

Some Autobiographical Overtones in Brahms's *Rinaldo*

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Since its earliest performances Brahms's *Rinaldo* has met with challenge. The premiere (Vienna, February 28, 1869), at which Brahms conducted the Akademische Gesangverein and the Hofoper orchestra, was greeted by largely negative reviews.¹ With the exception of Theodor Billroth's qualified praise, commentary ranged from tepid to hostile, with critics emphasizing *Rinaldo's* "endless shades of gray," "excessive Baroque conceits," and lack of sensuality.² Somewhat more favorable notices for performances outside Vienna (Jena, 1870; Koblenz, 1872; Munich, 1873; Leipzig, 1874; Darmstadt, 1878) failed to establish *Rinaldo* securely in the repertory.³ Nor did the critical essays by Brahms's supporters Hermann Deiters (1870) and Hermann Kretzschmar (1874) enhance the cantata's standing in Vienna; a second performance there in 1883, reviewed by Eduard Hanslick, met with similar reservations.⁴

Yet recent scholars have begun to view *Rinaldo* more positively. In his discussion of the cantata's "stylistic relations to the world of opera," Michael Musgrave compares the "blurring" between aria and recitative in *Rinaldo* to that in Schubert's incompletely preserved oratorio *Lazarus*, while also finding parallels with *Fidelio*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and the "warmth of feeling" of Italian opera. John Daverio alludes to Brahms's "Mozartean ideal" as manifested in the formal disposition of *Rinaldo's* two "grand arias." He has also referred both to *Rinaldo* and the *Alto Rhapsody*, op. 53, as "profound embodiments of personal expression," while noting the strength of their "autobiographical overtones."⁵

What "autobiographical overtones" might the text have awakened in the composer? Goethe's free adaptation of the fourteenth canto in Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* would have presented significant challenges even to a highly experienced dramatist. The poem's most salient feature is its unabated emphasis on the protagonist's inner turmoil: *Rinaldo* vacillates between remaining with the siren Armida on her enchanted island or renouncing her. Goethe's protagonist is a far cry from the invulnerable masculine hero commonly portrayed in chivalric texts.

What factors in the composer's biographical circumstances might have drawn Brahms to Goethe's indecisive hero? It is not certain when Brahms first became acquainted with Goethe's text, although in 1855 he acquired a copy of *Gerusalemme liberata* in a translation by Dutenhofer.⁶ During his last season at Detmold (fall 1859) Brahms conducted Mendelssohn's cantata *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*. The Brahms biographer Max Kalbeck suggests that at this time the composer may have browsed through Goethe's collected works, wherein *Rinaldo* follows *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*.⁷ Whether or not he made a detailed study of Goethe's departures from Tasso's text, the differences between the two versions would have been obvious to one as sensitive to textual nuances as Brahms. The most significant of these is the treatment of the female role.

As Mary Ingraham points out, Goethe eliminates all female characters (such as the guide who leads the knights to the island) but Armida.⁸ Indeed, even Armida's presence is minimized, despite her overwhelming power, for she has no singing part. The silencing of Armida is all the more paradoxical in light of the common literary trope of the siren: the sexually alluring and supremely powerful temptress who from the time of Odysseus has lured men to self-destruction through voluptuous cascades of virtuosic song.

This stifling of the female presence may well have struck a responsive chord in Brahms during the fall of 1859. During the previous January he had broken off his engagement to Agathe von Siebold, declaring that he loved her but could not "wear fetters." Given Agathe's exquisite singing voice (biographers often cite Joachim's comparison of her voice to an Amati violin), Goethe's treatment of the female voice may have struck Brahms on a perverse or quixotic level.⁹ In fact, Kalbeck suggested that Brahms's conflicted feelings about Agathe were what attracted him to Goethe's hesitant protagonist.

This possibility is all the more plausible in light of *Rinaldo's* protracted genesis. As is well known, Brahms often delayed the completion of works that posed psychological challenges. (Comparable examples include the Piano Quartet in C Minor, op. 60, the *German Requiem*, and the First Symphony.) He began the cantata in 1863 with the hope of entering it into a contest sponsored by the Aachener Liedertafel but failed to meet the October 1 deadline of that year because he did not complete the final chorus. It was not until August 1868 that he was finally able to realize Rinaldo's "victory" in a "great, new final chorus."¹⁰

Certainly during the early stages of *Rinaldo's* composition Brahms experienced conflicts similar to those of Goethe's troubled protagonist. As his Wertherlike agitation over Clara

Schumann settled into greater calm, he fell in love with and then spurned Agathe. Soon afterwards he embarked upon a friendship with the singer Otilie Hauer, which developed to the point that her family fully expected Brahms to propose to her. When, however, on Christmas Day 1863 Otilie became engaged to another man Brahms expressed relief that marriage had again eluded him.¹¹ From 1863 to 1864 Brahms gave piano lessons to the attractive and highly musical Elisabeth von Stockhausen. But as he later confessed to Julius Epstein, Brahms terminated this arrangement because he sensed danger in placing himself in such



close proximity to Elisabeth's considerable charms.¹² Even Agathe continued to exercise a certain fascination upon the composer, for Brahms is reported to have referred nostalgically to her Göttingen home some five years after the episode had ended. He also included her cipher--the letters of her name expressed in respective notes--in the first movement of the G-Major Sextet, op. 36, completed in 1864-1865.¹³

What did the 1868 resurrection of *Rinaldo* indicate? Was the composer simply tying up

loose ends? Or did the victorious final chorus, in which Rinaldo sails away from the seductress proclaiming that the past has "vanished," resonate on some level with Brahms's own experience? The facts of Brahms's biography suggest that fundamental changes had occurred from 1865 to 1868, several of which spelled greater equilibrium if not outright "victory." By 1868 his career prospects were more secure, thanks to events like the hard-won triumph of the first Piano Concerto (Mannheim, 1865) and the enthusiastic reception to the German Requiem (Bremen, 1868). He was also becoming resigned to the fact that he would never find satisfactory employment in his native city (having been twice denied the directorship of the Hamburg Philharmonic) and by the spring of 1869 gave up his rooms in Hamburg to take an apartment in Vienna. Personal victories are harder to pinpoint. But the open demonstrations of romantic interest that characterized Brahms's behavior during the 1850s and early 1860s seem to play no part in this period. His feelings for Julie Schumann, who in 1869 married another man, were so well concealed that not even Clara was aware of them. Indeed, the first half of 1868 was an extremely tense period in his friendship with Clara.¹⁴ Although that summer he stayed away from her home in Lichtental, in September he sent her as a birthday greeting the Alphorn theme, which would appear in the introduction for the last movement of the First Symphony, still years away from completion. As David Brodbeck has suggested, the contrast between the Sturm und Drang character of the symphony's tumultuous first movement, composed when his feelings for Clara had been at their most intense, and the "idyllic tones of the horn" may well reflect an increasing stability of Brahms's feelings.¹⁵ The completion at the same time of *Rinaldo's* "victory" chorus, with its extolling of manly fortitude, might suggest something of a similar kind.

¹ A trial performance with the Wiener Männergesangverein had originally been scheduled but was canceled. See Margit L. McCorkle, "The Role of Trial Performances for Brahms's Orchestral and Large Choral Works: Sources and Circumstances," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George Bozarth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 309-10.

² See Theodor Billroth, "Über *Rinaldo* von Johannes Brahms," in *Theodor Billroth als Musikkritiker*, ed. Otto-Hans Kahler (Rockville, Maryland: Kabel Verlag, 1988), pp. 44-45. The quotations are taken from an anonymous reviewer writing in the *Signale für die musikalische Welt* 27 (1869): 375, and Leopold Alexander Zellner, "Rezensionen," *Blätter für Theater, Musik und bildende Kunst* 15 (1869): 70. Addressing the cantata's lack of sensuality is "Wiener Musikreminiscenzen III," *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 23 (1869): 117. All these reviews are cited in Katharina Hofmann, "Die Kantate *Rinaldo* von Johannes Brahms: Genese, Rezeption, Struktur" (M. A. thesis, Kiel: Christian-Albrechts Universität, 1992), pp. 64-77.

³ In Koblenz only the final chorus, "Auf dem Meere," was performed; in Munich, only the solo numbers. For a survey of the first decade of the cantata's performance history, see Angelika Horstmann, *Untersuchungen zur Brahms-Rezeption der Jahre 1860-1880* (Hamburg: K. D. Wagner, 1986), pp. 179-85; see also Hofmann, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

⁴ Hermann Deiters, "Anzeigen und Beurtheilungen: *Rinaldo*," *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 13-14 (1870): 98-101, 105-107; Hermann Kretzschmar, "Neue Werke von J. Brahms,"

Musikalisches Wochenblatt 5-7 (1874): 58-60, 70-73, 83-85. Other commentaries include Carl Grabau, *Johannes Brahms. Rinaldo: Kantate von Goethe für Tenor-Solo, Männerchor und Orchester*, op. 50, *Der Musikführer*, no. 299 (Berlin: Schlesinger, R. Lienau [190?]); and Emil Krause, *Johannes Brahms in seinen Werken* (Hamburg: Lucas Gräfe & Sillem., 1892), pp. 20-21. Hanslick's review is published in *Concerte, Componisten und Virtuosen der letzten fünfzehn Jahre, 1870-1885, Kritiken von Eduard Hanslick* (Berlin: Allgemeiner Verein für Deutsche Literatur, 1896), p. 383-86.

⁵ Michael Musgrave, *The Music of Brahms* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 78. Daverio's remarks are found in "Brahms's *Magelone-Romanzen* and the 'Romantic Imperative,'" *Journal of Musicology* 7 (1989): 357, 360, and "The *Wechsel der Töne* in Brahms's *Schicksalslied*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46 (1993): 111.

⁶ According to Mary I. Ingraham, "Brahms's *Rinaldo*, op. 50: A Structural and Contextual Study" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nottingham, 1994), p. 134, it was not until January of 1862 that Brahms acquired the 1860 edition of Goethe he used while working on *Rinaldo*.

⁷ Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, vol. 2, (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1908), p. 64.

⁸ Ingraham, op. cit., p. 136. Another difference is that in Tasso's version Rinaldo can hardly be held accountable for his behavior since he falls in love with Armida under the influence of a magical spell, a point Deiters discusses in his op. cit., p. 99.

⁹ See, for example, Karl Geiringer, *Brahms: His Life and Work*, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 57.

¹⁰ *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Karl Reinthaler, Max Bruch, Hermann Deiters, Wilhelm Altman*, ed. (Berlin: 1908), vol. 3, p. 21. Brahms's description of this chorus as "new" implies the existence of an earlier version, either lost or destroyed. In Brahms's handwritten catalog of his own works he writes: "Sommer 1863 (einen 2ten Schlußchor Sommer 68), Bonn. See Ingraham, op. cit., pp. 78-79. See also Margit L. McCorkle, *Johannes Brahms: Thematisch-Bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis* (Munich: G. Henle, 1984), p. 205.

¹¹ Geiringer cites a letter from Brahms to Clara, in which the composer writes about "a very pretty girl with whom I, God knows, would have made a fool of myself, if as luck would have it, someone had not snatched her up at Christmas." Geiringer, op. cit., p. 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 82; Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (New York: Schirmer, 1990), p. 236.

¹³ The first movement of op. 36 may have been written in 1858-1859. See MacDonald, op. cit., pp. 170-73. Geiringer reports that with the completion of the Sextet Brahms declared to Gänsbacher that with this gesture Brahms "freed himself from his last love." See Geiringer, op. cit., pp. 59-61, who also cites from Agathe's *Erinnerungen*.

¹⁴ Presumably the conflict occurred because Brahms tried to interfere in family decisions. MacDonald, op. cit., p. 138.

¹⁵ David Brodbeck, "Review: *The Music of Brahms* by Michael Musgrave," *Journal of Musicology* 7 (1989): 412. See also Brodbeck's *Brahms: Symphony No. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). I discuss *Rinaldo's* autobiographical implications more fully in "'Als wahres volles Menschenbild:' Brahms's *Rinaldo* and Autobiographical Allusion," *Brahms Studies*, vol. 2, ed. David Brodbeck (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 63-89.