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The Brahms Centenary Exhibition

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THE BRAHMS CENTENARY EXHIBITION
By Dr. Otto E. Albrecht

Johannes Brahms, the centenary of whose birth was observed on May 7, was honored by a noteworthy exhibition in the University Library which was on view during the first three weeks of that month. The generosity of collectors in Philadelphia and New York in lending their treasures for the exhibition made possible a display of considerable interest for the layman as well as for the musician. Unpublished letters and photographs, manuscripts of Brahms' compositions, and a virtually forgotten work of the composer, were the high spots in the collection of objects which filled seven exhibition cases, and indeed a large quantity of material was rejected for lack of space.

Since most of the original mss. of Brahms' compositions are in the possession of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, to which he willed his possessions, or of his publishers, a great deal of interest attached to the mss. of two of the composer's finest lieder, lent by Mr. Charles Sessler. They are the printer's copies of "Die Schnur, die Perl' an Perle," and "Wir muessen uns trennen," the second song one of the Magelone cycle. Carefully written in ink, with a few last-minute changes in pencil, they are yet not easy to read off at the piano unless one is familiar with his hand.

To musicologists, perhaps the most important item was a copy of one of Brahms' works which has escaped the attention of the bibliographers. This was a set of orchestrations for five of the songs of Franz Schubert, one of Brahms' favorite composers, of whom he said that "there is not one of his songs from which one can not learn something." The arrangements were made about 1862 for Julius Stockhausen, one of Brahms' intimate friends and the finest lieder singer of his time. Some years after the death of Brahms, Stockhausen had copies made for Horatio Connell, who was studying with him and who is now of the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music. Three of the songs were performed in the Brahms version by Mr. Connell with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1914, the only time they have been performed in America, if not perhaps the only time anywhere since the death of Brahms. Mr. Connell casually mentioned his copy of these works to the writer, thinking they would be of no interest for the exhibition, until he was assured that they were unknown to the Brahms experts. One of the five, Ellen's second song from Scott's "Lady of the Lake," was apparently one of Brahms' favorites, for a setting for soprano solo, women's chorus, and wind instruments was
published in 1927. The scoring in the version made for Stockhausen is for horns and oboes only.

Of the unpublished letters, the most interesting was one lent by Dr. Daniel Gregory Mason, written by Brahms to the famous conductor, Hans von Buelow. It was the latter who, in his admiration for his friend's works, coined the phrases "the three B's" (Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms) and "the tenth symphony" (indicating that Brahms' first symphony was a worthy successor to the ninth of Beethoven). Whatever justification there may have been in these comparisons, they aroused a wave of hostility for which Brahms could scarcely have been grateful. But in this letter he playfully regrets having had to miss a reception in his friend's honor at the court of Saxe-Meiningen, and asks him to let off one of the members of the orchestra from one rehearsal a week in order to keep Brahms informed of von Buelow's doings. But the most amusing feature of the letter is the engraved portrait of von Buelow at the top of the sheet. Apparently Brahms had helped himself to a sheet of his friend's paper while on a visit to Meiningen, and amused himself by sending the portrait back to its owner.

Four other Brahms letters were lent by Dr. E. Brooks Keffer from the collection of the late Dr. Edward I. Keffer, one of the richest in the United States in autograph letters of famous musicians. One of these was to Albert Dietrich, a life-long friend of Brahms, and another to Sir George Henschel, first conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The others were received just as the exhibition opened, and there was no time to identify the person to whom they were addressed. From the Keffer collection came also autographs and photographs of Brahms' friends, Robert and Clara Schumann, and Joseph Joachim, the great violinist.

Robert Haven Schauffler, who had acquired a number of Brahms souvenirs while writing his forthcoming book, "The Unknown Brahms," lent several items of more personal interest. These included a raffia cigar case, perhaps the very one from which was drawn the cigar which figures so prominently in the portrait by Willy von Beckenrath. The latter easily drew the greatest attention of all the Brahms pictures exhibited. Mr. Schauffler also sent the blue pencil with which Brahms corrected his manuscripts, and in view of the composer's intense self-criticism, declared it without too much exaggeration to be "one of the most important tools connected with the history of music."

Only a part of the significant books and articles on Brahms and his music could be accommodated. These ranged from the article in the Neue Zeitschrift fuer Musik for October 28, 1853, edited by Robert Schumann, in which the great composer declared
to musical Germany the genius of the youth of twenty who had just come and shown him his first compositions, to the recent study of the composer’s chamber music by Henry S. Drinker, Jr., an associate trustee of the University, and the original draft of a part of Mr. Schauffler’s book. Parts of the eight-volume Life by Kalbeck and of the monumental complete edition of Brahms’ work in 26 volumes published by Breitkopf and Haertel, were also shown. Nearly a whole case was taken with a display of centenary programs of Brahms’ works given during the past few months in this country. Although the most impressive observance of the centenary was the series of six concerts by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia boasted, in its many concerts, a complete cycle of the composer’s chamber music and songs, both of which were due primarily to the enthusiasm of alumni of the University.

First editions of the individual works of Brahms are not sought after by collectors, but the case containing them was not the least interesting of the exhibition. The elaborately engraved title-pages offered a survey of the changes in taste from 1855 to 1896. The earliest example shown, the B major trio, Opus 8, was a noteworthy association item as well. This copy of Brahms’ first chamber music work was the one from which the world premiere of this work was given in New York in 1855, and this at a time when Brahms was not well known in Germany and when chamber music was just beginning to be seriously accepted in New York. The explanation is that William Mason, who organized the series of concerts in New York, had met Brahms at the home of Liszt at Weimar, and had the wisdom and courage to introduce his works to New York. The violinist of this memorable performance was none other than Theodore Thomas, who was destined to have an enormous influence on the development of musical taste in America as an orchestra conductor.

The widespread interest manifested in this exhibition leads one to hope that others of a similar nature may follow it in future years and that they may add new friends to the Library.