

Johannes Brahms, agnosticism and some other wisdom

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ABSTRACT

The use made of the biblical text in the cycle Vier ernste Gesänge by Johannes Brahms is investigated. The German text of Qohelet, Ben Sira and 1 Corinthians and the impact of their reciprocal relationship as Opus 121 are shown to illustrate the aspect of creativity on the hermeneutical level and a possible meaning of agnosticism on the theological level.

1 INTRODUCTION

Near where I live in Vienna is the house where Johannes Brahms lived and worked a 101 years ago. Also Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert lived in the vicinity and wrote their great religious works there. In these surroundings Brahms hosted, on the 26th of March 1896, a discussion with the composers Josef Suk and Antonin Dvořák on religion. Suk reports the admission of Brahms that he had read too much Schopenhauer to be religious. This shocked the deeply religious Dvořák so much that he became quite silent and could only mutter on the way home, “Such a great human being, such a great soul - and he believes nothing, nothing...”².

However, in the museum of the Society of Friends of Music in Vienna there is a German Bible that belonged to Brahms. It is well thumbed and thoroughly used. Brahms knew the Bible very well and used it daily³. He came from a Protestant background in Hamburg, Northern Germany, but moved to the music capital of the world because of his art. In this predominantly Roman Catholic city he established his reputation as a conservative musician who fundamentally opposed the up-and-coming

programme music of the day, such as pioneered by Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt, as well as the Jugendstil music introduced by Gustav Mahler.

A question suggested by these notes on Brahms's background, is the following: Can one not expect an artist, conservative in the genre and style of his output but sharply critical in its application, totally steeped in his own religious tradition but shocking in his comment upon it - can one not expect such an artist to have an affinity with the Israelite sapiential figure of Qohelet who was equally ambiguous in the treatment of his religious tradition? The answer is: Certainly, and it is vindicated by one of Brahms's last works, the cycle *Four Serious Songs*, composed as a birthday gift to himself for what was to be his last birthday, the 7th May 1896.

2 THE FOUR SERIOUS SONGS

These songs are, as the title states, a cycle of four and indicated by one *opus* number, notably Opus 121. They are therefore to be heard and interpreted as a unity. The first two are musical settings of two poems by Qohelet who follow each other directly in the Book of Ecclesiastes (Qoh 3:19-22 and 4:1-3) while the third is a setting of another sapiential text from the Lutheran Old Testament, Ben Sira 41:1-4 (all three of them on the topic of death). The surprise comes in the Fourth Song, which is a severely truncated and re-welded prose version of two passages from 1 Corinthians 13, notably verses 1-3, 12-13 (on the topic of love).

I propose to put the question as to what Brahms has actually *done*, i.e., how his use of the biblical text testifies to the way he read and applied the Bible - as a kind of hermeneutical illustration. Then I would suggest that we should interpret this use of the Bible as a deeply bipolar agnostic fascination with God.

2.1 The First Song

Brahms's used the following German text for Qohelet 3:19-22:

Denn es geht dem Menschen wie dem Vieh,
wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch;
wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch;
und haben alle einerlei Odem;
und der Mensch hat nichts mehr, denn das Vieh:
denn es ist alles eitel,
denn es ist alles eitel.
Es fährt alles an einen Ort;

es ist alles von Staub gemacht
und wird wieder zu Staub.
Wer weiß, ob der Geist des Menschen
aufwärts fahre, aufwärts fahre, aufwärts fahre?
und der Odem des Viehes unterwärts unter die Erde,
unterwärts unter die Erde fahre?
Darum sahe ich, daß nichts Bessers ist,
denn daß der Mensch fröhlich sei in seiner Arbeit,
denn das ist sein Teil.
Denn wer will ihn dahin bringen,
daß er sehe, was nach ihm geschehen wird,
was nach ihm geschehen wird?

Qohelet 3:19-22 is part of the poem comprising verses 16-22. That Brahms discarded the first part is explicable by the fact that only the second half contains the motif of death, which is also the case in the Second and the Third Songs. From the perspective of the underlying theme it is therefore clear that the coherent idea is the concept of death. This is also confirmed by what we know of the biography of the composer. He lost many loved ones and close friends during this period of his life. Most traumatic was the message of the death of Clara Schumann, wife of Robert Schumann and very close to Brahms. His journey to the funeral in Germany was slow and he only arrived at the end of the proceedings. He also confirmed in a conversation with another friend, Richard Heuberger⁴, that his experience with death and with thoughts about Clara Schumann was an inspiration to write Opus 121, although the songs were already completed when she died. Brahms entreated Heuberger not to make this known, lest people think it was only a mourning song. This, said Brahms, was no more the case than that his *German Requiem* was written for his late mother. This suggests that his painful experience with death triggered something more fundamental than mourning - the desire to express his innermost convictions on death and therefore also on life.

* One would have expected Brahms to begin his setting at Qohelet 3:18, where the beginning of a new section or stanza is clearly recognisable in the formula, "I said in my heart". But he did not. He wrote the verse down in his notebook of texts for later musical setting, but when he came to it, he eliminated the verse. This shows that it was a considered decision. This verse says, "I said in my heart: It is because of human beings, in order to test them that God has done so, so that they can see that they are animals".

Instead Brahms starts at the development of the theme of the equality, indeed qualitative identity, of humans and animals (v 19). By doing this, Brahms eliminates the only direct reference to God in the passage⁵, and, what is more, in all of the cycle passages. Brahms does what even Qohelet would not do⁶: he eliminates God from the equation. What remains, becomes a purely anthropological statement by Brahms in the exact words of the biblical tradition.

There are also other artistic changes to the biblical text. Several times Brahms amplifies the text by repeating words and phrases.

* In verse 19 three utterances of Qohelet are amplified by repetition: That humans die like animals, that both have the same breath, and, at the end of the verse, the words **כִּי הַכֹּל הַבֵּל** ("all is senseless, all is senseless"). This testifies to his insight that the declaration is basic to the text, especially *sub specie* the death motif, and to the fact that this is also basic to Brahms's treatment of the topic.

* The next important alteration (or amplification) is that the denial of the popular contrast between the lot of the human spirit/breath and that of the animals is repeated twice from the human perspective (= sung three times), and that the double statement from the animals' perspective is repeated once (two expressions sung twice = four times): The effect is that the contrast of the heavenly spirit and the earthly breath is cancelled repeatedly and therefore most emphatically (up, up, up; down, down, down, down). Death has therefore the final say and is to be seen as the declaration of equality between all life forms.

* The last repetition is contained in the seven final notes of the song, the rhetorical question about human ignorance. The ending of the first song is characterised by a descending chromatic line, which musically symbolises resignation⁷. Here the voice dies away. It is followed by two emphatic piano chords, a musical fullstop: there is nothing more to be said. In this way a negative answer to the rhetorical question about dying away dies away itself - we do not know. That is agnosticism, a-gnosis.

A rather remarkable feature of the First Song is that it contains Qohelet's *carpe diem* conclusion without expansion or any clear comment. This motif is so prominent in Qohelet's wisdom⁸ and, what is more, it looms so large in the quoted text that its underdeveloped presence surprises the listener. Qohelet says (and so does Brahms) that the conclusion to which the

reflection of senselessness leads, is one of joy - joy in human activity and achievement (the terms **שמח** and **מעשה**, Qoh 3:22).

2.2 The Second Song

Brahms's version of Qohelet 4:1-3:

Ich wandte mich und sahe an alle,
die Unrecht leiden unter der Sonne,
die Unrecht leiden unter der Sonne;
und siehe, siehe, da waren Tränen, Tränen derer;
die Unrecht litten und hatten keinen Tröster;
und d' ihnen Unrecht taten, waren zu mächtig
daß sie keinen, keinen Tröster haben konnten.
Da lobte ich die Toten,
die schon gestorben waren,
mehr als die Lebendigen,
die noch das Leben hatten;
und der noch nicht ist, ist besser als alle beide,
und des Bösen nicht inne wird,
das unter der Sonne geschieht.

In the biblical text this passage follows immediately after the one used for the First Song. It is a sestet consisting of two units of three lines each⁹. Qohelet reports an observation on the oppressed and their oppressors. The oppressed have tears but no comforter. The last phrase is repeated in the Hebrew text (**ואין להם מנחם ... ואין להם מנחם**), which emphasises the total hopelessness of the situation. Brahms used the German version, in which the passage is translated as prose and where the statement is ambiguous: The oppressors are either said to be too strong *not* to have a comforter, i e they do have someone to comfort them, or they are said to be so strong that the oppressed cannot have any comforter. The former is a possible but incorrect translation (the context requires no comforter for those not in need of such), and the latter is a weak rendering by virtue of its being ambiguous.

Brahms, however, improves the deficit by the use of several incisive musical techniques.

* First come three repetitions. The second hemistich of verse 1 is repeated to highlight the injustice of life (oppressed under the sun, oppressed under the sun). Then "Sehe", "Just see" (**והנה**) is repeated, which in German becomes an exclamation emphasising from the perspective of the observer that there is nothing to be done but look in awe. Immediately thereafter the

word “tears” is also repeated in four notes, which makes the theme unmistakable: repeated sorrow out of which there is no escape.

* Then comes an intensively critical comment. The weak German translation “keinen Tröster haben konnten” in the statement that the oppressors were too strong not to have a comforter is overloaded with sharps: five times in four words (even B flat is written as A sharp). In German the sharp sign is called a *Kreuzvorzeichen*, “cross sign”. In the works of Johann Sebastian Bach the proliferation of sharps is a technique often used as a symbol of the cross of Christ and of Christ himself¹⁰. Brahms had a great regard for Bach as musical technician, but could not identify with the pietism which he expressed in his music. Here he demonstrates this critical reverence in that he uses the Bach technique to achieve the opposite effect: Either the oppressors or the oppressed have their “comforter” in Christ, but, since the statement is negative, the cross is a non-comforter. The faith of the oppressors is false, or, alternatively, the faith of the oppressed is to no avail - no comfort is forthcoming. An additional note may be made: Brahms relates to Bach as Qohelet relates to traditional wisdom in that exactly this technique is found often in the Book of Qohelet: Qohelet uses the material and motifs of the wisdom tradition and employs them *against* the intention of their source.

* The third technique is to build a musical sigh motif into the piano accompaniment when the injustice is spoken of (“Unrecht leiden”, Hebrew העשוקים twice). This is the only appropriate comment on the hardness of reality.

* Musically Brahms associates the two sections of the poem (and his song) by using a descending motif at the beginning of the first part, while this technique is central in the second part¹¹.

Form-critically the second part of the passage is a benediction. It is full of bitter irony, since it praises the dead in preference to the living and the unborn happier than both. Brahms saw this irony clearly, since he uses two musical techniques to express it: First, the opening line of the blessing sinks to the lowest note that the bass voice has to sing; second, there is a long, dramatic pause after the words, “who is yet unborn” - it is the silence of “das Nichts”, the Void, הבל.

All of this means that death is *not* an advantage. It may be better than life in a relative sense, but the superiority of nonexistence robs even this relative status of all meaning. The statement of the Second Song (that death is no advantage) seems to contradict that of the Third Song (where it

seems to be said clearly that death *is* an advantage).

2.3 The Third Song

The text of Ben Sira 41:1-4:

O Tod, o Tod, wie bitter, wie bitter bist du,
wenn an dich gedenket ein Mensch, gedenket ein
Mensch,
der gute Tage und genug hat
und ohne Sorge lebet;
und dem es wohl geht in allen Dingen
und noch wohl essen mag!
O Tod, o Tod, wie bitter, wie bitter bist du!
O Tod, wie wohl tust du
dem Dürftigen,
der da schwach und alt ist,
der in allen Sorgen steckt
und nichts Bessers zu hoffen
noch zu erwarten hat!
O Tod, o Tod, wie wohl tust du!

The sapiential Book of Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira) was read by Brahms as part of the Lutheran canon. The present song is the penultimate of five poems in Ben Sira 40:29 - 41:7. It consists of two parts of closely contrasting content. Obviously Brahms had a keen eye for the phenomenon of contrasts, opposites, or (as I called it) polar structures. This can be seen in his choice of the Ben Sira passage to follow on the Qohelet passage just discussed in that the opposite statement about death is made in this case, and in that the Ben Sira passage itself is construed as a stark “polar structure”.

Death is personified as a powerful figure who cannot be escaped. The first stanza states that death is bitter for those who have a good life of abundance, and the second states that death is good for those who have a life of weakness and anxiety. It can therefore be said that death *can*, in certain circumstances, be evaluated positively (however, not in the sense of a life after death¹²). The contrast between the bitter and the good aspects of death is again amplified in a musical comment: The exclamation of bitterness at the beginning of the first stanza becomes a frame in that Brahms recreates it at the ending of the stanza and repeats it in both cases (to be sung four times). He also recreated the opening benediction of the second stanza at the ending, but this time the repetition takes places only once (to be sung two times with only the exclamation, “o Tod” repeated

once more). In this way the symmetry of the Ben Sira passage is given prominence precisely because an *imbalance* is created: the bitterness of death is double as much as its advantage. So the contrast with Qohelet 4:3 as expressed in the Second Song is still there, but its effect is undermined by Brahms's diametrically opposed interpretation; the very contrast becomes an ironical way of declaring that death has *no* advantage. There is no saying whether Brahms realised that precisely this was the way in which Qohelet criticised the sapiential tradition, i.e. by quoting in such a context and with such comment that the sapiential adage becomes its own deconstructional undoing. But that is what he has *done*. Probably the best example of this in Qohelet is to be found in Qohelet 9:4-5, where exactly this topic occurs: the relative advantage of death over life is epitomised in the saying about a live dog's being better than a dead lion, but immediately neutralised again by the irony of 9:5.

The choice of Ben Sira 41:1-4, therefore, is not only understandable from the perspective of the theme of death and specifically of the life-death-contrast, but also from the perspective of Brahms's use of quotations. His quotes are made in order to undermine the quoted text. This comes out in his most surprising choice of a text for the last song.

2.4 The Fourth Song

1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 12-13 as put together by the composer:

Wenn ich mit Menschen- und mit
Engelszungen redete
und hätte der Liebe nicht,
so wär ich ein tönend Erz
oder eine klingende Schelle.
Und wenn ich weissagen könnte
und wüßte alle Geheimnisse
und all' Erkenntnis
und hätte allen Glauben, also,
daß ich Berge versetzte,
und hätte der Liebe nicht,
so wäre ich nichts,
so wäre, wäre ich nichts.
und wenn ich alle meine Habe den Armen gäbe
und ließe meinen Leib brennen, meinen Leib brennen
und hätte der Liebe nicht,
so wäre mir's nichts nütze,
so wäre mir's nichts nütze.
Wir sehen jetzt durch einen Spiegel

in einem dunkeln Worte;
dann aber von Angesicht zu Angesichte.
Jetzt erkenne ich's stückweise,
dann aber werd ich's erkennen,
gleichwie ich erkannt bin.
Nun aber bleibet Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe,
diese drei;
aber die Liebe ist die größte unter ihnen,
die Liebe ist die größte unter ihnen.

The surprising choice of this passage from the New Testament has been interpreted as a final conquering of the pessimistic death motif in the first three songs¹³. But Stekel¹⁴ is to be agreed with that the famous Pauline chapter on love is not a resurrection song ("Auferstehungslied") at all and cannot, if only for this reason, function as a mitigation of the dark death motif. There must be another reason for the combination.

The famous thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is truncated for the Fourth Song. Only the first section (vv 1-3) and the conclusion (vv 12-13) are set to music. The verses inbetween contain utterances on personified Love and are instructional ("lehrhaft") and not reflection as the first and last sections are, where the first person dominates. Therefore they were not suitable for Brahms's purpose of intensely personal reflection on death and its effect (he absolutely refused to be present at any public performance of the work¹⁵). So he left them out.

In the first section the far-reaching superiority of love over all other typical first-century Christian values is proclaimed. Without love, these are "nothing". At this word ("nichts"), a key concept for the understanding of Qohelet's idea of the nothingness of everything (הַבֵּל וְרוּחַ רֵעוּת רֵוּחַ), there is an abrupt cesura which highlights the void. Its commenting character is strongly expressed by the repetition of the phrase - both times with the abrupt break. The only answer to the void is love. Therefore: The only answer to הַבֵּל is ἀγάπη.

And here, I submit, we have the solution for the lack of development of the *carpe diem* motif in the First Song. The one time that joy is mentioned as the "portion" of humans in life, it is left unexplored until the last song. According to Brahms, then, the one element that remains for humans is love. This is the "work" that should bring joy in this life. This is remarkably close to the answer given by another famous Viennese, Sigmund Freud, to the question how life should after all be lived: "Lieben und arbeiten"¹⁶.

In this context the ending of the song, and at the same time of the whole cycle, becomes a very specific Brahmsian "credo". What remains,

is the triune entity of faith, hope and love. Far from being a way of salvaging Qohelet's hardness for the benefit of everyday middle-of-the-road Christianity, this expresses Brahms's agnosticism. Love is greater than faith and hope. That is, *in this life* love is to be lived as the human "portion", as the activity to be pursued, the work to be actively created in the world. That is the joy better than which neither Qohelet nor Brahms saw in life.

Brahms could have eliminated the references to faith and hope as he often did with biblical passages and expressions that did not suit him, in Opus 121 as well as elsewhere, even in the *German Requiem*¹⁷. But he significantly did not do so. He even retained the hopeful statements that "I" will "then" see face to face (which now is impossible) and know as I am known (by someone). In the last song the counterpart of the ignorance motif of the opening song cannot be overlooked. We cannot see into the future, we still know as little as Qohelet, but one day we will know fully. This is hope *sotto voce*, but nevertheless discernible. Faith and hope are not negated, but neither are they practiced. That is true agnosticism. We cannot fathom the depths of life, we cannot say what the essence of life or the prospect of the future is. This aspect of not-knowing, conspicuous as it is in both Qohelet songs, is also explicit here in the negative rating of "all knowledge" ("alle Erkenntnis") and of the possibility of understanding of "all the mysteries" of life ("alle Geheimnisse"). Again the agnostic taint. But, if we cannot understand it, we *can* live this life as a life of love. Love, as part of a triumvirate, *carries* faith and hope. They are both of them implied in love. Unexpressed they are there. Put differently, they do not need to be expressed.

3 CONCLUSION

I think our exercise with Brahms has illustrated at least two things.

First, on the hermeneutical level, Brahms has illustrated how people use the Bible. Theology too works selectively and creatively within the framework of its own perspective, ideology, faith or whatever one may choose to call the basic *discrimen*¹⁸ which necessarily forms the setting for the life enterprise. An artist such as Brahms works esthetically in taking his material from the tradition, moulding, combining, discarding and building an expression of this conviction. Normally theologians are not artists, but often at least artisans, which in principle is the same thing, being only different in grade¹⁹. Therefore we should accept that we all work in this way, i e at least quasi-esthetically. The important thing is not to canvass for the "correct" exegesis or method or system, but to become aware of our creativity in using the Bible and to make it explicit so that

others can do the same.

Second, more specifically related to Qohelet, I think Brahms has given us a supreme example of why we should not feel the need of “salvaging” Qohelet by forcing him to have a positive message. This is often done moralistically, or by reading Pauline or Johannine intentions into Qohelet’s intentions, but also by requiring the book at least to have *something* positive (read: comforting) to say. Qohelet says הכל הכל, “all is nothingness / senselessness”, so repeatedly and so unmistakably that I am still profoundly unconvinced by recent endeavours to escape this tension²⁰. “All” means “all” as much as כל means כל. Nothing is exempt from the verdict. For this reason Qohelet’s *carpe diem* conclusion, developed into an ἀγάπη conclusion by Brahms, should be accepted for what it is. Precisely in the experience of the senselessness of life, precisely in the unanswerable question lies the injunction to love - now. Since we do not *know*, since those who admit as well as those who don’t *are* a-gnostics, not-knowers, the door to life is love. And this implies faith and hope, categories which Brahms retained in the most personal of his reflections - not in the sense of a theological construct of incognito faith by means of which great heathens could be smuggled into heaven, but in the sense that a-gnosis is a prerequisite for faith and therefore for hope.

So Dvořák was not right about Brahms after all.

NOTES:

- 1 B Litzmann, *Briefwechsel Brahms - Clara Schumann II*, Leipzig 1927, 623.
- 2 J Suk, Wiener Brahms-Erinnerungen, Der Merker 2, 1910, 149; cf H C Stekel, *Sehnsucht und Distanz. Theologischen Aspekte in den wortgebundenen religiösen Kompositionen von Johannes Brahms*, Vienna 1997, 292.
- 3 Rudolf von der Leyen, *Johannes Brahms als Mensch und Freund*, Leipzig 1905, 31.
- 4 R Heuberger, Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms, Tutzing 1976, 105; Stekel, *op cit*, 230.
- 5 Cf Stekel, *op cit*, 235-236. Noteworthy is that Stekel nevertheless regards these compositions by Brahms as *religious* works (cf the title of his dissertation, and titles of scholarly works are important). This may not be far off the mark.
- 6 The classic formulation of H-J Blieffert, *Weltanschauung und Gottesglaube im Buch Qohelet*, Rostock 1938, 17: For Qohelet God is “die einzige unbestreitbare und unbestrittene Tatsache”.
- 7 Stekel, *op cit*, 245.
- 8 Cf J A Loader, *Polar structures in the Book of Qohelet*, Berlin 1979, 105-111.
- 9 I have given a fuller exposition in Loader, *op cit*, 96.
- 10 Eg Cantata BWV 56 and in the Matthew Passion; v Stekel, *op cit*, 246.
- 11 So Stekel, *op cit*, 245.

- 12 Cf H Lamparter, *Die Apokryphen I. Das Buch Jesus Sirach*, Stuttgart 1972, 178.
- 13 M Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms IV*, Tutzing [1921]1976, 445.
- 14 Stekel, *op cit*, 238.
- 15 Cf Kalbeck, *op cit*, IV, 481.
- 16 E H Scheffler, Qohelet's positive advice, *OTE* 6/2 (1993), 264-265.
- 17 Cf B C Lategan, Ein Deutsches Requiem: Notes on Brahms' selection of biblical texts, *Scriptura* 1, 1980, 29-41.
- 18 Cf D H Kelsey, *The uses of Scripture in recent theology*, London 1975, 160.
- 19 J A Loader, Oor kerkgeboue en konsertsale, *Musicus* 16/1 (1988), 24.
- 20 Cf E H Scheffler, *op cit*, 248-271; N Whybray, Qoheleth, preacher of joy, *JSOT* 23 (1982), 87-98; M J H van Niekerk, 'n *Ondersoek na die Carpe-Diem-element in die boek Qohelet* (dissertation), Pretoria 1989; cf also G S Ogden, Qoheleth xi 7 - xii 8: Qoheleth's summons to enjoyment and reflection, *VT* 34 (1984), 27-38.