

FONTES

A R T I S M U S I C A E



A MASTER STANDS: RARE BRAHMS PHOTOS IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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English Abstract

Johannes Brahms was very conscious of his appearance, both in person and in photographs. There are few candid depictions of him and our main images of him are largely headshots. Four little-known photographs of Brahms are in the papers of Henryk Szeryng in the Library of Congress. They were taken in 1896 during a private music festival at Hagerhof, Germany. These photographs permit us to evade Brahms' own control of his iconography and make contemporary assessments of his image.

French Abstract

Johannes Brahms était très conscient de son apparence, à la fois en personne et en photographies. Il y a peu de représentations franches de lui et nos images principales de lui sont pour la plus grande partie des portraits de son visage. Quatre photographies, peu connues de Brahms, se trouvent entre les papiers de Henryk Szeryng à la Bibliothèque du Congrès. Elles ont été prises en 1896 lors d'un festival de musique privé au Hagerhof, en Allemagne. Ces photographies nous permettent d'échapper au contrôle iconographique de Brahms lui-même et de faire des évaluations contemporaines de son image.

German Abstract

Johannes Brahms war sich seiner äußeren Erscheinung sowohl im direkten Kontakt als auch auf Fotos sehr bewusst. Es gibt nur wenige ungestellte Abbildungen von ihm und die wichtigsten Bilder sind überwiegend Porträtaufnahmen. In den Unterlagen Henryk Szeryngs in der Library of Congress befinden sich vier recht unbekannte Fotos von Brahms. Sie wurden im Jahr 1896 während eines privaten Musikfestivals im deutschen Hagerhof aufgenommen. Diese Aufnahmen erlauben es uns, Brahms eigene Kontrolle seiner Darstellung zu umgehen und diese zeitgenössisch einzuschätzen.

For a master of abstract music, Johannes Brahms enjoyed surprisingly close ties with the most realistic of media, photography. A remarkable set of photographs taken as early as 1853, the year Schumann introduced him to the musical world,² document the transformation of a cherub-looking youth into a Viennese patriarch. Brahms not only posed before the camera but also enjoyed exchanging photos with his close friends and was touchy when unflattering images made their way to the public.³ Taking offence at a

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2. See Robert Schumann, "Neue Bahnen," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, vol. 39, no. 18 (October 28, 1853).

3. *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, selected and annotated by Styra Avins, trans. Josef Eisinger and Styra Avins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 275.

certain popular postcard of him in 1882, he fumed to his publisher, Fritz Simrock, "That picture has thoroughly enraged me and I wanted to protest loudly against its sale. . . . Couldn't you beg Hug really urgently, in my name, to stop taking and selling the picture! Luckhardt in Vienna has good ones."⁴ If his long beard, artificially-lowered voice, and growing waistline projected the authority of a master,⁵ his photos were preserving that image for posterity, a proper visual complement to his canonic status. To this day, our image of Brahms is generally confined to headshots of him, with magnificent beard and mustache, hair swept back from his forehead, and eyes looking into the distance. Candid depictions, such as Willy von Beckerath's crayon drawings of Brahms at the piano, are rarities.

The point comes into relief by the discovery of four little known Brahms photos in the Library of Congress. These were found in the papers of Henryk Szeryng (1918–88), the legendary violinist whose 1933 debut featured Brahms' concerto.⁶ Taken in May 1896, they show the composer in the company of friends, properly identified at the back of three photos by a Hermann Zigmann: Alwin von Beckerath (1849–1930) with his sons Erich and Heinz (1876–1940); Gustav Ophüls (1866–1926), Bram Eldering (1865–1943); Karl Theodor Piening (1867–1942); and Emilie (Emmie) Weyermann (1861–1924), wife of Walther Weyermann, owner of Hagerhof.⁷ The inscription on the fourth one gives the date and place: "Ostermontag 1896 / Honnef a. Rhein".

Brahms' last visit to the Rheinland in May 1896 is well documented.⁸ The death of Clara Schumann, the great love of his life, threw him into a railway adventure in search of her final resting place in Bonn, where he arrived just in time to attend the funeral procession.⁹ Emotionally devastated, he then sought refuge at a private music festival at Hagerhof, Walther Weyermann's estate at Bad Honnef. Brahms' strong links to the Mennonite community in the area went back as far as 1880.¹⁰ The sight of familiar faces and hours of music making had a soothing effect on him leading to an extended stay. During this time (following Whitsunday (May 24) and not Easter (April 5), as noted on the photographs)

4. *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, 595. Hug and Luckhardt were music publishers in Zürich and Vienna, respectively.

5. Brahms had "abnormally high voice," which he tried to lower with exercises; after two unsuccessful attempts, he finally grew a beard in 1878. On his "disappointing vocal endowment and physical size," see Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 177.

6. Library of Congress, Music Division, "Henryk Szeryng collection, 1933–1988," Box 29/1. I wish to thank Dr. Denise P. Gallo for securing Mrs. Waltrud Szeryng's permission to reproduce the photos here.

7. Beckerath was a leading figure in Krefeld's musical life and an amateur violonist-violist who greatly admired Brahms. A young lawyer at this time, Ophüls would later publish *Brahms-Texte. Vollständige Sammlung der von Johannes Brahms komponierten und musikalisch bearbeiteten Dichtungen* (Berlin, 1898). Eldering was concertmaster and Piening was cellist and later Kapellmeister (1915–20) of the Meiningen Court Orchestra. Walther Weyermann was an industrialist and Heinz's uncle.

8. The events of that memorable weekend are described in G[ustav]. Ophüls, *Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms* (Berlin: Verlag der Deutschen Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1921); and Heinz von Beckerath, "Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms: Brahms und seine Krefelder Freunde," *Die Heimat* (Krefeld) 29/1–4 (1958), 81–93; trans. Josef Eisinger with introduction and annotations by Styra Avins, in *Brahms and His World: Revised Edition*, ed. Walter Frisch and Kevin Carnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 349–80. I thank Professor George Bozarth for directing me to Ophüls' memoirs.

9. Brahms cried "Apart from Frau Schumann I'm not attached to anybody with my whole soul!" For his trip to Bonn, see Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*, 611–12.

10. Elfrieda Franz Hiebert, "Johannes Brahms and His Mennonite Friends," *Mennonite Life* 13/4 (October 1958), 156–9 (available online at <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/pre2000/1958oct.pdf>).



ILLUSTRATION 1 Heinz and Erich von Beckerath, Gustav Ophüls, Brahms, Bram Eldering, Alwin von Beckerath. *Henryk Szeryng Collection, Music Division, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Reproduced with permission.*

the twenty-year-old Heinz von Beckerath captured the master in moments of relaxation between friends. He later recalled: “It was my good fortune to take several photographs in those days [. . .] Brahms thanked me for them in a friendly letter, in which he expressed the hope to be able to thank me again next year.”¹¹ The photographs were among Brahms’ very last. In less than a year he would be dead of cancer.

Obvious as is their historical value, the photographs remain practically unknown to the public and have been only vaguely recalled by Brahms experts. Rarity is not the issue here. The Brahms reminiscences of Gustav Ophüls, one of the guests at Hagerhof, made them available as early as 1921.¹² In America, they appeared as early as 1958 in *Mennonite Life* and in a Brahmsiana exhibition at the Detroit Public Library in 1980.¹³ Moreover, a set

11. *Brahms and His World*, 375–6.

12. Gustav Ophüls reproduced and commented on four of the photos in his *Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms*, [33], [41], 21–2. The volume was reprinted by Ophüls’ daughter Erika as *Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms: Ein Beitrag aus dem Kreis seiner rheinischen Freunde. Mit zeitgenössischen Photographien* (Ebenhausen bei München: Langewiesche-Brandt, 1983).

13. Hiebert, “Johannes Brahms and His Mennonite Friends,” 157; *Johannes Brahms: The Man and his Work* (Detroit, 1980).



ILLUSTRATION 2 Alwin von Beckerath, Gustav Ophüls, Brahms, Bram Eldering. *Henryk Szeryng Collection, Music Division, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Reproduced with permission.*

of three of the photos (in addition to another one absent in the Szeryng archive) is held in the Livingston Gearhart collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo.¹⁴ Yet none of them will be found in the two defining Brahms publications of our times, Jan Swafford's biography and Styra Avin's collection of letters. From an editor's perspective, this exclusion makes perfect sense. Taken from a distance, the photos do not concentrate on Brahms but on groups of people. Why should one prefer them over the more popular head shots encapsulating the essence of Brahms' features: authority, resolve, monumentality?

Yet there is more to this neglect. In contrast to the image of a master that we have long been accustomed to, von Beckerath's photos capture only Brahms the man and, even worse, his unimpressive stature. Indeed, Gustav Ophüls singled out the first one as evidence of Brahms' height. He being 1.82 cm tall and both men standing on the same line,

14. Livingston Gearhart Collection of Photographs, 1896–1950, State University of New York at Buffalo, on-line (http://ubdigit.buffalo.edu/collections/lib/lib-mus/lib-mus019_Gearhart.php). One image, Illustration 3 above, has been cropped to remove the man on the left edge of the photograph, Karl Theodor Piening.



ILLUSTRATION 3 Karl Theodor Piening, Alwin von Beckerath, Gustav Ophüls, Brahms, Bram Eldering. *Henryk Szeryng Collection, Music Division, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Reproduced with permission.*

he estimated his friend to be around 1.70 cm.¹⁵ Surrounded by people considerably taller (and leaner) than himself, Brahms' image suffers and what remains clearly visible of his monumental head is the long white beard. Equally alienating is his apparently flirtatious posture next to hostess Emmie Weyermann only a few days after Frau Schumann's funeral, an image clashing with existing reports of a mourning Brahms. The photos would require, then, extensive commentary in order to be properly understood and used in public. Whatever exegetical intervention may be needed, however, their historical accuracy recommends their inclusion in Brahms iconography as records of a master's private life.

15. *Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms* (1921), 21–2.



ILLUSTRATION 4 Brahms and Emmy Weyermann standing in the veranda (cropped photo). *Henryk Szeryng Collection, Music Division, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Reproduced with permission.*