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# Stop, Look, and Listen!

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Musical Diversions and Commentary — by Rodney Flora



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**What is this?** Well, at the moment, this is still an experiment. Now that I am retired here in Castine, it is an outlet for the skills that I have developed during my career, and in this period of social isolation to open up a wider world of classical music to my readers, giving all of us something to focus on other than dreadful news and the tedium of isolation. Besides, music is itself a healthy preoccupation and a source of enjoyment and fulfillment. I hope this will make a small contribution to that.

**Who am I?** I've spent my 40+ year career as a professional classical music broadcaster, more than 15 of those years as Music Director for a Boston classical radio station and the last 10+ years as music director for a classical network that distributes programming to stations around the country. My role was very much a curatorial one, finding and evaluating music and recordings that fit our format and identity as a serious yet accessible source of classical music, and then creating appealing programs that showcased that music to best advantage.

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## FEATURED COMPOSER - Johannes Brahms

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Beethoven is an icon, a monument. I respect and revere Beethoven, but I adore Brahms. If there is one word to describe the most characteristic effect of Brahms's music it must be warmth. It simply exudes warmth and humanity from every bar. Which is kind of ironic, given the very guarded and irascible character he very frequently was.

It often seems like the motto of the Romantics in general should have been (and pretty much was) "Nothing succeeds like excess", but Brahms wasn't like that. To those of us who love him his music is the perfect balanced synthesis of classicism and romanticism. The emotion, the passion, isn't exactly suppressed, but there is a sense of propriety, of proportion, of economy of expression that, in a way, makes it all the more heartfelt and sincere. Brahms feels very deeply, but he doesn't gush.

An example of this is Brahms's Tragic Overture. Brahms confided to his publisher that he was unsure whether to call it "Dramatic" or "Tragic", but his publisher, in the spirit of the age, and with a Romantic's (and marketer's) propensity for overstatement, insisted that it must be called "Tragic", and so it is. A lot of us think that "Dramatic" is more accurately descriptive of the piece.

Brahms had many devoted friends who truly cared about and admired him. He in turn often treated them quite thoughtlessly and even unkindly. There is a story (perhaps apocryphal) of Brahms, upon leaving a gathering, turning at the door and declaring "if there is anyone here whom I have not offended this evening, I deeply apologize." Apocryphal or not, that was Brahms. But, of course, it was all part of his emotional armor too.

Brahms grew up in the slums of Hamburg. As a young man he was forced by his father to work nights as a pianist in the dingy dives of the Hamburg waterfront. What he might have seen, what experiences he may have had and how they might have affected him and his relationships later on, is something for psychologists to speculate upon. And it would be speculation indeed as he left few writings or reminiscences to guide us.

Whatever the reason, Brahms's relationships with women were always fraught. He never married and if he had love affairs they are not known, but he famously had a long, deep, and although likely platonic, nevertheless emotionally and intellectually passionate relationship with Clara Schumann, Robert Schumann's widow and a formidable pianist and composer in her own right. She was his principal muse and close confidant for many years.

His very irascible and prickly exterior was clearly in defense of a sensitive and vulnerable nature. This again is evident in his music which is full of warmth and tenderness. Clearly the inner and the outer Brahms could be quite different. To describe Brahms as a curmudgeon with a heart of gold is perhaps rather dismissively simplistic and clichéd, and yet somehow not entirely untrue.

I have lately come to my senses (I hope) and realized that my purpose here is to give a small snapshot of Brahms, not to write his biography. Which, by the way, has been superbly done in the book I recommend below.

I have also realized that it is a task beyond my capabilities to give a comprehensive overview of his music, encompassing all of his major works in all genres, but rather I must be content to point out a few of my favorite, less obvious Brahms works which, perhaps, you haven't heard before. But first...

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## DOCUMENTARY - Great Composers - Johannes Brahms

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Unfortunately I haven't yet been able to find a really great video biography of Brahms but here's a pretty good and fairly brief overview of Brahms the man and his music.

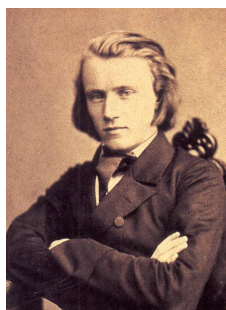
### ***Great Composers - Johannes Brahms***

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2z\\_uFzhigbg&t=814s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2z_uFzhigbg&t=814s)

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## DOCUMENTARY - The Life of Brahms

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For a briefer video biography of Brahms check out this one from the London Symphony Orchestra.

### ***The Life of Brahms***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVzcJIHC53w&t=26s>

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## MY FAVORITE BRAHMS

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These Brahms compositions should be at the very core of the listening repertoire of any classical music aficionado. There are many performances on-line and you can easily find them.

Symphony No. 1  
Symphony No. 3  
Piano Concerto No.1  
Piano Concerto No. 2  
Violin Concerto  
A German Requiem  
Double Concerto for Violin & Cello

If you want specific recommendations, send me an email and, if there is enough interest, I will try to produce an addendum with more links.

Here are some of my favorite Brahms works that are perhaps a bit less well known, but to me are quintessential Brahms and, I think, worthy of your attention:

### ***Serenade No. 1***

Sometimes described (rather dismissively I think) as a kind of practice symphony, I find this to be joyous and uplifting music. It's sunny, full of optimism and the triumph of the human spirit. I love it.

This is a wonderful performance by The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra with Bernard Haitink. It is a bit inconveniently posted as individual movements, so here are the links in order:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXogPvHV02Y>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfua28-tt74>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AkwDnxRC1Q>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v49DN0ME-d0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nenaVd8UU9A>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbBQcPwOQqo>



### ***String Sextet No. 1***

To me this is the very essence of the marriage of classicism and romanticism in Brahms that I described earlier. See if you agree.

***Brahms: String Sextet, Op. 18 - Janine Jansen & Friends - International Chamber Music Festival***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5D9FbG71eE&t=1810s>

### ***Piano Trio No. 1***

Begins with an achingly gorgeous cello solo. Brahms completely reworked this trio later in life but allowed the original version to remain. The verdict of posterity seems to overwhelmingly favor the original, as it is still the one most often played.

### ***Brahms: Piano Trio no. 1, op 8 (Bell Isserlis Hamelin) Verbier Festival 2014***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P949STN2PVE>



### ***Horn Trio***

Brahms knew how to write for the horn, and in his hands this somewhat unusual combination of instruments works beautifully.

### ***Horn Trio in E flat Major, Op 40 - Trio Arkel***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xYZgKVvt48&t=80s>

### ***Variations and Fugue on a theme by Handel***

It is said that Brahms would sit in his favorite Viennese Cafe writing counterpoint exercises and studying the works of his predecessors like Bach, Handel, and Mozart. Here is one outstanding result of that.

### ***Brahms - Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel Op. 24 - Yuja Wang***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOHRUrfJt4>

For a more measured approach here is Murray Perahia's interpretation of the same work.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7oZfVs\\_Ixw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7oZfVs_Ixw)



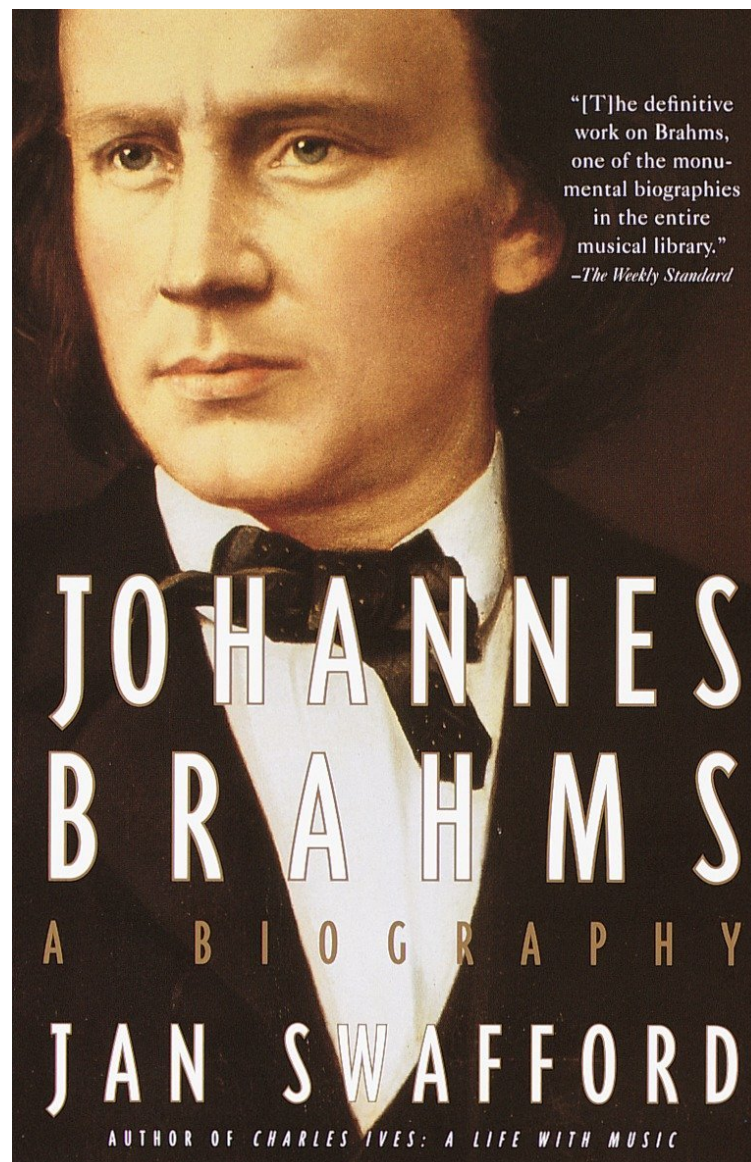
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## RECOMMENDED READING

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### *Johannes Brahms - A Biography - Jan Swafford*

Proclaimed the new messiah of Romanticism by Robert Schumann when he was only twenty, Johannes Brahms dedicated himself to a long and extraordinarily productive career. In this book, Jan Swafford sets out to reveal the little-known Brahms, the boy who grew up in mercantile Hamburg and played piano in beer halls among prostitutes and drunken sailors, the fiercely self-protective man who thwarted future biographers by burning papers, scores and notebooks late in his life. Making unprecedented use of the remaining archival material, Swafford offers richly expanded perspectives on Brahms's youth, on his difficult romantic life--particularly his longstanding relationship with Clara Schumann--and on his professional rivalry with Liszt and Wagner.



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## DISCOVERIES (and RE-DISCOVERIES)

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One of the things I have always enjoyed is “discovering” lesser known composers and their music. Obviously, someone has already discovered them or there wouldn’t be recordings for me to discover, but they are not generally well known.

Without doubt there are many obscure composers who richly deserve their obscurity, and I have certainly listened to lots of those. In many cases they are technically competent, but either sorely lacking in ideas or the skills to develop them, and often both. It’s like a story without a plot, characters come and go randomly without really doing anything or being developed, the music seems like it might be going someplace but never gets there. Sometimes it’s just endlessly “treading water” and there doesn’t seem to be any point to it at all. Needless to say, these are a waste of time, and I won’t waste your time with them. But there are gems to be found if you are willing to dig for them.

It's been said that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture." Which is to say that musical ideas are best expressed in music itself and suffer mightily when "translated" to other forms of expression. I know that in describing pieces for you I often find myself at a loss for words or, perhaps even worse, falling back on the same words again and again. My purpose of course is to tempt you into listening to the music itself.

About that, let me also say this is intended as a sampler, a kind of buffet if you will. It is not an assignment where you must slog your way through each and every piece in list order. There is no assignment due. There won't be a test. I say listen to the first 5 minutes and if it doesn't draw you in move on and maybe listen to it later or skip that one altogether. No harm no foul, as they say.

Here are a few pieces that I find interesting, appealing, and hopefully worthwhile. I’d love to hear what you think of them.

### **Clara Schumann**

Clara Schumann certainly wasn't discovered by me, but her talent as a composer wasn't discovered by anyone (apparently) until after her death. As indicated above, you can't talk really about Brahms without also considering Clara Schumann. She was such an important influence and sounding board for him. She was a very famous pianist in her lifetime and as noted above subsequently became known as a composer as well.

Her best known works are:

#### ***Piano Concerto in A minor***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcLtg5Ps8Rk>

#### ***Piano Trio in g-minor, op.17***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JyeWA1ZD8g>



If you wish to go a bit more deeply into her music this next one is actually a very interesting little lecture:

***Clara Schumann: Piano Trio in G minor - LSO Discovery A-level Seminar 2016***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmU2F3U3tbY>

It begins with a brief biographical sketch of Clara Schumann and then proceeds to analyze the structure of the trio. It is well presented and you don't have to have advanced knowledge of music to follow it. However you could just listen to the first few minutes for the biographical notes.

I hesitate to mention this next one because it will be out of reach for most of us, but if your German is a good deal better than mine (I "get" about a quarter of it) this looks to be a very fine documentary/biography of Clara Schumann:

***Die drei Leben der Clara Schumann***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ha3nR56JSUk>



It translates as *The Three Lives of Clara Schumann*, referring to her life as Clara Wieck, talented young pianist, but very much under the control of her domineering father. Then as Clara Schumann, wife of the great composer Robert Schumann, which seems to have been a true great love affair, and then, after Robert's tragic death, as Clara Schumann, the widow of Robert and the great friend and confidant of Brahms.

If you are inclined to try it, you can fool with YouTube's settings/subtitles/English and can get a very awkward, non-idiomatic, computer-generated translation, which often makes little sense but is, perhaps, better than nothing.

**Peter von Winter - (1754 - 1825)**

Friend and contemporary of Mozart. Very "Mozarty", elegant, lyrical and melodic. Seems to have been at his best writing solo concertos for woodwinds.

**Concerto No. 2 in F major for oboe & orchestra**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NI8p5vMtAuQ>

**Concerto in E flat Major for Clarinet and Orchestra**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNjNpA2qKLU>





## **Robert Fuchs**

Friend and colleague of Brahms. Very Brahmsian stuff! Not an imitation, but they do speak the same language. Sumptuously beautiful cello sonatas.

### **Cello Sonata No. 1 in D Minor (Op. 29)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj6UXFTK\\_qA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj6UXFTK_qA)

### **Cello Sonata in E-Flat Minor (Op. 83)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy8PgMXg\\_Ao](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy8PgMXg_Ao)

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## **OFF-TOPIC MEANDERINGS (or Peripheral Peregrinations?)**

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This being a non-traveling year for most of us, one of the things I look for besides classical music videos is travel videos. Many of us have places in mind that we hope to visit (or visit again), bucket-list destinations, or even places we are unlikely to go but that we're still curious about.

If your boat is now tucked-away for the Winter but you still haven't had enough time "on the water" you might like to take a look at these videos by Tony Fleming. He is the owner of Fleming Yachts and although the undoubted sub-text is to show off his boat's capabilities in the hope that you will buy one, these are not really sales pitches but rather very well-produced adventure travel videos. Highly recommended



### **Venture to Iceland. Part One. Southampton to Scotland**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1PlMbjDu2s&t=279s>

### **Venture to Iceland. Part Two. Faroes to Iceland and Return**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkB6iPyknKM&t=116s>

If you would rather travel by foot, and in a warmer climate, these might interest you.

### **Julia Bradbury: South Africa Walks Episodes 1 - 4**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITnhbf517Qw&t=33s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpo1m-bnpeM&t=11s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIM3i9wHIDo&t=15s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XthUBNW1kns&list=PLwJ3dKGiVfLKsZ5YVkkkIUrq28oC0bQHt&index=18>





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## A few (okay, a lot!) of words About YouTube

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It's hard not to have a complicated relationship with YouTube. As I often say, it is both a goldmine and a minefield. Everything you could want is there, all mixed up with everything you most definitely don't want. It is simultaneously appealing and appalling.

There are lots of different ways to watch/listen to YouTube videos. We have a first generation Apple TV box (getting to be about 7 or 8 years old now) which is very much "plug and play" and means we can easily watch videos in pretty high quality on our television screen. That is really the way to go when watching a concert or a documentary or a travel video in which the "picture" is important. I don't know anything about the newer versions of Apple TV or Amazon's or other competing appliances, but clearly anything that allows you to watch on a large high definition screen is an advantage, especially for viewing as a couple or a group. If you are solo watching, an iPad or equivalent, or a laptop with a high definition display is perfectly fine and rather convenient.

If you are primarily interested in listening to music I recommend a good set of headphones. I find the Bluetooth headphones are especially convenient as you are not "tethered" to your device with the concomitant risk of forgetting you are attached and dumping your laptop or iPad onto the floor when you absentmindedly get up to get a cup of tea. The sound through headphones is wonderfully enveloping as well; it puts you in the concert hall. The ones I have cost around sixty dollars and I find them perfectly satisfactory. I prefer headphones to earbuds, but that's just me and is likely because I am accustomed to headphones from wearing them on the job for many years, and probably also because I'm old and don't feel like changing my habits.

YouTube will bombard you with advertising. It makes you cringe (at the very least). It comes at you without warning, at high volume, and often (it seems) smack in the middle of a piece of music. We don't subscribe to cable tv and we do watch YouTube a lot so it made sense for us to pay their "protection money" and subscribe to ad-free "YouTube Premium" for \$12.99 a month. We are satisfied with it, but it is a personal cost/benefit decision.

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***Please send me*** your opinions and reactions to this newsletter and its contents. Also please share your own discoveries. You can reach me at

[enigmavars1899@gmail.com](mailto:enigmavars1899@gmail.com)

Note that any reply you might receive from my gmail will say it's from Edward Elgar, but that's really me.

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