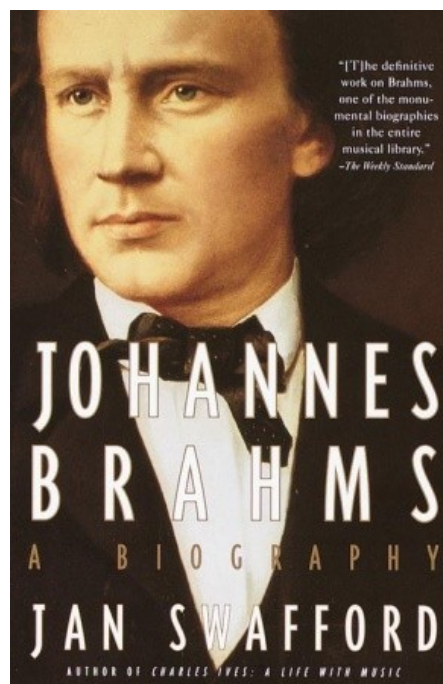




Johannes Brahms: A Biography

Jan Swafford

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A New York Times Notable Book

"This brilliant and magisterial book is a very good bet to...become the definitive study of Johannes Brahms."--*The Plain Dealer*

Judicious, compassionate, and full of insight into Brahms's human complexity as well as his music, Johannes Brahms is an indispensable biography.

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.

"[**Johannes Brahms**] will no doubt stand as the definitive work on Brahms, one of the monumental biographies in the entire musical library."--*London Weekly Standard*

"It is a measure of the accomplishment of Jan Swafford's biography that Brahms's sadness becomes palpable.... [Swafford] manages to construct a full-bodied human being."--*The New York Times Book Review*

Johannes Brahms: A Biography Details

Date : Published December 7th 1999 by Vintage (first published November 25th 1997)

ISBN : 9780679745822

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Format : Paperback 699 pages

Genre : Music, Biography, Nonfiction, History, Classical Music, Biography Memoir

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James Prothero says

A marvelously readable and balanced biography. I enjoyed it thoroughly. My brother and sister in law, both highly trained musicians that read, will get the parts I missed where Swafford illustrates a point about the music by printing out a section of various scores. Still, even if you cannot do this, it's a worthwhile read.

Bill FromPA says

This is an absorbing biography of a man who did his best to frustrate biographers – destroying all his musical sketches, a vast number of compositions he deemed unworthy, and apparently as many of his letters as he could convince his correspondents to return to him. Swafford promises to reveal the life whose traces Brahms was trying to obliterate, to give the reader “Brahms without the beard”. He has probably succeeded in this more than have previous biographers, marshaling what facts he can, and supplementing them with informed speculation, to discover the stories underlying the many stormy phases of Brahms’ closest and most significant relationships.

As part of the “de-bearding” of Brahms, Swafford notes more than once that the composer patronized prostitutes; he sees this, along with the fact of a young, probably pre-pubescent Brahms being forced by his father to play piano in waterfront dives that were combination barrooms and brothels, as being of key significance for Brahms’ relationships with “respectable women” and his lifelong bachelorhood. Given the importance Swafford attaches to this, it would have been helpful if he had provided a little more background on the nature of prostitution in late 19th century Vienna, its legal status, and social attitudes toward it.

Still, we read this biography because Brahms is one of the towering figures of Western music, and though Swafford concentrates on giving us the life, he must deal at length with the work as well: its inspiration, composition, performance, and reception; in this, he is an excellent and informative guide. The author, a composer himself, has a good ear for music and his many analyses of Brahms’ works (all the symphonies and many of the chamber works, as well as the early piano sonatas and the ‘Haydn’ Variations) are convincing and enlightening; even his asides, such as an endnote on Brahms’ orchestration, show a sure perception of aural truths. In discussing the inspiration for certain pieces in the life of the composer, he treads on dangerous ground: assigning specific biographical and programmatic aspects to compositions of the man who became the standard bearer for the concept of “absolute music”, famously composing music that exists only for itself and is only “about” the internal relationships of its constituent elements, disdaining any external referents. Nevertheless Swafford lays out his arguments for extra-musical meaning in Brahms clearly and, sometimes at least, persuasively; his points are always worth contemplating given his mastery of the facts of the composer’s life. He is less enlightening, however, on music his subjects find wanting or even bad. Brahms and Clara Schumann absolutely loathed the music of Liszt, but their objections to a specific piece they attack, the Sonata in B Minor, arguably Liszt’s masterpiece, are left at fairly vague generalizations. Swafford’s own characterization of Wagner’s *Parsifal* as “perhaps the highest expression in art of pseudo-spiritualized Germanic anti-Semitism”, un-annotated as if this were an objective description, is surely based on Robert W. Gutman’s tendentious distortion of this opera, an interpretation disputed by most Wagner scholars and based more on the atmosphere of Bayreuth in the 1880s and beyond and some of Wagner’s late after-the-fact writings on the opera rather than on any engagement with or understanding of the work itself.

Since Brahms did all he could to maintain the privacy of his private conversations, we have only a few personal memoirs from his friends which give an occasional look into his opinions and ideas, nothing like Cosima Wagner's diaries which provide a deluge of Richard Wagner's opinions and commentary on all sorts of matters musical and non-musical. But because of the insatiable, and probably dishonorable, curiosity of posterity, such scraps as are preserved seem fascinating far beyond their content or importance, for example Brahms' rejoicing in the defeat and death of General George Armstrong Custer, "Of course I know it won't help the poor fellows; but at least it was granted them to take one good bath in the blood of their persecutors!"

Nancy says

Johannes Brahms: A Biography / Jan Swafford. Despite the fact that I am truly tone deaf and basically musically illiterate, I took up my friend's recommendation (on a printed annual greeting) to read this book. I have now read it—apart from, say, a dozen pages of musical analysis--and I can report that it was worth my while. Fortunately, I do like detailed biographies and at 636 pages of text, this book fit the bill. Swafford expertly delineates Brahms' personal complexity, his musical giftedness, and both his personal and professional relationships. The extensive references to various "schools" of music was extremely interesting to me. The amount of scholarship is immense. I have been considerably enlightened.

Robin Friedman says

I read Jan Swafford's monumental 1997 biography of Johannes Brahms (1833 --1897) after reading his biography of the American composer Charles Ives and after reading the 1991 biography of Brahms by Malcolm MacDonald. Swafford has written an outstanding biography of Brahms and a thorough, perceptive consideration of his music. But greater than either of these accomplishments, his book brings Brahms and late nineteenth century Vienna to life. Swafford has given a great deal of thought to Brahms, and his book helped me think about the nature of creative gifts, about the relationship between love and calling, and about many matters that are much broader than either biography or music.

Swafford gives a great deal of attention to two formative experiences of young Brahms: 1. his childhood of poverty in Hamburg where he played as a pre-adolescent in dives frequented by prostitutes and sailors (this account has been questioned by some writers) and 2. Robert Schumann's article about Brahms at the age of 20, heralding the young man as the heir to Beethoven and predicting a brilliant future for him.

Swafford's book emphasizes Brahms's difficulties throughout life in forming a lasting, sexual relationship with a woman other than prostitutes. Brahms exhibited to sort of behavior towards women frequently described in terms of "The Virgin and the Whore." Brahms could only be physically intimate with women he did not respect. Thus, Brahms ultimately rejected the romantic opportunities that came his way in the persons of Clara Schumann and Agathe von Siebold, among other women. He withdrew into a protective shell when friendships with women threatened to become romantic. Yet women were the greatest source of inspiration to Brahms as a composer. He poured into his music what he denied himself as a man. A crusty figure, Brahms was difficult to know intimately, particularly by women.

The article by Robert Schumann made Brahms famous from the age of twenty before he had done much. Great things were expected of Brahms, but Schumann's praise burdened the fledgling composer with the fear that he would disappoint Schumann's hopes in him. Brahms worked slowly and became an astonishing

musical craftsman; but he felt he had to justify Schumann's confidence as well as meet the standards of the great composers of the past, especially Beethoven.

There is a wealth of discussion in this book of Brahms' relationships with both Clara and Robert Schumann, their daughter Julie, the violinist Joachim, the critic Hanslick, Liszt, Wagner, Bruckner, Mahler, and many others. The book is set in the last years of liberal Vienna, and Swafford poignantly draws the relationship between Brahms's music and the rise of irrationality, anti-semitism, and violence that would soon plague the Twentieth Century.

I found Swafford's discussions of Brahms music highly insightful. It is less detailed, perhaps, than Malcolm MacDonald's study which discusses virtually every work of Brahms; but there is ample material here to form a basis for an exploration and appreciation of Brahms's music. Brahms' romanticism and his musical formalism and learning are well-explored and tied in with a consideration of his major works. Swafford's most thorough musical discussions are of the four symphonies, and he tends to move quicker over Brahms's songs. (This was also the case in Swafford's book on Ives.)

I felt I got to know Brahms, in spite of himself, in this book. Brahms devoted himself wholeheartedly to his art, and in the process lost a great deal of the value of human love and human sexual closeness. It was and remains a difficult exchange. More than encouraging the reader to get to know and love Brahms's music, Swafford's biography will help the reader think about and try to compassionately understand people.

William Battersby says

Not only one of the best biographies of a composer I have read, but one of the best biographies of anyone!

This book is engaging, earthy, detailed and magisterial all at the same. The reader feels he/she really gets to understand this not-always-very-approachable man and links the great events of his life with his music.

Unlike many music biographies, you can read it and enjoy it without having heard a note of Brahms' music. But in truth if you do read it you will want to listen to the music of Brahms (and Joachim) and you will hear far more in it than you ever knew there was.

Highly recommended.

Daniel says

I almost didn't want to read it after I read the introduction, but I was won over once the focus was Brahms and not Swafford. I read this when I was a caste away in Orange County California and I think some of my happiest memories from that first stranding are of reading this book.

The only problem is that at times Swafford admits that Brahms is not as great as Beethoven. Of course he isn't, but whenever he did that I wanted to put the book down and go read another Beethoven biography. It's not that I wanted Swafford to delude himself or deceive me, I just wish he hadn't begged the comparison, which he did for me occasionally. Sorry Swafford, I know I am mostly complaining here but I really liked the book. It reads like a story, which is how I like my biographies.

Laura says

Johannes Brahms is one of the greatest composers of all time. He wrote 4 beautiful symphonies, all of which I have listened to and loved. My favorite piece by Brahms would probably be the Piano Quintet in F minor, it is really dramatic. The fiery elegance of the piece will take your breath away.

Jennifer Huang says

So good. I almost cried when he dies at the end (spoiler alert).

happy says

I found this a very well researched and readable biography of one of the greatest composers of his generation and the last of the 3 B's of classical music – Johannes Brahms. Mr Swafford looks at Brahms' life from his childhood in Hamburg through to his death in Vienna. In telling his story, the author looks at his loves, rivalries, his penchant for brutal honesty and even his agnosticism. In the preface, the author states that writing a biography of Brahms is more difficult than some of the others he has written because Brahms did everything in his power to destroy the raw material of a biographer. He destroyed all the letters he had in his possession and any others that he sent that he could convince the recipients to return, all of his working material for his compositions, and much of his early work that he considered not up to his standards. In spite of these handicaps, I found this an excellent look at man, his methods and his legacy.

The son of a horn player, Brahms started in the music business early. He played piano in the cabarets/brothels of the port of Hamburg as a preteen. The author gives credence to the stories that he was molested by the ladies employed by those establishments and speculates that this might have been the basis of his not being able to form a lasting romantic relationship. That said, Mr. Swafford does look at the ladies that had influence his life. The most important being the wife/widow of his patron Robert Schumann, Clara.

In telling the story of their life long relationship the author speculates that their love never became physical, and in spite of that Clara was the love of his life. Even after the romantic aspect faded, they maintained a strong friendship 'til her death. Along with her husband she was one of his earliest and most ardent backers. The author makes the point that he was the rock she could rely on as her husband descended into madness and an early death. Clara was a renowned pianist in her own right and often premiered his compositions and built her repertoire around them. In addition to Clara, the author speculates on the other romantic interests in his life and his inability to move from a respectable "courtship" to marriage. That is not to say he was gay – he apparently was a regular patron of the ladies of the evening in whatever town he happened to be living.

Mr. Swafford also looks at his rivalry with the other two masters of the time – Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner. The author states that Brahms was a devotee of the classical school of Beethoven, Bach and Mozart and detested the "New German School" of Liszt, Wagner and their devotees. That said he apparently was on good personal terms with them.

One other aspect of Brahms that Mr. Swafford explores is his irascibility. To say he was blunt in his dealing with others is to put it kindly. He would not humor people. If someone asked his opinion on their

composition or playing ability, friend or not, he would tell them exactly what he thought. This led to much tension in his inner circle. Even with this, many of his inner circle remained lifelong friends.

In addition to telling Brahms' life story, the author looks at his music, how it is constructed, and even includes snippets of scores. While I enjoy classical music, much of this was way over my head. That said, I did not find it too distracting from the rest of the narrative and I even learned interesting tidbits that I think will improve my enjoyment of the music

All in all this is an excellent look at one of the giants of classical music and well worth the time to read. I rate this a solid 4 stars for Goodreads.

Dominic Carlone says

Richly researched and written, it would be a joy for anybody interested in Brahms and his musical century. Swafford's insight into the nuances of the mythical rivalry between Brahms and Wagner is a particular revelation. Also, his ability to place the featured works of Brahms within the context of his life story is masterful, taking us as close as we can get to the mind of the composer in creating them and of his friends (in particular, the Schumanns) upon first hearing them. Of the book's faults, Swafford's habit of speculating on hidden meanings in the letters, etc. of the players in the story (almost invariably to the discredit of the speaker) seems at odds with a professed zero tolerance for speculation in his opening. It's a tendency that is natural enough, especially given Brahms' extensive efforts to obscure his life for posterity (by burning letters and so on), but given Swafford's claim that he would steer clear, it left me shaking my head a number of times. But, all in all, the book was indeed a page turner, even if the pages turned a little slowly during the more technical musical analysis (which, I admit, is due to my own sub-amateur knowledge), and I would recommend it without reservation to anybody interested in the subject.

Matthew Davidson says

I would tentatively recommend this biography. While it certainly is very long, and definitely not lacking in detail, some of that extraordinary amount of detail is not correct. For instance, on page 48, he describes insurrections taking place in several countries, including "Czechoslovakia" in 1848. In reality, Czechoslovakia did not come into existence until 1918, some 70 years later. What country did he mean? While some people may feel that this is a small point, the author makes reference in his introduction to a number of other errors being pointed out to him since it was published in hard cover. This is not good.

In addition, the author mentions the Frauenchor (women's choir) that Brahms directed while at the same time as mentioning Brahms' Marienlieder. While it is not made clear that there is no connection between the work and the choir, their being mentioned together indicates that the Marienlieder was written for women's voices alone, when in fact it was written for mixed choir. This is never made clear. Then the author goes on to mention that Brahms eventually wrote six Marienlieder, when in fact it was seven. These are not state secrets being held in an obscure archive at an obscure university in Bad Ischl; they are readily available and quantifiable basic facts that the author did not bother to either make clear or verify. These and other faux pas bring into question his research abilities (or rather, those of his assistant[s]), and how far he can be trusted, despite him often citing his sources.

On the plus side, there are few writers who have such a tremendous command of the English language and write as powerfully as Swafford can. I found it often fascinating to read. If nothing else, his tome helped me

to appreciate Brahms' music more than before. In addition, Swafford points out that one of the reasons for the lowering of musical standards (amongst composers and others) is the fact that people don't play two-piano or four-hand one piano renditions of important works anymore, due to the rise of the gramophone, and now the compact disc player. At times, his insights are exceptional.

The problem with composer biographies is that those whose research abilities are impeccable rarely have good writing skills, and vice-versa. For those who need to be sure that the information they are getting is absolutely correct, they will have to approach a good reference librarian to recommend an academic rather than a "popular" biography.

Carol says

This lengthy biography was an endlessly fascinating read. Swafford focuses more on Brahms' life, psychology, and relationships than on analyses of his compositional technique and development. There is a lot of detail here, but the prose never bogs down. Swafford has a great deal of insight into Brahms' motivations and his position as a relatively conservative yet daring composer caught between the waning of Romanticism and the emergence of modernism. The analysis and discussion of Brahms' music that does appear in the text makes the latter clear, and helps to explain the richness in these pieces.

He also has a very clear eye regarding his subject, portraying Brahms' as a complex person with flaws that often caused conflict with and even estrangement from even his closest friends and with virtues that drew people to him and cemented life-long friendships. I particularly enjoyed the examination of his relationship with Clara Schumann, which spanned four decades and was foundational to Brahms' personal and professional life.

Barbara says

A very nicely paced narrative of a great and interesting man and his times. Because of the intelligence of the author and his respect for his subject, I became filled with enthusiasm for Brahms and listened to a lot of his music. I travelled through his life with him from Opus 1 on. About half the music was new to me (thank you, YouTube). Though I'm an amateur, almost all the musical analysis was accessible and helpful. I loved Swafford's way with words - movingly high-flown just where I wanted it to be and dry to the appropriate degree at just the right moments.

Elyse says

It took me 5 months to read this book. It's not that I didn't like it; I just needed to take a break once in awhile and read lighter fare. I would get bogged down in the technical descriptions. I'm not unfamiliar with classical music. I took cello lessons for 10 years and played in my school and college orchestras. But not being a music major I never took any musical theory classes. And there are a lot of things written in this book that only a real musician could understand. I read every word but I can't say I really comprehended the technical parts.

Reading this book was a multi media experience for me. I own a few Brahms' CD's but my brother is an avid vinyl and CD collector; as I read about a piece I would ask him for a copy to hear and he was able to oblige every time. Sometimes with two versions. It was a wonderful way to enjoy this biography.

Ruth says

It took me a lot longer to finish this book than it did for others of my musical friends who've read this fantastic biography, but that had more to do with my impatience with musical analysis than other factors (after all, the book IS a scholarly work, even though it generally reads as a story anyone would pore over with great interest--so long as the reader loves the music of Brahms, anyway!) It IS a large tome, though--over 600 pages, easily--and there's so much to digest, it takes doing so a bit at a time.

In the end, one comes away not only with a greater appreciation for Brahms the man (and his reputation as a grouchy old bachelor is warranted!--but there's so much more THERE than just the myths), but also the other great musical, political, artistic figures who shared his history. This is easily as much a history of Robert and Clara Schumann as it is a Brahms history--also not a surprise, since nearly all classical music lovers know how the Schumanns' lives intertwined with that of Brahms--but there are also fascinating insights into Brahms's relations with Liszt and Wagner (both of whom he disliked, or more correctly--both of whose MUSIC he abhorred) and many others (for instance, he and Tchaikovsky disliked each other, whereas Edvard Grieg and Brahms admired each other's music). There is ample discussion of the women Brahms loved but never married, as well as thoughtful psycho-analysis on the wounds and abuses of his younger years that very likely caused him to remain a bachelor until the end.

A fantastic biography of a musical "lion"(one of the three "B's: Bach, Beethoven--and Brahms). Well worth the effort.

Richard says

I don't read many biographies, and I'm not sure why I picked this up, but I immediately liked the book, especially as it was written by a musician. The portions of the book that focus on the music are fabulous, even with my limited understanding, and I believe the author writes about the music the way that Brahms was intended to be appreciated.

However the rest, as the book goes on, descends into tedium. The problem really is that Brahms' life is too long and too large, and the author having set a standard for event reporting, just has too much to report, and can't step back. As a result, I became more distant from the author and from Brahms himself. I acknowledge it is a difficult task, but, to use a Brahms analogy, might have mixed up the writing style, like the last movement of Brahms' 4th, than just use the same reporting style.

I can recommend this to a lot of people, especially musicians, and biography lovers who want a change of pace. Brahms was a true giant and I love his music. The book is enlightening in many ways. I just can't recommend it enthusiastically.

MrSlowreader says

I was surprised to find that this book was out of print, undeservedly so. Having come from Jan Swafford's excellent biography of Beethoven, I had high expectations for this one, expectations which were not left

disappointed. This book provides an excellent overview of both Brahms the man, and his times, written in an engaging and accessible manner. The musical analysis is not too dense for the uninitiated, and should offer readers a deeper insight into the music we all so love and revere.

Brahms' life and career were full of dichotomies: the romantic young Kreisler vs. the classicist Herr Doktor Brahms, the musical conservative vs. the innovative composer of rhythmic ingenuity, the upstanding north German vs. the resident of frivolous Vienna, the man who longed for a home and family of his own vs. the man who did everything in his powers to ensure he remained "frei aber froh" (free but happy, or should that be lonely).

Tyler says

Maybe I don't love Brahms enough, but I found this book to be too detailed. It would go on and on about very minor little historical characters and their interaction with Brahms. I felt like I was sifting, along with the researcher, through piles and piles of papers to get to the essence of who Brahms was. I wish he would have been more willing to not share EVERYTHING he researched. I finally gave up after reading about 450 pages of this tedious book.

I will say that it is well researched and contains a lot of info but I would only recommend it to serious Brahms enthusiasts or to those who have read a bio of Brahms before and want to fill in some of the details of his life.

Timothy says

This is, by far, the best biography of any composer I have read. It not only presented interesting information about Brahms, the man, it also presented concurrent and detailed analysis of some of his seminal works. As I was reading, I would go find a youtube recording, and immediately not only see, but hear was I was reading about. My understanding and appreciation of Brahms the person and the breadth of his composition has been enhanced many fold.

Szabolcs Sebestyén says

This is the best biography I have ever read. Swafford finds the equilibrium how to describe the life of a composer, without being very technical on his music. Most people know Brahms, the composer. However, we know very little about Brahms, the human being. Brahms excellently shows Brahms' human side, and helps us understand his works through his personality. We get to know a grumpy man, whose misogyny originates from his childhood, and who feared that he would be just a footnote in the history of music. His unfulfilled love for Clara Schumann is a beautiful human story that ensured that Brahms would become one of the greatest composers of all time, since he made a decision and turned away from love, and instead chose music. As Swafford writes it: "He was ready to substitute an archetypal, and unilateral, Brahmsian bargain: to live with yearning rather than fulfillment." A must-read for anyone who wants to know the person behind the music.
