Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Intermezzo in A major, op. 118, no. 2

Variations and Fugue on a theme by Handel, op. 24

By Professor of Humanities John Edwards

The music of Johannes Brahms occupies a place on the relatively “conservative” end of the spectrum of late nineteenth-century music, in contrast to the more radical late Romanticism of Richard Wagner and his disciples, particularly Richard Strauss. When compared to Wagner, with his experimental approach to chromatic harmony, or to the intense emotionalism and dramatic display evident in Strauss, Brahms seems almost a classicist. What Brahms’s music truly represents is a spirit of continuity with both the immediate nineteenth-century past and with the earlier history of European music. The influence of Beethoven and Schumann on Brahms’s music is familiar to any music lover, but he also admired the Classical works of Haydn and Mozart, and he participated in the nineteenth-century revival of interest in the music of Baroque composers like François Couperin, George Frederic Handel, and Johann Sebastian Bach.

The Variations and Fugue on a theme by Handel, op. 24, reflects Brahms’s interest in and careful study of Baroque music. The work was written in 1861. Wagner himself, the poster boy of Romantic radicalism, was quoted as saying that this work demonstrated “what could still be done with the old forms.” In this case, the “old forms” are the theme with variations and the fugue. Though both of these forms were practiced in the Baroque era, the fugue is often seen as the quintessential form of Baroque instrumental music. In the Handel Variations, Brahms is therefore deliberately adopting a set of “old forms”—well-worn, familiar, reliable musical structures. Within these Baroque forms, he chooses (appropriately) to interpret a theme by a Baroque composer—specifically, the Air from the third movement of Handel’s Suite in B-flat Major, HWV 434. Brahms provides a set of twenty-five variations on this theme. Along the way, the composer illustrates his familiarity with the style of Baroque writing for keyboard (Handel’s theme, obviously, but also the echoes of Couperin in Variation 19). However, he also reveals himself as a composer very much of his time—Variation 13 is a funeral march of the kind introduced into the Romantic repertoire by Beethoven and Berlioz, while the intense chromaticism of Variation 20 puts one in mind of Brahms’s more experimental contemporaries. At the conclusion of the variations, Brahms uses Handel’s theme as the basis for a densely contrapuntal fugue, deliberately reminiscent not only of the Baroque fugue, but also of essays in the fugue form by Beethoven. The Handel Variations, then, represent Brahms as both a traditionalist and a romantic. In the words of Karl Geiringer, the work is one “in which the strictest adherence to the rules and the greatest freedom are miraculously balanced.”

The Intermezzo in A major comes from Brahms’s op. 118 (Six Pieces for Piano), completed in 1893. Originally, an *intermezzo* was a musical and dramatic interlude performed between acts of a play. By the nineteenth century, the term had come to apply both to an instrumental piece in between acts or scenes of a stage work and to a movement in the middle of a larger instrumental or orchestral work. The four Intermezzi in Brahms’s op. 118, however, are freestanding works and do not serve to “connect” other musical or dramatic sections to each other. They are character pieces, defined by Henry Sayre as “works of relatively small dimension that explore the mood or ‘character’ of a person, emotion, or situation.” Like the preludes and nocturnes of Chopin or the collections of piano miniatures by Brahms’s mentor Robert Schumann, these Intermezzi capture emotion in small-scale, poetic works that are very typical of the Romantic sensibility in music. The A major Intermezzo is in ternary (ABA) form. The gentle, lyrical outer sections are in the tonic key of A major, while the somewhat more troubled middle section is in the relative minor key of F# minor.