This section seems to be a fusion of the 14th variation from Book I of Brahms’s Op. 35, and surprisingly, the 13th exercise from his *Übungen*:

*Example 3a:* Brahms, Variations on a Theme of Paganini, Var. 14 (Book I)

*Example 3b:* Brahms, Exercise 13 from 51 *Übungen*
If any of the previous stuff seemed like it was preparing to reach full Brahmsian maturity, this passage captures the moment of struggle where Brahms attempts to and immediately achieves that synthesis: the breathless quality of the repeated dotted gesture, under the più presto marking, suggests a perpetual increase in tempo and hints at a teleological narrative. Ultimately, the “piece” becomes more obsessed with the end than anything; in fact, it “ends” for 13 measures out of 34 — for over one-third of the space! The “coda,” starting at m. 22, recalls the final section of the coda from Brahms’s Op. 83 finale (see Example 4), and is only one measure shorter (which is disproportional, given that the Op. 83 coda follows four complex movements totaling over 45 minutes of music). In comparison, the final sections of the codas from both Op. 35 books sound less conclusive than the fragment’s (see Examples 5 and 6).

**Example 4:** Brahms, Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, last page of fourth movement
Example 5a: Brahms, Variations on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 35, Variation 14 (Book I), coda

Example 5b: Brahms, Variations on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 35, Variation 14 (Book II), coda
The “piece” seems to have a very clear narrative: chaos (mm. 1-15), struggle (mm. 15-21) and solution (mm. 22-34). But why so many cadences, and so much fuss about the ending in a fragment whose main challenge or theme is not even fully written out, and which starts in medias res? Robert Pascall has concluded, similarly to Biehl about the etudes, that this kind of exaggerated celebration — or, “over-ending” — suggests that the piece was meant as a joke: because it was written “in such an inflated style,” he writes, “it is hard to imagine it even as a very small portion of a serious work.” But perhaps the fragment’s insistence for closure works as metaphor for Brahms’s unsteady experience around this time as he relocated to Vienna: homesick for Hamburg yet conflicted about his old friends, he wanted to close this chapter of his life, yet his insistence to do so only reveals his apprehensiveness and ambivalence about that desire. The prolonged goodbye-waving that took place around this time, we will see in the next section, supports this narrative of preventative nostalgia. That Laura — or even Elise, who requested the “souvenir” for her — would have understood such a pianistically conditioned metaphor is, however, improbable; it is unlikely that either of them would have been able to trace the fragment’s place in such an intricate network of exercise-masterpieces and (re)composition. And so it feels still undefinable, or ambiguous, in substance — hardly intimate, and devoid of private allusions meant to be understood by “outsiders” who did not share Brahms’s pianism. One final attempt at completing the story, however, might add some sparkle to this rather disappointing conclusion.

181 Pascall, 8.
IV

Bertha Porubsky, the charming Viennese woman — as Brahms wrote to Clara, the “prettiest girl in the chorus” — who supposedly provided for Brahms additional incentives to explore Vienna — inscribed in the Völckers sisters’ Stimmenhefte the first bars of the song “Oh God, how sad is parting,” accompanied by an expression of regret for having to leave Hamburg: “How hard has been my parting from a circle in which I found so much love.” On 8 April 1862 Marie’s Stimmenhefte acquired another similar entry — an inscription of “If I a bird could be” and “Far over the seas is my own dear lad,” two additional songs that fit this nostalgic mood in time where everyone, especially the Völckers and Laura (the Quartet), as well as Bertha and Brahms, seemed to be troubled by each others’ parting. This parting “theme,” in fact, had established itself much earlier, right after the conclusion of Brahms’s first summer with the chorus in 1859, when he received a silver inkwell as a goodbye gift (or maybe, a usable souvenir?). Brahms writes to Bertha in response to it,

I think constantly of my delightful surprise when I set eyes on the writing implement charmingly concealed under flowers, the memento of the Frauenchor. I have deserved it so little that I would be ashamed, did I not hope to write much more music for you, and really, more beautiful tones will resound about me when I see the lovely and beautiful gift on my writing table.

The silver inkwell (which is lost to us today) seems to have served Brahms well. It was no mere inscription in a Stimmenhefte but a useful, usable gift — which, to echo Arjun Appadurai’s reminder (that he takes from Bourdieu), is not a free gift at all but, because of its use-value, an ultimately “selfish” binding contract which silently demands something in return — in this

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182 Drinker, 74.

183 Judging by Brahms’s letters from the time, it seems that the Frauenchor had been in perpetual danger of parting thanks to Brahms’s other responsibilities, such as his job in Detmold, although the final goodbye came only three years later.

184 Drinker, 36.
case, more songs. Because Brahms did return to Hamburg to meet with the singers for the following summers, the inkwell’s invisible contract fulfilled itself. (Perhaps the “shame” Brahms felt when he received it was the driving force: even a material gift such as the inkwell — supposedly free — ultimately demands a sort of reciprocation, if at least affective initially.) But one might wonder what would have happened if Brahms’s other responsibilities in Detmold and with the Schumanns had kept him away from the chorus — and if his response to the group would have been as unfriendly as to Franziska’s letter in 1865, when he refused to send her some of the pieces they had sung together.

Throughout this chapter I have referred to the main object of knowledge interchangeably as a gift-object, manuscript, souvenir, gift, fragment, artifact, or “piece”; I did this purposely in order to hint that its substance, or persona, is a malleable, changeable one, contingent upon the spatial-biographical angle the biographer and reader evaluate it from. Depending on what narrative I want to establish, I could highlight any of its inherently suggested personas, construct any history of it that I want. This might raise the most alarming question concerning the biographer’s agency: to what extent is a quantifiable, objective — or even, “most important” — truth localizable? Perhaps, like Pekacz argues, there is never a “single psychic conflict” that “unlocks a subject’s life,” but rather, that “a self is performed and changes over the passage of time.” Perhaps this object’s personal multivalence is analogous to Brahms’s multifaceted musical persona, which, as I’ve suggested earlier, resists hierarchical description. What is interesting to note is how different narratives of the same person — or object — enable different findings. So far, the several “completion narratives” I’ve attempted

186 Pekacz, 69.
have failed to fill the “void” the object presented. Considering it as a gift, as Berry explains the significance of Brahms’s gift to Clara of the ornate copy of Op. 76, no. 1, for example — namely, as a gift whose most meaningful allusions are entirely private and meant for Clara’s eyes and hands only — is also prone to failure, since, as I concluded, the pianistic allusions inherent in our own object’s music were probably not similarly accessible to Elise and Laura. So perhaps it is finally time now to consider the object’s status as a souvenir — what Elise, who requested it, initially called it — and to see what happens.

The German word Andenken recalls Esther Leslie’s definition of souvenirs as “splinters of memory” — as something to remember something else by — or, as the verb version of the German word suggests, something that requires an act of contemplation or consideration. The more contemporary (yet by no means entirely interchangeable) synonym Mitbringsel, roughly translating to “small gift,” might fit Elise’s definition of souvenir even more closely according to her understanding: as we might recall, Elise told Brahms that “Fräulein Garbe wishes so very much for a small souvenir,” meaning, “a couple of notes from you or even better a lock of hair (emphasis mine).” The fact that Elise and/or Laura equated the worth of “a couple of notes” (more conceptual) with the value of “a lock of hair” (more physical) suggests that the act of giving itself — the gifting intention, and not the content or essence of the given object — mattered more than the object’s future potential for additional contemplation, engagement, or even use(-value). If they thought this way and if the dialect and culture of the time would have allowed it, Elise may have even requested a Mitbringsel rather than an Andenken. Considering this potential definition of the souvenir immediately excuses Brahms’s choice to send such

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“distanced” content — a piano exercise — to a soprano who would not have played it: since only Brahms’s act of friendly gifting actually mattered, the value of the object itself would have been the same no matter what its particular characteristics.

Alternatively, Elise’s equation of worth might emphasize the importance she (and Laura) placed on the physicality of the object: on closer inspection, the way Elise phrases her request — for some music “or even better, a lock of hair” — suggests that for her, receiving something as close to Brahms’s physical body as possible would offset — or create a better illusion of offsetting — the material distance between Vienna and Hamburg that was already there. In other words, Elise asked for an object which embodied the kind of intimacy that the existing physical barriers, and Brahms, were depriving her of: human contact with her brother. So far, I have been unable to prove that this kind of physical specificity exists within our souvenir. But it might be useful to contemplate whether, at a deeper level, Brahms’s thirty-four measures — his “couple of notes” — are perhaps not less physical or materially tangible than a lock of hair would have been.

Brahms’s souvenir is, after all, a product of his labor (even its musical progression, as I’ve briefly noted in my analysis, takes on the narrative of effort). Elise recognized this, and intuited that the work Brahms put into the manuscript-gift constituted part or most of its meaning. From a Marxist perspective, this would bump the object over to the category of the commodity, since “the labour spent on the production of” the commodity is “expressed as one of the objective qualities of that article, i.e., as its value.”\textsuperscript{189} But this definition needn’t necessarily apply in this instance, because the process of exchange Marx bases his definition on was absent: the manuscript was, unlike the inkwell, not treated primarily as an object of use. For

\textsuperscript{189} Appadurai, 13.
this reason it insists on its status as souvenir. But the reason it also fails to fit fully into the gift
category is not only because it does not — silently or not — call for something in return, like the
inkwell or Clara’s gift, but also because it contains no detailed enough significance or meaning
that demands future contemplation. Because Elise and Laura were not pianists, they could not
have engaged with or contemplated the souvenir the way, as Berry points out, Clara did the op. 76 gift.

But does this particular object-souvenir truly not call for something in return too? Elise
and Laura could not have written “a couple of notes” back to Brahms, but they might have sent
a letter of thanks (which might or might not have happened — we do not have any evidence for
or against this), or a “souvenir” — however tangible and literally physical — of their own.
Ultimately, of course this particular object had greater physical rather than conceptual
significance for Laura and Elise: it was, more or less, a keepsake. But, perhaps more importantly,
it was also a sort of promise. As Susan Stewart notes (on the souvenir as a whole), “The acute
sensation of the object — its perception by hand taking precedence over its perception by eye —
promises, and yet does not keep the promise of, reunion.” The reason Elise would have even
requested it in the first place was not only in order to bridge the immediate gap in distance
between her and Brahms (and Laura), but also to ask for a kind of affirmation, from Brahms —
for Laura, perhaps, if she was still earnest about this — that they would reunite again. In light of
the narrative of nostalgia that took over the time of Brahms’s first move to Vienna in 1862 and
the previously mentioned letters, gifts, and inscriptions of tearful goodbyes, this hypothesis
makes sense.

190 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection
(Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 139.
Luckily for our narrative, Friedchen Wagner also mentions a “souvenir” from around this time:

During one of the last lessons before he left for Vienna, I asked him to write something for me as a souvenir and he promised me to do so. Since I preferably played things by Bach under him, he chose a chorale melody, elaborated by him (also for the organ). O Traurigkeit, O Herzeleid. He did not give it to me during the lesson, however, but promised that I should soon have it. It was very hard for me to say goodbye to him; I had so very much to thank him for. As I was very sad, I did not open the piano for some days, but when I did open it again, I found there the beautiful gift I had been promised: the marvelous chorale prelude to O Traurigkeit, O Herzeleid. My maid told me Herr Brahms had put it in the piano himself.191

David Brodbeck has compellingly written about this moment, and this other souvenir — which has also been lost to us — by placing it into the context of Brahms’s simultaneously blooming interest in counterpoint and cyphers from around the mid-50s. Brahms sent O Traurigkeit, O Herzleid initially to Clara as a gift for Schumann’s (last) birthday on 8 June 1856, titling it “Ganz eigentlich für meine Clara.”192 According to Brodbeck, whose methodology is similar to Berry, the piece contained in its cyphers personal messages only Clara would have been able to decode — and placed itself in the most intimate category of gift-gifting; it was, in other words, not meant for other eyes. So when Clara — who should have undoubtedly, according to what Brodbeck thinks Brahms thought — been able to understand this, copied the music for one Herr Bogler, Brahms took it as a personal offense. As a kind of revenge, he copied this music originally meant “Ganz eigentlich für mine Clara” and morphed it into Friedchen’s own souvenir, which Friedchen more readily interpreted to have personal meaning for her (“Since I

191 Drinker, 74-5.

preferably played things by Bach under him, he chose a chorale melody…”). Brodbeck’s claim might be somewhere on the speculative side, but necessarily; his approach emphasizes my argument about biography, which views gaps as enabling factors and which values question marks as the generators of dialogic reading. Brodbeck’s story also highlights the shaky threshold that blurs the lines between Brahms’s gifts and souvenirs, and his personal gifting from his less intimate “regifting.” Apparently, Brahms was not averse to recycling — or to (somewhat forcefully) advocating for “friendly sharing.” Ultimately, Brahms takes a similar approach to our own souvenir by inscribing it with “Auch der lieben Schwägerin.” And so, an important question remains: what — or rather, whom — does the “Auch” refer to, in the end?

Once more, let us consider the way it came about. Despite the link between Brahms’s inside joke with Elise and the “Schwägerin” inscription, there is no evidence that Laura would have ever received the manuscript-gift. In the end, Elise could have been the intermediator — or more simply, the real “owner.” Most compellingly of all, note how Brahms inscribes the “famous” phrase:

![Image of sheet music]

The parentheses suggest that this was in some ways a clandestine endeavor — that it was meant for Elise but also (“Auch”) or Laura, if she happened to be there, glancing over Elise’s shoulder. In a way, this extends the humor of the “sister in law” inside joke by inviting Laura in for the first time: perhaps this very souvenir gave her a chance to find out what she had been called,
without her knowledge, all those years. Oppositely, the “Auch” might also have been Brahms’s way of shutting her out forever, by displacing her hierarchically to the Hamburg bubble that no longer held as much social significance for him (even his sister, to whom he was never as close, stood above Laura). If this sounds too cruel, it might have been the case simply that Brahms capitalized on the flirtiness of his relationship with Laura and, with the “Auch,” sent her a message along the lines of — “you can look but can’t touch.”

It is also possible that Elise and Laura, who were clearly better friends, were in on the secret — that Elise told Laura about the joke at some point — and that Brahms was left out when it came to this. Finally and less speculatively, Elise might simply have been the interlocutor for Laura’s request, and Laura probably would have seen the object after Elise received it from Brahms. This would also support the possibility that the “Schwägerin” joke was no

Figure 3: The Mädchens Quartet of the Hamburg Frauenchor: Laura Garbe, Betty Völckers, Marie Reuter, Marie Völckers
secret between brother and sister, and that the inscription would have carried sentimental meaning for Laura as well.

That this sentimental meaning might’ve been more serious than fanciful, I am still skeptical of; more likely, Laura might have treated it as she had many other such gifts, souvenirs, and inscriptions she received from Brahms or other friends. The picture of the Mädchen Quartet (see Figure 3) captures the women holding pieces of paper — whether scores, an inscribed *Stimmenhefte* or two, or a private souvenir with some kind of specific meaning, is impossible to tell — so it tells us that this kind of sentimental-material exchange was not only typical of, but central to, their social bubble. The phrase Brahms inscribed in the Völckers’ *Stimmenhefte* — “Zur freundlichen Erinnerung an gemeinschaftliches Musizieren und Ihren ergebenen Johs Brahms” (“As a friendly remembrance of our sociable music making”) — seems to adequately encapsulate all of this:

![Figure 4: Brahms’s Inscription in the Völckers’ Stimmenhefte](image)
The grammar of the German phrase (which is not entirely translatable) suggests that Brahms wanted the girls to remember him as clearly as they remembered the many hours of “sociable music making.” Again we might be tempted to view the physicality of the object — Brahms’s fingerprint on it — as more important than the content. But this inscription is much more clearly delineated: there are no parentheses, the music is easily quotable and recognizable, and we find a date. The phrase Brahms writes is a reproduced version of an already-existing piece, a perfect act of recalling — repetition. This kind of souvenir promises a reunion, but — not failing well enough to “keep its promise” of reunion, as Stewart says — too quickly achieves it; its boundaries are more clearly delineated and therefore box in its meaning, imprisoning it on the page forever, and, paradoxically, removing the possibility of long-term reunion outside of the page. Our souvenir is more enigmatic, not only because it is not only an inscription-repetition of a previously-existing musical phrase, but because it is, or feigns to be, a real piece in its own right — namely, a piano exercise. Just the intricate detail it contains refuses to let it join the same category the Stimmenhefte inscription belongs to. Could such a detailed gift really have been regarded by anyone, even a non-pianist, as casually as an inscribed repetition of an already-existing phrase? But could that same non-pianist appreciate it more deeply at a specific level? Ultimately, we are back to the same problem as before. For the last time: what does the piano exercise have to do with friendship, or friendly gifting?

One more aspect is to be considered. Looking at the detailed notation, including the hairpins and dynamic markings, that the fragment includes, I wondered whether Brahms kept a copy of it for himself, simply for the sake of remembering the musical content. I have found no evidence of any duplicates or further sketches. Additional inquiry into this might make
something turn up, but for now, we will have to work with this further gap. By giving away one of his creations (small creations — but that is no matter), Brahms willingly accepted that his body of work, over which he had creative ownership, would always assume a tiny void. Quite literally, Brahms gave up a sample of his work, in the process completely relinquishing ownership over it. Since there was no copy of this object, one could even say that Brahms lost a part of his physical self as he gave it away, in the same way he would have lost a lock of hair, were he to have snapped it off and sent it to Elise instead. Furthermore, the “deeper” meaning that the manuscript’s “piece” holds — its narrative of effort, which is a snapshot of Brahms’s practicing body — was not, in this sense, necessarily indiscernible to Elise and Laura. That Brahms’s process of composition was supposedly private, and that even his effortful practicing — both with fingers and pen — took place mostly behind closed doors, does not automatically discount the meaning its externalization on manuscript paper held for those who were not directly a part of it — as, for example, the Frauenchor singers who were there when Brahms performed the Symphonic Etudes. More poetically, Brahms’s manuscript acquired the aura of that private effort, and became a physical extension of him. For that reason, he lost a part of himself as he gave it away — and, in this sense, the souvenir is not only a one-of-a-kind, not at all distant gift, but one indeed imbued with the most intimate and physical meaning.

And yet, this still says nothing of the piece’s content. While the physicality of the object could elevate it in specificity to the status of the intimate gift, the content still seems removed and almost selfish: Brahms might simply have taken Elise’s request as an opportunity to practice what he was doing at the time — writing exercises. But I still have to wonder if the

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193 The New York Public Library has a Brahms collection, which I’ve taken a brief look at, that includes sketches of things like discarded exercises from his 51 Übungen, but I haven’t found anything that directly relates to this MS.
musical content of the souvenir really was inconsequential to Elise and Laura, or even secondary in worth to its physicality. I would hope that, after reviewing Brahms’s musical activities from around this time, it comes as no surprise that, when asked to write “a couple of notes,” Brahms would sit down and “just happen” to produce, almost by default, a piano exercise. Simply, this is what he was most invested in at the time. Whether he expected Laura, Elise, or both of them to understand what the souvenir’s “piece” was doing — that it was expressing his own private narrative of effort as he practiced and “struggled” to write — is unlikely. But that is not the point. More importantly, writing a virtuosic piano piece was, at this time, not just a compositional and pianistic exercise for Brahms; it was, above all, an exercise of selfhood, a performance of self. Although I kept referring, throughout this chapter, to Brahms’s “multivalent” musical persona — which resists complete compartmentalization into categories such as “pianist,” “composer,” “vocal composer,” etc. — I do have to point out that at no other time in his life was Brahms more invested in a process of pianistic self-fashioning. Therefore, a piano exercise was a snapshot not only of his literal daily life, of his project of virtuosic self-making, but also a portrait of a very prominent, perhaps, at this time, dominant, part of his persona and personality. By setting down this piano exercise on paper as a gift-souvenir, Brahms was not only imprinting on it his body; he was also capturing in it his spirit.

In this sense, Brahms gave away — to Elise, or Laura, or both — not only a physical-metaphorical part of himself, but also a part of his consciousness. When he relinquished ownership of his manuscript, he did not only commit to the void that would, however tiny, always be there in his Werkverzeichnis; he also gave away what would have been his intellectual property. So, rather than viewing Brahms’s act of giving as selfish, neutral, or perfunctory — as an instance when Brahms took the opportunity to simply engage in another self-given exercise
of selfhood instead of think up a truly intimate gift that included personal allusions for the receiver(s) — we could also view it as an example of his generosity: simply, he did not care whether he “lost” it, since there was so much more where that came from. Brahms denied that he was the sole owner of the little fragment, and all its allusive exercise networks. A souvenir, for Brahms, was therefore an object whose meaning was constructed and maintained as it circulated between people; as soon as it became static, it died. But, if we are to agree with Stewart — that the narrative of a souvenir is also the narrative of its possessor — this might pose problems for our own object, simply because it is unclear whether it has any fixed owner at all. But is that really the case?

Supposedly, I have become the owner of the souvenir for these fifty-something pages, because I have been the one handling its reception history and constructing its meaning. But does that mean that I have had complete agency over it? Less generally, did Brahms really fail to retain ownership of all of the object’s content? Viewed obliquely, this exercise is, despite its overwhelmingly conclusive cadencing, fundamentally transitory and transformative; its “narrative of effort” suggests that Brahms’s process of writing it out musically, or of practicing it physically, is its most important feature. If it is a snapshot or example of Brahms’s compositional and pianistic practicing, that means that it is necessarily a preparatory sort of work whose higher function is to train the creator’s mind and fingers for lengthier projects. This outlook, then, defines the object in the way I’ve tried to avoid defining earliest in my chapter: more as a sort of preparation for Brahms’s later and more complicated writings and therefore less as a gift. There is, of course, truth to that: the dotted motif that Brahms “works through” at the highest level of synthesis in the fragment later becomes part of the Paganini theme on which

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194 Stewart, 136.
he will later write twenty-four exercise-variations; and the coda, as I’ve briefly noted, finds its final incarnation, perhaps, in the conclusion to the Second Concerto. In this sense, the core personality of the souvenir-exercise consists of its role as mediator: between Brahms’s compositional and pianistic experimenting, and the lengthier products of his experimental self-fashioning as composer and pianist; and between older exercise-masterworks such as Chopin’s and Paganini’s and Schumann’s and his own. In this sense, no one, including Brahms, can entirely own the souvenir: it is always the middleman. It is more of a space than an object, the perfect territory for dialogic engagement, be it between masterworks, different sides of a composer or performer’s (or even scholar’s) persona, several historians, or other kinds of people, or bubbles of people. The reason no amount of analysis or hermeneutic engagement succeeds to fill its voids is because its space is, between its paradoxically well-delineated edges, musically dynamic, and diachronic, constantly changing as new histories and historical understandings come into play. A decade from now, this fragment could take on an entirely different meaning — contingent on new findings about it, or on historians’ new analyses of its historical worth.

But it would be wrong to conclude that Brahms’s ownership of the souvenir-fragment was only as transitory as mine, or as Elise’s and Laura’s. Brahms did not retain the physical object nor a copy of it, so, supposedly, relinquished ownership over its intellectual substance as well. But not quite. It might be too obvious to note that Brahms would not have completely forgotten what he wrote; but this is important. Ultimately, it is memory — supposedly, the least materially conditioned space (but not really) — that defines an object’s meaning. While Brahms’s transitory exercise calcified into a fixed form on the manuscript paper, his memory of it, or its self-use, might have altered its meaning for him as he morphed it into future creations.
Ultimately, perhaps the person behind the “Auch” is Brahms himself: when gifting the manuscript, he might have meant, “this exercise, which is mine — a snapshot of my pianistic and compositional struggle — is also for you.” In this light, one-of-a-kind gifts, created by the gifting person, are never completely gifts because the creator still keeps mental score of them. So, even this given-away manuscript was still somehow replicable (albeit in synthesized form, in opp. 35 and 83), and still managed to live on in Brahms’s mind despite his supposed loss of it.

One thing stands true, however, which is that this process of reusability was a private one; its labor is still concealed. Certainly, this object is not a souvenir, because it is not replicable in the usual sense (and because it did not really try — and fail — to bring about a reunion), but it is not a gift either, because there is no traceable process of dialogic exchange that followed it.

However, the very process of its coming about was dialogic, and so the story of exchange — and Brahms on the receiving, not just giving, end — is already inherently a part of it. In this light, I want to recall my initial remark about the Frauenchor singers’ engagement in Brahms’s compositional space — that they were co-creators — and hope I can suggest that they too had a certain amount of agency over Brahms’s works — perhaps, including this one. The musical friends were engaged in an equal process of co-creation that, I’ve suggested, a spherological contemplation of the Frauenchor milieu enables us to see. Perhaps Brahms is exactly the Romantic artist who can successfully debunk the myth of Romantic genius whose inspiration is unilateral and private. Even when he was most alone, as when he feigned jealousy at his friend’s more sociable activities while he was composing alone in Detmold, Brahms was not alone. The very fact that he was contemplating the presence of those ladies whose company he desired made them part of his compositional process, and elevated them to the status of co-creators. Whether he was thinking of Laura or Elise when he wrote this particular exercise-
fragment remains uncertain; but it is clear that in this — and other — instances, agency in Brahms is never confined to the composer or to a solitary consciousness. Brahms’s compositional process was as dialogic as his musical personality was multivalent. The door, for him, is always left open to new histories and musical dialogue.