

Two Brahms Letters

Jürgen Thym

*[To Dr. Max Abraham at C.F. Peters, Leipzig]
[Wien, 3. Oktober 1881]¹*

Sehr geehrter Herr.

Ich glaubte täglich den Kopisten erwarten zu dürfen u. verschob deshalb den Dank für Ihre neuliche Sendung.

Diese aber war gar zu prompt denn Sie haben das Stück ja noch gar nicht! Und unsre hiesige Aufführung mußten wir leider vom Nov. bis in den Dec. oder Jan. verschieben! Der Tage sende ich jedenfalls Chor u. Violinstimmen.

Am 15. Oktober denke ich in Meiningen zu sein um ein Concert mit Bülow u. s. Kapelle zu versuchen. Nun wäre es hübsch wenn Sie zu der Zeit (einfach an Hr'n v. B[ülow]) die Geigenstimmen schicken könnten! Etwa 5 erste und zweite Geigen, 3 Br. 3 V.C., 3 Bass.

Den Chor dazu werden wir nicht versuchen können denn in Norddeutschland singt man nicht wie hier vom Blatte.

Von den Händelschen Duetten bitte ich um 3 Ex. u. vielleicht haben Sie die Güte in m[einem] Namen eines an Stockhausen, eines an Adolf Schulze, Gesangs-Professor a. d. Hochschule in Berlin zu senden und eines an den Hofcapellm. Franz Wüllner in Dresden.

Verzeihen Sie, aber bei mir ist jedes Paquet u. Xband [Kreuzband] ein trauriges Ereignis.

Meine Bitte wegen Meiningen ist natürlich gar nicht wichtig und gilt nur falls Sie Ihnen gar keine Umstände macht.

Eine Korrektur brauchte ich ja vorher nicht zu lesen.

Und so nächstens mehr von Ihrem sehr ergebenen Joh[annes] Brahms

Dear Sir:

I thought that the copyist would be coming here any day and therefore postponed thanking you for what you recently sent me.

This, however, was all too prompt, because you do not have the piece as yet! And unfortunately we had to postpone our performance here from November to December or January. In any case, I will soon send chorus and string parts.

On October 15 I plan to be in Meiningen to try out a concerto with Bülow and his orchestra. It would be nice if around that time you could send (addressed simply to "Mr. v. Bülow") the string parts, say: 5 first and second violins, 3 violas, 3 violoncellos, and 3 basses.

It will not be possible to try the chorus because in North Germany people do not sight-sing as well as they do here.

May I ask for three copies of the Duets by Handel, and perhaps you would be kind enough to send, on my behalf, one to Stockhausen, one to Adolf Schulze, voice professor at the Hochschule in Berlin, and one to Court Conductor Franz Wüllner in Dresden.

I apologize for the imposition, but every time I wrap a package, the result is a sorry job.

My request for Meiningen, of course, is not important and applies only if it does not inconvenience you.

It would probably not be necessary for me to read the proofs ahead of time.

With more soon from yours sincerely,

Johannes Brahms

Sehr geehrte Frau,

Ich erlaube mir hiermit
Längst zu erlauben zu dürfen
i. unglückseligsten Dank für
Ihre ansehnliche Gabe.

Es ist aber eine gute Gelegenheit
denn die Substanz des Staats zu weh
ren auch! Und in der
Angelegenheit anderer von
dem Staat: hat in der
Verfassung! Die Sache
ist jedoch nicht die
den 15. Oktober haben in
München zu sein im u. d. d. d.

[20. November 1881]²

Geehrtester Hr Dr,

Unsere Lorbeeren sind wirklich übel gerathen, Feuerbach verdient bessere u. ich hoffe die Nänie auch ein wenig.

Mögen Sie trotzdem wohl die Güte haben an Fr. Hofrath F[euerbach] in Ansbach, Bayern zu senden u. kann es wohl ein gebundenes Ex. sein? G[egeben] Z[eit] schicken Sie vielleicht dito eine Partitur die sich dann etwas stattlicher ausnimmt.

In Zürich werde ich nicht säumen Ihnen zu schreiben ob auch Correkturen nöthig.

In Eile Ihr ergebenster

Joh Brahms

Dear Doctor:

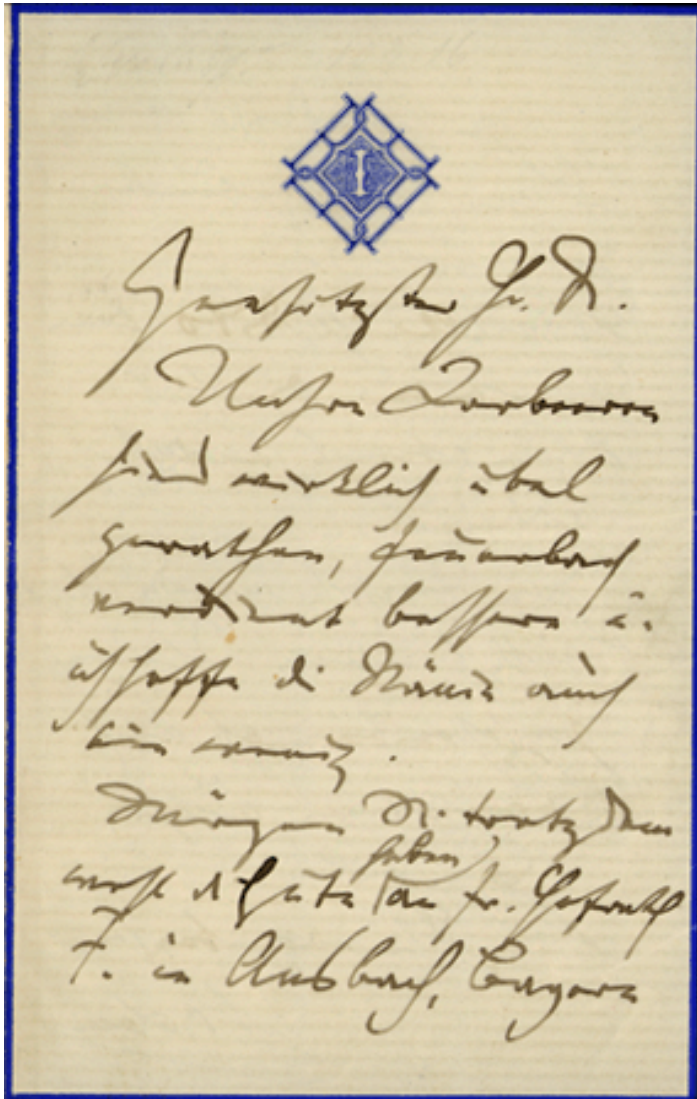
Our laurel decorations really turned out badly. Feuerbach deserves better ones and so, I hope, does *Nänie*.

Anyway, would you be so kind as to send a copy to the Frau Court Counselor Feuerbach in Ansbach, Bavaria? And could it perhaps be a bound copy? At the appropriate time you could perhaps send to the same a score, which in turn would look more substantial.

Once in Zürich, I will not hesitate to write you whether corrections are needed.

In a rush I remain yours sincerely,

Johannes Brahms



Commentary:

Brahms never had much trouble getting his compositions published. Introduced to the music world by Robert Schumann in the famous "Neue Bahnen" paean of 1853 as a genius "who, like Athena, sprang fully armed from the head of Zeus" (in other words: a second Beethoven and a new Messiah of music), Brahms offered his earliest works to Breitkopf & Härtel. And the Härtel brothers, informed by Schumann about the rising star, immediately accepted the music of the twenty-year-old for publication (the two piano sonatas, opp. 1 and 2; six songs, op. 3; and the Scherzo in E-flat Minor, op. 4). The Leipzig company, founded in 1719, was one of the most

distinguished music-publishing firms in the German-speaking world, and Brahms probably would have continued entrusting his works to this firm, if there had not been a falling-out over the publication of his String Sextet, op. 36, in 1865. (Simrock finally got the piece.) Over the next three decades Brahms participated as editor or adviser in the publication of several Breitkopf & Härtel collected-works editions (e.g., Bach, Chopin, Mozart, Schumann), but never again did the composer give any new manuscript to the Leipzig firm.

Instead, two companies which until then had played a subordinate role to Breitkopf & Härtel in connection with Brahms emerged as the winners: the recently founded (1849) firm of Johann Rieter-Biedermann in Winterthur, Switzerland, and Simrock in Bonn, the latter being a house with a solid reputation acquired over several generations. (Nikolaus Simrock had been Beethoven's enthusiastic promoter despite the composer's frequent temper tantrums, and his son Peter had been able to lay claim to Mendelssohn's scores and gratitude.) Rieter succeeded in acquiring, among other Brahms works, the First Piano Concerto, op. 15 (certainly a courageous decision, since the piece was tainted by the poor reception at the Hannover premiere in 1859); the Magelone cycle, op. 33; the Piano Quintet, op. 34; the Paganini variations, op. 35; and--a real gem for the small company--the German Requiem, op. 45. While the income from these works may initially have been minimal, Rieter scored a hit with the publication of Brahms's waltzes, op. 39, which, in arrangements for all kinds of instruments and ensembles, including editions that took into account the limited skill of beginners at the keyboard, must have been a publisher's dream of a fast profit investment. After the premature death of Johann Rieter in 1876, the professional relations between the composer and the publishing house cooled somewhat, although personal exchanges with the widow and several business successors remained cordial.

The real victor in the struggle for Brahms manuscripts was Simrock. After the company's leadership had passed to the third generation in 1867 or 1868, Fritz Simrock, the founder's grandson, only four years younger than Brahms, wasted no time in combining business sense and artistic instinct for cornering the market on Brahms and acquiring a virtual monopoly. The company had moved from provincial Bonn to Berlin in 1871, shortly before the city became the capital of the Second German Empire. Inspired by the business fever of the *Gründerjahre*, Simrock was ready to become one of the major-league players in the music-publishing business with Brahms as its chief icon. The lion's share of Brahms's works in the following decades was indeed ultimately published by, or came into the hands of, the Simrock firm, including the lucrative Hungarian Dances (no opus number) of 1869 (first set) and 1880 (second set). Fritz Simrock even advanced to the status of Brahms's investment

adviser and confidant. Despite enormous professional tensions between the businessman and the artist, the relationship and friendship survived to the end: Brahms even confirmed the latter by offering Simrock the familiar "Du" in 1895.

The only one who dared to challenge Simrock's Brahms monopoly in later years (if one disregards Albert Gutmann's rather public, and hence clumsy, attempt to outbid Simrock in acquiring the Third Symphony in 1883) was Dr. Max Abraham, the owner of the Leipzig music publishing firm of C.F. Peters (founded in 1800), which emerged in the late nineteenth century as a force to be reckoned with. No less inspired by the zeal of the German Empire than Simrock, and directing his business zeal toward granting inexpensive access to musical artworks, Abraham had established "Edition Peters" in 1867, a subsidiary whose goal was to bring music to the masses. He may have hoped for another set of Hungarian Dances or waltzes (similar to op. 39), but Brahms, even though he was lured by generous honoraria and the prospects of Peters's affordable editions (which the socially conscious Brahms did not fail to hold up as a model to Fritz Simrock), only consented to give up some songs and vocal quartets (opp. 63 and 64) in 1874 and, after he felt personal gratitude toward Abraham mounting several years later, his arrangement of Handel duets (edited in collaboration with Friedrich Chrysander) and the choral-orchestral work *Nänie*, op.82.

The immediate reason for setting Schiller's verses was the death of his friend, the artist Anselm Feuerbach (1829-1880). Brahms, who was quite fond of Feuerbach's canvasses with their idealized classical subjects, had been instrumental in attracting the painter to the Vienna Academy of Visual Arts in 1873 (a position which Feuerbach held with varying degrees of success until he resigned in 1877). and wanted to honor his memory. On a trip to Italy in the spring of 1881 the composer visited not only Venice, where Feuerbach had died, but also Rome, Southern Italy, and Sicily, where he could familiarize himself with many of the sites of classical antiquity so dear to his deceased friend. After returning from this trip, he was ready to approach the task of setting Schiller's lament "Auch das Schöne muß sterben!" (Even beauty must die!) with its evocation of classical mythology. The poem is laid out in alternating hexameter and pentameter lines (distichs)-certainly an apt choice for commemorating Feuerbach.

Even though Fritz Simrock helped Brahms acquire some photographic reproductions of Feuerbach's paintings during the summer of that year and even though he saw the composer at his summer residence in Preßbaum near Vienna during this time (no doubt learning about Brahms's composition of *Nänie* during his visit and urging Brahms to have it published with the Simrock house), ultimately the Feuerbach piece went to Peters. (Simrock's

"consolation prize"-not a bad deal by any standards-was the Second Piano Concerto, which Brahms completed during the same summer.)

The two letters reproduced here in the original and in translation pertain to the publication process of Brahms's *Nänie*. Abraham, instinctively aware of Simrock's pressure on Brahms and perhaps fearing that the work might still go to his competitor, sent Brahms the honorarium even before the manuscript had reached his firm. Always reluctant to part with a new composition for publication before he had heard it in performance, Brahms instructed Abraham to forward, if possible, the freshly engraved string parts to Meiningen where he planned to try out his new piano concerto with Hans von Bülow and where he also hoped to squeeze in a rehearsal of *Nänie*, at least of the orchestral sections. Packing and preparing his manuscripts and scores for mailing seems to have been a dreaded chore for Brahms, but the prospect of having performance materials of the work available during his Meiningen visit would help to speed matters. Brahms managed to get the manuscript to Leipzig, decided on Henriette Feuerbach, the painter's stepmother, as a dedicatee of the work, and asked for laurel sprigs or wreaths as a decorative flourish on the title page. But the resulting proposed title page did not satisfy the composer, and, in the end, the first edition was published without such "vegetation." Brahms put pressure on Abraham to publish parts, piano reduction, and score as soon as possible, because in the meantime the premiere of *Nänie* had been scheduled in Zurich for early December of that year under the composer's baton, and Brahms also promised to inform Abraham immediately about any corrections to the score that might become apparent from the Zurich performance.

Nearly a year later Abraham reminded Brahms of the composer's informal promise to send more works, especially larger ones, to C.F. Peters. Despite his generosity in matters of honoraria and occasional urgings, Abraham was ultimately unable to break Simrock's monopoly. The only Brahms pieces that the Leipzig firm published in later years were the vocal quartets, op. 112, and canons, op. 113, of 1891, thereby making the setting of Schiller's *Nänie* the most substantial work that the company received from the composer's pen.

¹ Dates provided by Wilhelm Altmann in *Johannes Brahms: Briefwechsel*, 4 vols., ed. Max Kalbeck (Berlin, 1917-19, reprinted Tutzing: Schneider, 1974).

² Dates provided by Wilhelm Altmann (on the basis of context and postage stamp).