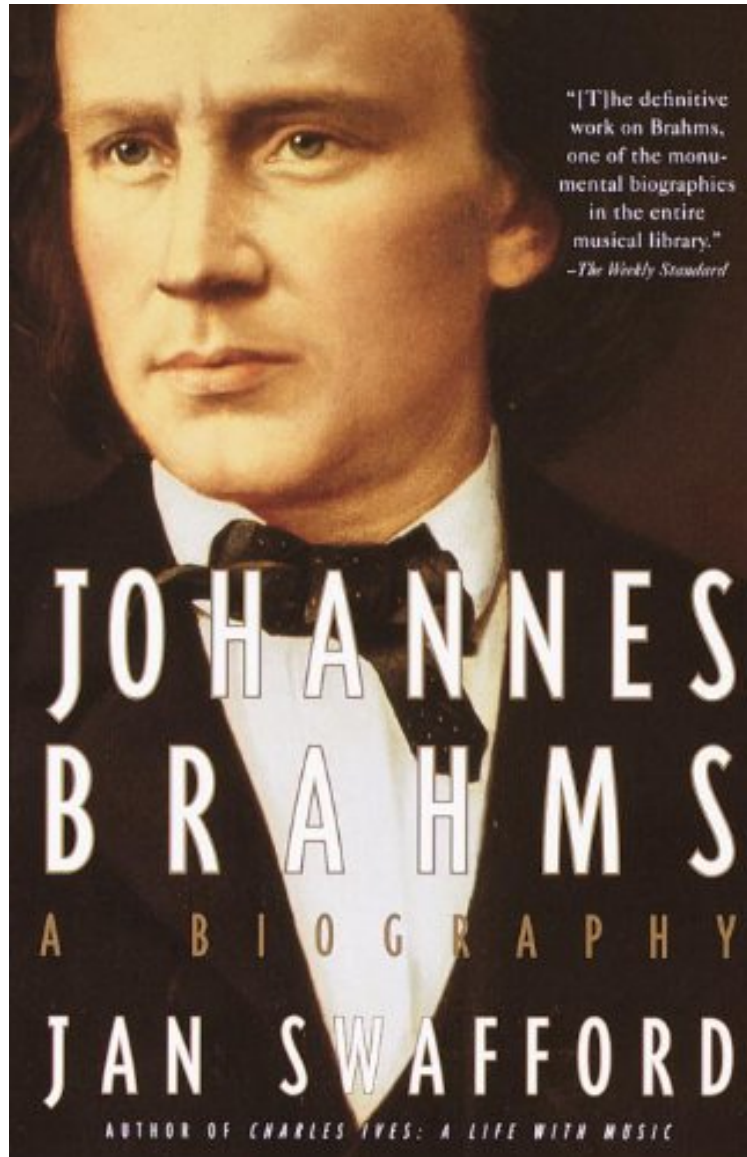


[Ebook free] Johannes Brahms: A Biography

Johannes Brahms: A Biography

Jan Swafford

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Jan Swafford : Johannes Brahms: A Biography before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Johannes Brahms: A Biography:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A wonderful human beingBy eledavf VivianI cannot begin to tell you what a lovable man Johannes Brahms was. This thought came to me three quarters of the way through this excellent biography.Brahms, a curmudgeon with his friends, but only occasionally. Impatient with pushy fans, but rarely with simple acquaintances. Loving son. Devoted confidante of Clara Schumann over a span of forty years on and off the concert stage.A major part of his character is summed up in those statements.He began his career playing

his own compositions in concert (he was an excellent pianist but not the best). Usually he appeared onstage with another performer, often with his close friend the violinist Joseph Joachim, or with Clara Schumann in two-piano arrangements of his works and those of Robert Schumann. Clara Schumann's technique at the keyboard was superior to his own as it was to almost everyone else's except Liszt's. He trusted her musicianship and listened carefully to her suggestions about his compositions as they were being created. More or less unsettled during his twenties and thirties, he changed with his forties, establishing himself finally in Vienna. There his needs were minimal, his demands almost non-existent: a tiny, cluttered bedroom and parlor on the fourth floor of an apartment house, meals in a coffee house, his laundry and dusting provided by the elderly landlady. This remained his home for the last twenty-five years. Yet these decades brought enormous fame, public affection, and financial rewards, his Hungarian Dances gaining worldwide popularity as did his Lullaby. The monumental works, too, were more and more demanded by serious audiences of every continent. This biography shows us a truly admirable human being whose moods were generally mild and fleeting, a man lacking in cupidity, devoted to his mother, reverential toward his father and generous to family members. Invariably kind to children. A man with few enemies and despising few people, chief among them Franz Liszt for his "meretricious" music and Anton Bruckner for being an inveterate attention seeker. His warmest attachment as a young man, and into old age, was first to Clara Schumann, and then to her daughter Julie, who, however, had no such interest in him and married elsewhere. This disappointment found expression and resolution only in music, the center of his emotional existence. His ambition was to create a body of work worthy to rank with that of Mozart and Beethoven. Yet he always recognized that public taste would move beyond the classical, beyond Mozart and Beethoven and himself. In his usual philosophical way he accepted the inevitable, that such masterpieces would never be written once he was dead. And they never were. For an understanding of the nature and life experiences of this commanding figure I recommend this biography. It flows easily and interestingly, sometimes with real humor. Someone like me, who knows nothing about music, not even the names of most instruments, can simply skip the many pages analyzing his works. But anyone who loves the Academic Festival Overture or his Hungarian dances (which he enjoyed composing as much as he enjoyed listening to that type of music in the Viennese cafes), or certainly anyone who admires his monumental compositions will appreciate this biography of a great man, the last of his kind "when music was in its glory."

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Brahms Brought to Life By Eric Gross I have listened and loved the music of J. Brahms since I was about 7. Since I am 63 now, I can say that I've listened to most of his published works many times over. In addition, I have played quite a number of his piano works for decades. Yet despite all of that experience, I found this book revelatory. Brahms, as the author points out, makes for a difficult subject. He made it clear that he was not interested in detailed biographies of his life. He destroyed most of his letters and notes. Moreover, he was someone who made it difficult to get to know. Even Clara Schumann, his lifetime companion, said that she really never truly knew Brahms the man ... the human being. Yet Swafford does an outstanding job to bring this enigmatic person to life. We can almost get a sense of this garrulous, generous, disarming, rigid and brilliant man as a living breathing human being. Brahms' music is so well crafted that sometimes it's rather difficult to possess the key that unlocks the underlying complexity of its musical form. But this book does a very good job and giving the reader that key, as long as the reader is willing to invest the time and energy to listen to the music with the purpose of "hearing" the complex musical structures that underlie the all but perfectly seamless melodies and harmony that represent its surface. After reading several of the reviews here at , I came to realize that Swafford did not have access to some of the historical materials while putting together this book and that it suffers on account of their omission. These materials suggest that Swafford fails to present an accurate description of Brahms' early years. The economic deprivation described in this book may have been over-stated. It also seems likely that the book makes too strong a case for linking his experiences playing in Hamburg's rough waterfront bars as a child with his relationship struggles with women as an adult. Nonetheless, I very highly recommend this book for anyone who wants to learn more about classical music of the late romantic and the life of one of its greatest composers.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Excellent book, and questions remain... By Edward R. Kriege This is the most enjoyable book I've read (so far) in 2009. As an amateur pianist I've been witness to the glory that is Brahms (e.g. shorter piano works; "veiled symphonies", as Robert Schumann referred to some of Brahms' piano compositions). This thoroughly researched yet non-technical (not too much to get in the way of a layperson's enjoyment) book brought to life not only this great man, but the dying age that he lived in. To understand how this person, from such humble beginnings could, in his 20s, be anointed the next Beethoven by Schumann, and go on to fulfill that prophesy "in the tramp of giants" is a story to behold, and Mr. Swafford does an excellent job. To also understand that Brahms destroyed so much of his work, yet so much remains, is also to give us a sense of the prodigious genius of this great master. And his gift with words (letters to Clara, friends, colleagues) reminds us that he was no less capable in that craft. However, in my mind questions remain. Although I respect the author's restraint from speculating about Brahms' romantic relationships, I find it hard to believe that he would have only taken inspiration 'figuratively' from the many women who loved and admired him from within his social circles only to find 'fulfillment' in the brothels. As good as Brahms was in protecting his privacy, I think there's more here than meets the eye, and a separate thesis from some music or psychology PhD candidate into the sexual psychology of Brahms (speculation and all) could at the very least

prove entertaining. I don't agree with the author's assessment that Brahms was a misogynist. His early experiences (or not) playing in the waterfront bars may have shaped his attitude toward women, but too many examples of him helping women in their careers and his 'affairs of the heart' lead me to conclude that he was an 'equal opportunity abuser', in that he could be ruthless regardless of gender (he could also be very kind and generous). Such may be the curse of genius, having those of us from below pigeonholing an eagle. My other nits include a bit of redundancy in the book, but forgivable due to its length. What is less forgivable is the use of German terms that are only defined once within the text, and no glossary for them (and they are referred to frequently). Not easy to find in a 700 page book over the course of some weeks of reading (write them down as you go is my advice). I had planned to deduct a star for these nits, but in the end the overall enjoyment of the book trumps all. Again, a wonderful book about a great genius, composer and man, in the context of a golden age that's on its last legs. They just don't make 'em like this anymore. Enjoy.

An illuminating new biography of one of the most beloved of all composers, published on the hundredth anniversary of his death, brilliantly written by a finalist for the 1996 National Book Critics Circle Award. Johannes Brahms has consistently eluded his biographers. Throughout his life, he attempted to erase traces of himself, wanting his music to be his sole legacy. Now, in this masterful book, Jan Swafford, critically acclaimed as both biographer and composer, takes a fresh look at Brahms, giving us for the first time a fully realized portrait of the man who created the magnificent music. Brahms was a man with many friends and no intimates, who experienced triumphs few artists achieve in their lifetime. Yet he lived with a relentless loneliness and a growing fatalism about the future of music and the world. The Brahms that emerges from these pages is not the bearded eminence of previous biographies but rather a fascinating assemblage of contradictions. Brought up in poverty, he was forced to play the piano in the brothels of Hamburg, where he met with both mental and physical abuse. At the same time, he was the golden boy of his teachers, who found themselves in awe of a stupendous talent: a miraculous young composer and pianist, poised between the emotionalism of the Romantics and the rigors of the composers he worshipped--Bach, Mozart, Beethoven. In 1853, Robert Schumann proclaimed the twenty-year-old Brahms the savior of German music. Brahms spent the rest of his days trying to live up to that prophecy, ever fearful of proving unworthy of his musical inheritance. We find here more of Brahms's words, his daily life and joys and sorrows, than in any other biography. With novelistic grace, Swafford shows us a warm-blooded but guarded genius who hid behind jokes and prickliness, rudeness and intractability with his friends as well as his enemies, but who was also a witty drinking companion and a consummate careerist skillfully courting the powerful. This is a book rich in secondary characters as well, including Robert Schumann, declining into madness as he hailed the advent of a new genius; Clara Schumann, the towering pianist, tormented personality, and great love of Brahms's life; Josef Joachim, the brilliant, self-lacerating violinist; the extraordinary musical amateur Elisabet von Herzogenberg, on whose exacting criticism Brahms relied; Brahms's rival and shadow, the malevolent genius Richard Wagner; and Eduard Hanslick, enemy of Wagner and apostle of Brahms, at once the most powerful and most wrongheaded music critic of his time. Among the characters in the book are two great cities: the stolid North German harbor town of Hamburg where Johannes grew up, which later spurned him; and glittering, fickle, music-mad Vienna, where Brahms the self-proclaimed vagabond finally settled, to find his sweetest triumphs and his most bitter failures. Unique to this book is the way in which musical scholarship and biography are combined: in a style refreshingly free of pretentiousness, Jan Swafford takes us deep into the music--from the grandeur of the First Symphony and the intricacies of the chamber work to the sorrow of the German Requiem--allowing us to hear these familiar works in new and often surprising ways. This is a clear-eyed study of a remarkable man and a vivid portrait of an era in transition. Ultimately, Johannes Brahms is the story of a great, backward-looking artist who inspired musical revolutionaries of the following generations, yet who was no less a prophet of the darkness and violence of our century. A biographical masterpiece at once wholly original and definitive. From the Hardcover edition.