The Pivotal Role of Brahms and Schubert in the Development of the Women's Choir

by Victoria Meredith

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Quartet from Hamburger Frauenchor, ca. 1860

The Roman god Janus is pictured with two faces—one looking back and one looking ahead. Representing the old and the new, Janus is the god of doors and gateways. Looking back and ahead, Schubert and Brahms were part of an important transition in the evolution of the women's choir during the nineteenth century. Historically, women's ensemble singing focused around school and home. In the nineteenth century, however, women's choirs began to take small steps into the public performing arena, singing music written specifically for their use.

Looking Back—Evolution of Women's Choirs

For the first four hundred years of Christianity, women were active participants in worship services as singers, both in congregations and in choirs. Men and women were divided into separate choirs and often sang antiphonally. St. Ambrose of Milan wrote with approval: "the women sing the psalm well."[1]

> By the fourth century a girl choir had become a well-established institution. Any group that did not have one fell behind in popularity. The good Bishop Ephraem of Edessa in Syria frankly organized his "Daughters of the Convent" as a counterattraction to the Arian choirs that had been functioning successfully for three hundred years. An anonymous Syrian biographer described Ephraem's ardor in training his girls and mentioned the fact that he "arranged for them different kinds of songs."[2]

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Unfortunately, this music is not extant.

After the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. and Constantine's recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 325 A.D., congregational singing was gradually abandoned, and all musical portions of the services became the domain of choirs of men and boys. While women did not sing in the Church at large, they did pursue music within their own religious institutions—the convents.[3]

During the seventeenth century, female choruses evolved further as student ensembles assumed an important place in women's educational institutions. The best-known female choirs of this time were the four Venetian *ospedali,* or orphanages. These institutions, originally established in the fourteenth century to care for destitute Venetian girls, gradually evolved into elite music conservatories performing music by leading composers such as Hasse, Porpora, Pergolesi, Galuppi, and Vivaldi.

At about the same time that the *ospedali* flourished in Venice, female ensembles formed in France. In 1686, Mme. de Maintenon, wife of Louis XIV, established the Maison Royale Saint-Louis de Saint-Cyr, a boarding school where girls of the French aristocracy were taught to sing.[4] The girls became renowned for their beautiful singing in chapel. When they ventured outside the chapel to present public performances of operas written especially for them, however, objections were raised about the time spent on secular music, and such performances were discontinued.[5] Motets composed for the students by Louis-Nicolas Clérambault, Michel-Richard Lalande, André Campra, and Jean-Joseph Mondonville were considered more acceptable repertoire.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, girls' schools in England, the United States, Germany, Switzer-

land, and Russia also included singing as an integral part of their educational and social programs. Nevertheless, classical-period composers produced little original music for female choir, most likely because the women's chorus had yet to establish itself as an acceptable medium for public performance. Aside from numerous canons, which can be performed by any combination of equal voices, neither Mozart nor Haydn composed music for women's choir.[6] Most music of the Classical period chosen for performance by today's women's choirs was originally composed for boys' choirs.

Women's Choirs in the Nineteenth Century

During the nineteenth century, music clubs and societies—male, female, and mixed—flourished, particularly in Germany. Aristocratic and upper-middle-class women met for singing in drawing rooms of large houses. Some women went from one gathering to another, often singing four or five hours a day.[7]

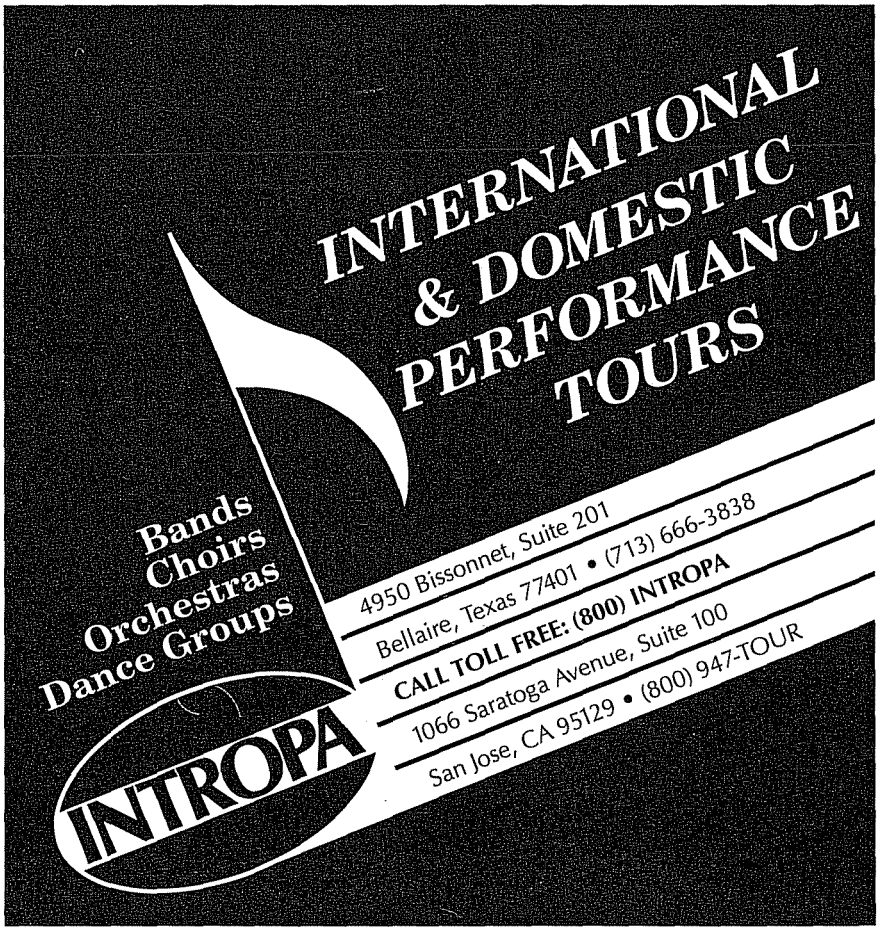
Although women appeared regularly in public concerts of mixed choirs, their public performances in ensembles made up solely of women were far less frequent. Most women's singing was limited to private social occasions. While women's position in society delimited somewhat their participation in public concerts, the sparseness of serious repertoire for women's voices also inhibited the development of the women's choir. The works of Brahms and Schubert in this neglected medium began to fill that gap. Brahms's position as conductor of the Hamburger Frauenchor prompted his many compositions in this genre. Though Schubert was less directly involved with female choral ensembles, he made important contributions to their repertoire and development.

Schubert's Works for Women's Choir

Schubert's primary output for women's choir consists of his eight three- and four-part choruses. He also wrote five unison choruses, several canons, and a number of duets and trios that are sometimes performed by women's ensembles. Of the eight choruses, the first four—*Das Leben, Klage um Ali Bey, Das grosse Halleluja,* and *Schlachtlied*—were written in 1815 and 1816 during Schubert's early career as a school teacher. *Das Leben, Das grosse Halleluja,* and *Schlachtlied* are choral settings of pieces he had previously composed as solos. These early choruses, three of which are strophic, are brief, homophonic compositions in which the voice parts are reinforced by the piano accompaniment. It is possible that they served both as arranging exercises for the young composer and as simple pieces for his students to sing.

Schubert wrote his four later compositions for women's chorus between 1820 and 1827. *Psalm 23, Gott in der Natur, Coronach,* and *Ständchen* are longer and more fully developed than the four earlier choruses. They display the same careful attention to detail and melodic grace found in Schubert's solo songs and contain independent piano accompaniments that add to the color and expression of the texts. At least three received public performances during Schubert's lifetime, helping to lay the groundwork for later composers of women's choruses. *Coronach,* a setting of a text from Sir Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake,*[8] is one of only twenty-two Schubert choral works published during his lifetime.

Both *Psalm 23* and *Ständchen* were written for Schubert's friend Anna Fröhlich and her singing students at the



Vienna Conservatory. These two pieces as well as *Gott in der Natur* received numerous performances at the conservatory, at private concerts, and at concerts of the Philharmonic Society. After the first public performance of *Ständchen* by the Society on January 24, 1828, Schubert said to Anna Fröhlich, "Really, I never realized it was so beautiful."[9] The *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (March 26, 1828) rated it "among the most charming of this favorite composer's works."[10] The performance of *Psalm 23* at the Vienna Conservatory on September 7, 1826, was so well-received that it had to be repeated.[11] Schubert himself accompanied the conservatory singers for the first performance of *Gott in der Natur* on the Philharmonic Society concert of March 8, 1827.[12]

Brahms's Works for Women's Choir

Brahms wrote all his women's choruses between 1858 and 1873, during his middle compositional period. He composed most of them for the Hamburger Frauenchor, a group that he directed from 1859 to 1861. When Brahms moved to Vienna in 1862, he established another women's ensemble of greater performing ability than that of his Hamburg choir. Only a few of his women's choir pieces, however, date from his Vienna period. Brahms's numerous compositions for women's ensemble range from sacred works to folk songs. Some settings are unaccompanied while others use piano, organ, or small instrumental ensemble. Unlike some of Brahms's later choral compositions purposely written for publication, his works for women's choir were composed for the exclusive use of particular groups of singers.

The Hamburger Frauenchor began when one of Brahms's piano students requested folk arrangements to sing with her friends. It quickly grew into a choir of approximately forty singers who rehearsed on a weekly basis, with sections led by a quartet that Brahms rehearsed separately.[13] The music that Brahms composed for this choir is simple and practical. He had written *Ave Maria*, op. 12, for women's choir and organ (his first choral composition) before his association with the Frauenchor. The Frauenchor's December 2, 1859, performance of *Ave Maria* at the Grädener Academy in Hamburg, however, featured Brahms's newly arranged orchestral accompaniment. Brahms's other sacred works for women's chorus also were among his earliest choral compositions. Both *Psalm 13*, op. 27, and the first two of the *Drei geistliche Chöre*, op. 37, date from his first year with the Frauenchor.

Like Schubert before him, Brahms shows a particular affinity for the canon in his choral output. In addition to the *Thirteen Canons*, op. 113, for female voices, he set all three of the op. 37 choruses in canonic form. On his original score, Brahms describes the first, *O bone Jesu*, as "a double canon in contrary motion with the strong beats of the leading voice imitated on weak beats by the answer"[14]—a decidedly academic exercise. The second, *Adoramus te*, is a canon at the fourth, fifth, and octave. The final and most complex canon, *Regina coeli laetare*, involves not only the four-part chorus but also two soloists. Brahms probably composed this third chorus for his women's ensemble in Vienna.[15]

One Brahmsian characteristic established through these early contrapuntal compositions is the equality between the voice parts. The consistent musical interest in the inner and lower parts in Brahms's choral compositions makes them attractive to singers. His tendency to write low alto lines, however, creates difficulty for singers at times. For example, he composed the *Marienlieder*, op. 22, for four-part women's choir. However, tenors had to sing the second alto part at the Frauenchor's first performance of these pieces in 1859.[16] Brahms later rearranged the *Marienlieder* for mixed voices. Original part-books of the Hamburger Frauenchor discovered in the 1930s reveal that Brahms rearranged several other women's choir compositions for either mixed choir or solo voice.[17]

Brahms's secular output for women's choir includes the *Vier Gesänge,* op. 17, for women's voices, two horns, and harp and his *Zwölf Lieder und Romanzen,* op. 44. The twelve pieces in the latter collection were published in 1866 in two sets of six songs, having been composed at various times between 1859 and 1866. According to the composer, these charming folklike miniatures may be sung either unaccompanied or with the *ad libitum* piano accompaniment. The texts, at times sentimental and almost trivial, are taken from eight different sources and were not set as a cycle, thus allowing for flexibility in programming. Brahms conducted the premiere of the first two of the *Lieder und Romanzen* at a Hamburg concert on January 15, 1861. The remaining ten pieces were premiered at a variety of concerts in Hamburg, Basel, Zürich, and Vienna by various conductors and ensembles.[18]

Brahms's Use of Music by Schubert and Other Composers

In addition to including his own compositions on his women's choir concerts, Brahms programmed pieces by earlier composers whose work he admired. Sometimes he even arranged the music of other composers to suit his programming needs. For example, he arranged Schubert's vocal solo with piano accompaniment *Ellens Gesang II* from *The Lady of the Lake* for soprano solo, three-part female choir, four horns, and two bassoons. This was first performed by his Viennese ladies' choir at a Vienna Gesellschaft concert on March 23, 1873, with Brahms conducting.[19] Brahms expressed his high regard for Schubert in a letter to Adolf Schubring on June 19, 1863:

> My love for Schubert is of a very serious kind, probably because it is not just a fleeting infatuation. Where else is there a genius like his, that soars with such boldness and certainty to the sky where we see the very greatest enthroned? He impresses me as a child of the gods, who plays with Jove's thunder, and occasionally handles it in an unusual manner. But he does play in a region and at a height to which the others can by no means attain.[20]

Select Editions of Music for Women's Choir by Schubert and Brahms

Schubert
(in order of composition)

Nine Two- and Three-Part Choruses for Women's or Children's Voices (1813–16)
Unaccompanied (English)
C. F. Peters 66158

Das Leben, D269 (1815)
SSA, piano
Breitkopf L PB 1104

Das grosse Halleluja, D442 (1816)
SSA, piano
E. C. Schirmer 1041 (German and English)
Schott

Der 23. Psalm **("Gott ist mein Hirt"), op. 132,** D706 (1820)
SSAA, piano
Breitkopf PB 1657 (SSAA, piano or organ)
Carus 40.149 (SSAA, organ)

The Lord Is My Shepherd
In English
Novello 28.0067.05
Oxford 44.044
G. Schirmer 5302

Gott in der Natur, **op. 133,** D757 (1822)
SSAA, piano
Breitkopf und Härtel 5082
Carus 40.295 (SSAA, violin, piano)

God in Nature, op. 133
In English
SSAA, piano or organ
Peters 6878

Coronach, **op. 52, no. 4,** D836 (1825)
SSA, piano
Breitkopf W CHB 5135
Novello 51.0013.05 (English)
Sverig SK 371

Ständchen, **op. 135,** D920 (1827)
SSAA, A solo, piano
Breitkopf W CHB 3426
Carus 40.296.02
Schott 4339

Serenade
In English
Mercury 352-010015
Novello 19205

Ellens Zweitergesang **(Ellen's Second Song),** arr. Johannes Brahms (1873)
SSA, S solo, piano (or four horns and two bassoons)
E. C. Schirmer 2082 (German and English)

Brahms
(by opus number)

Ave Maria, **op. 12** (1858)
SSAA organ (later orchestrated by Brahms); Latin
Belwin Mills 6103
Breitkopf WPB3217CHB3540 (with orchestra) Carus CV 40.180/01; CV 40.179 (with orchestra) Latin and English
Carus CV 40.180 (with organ); Latin and English
Peters 10069 (with organ and orchestra)
E. C. Schirmer 2515 (Latin and English)

Vier Gesänge **(Four Songs), op. 17,** (1859–60)
SSA, two horns, harp
Breitkopf W OB 3226
Hinrichsen P-6617 (English and German)
C. F. Peters (German and English)

Psalm 13, **op. 27** (1859)
SSA, organ or piano, optional strings
Belwin Mills 1162
Breitkopf W PB 3227; CHB 3480
Carus 40.183
Huguenin CH 982
Oxford (German and English)

Lord! How Long Wilt Thou Forget Me, **op.27**
In English
Unaccompanied
Peters

Drei geistliche Chöre **(Three Sacred Choruses), op. 37,** (1859, 1863)
SSAA unaccompanied, Latin
Broude Brothers BB 136 (Latin and English)
Breitkopf CHB 3414
Carus CV 40.179/02
Oxford
C. F. Peters 66141 (Latin and English)

Zwölf Lieder und Romanzen **(Twelve Songs and Romances), op. 44,** (1859–66)
SSAA/piano ad lib.
Belwin Mills 1167
Breitkopf L CHB 2617; PB 3237
Marks 105-108 (English)

Canons, **op. 113** (compiled and published, 1891)
Three to six parts
Belwin Mills 1167
C. F. Peters 6860

Performances of the Hamburger Frauenchor conducted by Brahms also included compositions by Bach (duets from *Ein feste Burg* and *Gott der Herr ist Sonn' und Schild*), Byrd (*Non nobis, Domine*), Antonio Caldara (*Peccavi*), Johannes Eccard (*Übers Gebirg Maria geht*), Gallus (*Ecce quomodo moritur justus*), Hassler (*Mein G'müth ist mir verwirret*), Isaac (*Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen*), Lotti (*Vere languores nostros*), and Palestrina (*Princeps gloriosissime* and *Gaude Barbara beata*).[21] Hence, Brahms contributed not only to the development of the women's choir through his compositions and performances but also to the preservation of other significant repertoire for this medium.

One of Brahms's last publications to appear in print during his lifetime was his *Canons,* op. 113, a compilation of canons for female voices written at various times throughout his career. This brought both his interests in canons and in music for female choir full circle. Brahms pays homage to Schubert in this last set as the final canon employs the melody of Schubert's "Der Leiermann," the final song in his *Winterreise.* An awareness of the relationships between the works of these two composers for womens choirs could result in some interesting and creative programming possibilities for women's choirs during this year marking the anniversaries of the two composers.

NOTES

[1] T. Gérold, *Les pères de l'église et la musique* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1931), 109, quoted in Sophie Drinker, *Music and Women* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1948), 160.

[2] Drinker, 161–62.

[3] Carol Neuls-Bates, ed., *Women in Music* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 6.

[4] James R. Anthony, "Paris," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 207.

[5] Drinker, 252.

[6] Mozart's *Kyrie for Five Sopranos,* K. 89 was probably intended for five solo voices.

[7] Drinker, 256.

[8] Schubert's seven-movement *Lady of the Lake* consists of one male chorus, one female chorus, and five solos, the best-known of which is *Ave Maria.*

[9] Alfred Einstein, *Schubert,* trans. David Ascoli (London: Cassell, 1951), 343.

[10] Otto Erich Deutsch, *Schubert: A Documentary Biography*, trans. Eric Blom (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1946), 723.
[11] Ibid., 552.
[12] Ibid., 614.
[13] Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1990), 55.
[14] Ibid., 91.
[15] Virginia Hancock, *Brahms's Choral Compositions and His Library of Early Music* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983), 126.
[16] MacDonald, 116.
[17] Karl Geiringer, *Brahms: His Life and Work* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1936), 293.
[18] Renate and Kurt Hofmann, *Johannes Brahms Zeittafel zu Leben und Werk* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1983), 246–47.
[19] Ibid., 275.
[20] Geiringer, 354–55.
[21] Hancock, 209.

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