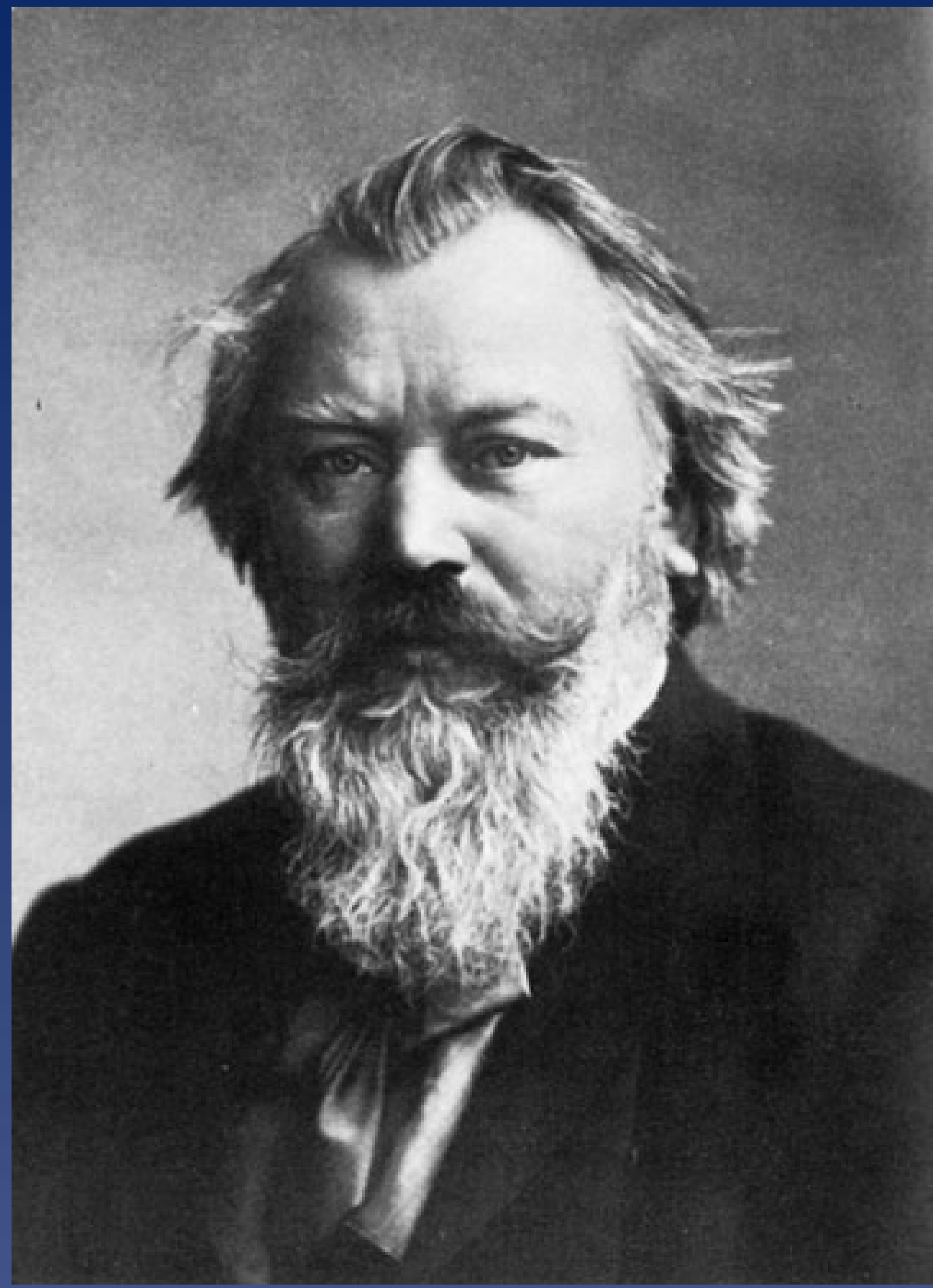


Brahms, Opus 32: The Forgotten Cycle



Johannes Brahms

A song cycle may be loosely defined as a set of works for solo voice and piano intended for performance as a whole, and in a predetermined order. Established by such composers as Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann, cycles are typically characterized by a deliberate structure, the texts of which are almost without exception by the same author. So conventional is the practice of containing the settings of a single poet, it may be considered a prerequisite. Song cycles are also distinguished, therefore, by one or more unifying elements originating in the poetry, such as literary themes or narration. It is thus inherent that a composer takes a deliberate approach to writing a cycle, both in his selection and setting of the texts. The result is a cohesive musical form with an obvious structure dependent on the aforementioned elements, the musical expression of which is influenced by the text.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) is known to have written only one group of songs, *Die Schöne Magelone*, which adequately fits the description of a cycle, but there is a neglected collection of pieces that deserves more thorough investigation. The nine songs of his Opus 32, composed in 1864, employ nearly every convention of a song cycle. However, the texts consist of the settings of two authors (Georg Friedrich Daumer and August von Platen-Hallermünde), a detail almost trivial in the face of the obvious consistency of both its poetic and musical coherence.

Brahms Opus 32: *Neun Lieder und Gesänge* (Nine Songs)

1. *Wie rafft' ich mich auf in der Nacht* (how I roused myself in the night)
2. *Nicht mehr zu dir zu gehen* (To go to you no longer)
3. *Ich schleich umher* (I lurk abroad)
4. *Der Strom, der neben mir verrauschte* (The stream that went past me)
5. *Wehe, so willst du mich wieder* (Alas, so you would again)
6. *Du sprichst, dass ich mich tauschte* (You say that I deluded myself)
7. *Bitteres zu sagen denkst du* (You think of something bitter to say)
8. *So stehn wir, ich und meine Weide* (So we stand, I and my mistress)
9. *Wie bist du, meine Königin* (How are you, my queen)

This work and its texts contain several elements characteristic of Romantic literature and the German Lied. The consistency of specific features, such as that of nature, wandering, the pensive first-person and elusive, unattainable second-person liken this set to such well-known cycles as Schubert's *Winterreise*. The plot is an obvious shift from a lament to an attempt to flee, and finally to a bittersweet acceptance and longing admiration.

The composer is unobtrusive in his choice of more than one poet, as if disguising the connection between the pieces by choosing texts without a non-musical association. The order he chooses, however, provides a unique clarity that otherwise would not exist; nowhere is this more evident than in the first three pieces. The narrator wanders out of his town, drawn forth almost unwillingly by some pressing, personal matter, which is revealed in the second to be a troubled companionship he has sworn to cease, yet cannot stay away from. His demand that the companion reveal their "true feelings" is answered in the third piece by his speculative gloom. It is thus that the composer has taken the matter of coherence upon himself, rather than leave it to the poet.

Brahms had a troubled, fervent and apparently unconsummated affair with the composer and pianist Clara Schumann (1819-1896). This a somewhat hackneyed subject, upon which there has more speculation than proof; in any case, Brahms admits in various letters a distressed infatuation with her. The prominence of their relationship often obscures the full extent of his interactions with women; Clara Schumann was one of many unsuccessful endeavors, any of which may have provided the motivation for a cycle of this nature. This opus was composed nearly ten years after Brahms wrote to Clara, "I can do nothing but think of you... What have you done to me? Can't you remove the spell you have cast over me?" suggesting one of his other affairs, perhaps one unknown to history, is the subject of this cycle.

Known primarily as a composer of non-dramatic works, Brahms did not write anything that was meant to be staged. Interpretation of his Opus 32 as a song cycle illustrates a literary and dramatic sensibility previously unassociated with the composer.



Clara Schumann