

# THE SPIRIT OF FOLK SONG IN THE LIEDER OF JOHANNES BRAHMS

Sally Horgan

In Brahms's lifetime his folk song setting came to be considered not only popular music but actual folk songs themselves. Brahms's love and reverence for folk song is seen throughout his work. In the second movement of the First Piano Sonata, Opus 1 (ca. 1854), he uses the folk music which is later heard in No. 49 of the 49 *Deutsche Volks-lieder*, completed in 1894.

Consistently over this forty year span, folk song can be seen influencing Brahms's work. It has been noted that Brahms was not a scholar of what constituted authentic folk music as "misunderstandings about the authenticity were fairly widespread among nineteenth century musicians, particularly in Germany"(1: 86). His preoccupation, rather, was with the spirit of folk music as the ideal of expression. A nineteenth century trend with folk art was "to render music more acutely expressive through the use of local, regional traits" (1: 85).

This spirit conveyed in Brahms's work is most strongly felt in his song settings, of which seventy out of two hundred songs are folk song settings. Brahms's songs are what Germans call "volksthumlich", that is "artistically idealizing the folk song style" (1: 276). Brahms himself wrote to Clara Schumann, "Songs today have gone so far astray that one cannot cling too closely to one's ideal, and that ideal is the folk song" (3:172).

A prime quality of German folk music is simplicity of melody and rhythm. These characteristics can be seen in Brahms's folk song settings: in his use of predominantly diatonic handling of the melodies which are "invariably simple, singable and fluently melodious" (2: 276); in basses which move mostly diatonically with most chromaticism heard in the inner parts; in maintenance of consistent rhythmic patterns in the melodies with more complex rhythmic patterns being in the instrumental accompaniment. Another folk song influence is seen as he starts straight into the songs, avoiding long piano introductions and postludes.

Nearly half of Brahms's songs, including non-folk song settings, are strophic or modified strophic in form, indicating another folk influence. When he uses through-composed form, he uses "the method of repeating the melody of the first stanza note for note in the last to give the listener the feeling of return after the variations of the middle verses" (3: 172). For Geiringer, the form of Brahms's songs is almost always "symmetrical, beautifully complete and even" (4: 267).

In choosing text, it appears that on numerous occasions Brahms turned instinctively to folk song, his choice of texts regularly reflecting "his own inner moods and needs" (5: 843). His devotion to minor poets and anonymous folk song texts allowed him to adapt verse "for autobiographical purposes" (5: 843). A favorite source of folk song material throughout his life was the collection published by Kretzschmer and Zuccamaglio, *Deutsche Volkslieder mit ihren Original-Weisen*.

The above mentioned folk song influences will be observed as they emerge in several examples of Brahms's folk song settings. Brahms experienced a great deal of emotion during his life and a fair beginning would be his relationship with the Schumann family. Struck severely by both Robert Schumann's illness and eventual death and Clara Schumann's plight of being alone with eight children to raise and support, Brahms internalized many emotions which surely were to emerge in later works.

In *Das Lied vom Herrn von Falkenstein*, opus 43, No. 4, written ca. 1857, we see the use of a folk song text from Uhland's "Volkslieder." All nine verses are about a woman's devotion to her lover who is being held

prisoner. The woman's constant pleading, "release my prisoner, I shall surely go out of my mind unless I see him again," might very well reflect Clara's burden at this time. The declamatory melody follows folk song tradition in its simplicity. Over nine verses, Brahms maintains a folk-like form with enough variety to keep the song interesting.

*Liebesklage des Mädchens*, Opus 48, No. 3, takes its text from the folk song collection "Des Knaben Wunderhorn":

If thou wouldst know of fountains never sleeping,  
the which ever on by night and day,  
Then see my eyes, so weary with their weeping.

If thou wouldst know of wounds to thee appealing,  
The which mayhap thy pity might allay,  
Then see my heart, so torn and past all healing.

In modified strophic form, the melody is simple with the main interest coming from the harmonies of the accompaniment. In the work, the simple vocal line is enhanced by the use of diminished seventh and secondary chords.

Before leaving Dusseldorf to take a post in Detmold, Brahms wrote the 28 *Deutsche Volkslieder* (published 1856) and the 14 *Volkskinderlieder* (published 1858) which he dedicated to the family of Clara and Robert Schumann. Numbers 4 and 10, *Sandmännchen* and *Wiegenlied*, from the *Volkskinderlieder*, show Brahms's special tenderness for children. In *Sandmännchen*, Brahms uses a genuine folk song melody from the "Geistlicher Psalter," published in 1697. He embellishes it with his inspired accompaniment in which an *una corda* quaver depicts the trickling of sand. In *Wiegenlied*, the original folk song melody from Kretschmer and Zuccamaglio's collection is constructed over a folk song-like accompaniment which includes elements of a genuine Upper- Austrian waltz song. The entire melody is simple, only using five pitches. The bass of the accompaniment consists of broken one and five chords.

As Brahms's songs mature, he shows fluency in the song-form. His folk songs have two characteristics: they are advanced in technique and evoke emotions from his poignant past. In *Mädchenlied*, Opus 85, No. 3, a setting of a translation of a Serbian poem, "the combination of art and folk, experience and innocence, sounds like the mating of naive young melodies with old and knowing accompaniments" (6: 50). The poem, set in two strophic verses, tells of a girl who asks the rose why it blooms when she has no one to pick it for. Interestingly, Brahms uses a 5/4 meter with a rather complex 2 against 3 rhythmic pattern in the introduction and coda. In studies done later by Kodaly and Bartok, it was proven that folk-dance music often uses these more complex rhythms.

In Brahms's later period of creative output, he is "no longer so naively wedded to the folk song . . . . However, we still notice many little traits in the more elaborate songs which show how completely the master had adapted the language of the folk song" (4: 282). In the *Zigeunerlieder*, written ca. 1887, Brahms hoped to capture the spirit of Hungarian folk music without copying it. The words and melodies are based on Hungarian folk songs. He strove to produce artistic music by retaining only certain aspects of the gypsy music: the favorite Hungarian rhythm of 2/4 is used in all eight of the songs; imitation of gypsy instruments such as the cymbal and dulcimer; use of syncopation; and irregular rhythms of 3, 5, and 7 bars. In No. 8 of the *Zigeunerlieder*, the use of syncopation is seen in the accompaniment. In No. 4, the rolled chords may represent the gypsy dulcimer.

This later period, 1894, saw the completion of the *49 Deutsche Volkslieder* which Brahms had begun ca. 1854. He strove to maintain the original melodies and texts as well as maximum expression in the accompaniment without detracting from the folk song character. Upon completion of the last song in the collection, Brahms must have felt a great sense of satisfaction of completion of a task begun in his youth.

The last song, *Verstohlen geht der Mond auf*, exemplifies Brahms's feelings of completion. "Did you realize," he wrote to his publisher, "that as a composer I definitely have said farewell? The last of the folk songs and the same one in my Opus 1 are the serpent which bites its tail and says nicely, symbolically, that the story is over. If I should compose anything for fun . . . I shall take care that publishers will not be tempted" (8: 144).

Hence, the spirit of the folk song which lives in Brahms's songs is seen as a special means of expression for a man who idealized that form and style. In one last example, *In stiller Nacht*, from the *49 Deutsche Volkslieder*, Brahms took an original folk melody and used it for the first few bars, composing the remainder of the melody himself. "But how magnificently the melody is contained in the very spirit of the song! Who could detect the work of the restorer, and who could fail to recognize that this stylistically faithful continuation of an older melody was possible only after a complete absorption of the spirit of the folk song" (4: 290)? The essence, then, of Brahms's ideal song is the spirit of folk song which he captures so faithfully in his folk song settings.

## Works Cited

1. Harrison, Max. *The Lieder of Brahms*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978.
2. Thompson, Oscar. *The International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, 11th Ed. Bruce Bohle, ed. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985.
3. Becker, Heinz. "Johannes Brahms". *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Stanley Sadie, ed. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980.
4. Geiringer, Karl. *Brahms, His Life and Work*. London: George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1948.
5. Sams, Eric. "Lied IV." *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Stanley Sadie, ed. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980.
6. \_\_\_\_\_. *Brahms's Songs*. Seattle: U of Washington Press, 1972.
7. Evans, Edwin, ed. *Historical, Descriptive and Analytical Account of the Entire Works of Johannes Brahms: Handbook to the Vocal Works of Brahms*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1970.
8. Pascall, Robert, ed. *Brahms: Biographical, Documetary and Analytical Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.