

‘The Vibrant, Passionate Human Soul He Was’: Robert Haven Schauffler’s *The Unknown Brahms* (1933) and the American Middlebrow

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In 1933, the centenary of the birth of Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), a new American biography claimed to reveal previously undisclosed facts about the composer’s life and works. This biography was *The Unknown Brahms* by Robert Haven Schauffler, a Brooklyn-based popular writer and cellist. On its publication, many North American critics praised the book as a pathbreaking work that had humanised Brahms. Today, however, *The Unknown Brahms* holds an unenviable status as an eminently readable but substantively absurd piece of popular psychology based not on serious research, but on hearsay and rumour.

The Unknown Brahms’s reception in North America has remained largely unexamined within the social, aesthetic, and intellectual contexts of its time. One recent exception is Laurie McManus’s article ‘Prostitutes, Trauma, and (Auto)-Biography: Revisiting Brahms at the *Fin-de-Siècle*’—expanded as a chapter in her recent book *Brahms in the Priesthood of Art: Gender and Art Religion in the Nineteenth-Century German Musical Imagination*—which addresses *The Unknown Brahms* for its role in perpetuating a narrative of traumatic childhood.¹ McManus’s focus on the ways in which Brahms biography has historically been psychologised is a welcome move away from the traditionally analytic focus of Brahms scholarship. Yet her work addresses *The Unknown Brahms* as but one expression of a larger biographical narrative that, she argues,

¹ Laurie McManus, ‘Prostitutes, Trauma, and (Auto)-Biographical Narratives: Revisiting Brahms at the *Fin de Siècle*,’ *19th-Century Music*, 42.3 (2019): 225–48; Chapter 6, ‘Biographical Hermeneutics at the *Fin-de-Siècle*,’ in *Brahms in the Priesthood of Art: Gender and Art Religion in the Nineteenth-Century German Musical Imagination* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), 195–227.

originated in Brahms's own lifetime, and which may have been constructed with the help of Brahms himself.²

Following McManus, I explore *The Unknown Brahms's* critical reception around 1933, and ask why it was such a public success. In particular, I do so within the discursive context of the American middlebrow, taking cue from musicology's growing venture into middlebrow studies.³ I begin by contextualising Brahms's reception in early twentieth-century America and the perceived challenges of early Brahms biography. Subsequently, I survey the contents of *The Unknown Brahms* and distinguish Schaufler's false claims from the facts as established since the 1970s. I then examine *The Unknown Brahms's* reception, analysing a range of reviews published in large-circulation newspapers around 1933. I do not defend Schaufler's text or suggest that it has contemporary value. Rather, I use it as an object of historical analysis to yield a glimpse into a period when Brahms's image for North American audiences was rapidly changing.

Brahms: A Biographical Enigma?

'Has the real Brahms biography ever been written?' asked Edward Cushing, music critic for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, in October 1925. 'I think not,' he answered.

There are, in most modern languages, titanic volumes aspiring to evoke for us the figure of that Nineteenth Century giant in all the frowsy generosity of his nature: Brahms, the esthetic ascetic; Brahms, the noble; the plodding Brahms; Brahms the obscure, the recondite; Brahms, at once the Euclid and Kant of music; Brahms, the glorified German kapelmeister, fond of his book and his bock; the gentle Brahms; the Brahms of anecdote, the critic, the teacher; Brahms, the humorist, the elephantine wit, the ponderous playfellow of his friends' households; the bathetic Brahms. We have them all—a long gallery of enthusiastic, pathetic, sentimental, pedantic portraits—and as we look them over we must certainly wonder, 'Is this indeed Brahms?—or this?—or this?'⁴

As Cushing's quotation attests, Brahms biography was understood to be a cause for confusion among many Americans, for whom his personality was mysterious, contradictory, and unrelatable. While many biographies were written before and after Brahms's death in 1897, they were almost all 'Life and Works' biographies, which separated discussion of Brahms's music from his personality.⁵ Since most of these were German-language biographies, most North American readers were limited to what had been translated into English. The most prominent of these were Walter Niemann's *Brahms* (published in German in 1920), which was translated into English by Catherine Alison Phillips in 1929,⁶ and Richard Specht's *Johannes Brahms* (published in German in 1928), translated into English by Eric Blom in 1930.⁷

² McManus, 'Prostitutes, Trauma, and (Auto)-Biographical Narratives,' 237–41.

³ See Christopher Chowrimootoo and Kate Guthrie, 'Colloquy: Musicology and the Middlebrow,' *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 73.2 (2020): 327–95.

⁴ Edward Cushing, 'Some Variations on Familiar Themes: The Greater Brahms,' *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 Oct. 1925, 2.

⁵ For example, see Edward Cushing's 'A Brahms Biography,' *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 2 Feb. 1930, 6, a mixed review of Phillip's 1929 translation of Walter Niemann's *Brahms*, trans. Catherine Alison Phillips (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929).

⁶ Niemann, *Brahms*. For an analysis of Niemann's biography in the broader context of German-language Brahms reception from 1897 to 1945, see Daniel Beller-McKenna, 'The Rise and Fall of Brahms the German,' *Journal of Musicological Research*, 20 (2001): 187–210.

⁷ Richard Specht, *Johannes Brahms*, trans. Eric Blom (New York: Dutton, 1930).

To be certain, Brahms was renowned as a German ‘master’ and his music was featured extensively in concert programs during the interwar period,⁸ yet he only became truly popular among American audiences in the late 1920s.⁹ As one writer reflected in 1934, ‘Brahms as beloved artist and master of the classic forms of music was accepted, admired, understood; but the individual beneath the genius was an enigma of opposites.’¹⁰ These oppositions included the apparently calm, undramatic nature of Brahms’s life, despite the loftiness of his music; the seeming absence of women in his life despite his pre-eminence as a lyric-romantic composer; and his parallel reputations for bearishness and charity. Simplistic though they might appear, reconciling these binaries was considered necessary because in American classical concert culture in the early to mid-twentieth century, appreciation of music was largely tied to appreciation of personality. This is a theme that I will develop later in my account of *The Unknown Brahms’s* reception.

By the Brahms centenary in 1933, many still believed that there was no three-dimensional portrait of Brahms. In his obituary written for the Brahms centenary edition of the *Musical Quarterly*, Guido Adler wrote that ‘we await a really definitive book on Brahms.’¹¹ Cushing echoed this view, using his column in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on 7 May—the centenary date—to lament that:

Our usually enterprising book publishers seem to be neglecting an opportunity for making a profit in a branch of their business which seldom yields them any. I refer ... to their failure to take advantage of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Brahms by issuing new biographies, critical studies, etc., of the composer.¹²

The Unknown Brahms (1933)

This gap was apparently filled in October with the release of *The Unknown Brahms*, the first major Brahms biography written by an American.¹³ Schauffler had arrived in America at the age of two; he had originally made a name for himself as an athlete, and then as a poet and popular writer. In this capacity, he found success with his works of music appreciation, including *The Musical Amateur: A Book on the Human Side of Music* (1911) and *Beethoven: The Man Who Freed*

⁸ For example, Brahms was programmed 605 times (including repeat performances) by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra between 1919 and 1939. See archives.nyphil.org/index.php/search?search-type=singleFilter&search-text=brahms&search-dates-from=01%2F01%2F1919&search-dates-to=12%2F31%2F1939.

⁹ RCA Victor producer Charles O’Connell wrote in his 1934 book *The Victor Book of Symphonies* that ‘prior to 1926 the Brahms symphonies did indeed appear in the repertoire of every first class orchestra, but like much else in the musical library, they were endured rather than enjoyed by a large section of the public.’ Quoted in Roger S. Vreeland, ‘Music News and Views: The Popularity of Brahms,’ *Record*, 3 Aug. 1936, 8.

¹⁰ ‘Entertaining and Instructive Life of Brahms as Centennial Offering—Humanism Defined by Three Greatest Figures in Movement—Fiction of Varied Nature and All Worth Reading,’ *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 Jan. 1934, 4.

¹¹ Guido Adler, ‘Johannes Brahms: His Achievement, His Personality, And His Position,’ *Musical Quarterly*, 19.2 (Apr. 1933): 114.

¹² Edward Cushing, ‘Brahms: The Discrepancy Between the Composer’s Life and His Works Remains Unaccounted for in the Standard Biographies,’ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 7 May 1933, 12.

¹³ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1972; originally published by New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1933). Date of release provided in Unsigned, ‘The Unknown Brahms,’ *Lexington Leader*, 17 Sep. 1933, 5.

Music (1929).¹⁴ In 1929, with the Brahms centenary just over four years away, Schauffler set out to write a new biography, interviewing primary and secondary contacts of Brahms, purportedly to give a fuller, less hagiographic account of Brahms than was then available. He travelled first to Germany, then onwards to Switzerland and Italy, before returning to the United States. Contacts included Dr Max Friedländer and his wife, who Schauffler claims first introduced him to the subject of Brahms's love life; Ferdinand Schumann, grandson of Robert and Clara Schumann; Professor Julius Winkler, professor of violin at the Vienna Conservatory; Viktor von Miller zu Aichholz, who took photos of the aged Brahms; Dr Celestina Truxa, the former housekeeper of Brahms's Vienna apartment; and Else Kurzbauer, who claimed to have transcribed many of Brahms's dialogues with peasants.¹⁵ While seemingly useful witnesses, Schauffler accepted his subjects' memories as reliable sources without corroborating their testimonies with available written sources, including—but not limited to—Brahms's correspondences with Heinrich von Herzogenberg and Clara Schumann.¹⁶

Instead, Schauffler claimed scientific rigour by drawing on amateur psychoanalysis, which had become hugely popular in interwar America. Psychoanalysis as a therapy was generally inaccessible to those outside the upper and upper-middle classes; yet psychoanalytic theory—or a derivation of it—became a part of mass culture during the 1920s, seeping into the popular vernacular and even becoming 'a kind of social tool.'¹⁷ In this regard, psychoanalysis became allied with the self-help movement of the 1930s and was promoted to a mass market as a means towards personal and professional betterment.¹⁸ Against this backdrop, Schauffler states in the preface to *The Unknown Brahms* that 'thoughtful readers to-day regard psychology as the biographer's indispensable ally in interpreting the significance of soundly established data.'¹⁹ Given his reputation as a popular writer, Schauffler's project had been anticipated in the press; in 1931, *The New York Times* reported that Schauffler had spent two years on his 'pilgrimage' around central Europe, speaking with sixty of Brahms's surviving friends to gather 'important and generally unknown facts.'²⁰ Schauffler published what would become a chapter of *The*

¹⁴ Robert Haven Schauffler, *The Musical Amateur: A Book on the Human Side of Music* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1911); *Beethoven: The Man Who Freed Music* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929).

¹⁵ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, 5–13.

¹⁶ See Max Kalbeck, ed., *Johannes Brahms: The Herzogenberg Correspondence*, trans. Hannah Bryant (New York, E.P. Dutton and Company, 1909); Berthold Litzmann, ed. & trans., *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms: 1853–1896* (London: E. Arnold, 1927). While these were the only two volumes translated into English before 1933, sixteen volumes of Brahms's correspondences (*Briefwechsel*) were published by the German Brahms Society after Brahms's death. For the complete collection of Brahms's letters in English translation, see Styra Avins, ed., *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, trans. Styra Avins and Josef Eisinger (Oxford: OUP, 1997).

¹⁷ Lawrence R. Samuel, *Shrink: A Cultural History of Psychoanalysis in America* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Samuel, *Shrink*, 23. While it had become entrenched in popular culture, psychoanalysis also held great—if contested—prestige in medical circles. Introduced to America by Freud in 1909, it had developed from a niche group of specialists concentrated on the eastern seaboard into a fully institutionalised profession with national reach. See Arcangelo R.T. D'Amore, 'Psychoanalysis in America: 1930–1939,' *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 50 (1981): 570.

¹⁹ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, viii.

²⁰ 'Says Sale of Books Gains in England: Mrs. Mordaunt, Arriving on the Rotterdam, Reports Classics Are Now Popular; Schauffler Also Returns: Biographer of Beethoven Home with Unpublished Data for New Work on Brahms,' *The New York Times*, 24 Aug. 1931, 18. See also, 'Brooklyn Man Writes Biography of Brahms,' *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 31 Jan. 1932.

Unknown Brahms in the *Musical Quarterly* in 1932, entitled 'Brahms, Poet and Peasant.'²¹ He had also lent items obtained during his travels to a major public exhibition held at the University of Pennsylvania in January 1933 to mark the Brahms centenary. These included the raffia cigar case featured in Willy von Beckerath's 1896 portrait, *Brahms am Flügel*, and the blue pencil that, according to exhibition curator Otto E. Albrecht, Brahms used to correct manuscripts.²²

Schauffler structured *The Unknown Brahms* around different aspects of Brahms's personality, and the book is divided into four parts. Part One, 'Adventures in Search of the Unknown Brahms,' recounts Schauffler's travels to central Europe in search of the secrets behind Brahms's enigmatic life and personality. Part Two, 'The Known Brahms,' summarises what Schauffler wrongly claims to be current knowledge of the composer. Part Three, 'Aspects of the Unknown Brahms,' contains the bulk of the text and would prove the focus of critical reception. Part Four, 'The Music,' looks at Brahms's music in relation to the character analyses of the previous chapters. The sub-chapters of Part Three are as follows:

- VIII: Poet and Peasant
- IX: Greatheart
- X: The Barrel of Gunpowder
- XI: 'Uncle Bahms' [*sic*]
- XII: The Heart of a Child
- XIII: Quite Contrary
- XIV: What He Hid Between the Lines
- XV: The Flaubert of Music
- XVI: Brahms: Wit and Humorist
- XVII: His Gift for Words
- XVIII: The Lion as Bear
- XIX: His Modesty
- XX: The Singing Girls
- XXI: Health and Last Days

Schauffler claims that Brahms descended from peasants, that he grew up in poverty, that he had a domineering mother who gave him an Oedipal complex, and that his gruff persona was a defensive mechanism against an inferiority complex caused by these hardships.²³ None of these arguments was supported by credible evidence. While Schauffler did translate excerpts from some of Brahms's letters for the benefit of North American readers who could not read German, it is not known how advanced his German was beyond that. Moreover, while he provides a substantial bibliography of then-current secondary sources,²⁴ it is not clear to what extent he engaged with them, as none of the arguments he puts forward are supported by them. In the now-infamous Chapter XX, 'The Singing Girls,' Schauffler borrows from an article released earlier in 1933, 'Brahms und die Frauen' ('Johannes Brahms and Women'), by Eduard Hitschmann. A pupil of Freud and a respected psychoanalytic practitioner, Hitschmann was neither a musicologist nor a biographer, and his own claims could not be supported by primary sources.²⁵ From Hitschmann, Schauffler cites an anecdote reportedly passed down by

²¹ See Schauffler, 'Brahms, Poet and Peasant,' *Musical Quarterly*, 18.4 (1932): 547–58.

²² Otto E. Albrecht, 'The Brahms Centenary Exhibition,' *University of Pennsylvania Library Chronicle*, 1.2 (June 1933): 29.

²³ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, 71–91; 253–54, 261; 276–77.

²⁴ See Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, Appendix IV, 513–29.

²⁵ Eduard Hitschmann, 'Brahms und die Frauen,' *Psychoanalytische Bewegungen*, 5.2 (1933): 97–129. English translation published as Edward Hitschmann, 'Johannes Brahms and Women,' *American Imago*, 6.2 (1949): 69–96.

the musicologist Max Friedländer, which suggests that Brahms confessed to being molested as a child during a drunken outburst in 1883:

Suddenly Brahms burst with violence into my reminiscences, making a furiously angry scene in the middle of the Prater. His eyes grew bloodshot. The veins in his forehead stood out. His hair and beard seemed to bristle.

'And you,' he cried menacingly, 'you who have been reared in cotton wool; you who have been protected from everything coarse—you tell me I should have the same respect, the same exalted homage for women that you have!' (I had not, of course, put this into words, but his sensitive soul had caught my unuttered reproaches.) 'You expect that of a man cursed with a childhood like mine!'

Then, with bitter passion he recounted his poverty-stricken youth in the wretched slums of Hamburg; how as a shaver of nine, he was already a fairly competent pianist; and how his father would drag him from bed to play for dancing and accompany obscene songs in the most depraved dives of the St. Pauli quarter.

'Do you know those places?' he asked. 'Only from the outside.' 'Then you can't have the least idea of what they are really like. And in those days they were still worse. They were filled with the lowest sort of public women—the so-called "Singing Girls." When the sailing ships made port after months of continuous voyaging, the sailors would rush out of them like beasts of prey, looking for women. And these half-clad girls, to make the men still wilder, used to take me on their laps between dances, kiss and caress and excite me. That was my first impression of the love of women. And you expect *me* to honour them as you do!' It was long before his anger simmered down and we left the park.²⁶

The 'Poverty Myth'

Schauffler's account of Brahms's childhood is the most exaggerated example of what Styra Avins has called the 'Poverty Myth.'²⁷ According to this narrative, Brahms was born into a Hamburg slum, the Gängeviertel, near the red-light district of St Pauli, and endured a traumatic childhood. In particular, he was forced to play the piano in disreputable bars or brothels to make extra money for his parents, where he was molested by sex workers.²⁸ The narrative first appeared in Max Kalbeck's two thousand-page biography of Brahms, the first volume of which was published in 1903.²⁹ While uniquely comprehensive, Kalbeck's work was not always accurate. Nonetheless, it was quickly accepted as definitive due to his influence as a Viennese critic and his involvement in Brahms's inner circle. Most critics and biographers turned to Kalbeck for the basic facts, neglecting the ten more-accurate Brahms biographies before his.³⁰ Schauffler, on his part, claimed to distance himself from Kalbeck's influence; critics in 1933 recognised the general over-reliance of most writers on Kalbeck and had called for new contributions.³¹

²⁶ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, 225–26. This anecdote is quoted and discussed briefly in McManus, 'Prostitutes, Trauma, and (Auto)-Biographical Narratives,' 225–26.

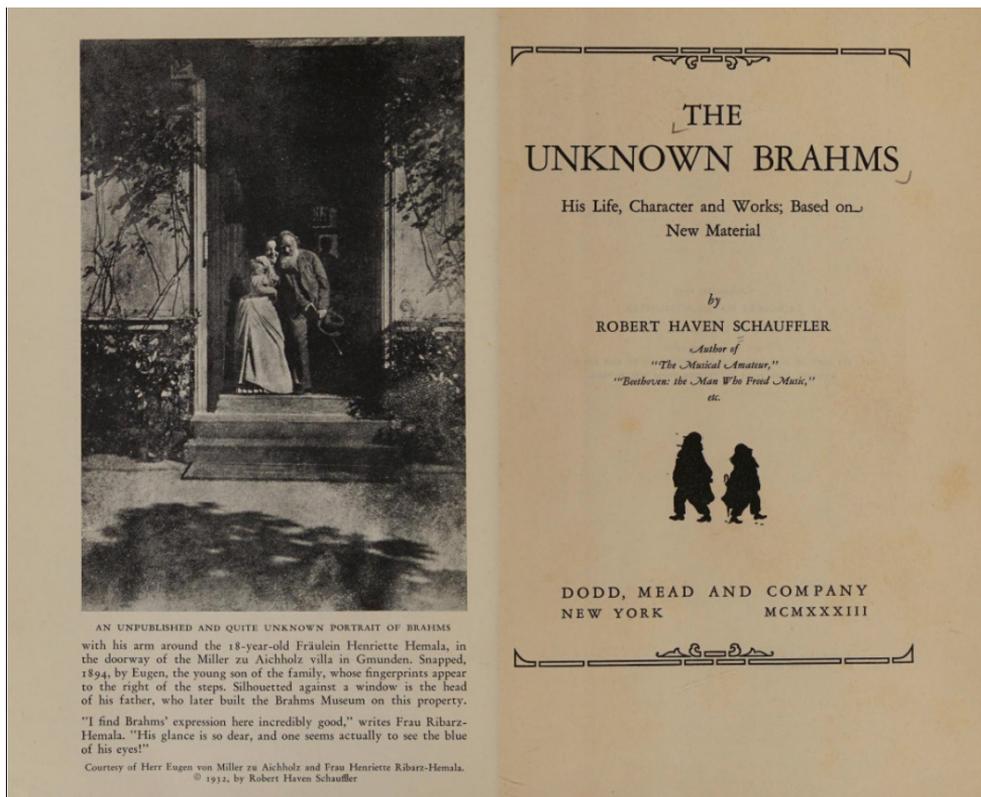
²⁷ Styra Avins, 'Myth in Brahms Biography, or, What I Learned from Quantum Mechanics,' *Fontes Artis Musicae*, 62.3 (2015): 183.

²⁸ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, 258.

²⁹ Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 4 vols (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms Gesellschaft, 1914–1921).

³⁰ A list of these biographies is provided in Avins, 'Myth in Brahms Biography,' 199–202. For a general study of Viennese music criticism at the fin-de-siècle, see Sandra McColl, *Music Criticism in Vienna, 1896–1897: Critically Moving Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

³¹ One prominent example is Guido Adler, 'Johannes Brahms,' 13.

Figure 1. Title page of *The Unknown Brahms*, first edition (1933)

Yet Schauffler's version of events merely reformulated Kalbeck's original with speculative psychoanalysis that appealed to his target readership. As McManus notes, Schauffler's version of the myth was influential to the historiography of Brahms biography for two reasons. On the one hand, it was the first to add a sexual element to the narrative, which previously had been only economic. On the other hand, while earlier versions have Brahms overcome his alleged childhood hardships, Schauffler had Brahms remain traumatised in a way that defined his adult life, particularly his relationship with women.³² The myth persisted in many twentieth-century biographies, perhaps, in part, because it invokes Romantic tropes of struggle.³³ However, the myth was debunked in the 1970s and 1980s, when Hamburg scholars Kurt Stephenson and Kurt and Renate Hofmann proved, with documentary evidence, that Brahms grew up in a middle-class family and did not perform as a child in brothels.³⁴ Avins's 1997 translation of Brahms's letters corroborated this work, and the record on Brahms's childhood has since been accepted as uncontroversial. Today, the poverty myth remains as a vestige of past biographical trends that can shed light on the critics and audiences that embraced it.

³² McManus, *Brahms in the Priesthood*, 196.

³³ Avins has compiled a list of Brahms biographies since Brahms's lifetime until the present, identifying those that include the myth. See Avins, 'Myth in Brahms Biography,' 199–202.

³⁴ Kurt Stephenson, *Brahms in seiner Familie* (Hamburg: Hauswedell, 1973); Kurt Hofmann, 'Brahms in Hamburg,' in *Brahms und seine Zeit*, ed. Constantin Floros, H.J. Marx and Peter Petersen (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1984), 21–32. Subsequently, see Styra Avins, 'The Young Brahms: Biographical Data Reexamined,' *19th-Century Music*, 24.3 (2001): 276–89.

Critical Reception

On its publication in 1933, *The Unknown Brahms* received rave reviews from many music and literary critics writing for large-circulation newspapers, and it was described as ‘one of the salient features of the Brahms centenary.’³⁵ It quickly found a place on the bookshelves of public libraries and became a popular text in book clubs and women’s clubs throughout the following years.³⁶ Critics believed that the book offered an unprecedented portrait of Brahms as a complex man rather than as a deified composer. The literary critic Elizabeth C. Moore called it a ‘brilliant psychograph.’³⁷ John K. Sherman (1898–1969), known as the Dean of Midwest music critics, proclaimed in the *Minneapolis Star* that the biography unveiled a ‘humanized Brahms.’ For Sherman, it was ‘the first literary portrait of Brahms as a many-sided human being—an informally told, richly documented biography that answers practically all questions about a life which hitherto has been mysteriously shrouded in secrecy.’³⁸ Another critic, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, noted how ‘a turbulent, tender, aggressive, modest, ironic, whimsical, rude and genial Brahms strolls and skips and strides through the pages of a new biography.’³⁹ Others were more ecstatic still. ‘For the first time,’ asserted the reviewer from the *Detroit Free Press*, ‘Brahms is made out as the vibrant, passionate human soul he was,’ declaring Schauffler’s work ‘one of the most brilliantly searching descriptions ever written about a musician.’⁴⁰ At the centenary, it was still fairly common for press obituaries to invoke the nineteenth-century image of Brahms as a priest of art; for example, Alice Eversman had written that ‘the life of Johannes Brahms is unique among the histories of composers, for it is a life free from material worries, from internal unrest and any record of outstanding moments of emotional or worldly greatness.’⁴¹ In contrast, critics reacted positively to *The Unknown Brahms* because it turned this image entirely on its head.

While these critics believed that the book broke new ground, they did not consider it definitive in all respects. Cushing, for instance, acknowledged the book for what it was:

I would not say that [*The Unknown Brahms*] entirely supplants the best of the biographies already existing; but then, Mr. Schauffler obviously did not intend that it should. He has produced not a reference book for students and commentators—Kalbeck’s encyclopaedic work remains supreme in this field—but an intimate portrait

³⁵ ‘A New Study of Brahms,’ *Kansas City Star*, 23 Feb. 1934, 48.

³⁶ ‘Society Notes: Mrs. Epling Gives Review at P.E.O.,’ *La Grande Observer*, 16 Dec. 1933, 2.

³⁷ Elizabeth C. Moore, ‘“The Unknown Brahms” a Brilliant Psychograph,’ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 Nov. 1933, 14. There is a correspondence between Schauffler and Moore in the Robert Haven Schauffler correspondence held at the University of Texas at Austin: see Manuscript Collection MS-03719. Since I have not been able to access this correspondence, it is unclear when it occurred and whether it related to *The Unknown Brahms*. Therefore, I cannot determine at this stage whether Moore wrote her review after communicating with Schauffler, or whether they made first contact after the book’s publication. See ‘Robert Haven Schauffler: An Inventory of His Correspondence at the Harry Ransom Center,’ norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00117.

³⁸ Sherman, ‘Humanized Brahms Portrayed in New Biography by Schauffler,’ *Minneapolis Star*, 16 Dec. 1933, 19. Sherman worked at the *Minneapolis Star* as book and arts editor for forty-four years, from 1925 until his death in 1969. See Sherman’s obituary: ‘John K. Sherman, Arts Critic, Dies at 70,’ *Minneapolis Star*, 19 Apr. 1969, 1.

³⁹ J.H.S., ‘A Turbulent Musician,’ *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Dec. 1933, 7.

⁴⁰ ‘New Books Tell Composers’ Lives,’ *Detroit Free Press*, 19 Nov. 1933, 16.

⁴¹ Alice Eversman, ‘Music World Celebrates Centennial of Brahms,’ *Evening Star*, 7 May 1933, 3.

of Brahms the man, drawn in the words of men and women who knew him and have confided their memories of him to a curious and sympathetic American.⁴²

The critical point, however, is that it was precisely this type of sympathetic biography, and not a rigorous source-based study, that did galvanise middlebrow American readers and the critics who represented them. Sherman suggested that *The Unknown Brahms* 'creates a precedent in the type of biography which ... balances the story of a composer's life with a deep analysis of and sympathy for the composer's music.'⁴³ A reviewer in February 1934 invoked the same idea by stating that 'the task of the modern biographer is to define his hero's genius, and at the same time to acquaint the reader with the flesh-and-blood man without pulling either the hero or the reader down into the gutter.'⁴⁴ These statements embody a broader tendency in early twentieth-century biographies—widespread by the 1920s and 1930s in both North America and England—to draw on psychological and other hermeneutic perspectives in an attempt to demythologise figures of the past.⁴⁵ In this vein, critics tended to measure the honesty of Schauffler's work by the extent to which he had probed Brahms's private life, and not by the rigour with which he had marshalled and analysed evidence. One such reviewer was impressed that 'Mr. Schauffler does not seek to glorify his subject through myth and fiction. He digs to the very depths to present a true and honest picture.'⁴⁶

These reactions invite us to consider the cultural values that underpinned such responses. Critics may have accepted Schauffler's scholarly credentials simply because they did not see any reason to suspect otherwise, and they were certainly not homogenous in their own musical tastes. Yet in taking music criticism as a gauge of public opinion, I argue that the book's acceptance reflected middlebrow sensibilities. As a growing literature by scholars including Christopher Chowrimootoo has shown, the middlebrow may refer either to the social initiative of democratising elite art, or to the aesthetic status of art itself.⁴⁷ I deal here with the first type, which relates to North American notions of meliorism. During the Gilded Age (approximately 1870–1900) American elites, such as John Sullivan Dwight (1813–1893) and Lowell Mason (1792–1872), sought to improve the supposedly undeveloped state of North American culture by drawing on the Germanic idea of classical music's uplifting powers.⁴⁸ As Lawrence Levine argued influentially, classical music was sacralised at the fin-de-siècle and associated with the new label of 'highbrow', whose opposite term, 'lowbrow', would appear around twenty years later.⁴⁹ In the following decades, a middlebrow culture developed that

⁴² Cushing, 'The Unknown Brahms.'

⁴³ Sherman, 'Glamour Laid on Too Thickly in Ewen Biography,' *Minneapolis Star*, 13 Jan. 1934, 23.

⁴⁴ 'New Study of Brahms,' 48.

⁴⁵ Paul Watt notes the pioneering influence of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) in fomenting interest in this type of biography. See Paul Watt, 'Ernest Newman's *The Man Liszt* of 1934: Reading its Freethought Agenda,' *Context: A Journal of Music Research* 31 (2006): 204–5.

⁴⁶ 'New Books Tell Composers' Lives: Brahms and Beethoven Are Subjects of Biographies,' *Detroit Free Press*, 19 Nov. 1933, 16.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Chowrimootoo and Guthrie, 'Colloquy.'

⁴⁸ See Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 273–395.

⁴⁹ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 121–25. For an extended disquisition on music appreciation, see Julia Chybowski, 'Developing American Taste: A Cultural History of the American Music Appreciation Movement' (PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2008).

sought to expand access to 'high' art through music appreciation initiatives in the pursuit of national cultural, moral, and political uplift. By the 1920s, North America's classical concert culture had developed primarily into a performance, rather than compositional, culture, based around a Eurocentric canon of classics and shaped by star conductors such as Arturo Toscanini.⁵⁰ The push to create a population of cultured consumers was enacted through the delivery of public education programs, while the radio spread classical music beyond the concert hall. Appreciation of the great composers symbolised not only sophistication, but the ideal of a growing middle class. In one sense, *The Unknown Brahms's* middlebrow appeal derived from its structure and style. Structurally, Schaffler's clean separation of 'The Known Brahms,' 'The Unknown Brahms,' and a final analytical section allowed both musically trained and lay readers to engage with the book in a matter that suited them.⁵¹ Stylistically, Schaffler's casual writing style was seen as a refreshing change from the often-stuffy prose of traditional biographies. According to Elsa Elene Swartz, the book was 'perhaps not altogether a biography, but more in the nature of a sketch,'⁵² while another unnamed reviewer praised Schaffler's 'easy, graphic, and incisive' prose style.⁵³

More significantly, however, *The Unknown Brahms* was a middlebrow biography because of the way that it used Brahms's biography to shed light on his music. As historian David Goodman suggests, 'music appreciation generally sought to humanize the great composers, and to relate their music to their individual personalities, and thus—importantly—to open up the possibility of the listener engaging empathetically and emotionally with the music.'⁵⁴ Thus, in November 1933 George A. Leighton, music critic for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and Professor of Music Theory at the Cincinnati Conservatory, reflected that 'biographers have had a stiff time trying to find incident upon which to build a story of [Brahms's] life. It virtually was uneventful except as one work succeeding another could be classified as eventfulness ... The movies,' Leighton continues,

have proved that man's chief concern is man ... This ... might cause to smile those who know something of the personality of ... Brahms. He would have created a problem for Hollywood's press agents had they been assigned the job of 'putting him over,' such as even their powers of glorified description could not have met.⁵⁵

Leighton himself was sceptical of the notion that understanding biography, or anything extramusical, was necessary to understand music; in a later entry of his column he suggested that the primary value of musical biography was its ability to prompt general readers to engage with a composer's music where they may otherwise have no reason to.⁵⁶ Granted, if Leighton thought it could be problematic for biographers and popular audiences that Brahms was not Hollywood material, Schaffler appeared to solve the issue. '[Brahms's] outer life,' he claims

⁵⁰ Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, 266.

⁵¹ See John Selby, 'The Literary Guidepost: "The Unknown Brahms" by Robert Haven Schaffler and "Brahms" by William Murdoch,' *Morning Chronicle*, 8 Nov. 1933, 4.

⁵² Elsa Elene Swartz, 'Musical Musings,' *Missoulian Sun*, 21 Jan. 1934.

⁵³ 'Two Biographers for Music Lovers,' *Hartford Courant*, 19 Nov. 1933.

⁵⁴ David Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition: American Democracy and Broadcasting in the 1930s* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 136.

⁵⁵ George A. Leighton, 'Johannes Brahms,' *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 5 Nov. 1933, 52.

⁵⁶ See George A. Leighton, 'Program Music,' *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 10 Dec. 1933, 2.

in *The Unknown Brahms*, 'was as poor in dramatic events as his inner life was rich in passion, thought, humour.'⁵⁷ Schauffler's lurid portrayal of Brahms as a traumatised peasant with an Oedipal complex provided the narrative drama that some considered necessary to market him effectively as a Great Man of history, along the lines proposed by the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle.⁵⁸ More important than this, however, was that Schauffler's narrative supposedly reconciled Brahms's contradictions of character. By treating his complex persona as a result of his alleged childhood trauma, Schauffler presented Brahms as a man 'whose outwardly negative qualities masked his essentially noble and lofty character.'⁵⁹ This conclusion, despite its psychoanalytic framing, remained essentially hagiographic in nature, and in this way the book joined the many music appreciation biographies that characterised canonical composers as noble, sincere, and thus worthy of study.⁶⁰

Yet the most significant result of *The Unknown Brahms's* reception was that as Brahms the man became perceived as more interesting, Brahms's music became more palatable to relevant sections of the North American public. This development was significant because in contrast to Europe, where Brahms had been canonised since the 1870s, Brahms was canonised in North America relatively recently. At the fin-de-siècle, prominent critics such as Phillip Hale had criticised Brahms's music as drab and antiquarian.⁶¹ In the following two decades, Brahms gained the respect of critics as a great, yet cerebral, composer.⁶² By the 1920s, with the decline of so-called 'Wagner-mania',⁶³ most had reappraised Brahms as a misunderstood Romantic, whose music was wholesome, durable, and rewarding for the informed listener willing to invest the time. As the pianist Harold Bauer observed in 1932, 'Today Brahms is considered not highbrow music but good music that is enjoyable [to] hear, music that has a genuine human appeal.'⁶⁴

I do not wish to suggest that *The Unknown Brahms* made Brahms popular in the first instance. But if the 'human appeal' to which Bauer refers was conceptualised in abstract, idealistic terms—as dignified, honourable, earnest—Schauffler allowed readers to map Brahms's music onto specific life experiences and personality traits. According to one writer from the New York-based *Democrat and Chronicle*, 'From this abnormal family life and unfortunate environment are

⁵⁷ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, 33.

⁵⁸ See Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (California: University of California Press, 1993). In the following years critics began to describe Brahms not only as a great composer, but as a great man more generally. As Alexander Fried, writing for the *San Francisco Examiner*, declared in 1935: 'He is one of the great men of history.' See 'Brahms Festival,' 9 June 1935.

⁵⁹ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, 257.

⁶⁰ See Chybowski, *Developing American Taste*, 128–29.

⁶¹ Reviews of the American premiere of the First Symphony are collected and annotated by George Bozarth in "'A Modern of the Moderns": Brahms's First Symphony in New York and Boston,' in *Brahms and His World: Revised Edition*, ed. Walter Frisch and Kevin C. Karnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 287–305. See also, newsletters of the American Brahms Society: 'Brahms in America,' 10.2 (Autumn 1992): 7–8; and 'Brahms in America,' 11.2 (Autumn 1993): 6. A small sample of nineteenth-century American reviews of Brahms is also documented in Mark N. Grant, *Maestros of the Pen: A History of Classical Music Criticism in America* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 70–124.

⁶² As Rupert Hughes put it in 1914, 'Brahms is too passionless.' Hughes, *Contemporary American Composers* (Boston: The Page Company, 1914), 56.

⁶³ See Joseph Horowitz, *Wagner Nights: An American History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

⁶⁴ 'Tastes in Music Change as Much as Tastes in Dress, Says Harold Bauer, Well-known Pianist who Appears Here Friday, April 15,' *Burlington Daily News*, 9 Apr. 1932, 6.

traced the composer's odd quirks of character that find their parallels in his music.⁶⁵ Listeners could now appreciate, or so they believed, that the tempestuous opening of the First Piano Concerto in D minor was inspired by Schumann's attempt to drown himself in the Rhine in 1854 (a reading first proffered by Kalbeck),⁶⁶ or that the Second String Sextet in G major was a parting elegy to Brahms's lover, Agathe von Siebold.

This mode of hearing Brahms through his biography can be understood as one iteration of what Mark Evan Bonds has recently called the 'Beethoven Syndrome': the tendency, since Beethoven, to hear music as subjective rather than objective expression.⁶⁷ The thrust of Bonds's argument is as follows. Prior to 1830, music was primarily considered an objective construct that conformed to 'a framework of rhetoric'. Musical expression, like language, was thought to be a type of persuasion, and it was the composer's responsibility to move their listeners through a successful application of rhetorical techniques.⁶⁸ Beginning with Beethoven, however, the eighteenth-century framework of rhetoric was replaced by a Romantic 'framework of hermeneutics'. Music—particularly instrumental music, with its lack of verbal signifiers—began to be heard by critics and audiences as a projection of the composer's inner self, and it was now the task of listeners to interpret and understand the composer's subjective voice.⁶⁹ The Beethoven syndrome, Bonds argues, remained the dominant form of listening until 1920, when the rise of high modernism revived the eighteenth-century idea of objective expression, particularly through the 'New Objectivity' movement.⁷⁰

While he acknowledges that expressive subjectivity was never fully replaced by objectivity in the twentieth century, Bonds does not address how the middlebrow was a major context in which the Beethoven syndrome persisted. To this end, I argue that hearing music as autobiography had not just an expressive function in the middlebrow, but a didactic one, because it was a way of bringing high art to the musical non-specialist. To some extent, biography was a hermeneutic tool that substituted for specialist music analysis; Bonds's idea of the Beethoven syndrome gives us a more philosophically grounded model to understand Goodman's argument, cited previously, that the middlebrow tended to connect an appreciation of music with an appreciation of personality. In relation to *The Unknown Brahms*, this discourse helps us to understand why the book had such a strong practical influence on Brahms's middlebrow reception. As Elizabeth Moore stated, '[*The Unknown Brahms*]'s profound scholarship, the valuable light it throws on Brahms's personality, its power to stimulate our own devotion to his music—all these keep growing on us as we use the book.'⁷¹

Other writers in the 1930s were less accepting of *The Unknown Brahms*. 'Unknown to whom?' questioned *The New York Times*'s veteran critic Richard Aldrich. 'It can hardly be said that there

⁶⁵ 'Entertaining and Instructive Life of Brahms as Centennial Offering—Humanism Defined by Three Greatest Figures in Movement—Fiction of Varied Nature and All Worth Reading,' *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 Jan. 1934, 4.

⁶⁶ It is in this respect that Bonds cites Kalbeck's biography as having made Brahms 'a more Beethovenian' figure, leading critics increasingly to ascribe autobiographical meaning to Brahms's music. See Mark Evan Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome: Hearing Music as Autobiography* (Oxford: OUP, 2020).

⁶⁷ Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome*, 160.

⁶⁸ Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome*, 21–93.

⁶⁹ Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome*, 97–168.

⁷⁰ Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome*, 171–200.

⁷¹ Moore, "'Unknown Brahms'," 14.

is much of importance—except in one matter [Brahms's love life], and the importance of that may be doubted.' In his review, Aldrich focused less on the veracity of Schaufler's claims as the relevance and appropriateness of the subject. As he writes,

It is considered highly important in these days to explore every detail, to lay bare every reticence ... We are to know the worst. Then we can gloat over it, those who are disposed to gloat over such things ... There are some things in the private lives of men great and small which ... may not be wholly essential to a fair knowledge of the man, and especially of his art.⁷²

Like Aldrich, another critic signed R.M. found Schaufler's psychoanalytic approach forced and unhelpful. 'We must let the professional psychologist go,' they assert. 'Doesn't Mr. Schaufler make far too much of the pardonable habit of wenching, which is not particularly rare among bachelors? Doesn't he make a mountain out of what he is pleased to characterize as a dunghill?' R.M. concludes that 'the work seems to fall chiefly into the entertaining class,' and that, as a result, 'the final word on Brahms has not been said.'⁷³

By questioning the relevance of Brahms's psychology to the analysis of his music, Aldrich and R.M. both tapped into an aesthetic idea that Brahms's absolute music, *ipso facto*, needed no biographical explanation. It is important to qualify here that not all writers associated with the middlebrow subscribed to the notion that Brahms's music was a window into his inner psyche, and one did not have to be a high modernist to reject the type of psychological speculation that *The Unknown Brahms* offered. One example was Henry S. Drinker, who derided, although not with reference to the book, 'the utter futility' of any biographical or, for that matter, programmatic readings of Brahms.⁷⁴ Critic Dorothy Blank Galloway would later write in 1936 that 'Brahms the lover can always be "The Unknown Brahms" as far as audiences are concerned, because of the transcendental quality of his music.'⁷⁵ Continuing this line of thought, objections to *The Unknown Brahms* related less to the putative facts claimed by Schaufler than they did to ideals concerning the relationship between music and biography. While some were said to have slammed the chapter on Brahms's love life as 'preponderantly destructive,'⁷⁶ it appears that more critics thought it merely unhelpful in advancing public understandings of Brahms.

Curiously, Lawrence Gilman appears to have changed his opinion since 1929, when he had written that 'only the incurably naïve expect to see the artist externalized in the man.'⁷⁷ Perhaps Schaufler had persuaded him otherwise, as he considered *The Unknown Brahms* to be 'the fairest and most balanced estimate of Brahms as a man and artist that has yet appeared in any language.'⁷⁸ This was generally the position of middlebrow audiences. While Schoenberg, in the

⁷² Richard Aldrich, 'Two Books that Celebrate the Growing Fame of Brahms,' *The New York Times*, 26 Nov. 1933, 10.

⁷³ R.M., 'A Word on Brahms,' *New York Sun*, 23 Dec. 1933, E3.

⁷⁴ Henry S. Drinker, *The Chamber Music of Brahms* (Philadelphia: Elkan-Vogel Co., 1932), 25.

⁷⁵ Dorothy Blank Galloway, 'New Biography of Brahms Is a Dignified Study,' *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 5 Sep. 1936, 1B.

⁷⁶ As according to the writer for the *Kansas City Star*; see 'A New Study of Brahms.' The reviewer does not mention specific critics.

⁷⁷ Lawrence Gilman, 'Brahms Enemy to Modern Novelties,' *Salt Lake Tribune*, 24 Nov. 1929, 4.

⁷⁸ Display Ad 84—No Title, *The New York Times*, 10 Dec. 1933, 27.

music-analytic domain, deconstructed the motivic foundations of Brahms's work,⁷⁹ Schauffler wagered that Brahms's lofty music was a sublimation of his failed love life—'a sublimation as far-reaching as any recorded in the history of the arts.'⁸⁰ On this basis, so Schauffler quips, 'The music of Brahms is full of sex appeal.'⁸¹ Crass though this might have been to critics like Aldrich, it was a welcome exposé for others. Sherman wrote, with typical middlebrow humanism, that if previous biographical understandings had been affirmed, 'Brahms would have been a kind of idealized monstrosity never seen on land or sea. Schauffler takes pains to show that ... many of [Brahms]'s self-thwarted love affairs ... were rationalized and embalmed in some of his finest work.'⁸² Aesthetically speaking, this pseudo-Freudian reading gave middlebrow readers a conceptual language to engage with Brahms more fully as a Romantic composer, and less as an Apollonian Classicist—a dry master of form—as was previously common.

Conclusion

The Unknown Brahms lost some of its lustre with the publication of Karl Geiringer's 1936 biography *Brahms: His Life and Work*,⁸³ which itself faded from prominence with the publication of Stephenson's and Hofmann's findings in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the early appeal of *The Unknown Brahms* was such that it marked popular understandings of Brahms in North America for years to come. In 1943, Schauffler collaborated with Madeleine Goss to publish a version for young adults—*Brahms: The Master*—and in 1947 Sara Ruth Watson credited *The Unknown Brahms* with establishing the Romantic image of Brahms then dominant in North America.⁸⁴ What explains this appeal of a work now universally panned by scholars? As I have argued in this article, *The Unknown Brahms* was accepted because it was a useful tool of music appreciation that allowed lay listeners to engage more empathetically with Brahms's music. By exploring the role of middlebrow discourses on the early reception of *The Unknown Brahms*, this case study offers a glimpse into sections of the American public in the 1930s and thereby broadens understandings of Brahms's cultural status in the twentieth century.

About the Author

Adam Weitzer recently completed a Master of Musicology at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, where he researched the critical reception of Brahms in the United States during the interwar period. He has written for publications such as *Antithesis Journal* and was a Global Winner at the 2020 Global Undergraduate Awards.

⁷⁹ See Arnold Schoenberg, trans. Leo Black, 'Brahms the Progressive,' in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings*, ed. Leonard Stein (California: University of California Press, 2010), 52–104. Tony Palmer's 1996 film *Brahms and the Little Singing Girls* is also based on *The Unknown Brahms*. See John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 250–53.

⁸⁰ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, 285.

⁸¹ Schauffler, *The Unknown Brahms*, 283.

⁸² Sherman, 'Humanized Brahms,' 19.

⁸³ Karl Geiringer, *Brahms: His Life and Work* (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 3rd ed., 1984).

⁸⁴ Madeleine Goss and Robert Haven Schauffler, *Brahms: The Master* (Michigan: H. Holt, 1943); Sara Ruth Watson, 'The Romantic Brahms,' *The American Scholar* 17.1 (1947–48): 69–78.