

Why Brahms Sounds Best In Brooklyn

By FRED KIRSHNIT

When Johannes Brahms was asked to remove himself as conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic, the stated grievance was his reluctance to perform much contemporary music, including, ironically, his own. Brahms instead programmed what was considered a disproportionate amount of Bach and Handel, gaining him the reputation of being behind the times. But his penchant for the old masters was a direct result of his reverence for the past, and a major element of his own compositional style.

MARK PESKANOV, PETER BRUNS & VLADIMIR STOUPEL
Bargemusic

An examination of Brahms's adaptation of musical tradition is key to understanding his controlled intensity. In the Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 38, performed on Friday evening at Bargemusic, the main theme of the first movement is a reworking of the Contrapunctus 3 from Bach's Art of the Fugue, while the fugato of the finale is built around a theme almost identical to the Contrapunctus 13. This is more than mere quoting; rather it is a trumpeting of solid principles of unity and organization.

The piece received nothing short of a great performance. Peter Bruns has been principal cellist of both the Dresden Staatskapelle and the Bayreuth Festival orchestras. I can only imagine how beautiful the solo at the beginning of "Die Walkure" must be with him in the pit. Just two notes into the Brahms and it was clear we were in for something special. Mr. Bruns plays a Carlo Tononi instrument made in Venice in 1730, whose front is positively blackened with age and conditioning. The sound that he has developed is woody, deep, resonant, circadian — it is as if it em-

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anated from within the listener. Hearing him on the Barge, where patrons sit so close to the stage as to seem a part of the ensemble itself, was a memorable experience.

Mr. Bruns employs a highly developed vibrato and makes the most of his strong hands to fashion each note in the grand, emotional style of the mid-19th century. This work is a particularly passionate one, even for Brahms, and Mr. Bruns conveyed its depth of feeling expertly. Also, his superb dexterity served him very well in the final allegro. This was white-hot Romanticism, supported lovingly but unyieldingly by Vladimir Stoupel at the piano. The finest realization of any work I have encountered thus far this season, it was so involving that I actually forgot to look at the fabulous view of Lower Manhattan.

Bargemusic's artistic director and frequent violin soloist, Mark Peskanov, joined the duo for two piano trios. The Haydn No. 44 in E major, Hob. XV: 28 was both aristocratically graceful and chillingly dramatic, an unusual combination for a piece of 18th-century courtly music. Mr. Peskanov mentioned that he hears the style that inspired Shostakovich in this work — the way that we can hear Prokofiev in Mozart — and he led this reading so that a strong case was made for its connection to the future. The conclusion of the allegretto sounded very modern indeed.

The evening ended with Brahms's C major Piano Trio. Considering that the much later C minor was written just before the "Double" (for violin, cello, and orchestra), it would be legitimate to assume that those two works were in similar styles, but actually it is this middle period work that mirrors the great concerto. Some of the themes, including the opening one, are specifically written for the stringed combination exclusively, and the piano does not reprise them as it normally would in a Brahms construction.

It was a special thrill to hear these two string players — so in sync in their athletic, masculine vibratos — offer these lissome Brahmsian melodies. For a pick-up ensemble, the trio was remarkably balanced, and Mr. Stoupel sacrificed none of his harmonic or foundational power by playing somewhat more quietly than it is reported was the penchant of the original pianist-composer. You don't hear this high level of quality very often on the other side of the river.