

PLAYING TO CONFLICT

TWO RIVAL COMPOSERS SHARE A SINGLE PROGRAM, WITH AN UNLIKELY THIRD TO RECONCILE THE TWO.

BY EDDIE SILVA



In the September/October issue of *Playbill*, I talked about a theme running throughout the St. Louis Symphony season: a study in contrasts. Much orchestral programming is about likenesses, the combining of musical selections that may provide a pleasing unity. In the 2013-14 season, the St. Louis Symphony explores a more roughshod musical terrain. At the conclusion of the January Beethoven Festival in February, for example, two symphonies were performed—a pair of fives—Beethoven's Fifth and Shostakovich's Fifth. The two indeed exhibited likenesses, both in ambition, in the complex mixture of aggressivity and tenderness, and in the formal conventions of a Romantic symphony. More striking, however, were the contrasts that emerged.

After Fate knocks on the door, Beethoven's Fifth exemplifies a dramatic struggle, in which courage overcomes adversity, leading to a triumphant, heroic finale.

In Shostakovich's Fifth, dramatic struggle also leads to an exuberant finale, but its final drum beats are far from triumphant. A bitter irony, rather than heroism, prevails. Shostakovich's Fifth is an act of saving one's own skin. The Fate that knocks on the door will demand entrance again.

Playing to conflict makes for a different sort of concert experience. At the end of March, St. Louis Symphony Music Director David Robertson conducts the music of Brahms (Symphony No. 3), Wagner (Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*), and Schoenberg (*Erwartung*, with soprano Karita Mattila). Few programs this season are as rich with back story. Brahms and Wagner together on a program? At the time they were living, just the idea would have provoked a riot.

Brahms and Wagner were the two the giants of their age—and there is rarely

room for two. Brahms represented a looking back—back to a pre-Beethovenian Classicism, to a re-evaluation of the riches found in Mozart and Haydn. An absolute music, one in which precision is placed before beauty, was Brahms' goal.

Wagner was the progressive, pressing forward. For him, the finale of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 was a metaphorical springboard to a new and vital art. Wagner's music illustrates grand fables of love-death, of romantic-tragic heroes and heroines evoking a pure, indefatigable race. You can hear the blood—and blood lust—pulsing in Wagner's music.

Music mattered in 19th-century Germany. Between two giants, two camps emerged—each despising the other. Fist-fights ensued when lines of opposition were crossed. One side upheld Brahms the conservative, who reassured the bourgeois Viennese; on the other was the Wagner cult, he the radical progressive, who abandoned Vienna for his Bayreuth rookery. He made the Viennese come to him.

The Symphony won't be taking security precautions with these two on the program at Powell Hall, however. People don't duel over music any more. And with the perspective of history, these battle lines are less fraught, and not so distinctly drawn—neither in the music nor in the composers' personalities. Brahms biographer Jan Swafford depicts his subject as Janus-like—Brahms is Classical *and* Romantic; conservative and progressive. Is Brahms a wave or a particle? It depends on from where you hear him.

"I am the best of Wagnerians," Brahms said. If Brahms was looking back, he was doing so to move music forward, a momentum Wagner pursued more aggressively. They meet on the verge of the Modern, of atonality and dissonance, of Schoenberg.

Brahms' Symphony No. 3 was composed shortly after Wagner's death. In March you may hear the two adversaries draw closer: the harmonic complexity of Brahms' Third approaching the hyperchromaticism of Wagner's *Tristan*—two separate paths leading to similar places. Brahms' "atmospheric string textures," as Swafford describes them, expose connections to Wagner's own effects. Brahms and Wagner may not merge, but there may be a frisson, a delight in the friction that occurs between the two.

I suspect more than a few St. Louis Symphony fans raised a skeptical eyebrow at the inclusion of Schoenberg in this mix. Yet the dreaded emancipator of dissonance is the reconciler in this impossible marriage between Brahms and Wagner. Robertson says of the program, "Schoenberg pushes boundaries of music as far as they can go, but the music is nonetheless extremely warm. Wagner prepares us for this, with the Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* centered on conflicting emotions. Brahms and Wagner were rivals, divisive. Schoenberg tries to put the two together."

It is worth acknowledging that Schoenberg

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Karita Mattila sings Erwartung



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was of this time too. He was a teenager in Vienna by the time Brahms composed his last works—a music quavering toward dissonance. He undoubtedly saw the old master on the streets of Vienna, a living icon with cigar.

A living link to the two was composer/conductor Alexander Zemlinsky, both a protégé to Brahms and a friend and mentor to young Schoenberg. Zemlinsky showed an early composition, Schoenberg's D-major String Quartet, to Brahms. Brahms was impressed and offered Schoenberg a stipend to attend conservatory, an offer the prideful Schoenberg refused.

With the passing of Brahms and Wagner, Schoenberg became the most influential composer of the early 20th century, achieving a radical new means of musical expression, Nonetheless, the revolutionary Schoenberg claimed Brahms as a forbearer. Schoenberg referred to himself as a "traditionalist," even as he challenged, in Swafford's description, all that Brahms held eternal: "tonality, lyric melody, and abiding loyalty to bourgeois audience." Schoenberg claimed Brahms as a source for his revolutionary 12-tone method. A 12-note thematic, a kernel, a row—Schoenberg says he found in Brahms. He writes an essay,

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COMPRESSED INTO 400 BARS."

"Brahms the Progressive," and so aligns himself within the Western musical tradition.

But Schoenberg isn't writing the music of Brahms, or of Wagner. Although he places his music within their lineage, his art is very distant from them. *Erwartung*, which concludes the March program, is unimaginable without the influence of Freud on Schoenberg's generation. What would become common motifs of early Modernism—the hysterical woman, the inner anguish of the psyche, the "stream of consciousness music," as Schoenberg biographer Bohan Bujić describes it—is not of Brahms' and Wagner's pre-psychoanalytic time, before dream interpretation, the unconscious, and neurosis became part of the vernacular.

A new age calls for a new music. Where Wagner was expansive, Schoenberg implodes. Theodore Adorno described *Erwartung* as "the infinity of a second compressed into 400 bars." It is an art Brahms and Wagner could have barely dreamed. Nevertheless, these are sounds they would have recognized.

"How we experience history is never fixed," writes David Robertson in an essay published in the journal *Daedalus*, "Listening to the Now." In the March concert you may hear echoes. The past of Brahms and Wagner pressing into Schoenberg's future. But also that future calling back, affecting the music of the past.

*The St. Louis Symphony performs works by
Brahms, Wagner, and Schoenberg, March 28-29 at Powell Hall.*

Eddie Silva is the External Affairs and Publications Manager for the St. Louis Symphony.