Brahms in the Priesthood *of* Art

Gender and Art Religion in the Nineteenth-Century German Musical Imagination

LAURIE McMANUS

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Note on Translations

In a study of rhetoric, it is necessary to read sources in the original German; however, I have also consulted English translations where available. In each case where I have cited or modified an existing English translation, both German and English versions are cited in the footnote. Otherwise, translations are my own with the input from Katharina Uhde, to whom I am grateful for her advice and insight.

Introduction

> I spared myself no trouble and work to awaken and nurture it [Brahms's talent] in order to raise a priest of art, who would preach afresh, in a new way the sublime, true, and everlasting eternality of art and achieve it in the deed itself.
>
> —Eduard Marxsen, 1874[1]

> To all appearances, however, this [Brahms] was a very respectable phenomenon; only it remains doubtful how such a phenomenon could be set up in a natural way as the Messiah, or, at least, the Messiah's most beloved disciple; unless, indeed, an affected enthusiasm for medieval wood-carvings should have induced us to accept those stiff wooden figures for the ideals of ecclesiastical sanctity.
>
> —Richard Wagner, 1870[2]

Brahms's early composition teacher, Eduard Marxsen, and his outspoken antipode, Richard Wagner, together offer us a sense of the competing rhetorics of art religion (*Kunstreligion*) in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They both drew on an older, Romantic notion of the exceptional artist as a quasi-religious figure who was set apart from society by the destiny of great talent and an almost monastic devotion to his or her art. Underpinning this notion was the fundamental belief in music's power to transport the listener to spiritual realms, to the extent that engagement with art might replace confessional religious practice. The occluded nature of this musical discourse created an opportunity for exceptional composers and performers to mediate between the divine and the mundane. Thus, neither Marxsen nor

[1] La Mara [Marie Lipsius], *Musikalische Studienköpfe*, 244. All translations are mine with the help of Katharina Uhde, unless otherwise cited. The translation is modified from Niemann, *Brahms*, trans. Catherine Allison Philipps, 21.

[2] Wagner, *On Conducting*, trans. Edward Dannreuther, 84.

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Wagner seemed interested in disputing the art-religious ideology itself, but rather differed in its application to Brahms. They also each had something at stake in Brahms's reception: At nearly seventy, Marxsen looked to Brahms as a lasting legacy of his teaching; Wagner, still at work on his magnum opus *Ring* cycle, stood to benefit from disparaging the younger composer who in the late 1860s had just achieved national fame with his *German Requiem*.

As Marxsen's and Wagner's comments suggest, by the 1870s Brahms and some performers in his circle had garnered the title of "priests of music," and even beyond their individual profiles, they collectively formed what influential critic Eduard Hanslick deemed a "priesthood of art."[3] This exceptional group included the violinist Joseph Joachim, pianist Clara Schumann (née Wieck), and singers Amalie Joachim (née Schneeweiß) and Julius Stockhausen. Brahms was the unique character among them in that he identified first and foremost as a composer, and his compositions garnered more value than his performances as a pianist. The very juxtaposition on concert programs of Brahms with Beethoven, Schubert, and Bach helped to induct Brahms into the hallowed realm of serious composers. In particular, Brahms supporters consistently spoke of his musical purity, a term heavily laden with long-standing moral and ethical associations, which would figure in a larger cultural conflict against Richard Wagner. Marxsen's comments indicate the great extent to which some of these supporters depicted Brahms as a quasi-religious hero, while Wagner's demonstrate how the priestly persona could be lampooned as an exaggerated invention of fawning admirers, or worse, a pretentious cover for personal deficiencies.

Why study the rhetoric of artistic priesthood in Brahms's time? Broadly speaking, the perseverance of an art-religious ethos into the period after the failed social revolutions of 1848 and 1849 demonstrates the continued currency of music's supposed mystical power even in the face of technological and scientific progress. Music maintained its ability to transport listeners to safe realms, offer spiritual refuge, and promote moral uplift. Particularly in the circle around Brahms and Clara Schumann, music offered a means of emotional disclosure and interpersonal communication.[4] Brahms's interactions with his friends deeply influenced both the composition of his music as well as the reception of those fellow artistic priests who performed it. Beyond personal associations, performers and composers were able to

[3] Hanslick, *Geschichte des Concertwesens in Wien*, 418.
[4] Berry, *Brahms Among Friend*s, 26.

project an air of aloofness to the general public, reinforcing the image of an artist devoted humbly to their art. Through the turns and gestures of public discourse, the meanings of private musical utterances were translated into art-religious rhetoric that invited interpretation on levels beyond the circles where they originated.

Although Brahms attempted to shape the nature of his own reception and public image, he found that once in circulation, ideas could gain currency and develop in directions beyond his control.[5] Certain of these currents remain in the listening public's conception of Brahms today—Brahms as emotionally restrained, as masculine, as academic. But this prominent nineteenth-century trope in his reception, that of the priest of music devoted to his pure art, seems to have disappeared from most contemporary discussion of Brahms. The main purpose of this book is to trace the trajectory of Brahms reception at the intersections of art religion, gender, and sexuality and to recover the ambiguities of his early reception. I argue that the priestly rhetoric effectively created an exceptional gendered space for Brahms and to a lesser extent for the performing mothers, Clara Schumann and Amalie Joachim. Women's presence in a priesthood of art points to both the malleability of gender roles and to the ambiguity of the priestly identity itself. For Clara Schumann, it opened a world of authority that was invested with feminine devotion, while for Amalie Joachim, the purity of the priesthood saved her from the immorality of the operatic stage. For bachelor Brahms, it could be argued that he sacrificed a normal bourgeois married life in order to devote himself to his art.

As the concept of the musical priest drew on tropes of the solitary genius, it proved a more ambiguous figure with its implications of bodily self-denial in pursuit of spiritual transcendence. In the face of increasing demands for art to perform a relevant social and political function, the art-religious notion of the solitary artist could be seen as an ineffective vestige of the early nineteenth-century Romantic decades. Especially in the case of the lifelong bachelor Brahms, this ambiguity also left room for insinuations of repression and abnormality. For example, Wagner's aforementioned critique parodies the cultural phenomenon of Brahms's art-religious reception by likening his supporters to medievalist antiquarians with implied psychological and

[5] Brahms's attempts to control his image are well known, even beyond the now iconic beard he began sporting in the 1870s. Even in his mid-twenties he stopped signing letters with his full name in order to deter autograph seekers. He also read contemporary reviews in journals and invited critics to his concerts.

sexual deficiencies. Brahms, of course, is also implicated as a "stiff, wooden figure" attracting the fetishistic attention of this dubious cult. Wagner thus repositions the art-religious rhetoric in the context of cultural trends and psychological critique contemporary to the late 1860s. By the end of the century, psychological and psycho-sexual interpretive frameworks had come to co-exist beside older, Romantic readings of composer biography and musical meaning. This development produced increasingly heteronormative, masculinized rhetoric from Brahms's supporters as critical psychological methods led others to question the purity and healthiness of his image—in some analyses, the priest of pure music even became an example of Freudian repression. I argue that the more masculine image of Brahms developed in response to such critical attacks and largely superseded the ambiguities of his earlier art-religious reception.

Artistic Priesthood

> Poet and Priest were one in the beginning, and only in later times have they separated. The true poet is however always a priest, as the true priest has always remained a poet. And should not the future bring about the former condition of things?
>
> —Novalis, 1798[6]

In this fragment the German Romantic poet Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) confronts readers with a paradox. He asserts that poet and priest have separated, but that the authentic poets and priests have never strayed from this union. Novalis thus establishes a timeless, detached nature of the "true" poet from his or her conditions, connecting the poet rather to an unconditional, absolute ideal. While implying that the artistic product is connected to its conditions through his suggestion that the future might effect change, he also allows that true art stretched back to "the beginning." The nostalgic tone of the fragment combines with a hopefulness that there will be a resurgence of the older conditions. Novalis elaborated on his hopes for the future in his lecture on *Christianity or Europe* (1799), in which he projected the romanticized vision of a Catholic medieval

[6] Novalis, "Blüthenstaub," *Athenäum: Eine Zeitschrift* 1 (1798): 90.

past onto a future utopia.[7] His icon of poet-priest was perfectly suited to express an artistic authenticity in both its implications of a long-standing, legitimized historical tradition as well as its connection to a greater absolute.

In Novalis's formulation, a true priest had always been a poet, and it is not difficult to imagine how the art of persuasive rhetoric, oratory, and more generally, of artistic—even musical—expression, could in turn be applied in the service of religious agendas. By the late eighteenth century, the artist, poet, novelist, or composer could be understood as an oracle, disclosing mysterious truths beyond the quotidian, earthly realm. But what exactly qualified someone as a priest of art, beyond basic claims to historical legitimacy and esoteric revelation? Which aspects of priesthood remained relevant and desirable for the musician and composer? Which aspects might a musician want to discard? Did the priestly musician serve as a conduit for greater aesthetic transcendence, or might the notion of priest also imply a dogmatic adherence to artistic ideals? Certainly, it involved a sense of dedication to a higher cause and avoidance of mere frivolous entertainments. But the priestly rhetoric remained vague and malleable for each new case of an artist-priest, and Novalis drew from generalized ideals of religious devotion rather than from any denominational particularities of Catholic or Druidic priests. In that sense, the artistic priest was a new pedigree, a hybrid of secular artistic and religious values born from the hopeful and nostalgic modes of the Romantics. Over the course of the century, the discourse on artistic priesthood would come to incorporate the nuances of various commentators' religious, social, and artistic positions.

The priest of art was only one archetype in the new Romantic world of art religion (*Kunstreligion*), in which pre-Enlightenment religious ideals of communality and universality combined with secular values of anti-dogmatism. Proponents of art religion drew on traditions of natural theology, in which human reason and ability to comprehend the world replaced uncritical faith. Art assumed the place of religion for many who sought an absolute spirituality. Scholars have recognized the parallels between the religious early nineteenth-century Pietist movement and the German Romantic interest in communal brotherhood, as Novalis had expressed in his *Christianity or Europe*. But while the denominational and dogmatic elements of organized religion disappeared, the ritualized nature of religious practice remained, evidenced in the architectural modeling of concert halls after places of

[7] Kleingeld, "Spirituality or the World: Novalis' 'Christianity or Europe,'" 158–60.

worship.[8] Articulated through artistic practices and permanent structures, art-religious values would persevere into the later nineteenth century, aided in part by a growing secularism among middle-class Germans.[9]

The German Romantic era, broadly defined here based on literary studies as the period from the 1790s to the 1830s, generally emphasized the transcendental, the abnormal.[10] It gave rise to a new category of "absolute" music, which emphasized the superiority of wordless music precisely on account of its indeterminate meaning.[11] The composer, inspired from beyond, might now utter ineffable truths, unrestricted by the limitations of language. This new model of composer-as-oracle replaced the earlier, rhetorically driven model of the composer-as-preacher, which lasted from the sixteenth century into Johann Sebastian Bach's time. The composer-as-oracle therefore also dispatched with the original functions of the composer-as-preacher model, which had originated with Martin Luther's pronouncements on the power of music.[12] The art-religious move toward non-denominational spirituality, combined with a Romantic interest in a distant, reimagined medieval Catholicism, established the quasi-magical figure of the priestly artist. After all, the archetypal Catholic priest might be seen as an exclusively positioned, mediating figure between the spiritual-supernatural realm and the material world; in this way the composer too could be understood to facilitate mystical union between audiences and the spiritual world. In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, his coming-of-age novel (*Bildungsroman*) that chronicles the experiences of a medieval poet, Novalis conflated the identities of poet and musician in the form of minstrel, drawing on Greek myth to accord these figures supernatural powers.Ultimately, any variation of a composer-priest might combine elements of Protestant or Catholic traditions or pagan, mythological archetypes, but the very non-confessionalism of art religion made it accessible to a variety of consumers.[13]

[8] Novalis's father was a member of the Pietist movement. See Weigelt, "Das Elternhaus von Novalis," 493–507. See also Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism, and Holiness*, 114–16; Rank, "Romantische Poesie als religiöse Kunst"; Kramer, "The Idea of *Kunstreligion* in German Musical Aesthetics of the Early Nineteenth Century."

[9] See Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany*.

[10] For an overview of the periodization of Romanticism, see Schmidt, "From Early to Late Romanticism," 21–40.

[11] For more on the idea of absolute music, see Bonds, *Absolute Music*, 109–14.

[12] For more on this so-called *musica poetica*, see Bartel, *Musica Poetica*.

[13] Martina Bick has noted the use of Greek mythological language in Liszt reception by Lina Ramann and Marie Lipsius, "Mittäterschaften? Wie Musikschriftstellerinnen zur Heroenbildung beitrugen," 187.

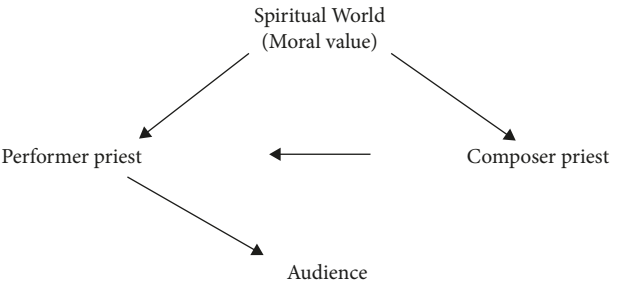

Figure I.1 Model of Art-Religious Communication

The Romantic image of the priest also proved relevant to the performer of music. The rhetoric of priestly performance might at first seem logical: the performer-priest communes with the composer and mediates between him and the public (see Figure I.1). Because the composer also mediates and transfers knowledge between a spirit-world and the public, however, the rhetoric establishes a more complex relationship between the human mediators and the something beyond.

Despite the continued existence of composer-performers such as Anton Rubinstein, the distinction between these two roles widened over the course of the nineteenth century. Even by midcentury, the author Eduard von Bauernfeld could parody the serious artist-composer as a pretentious character who only performed virtuoso violin music under a pseudonym as a final recourse to make ends meet.[14] Later in the century, Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl penned a story in which a male virtuoso marries, retires from performing, and settles down to create "pure and noble art."[15] Some commentators, including Hegel, had spoken of spiritual communion between the performer and composer. Both communicated the idea of the Absolute, although the performer often did so through a framework established by the composer.[16] In this way, "true" performers, like Novalis's true priests, always retained an element of compositional authority even as they conveyed musical ideas penned by someone else. In the end, composers, performers, and composer-performers all fell under the umbrella category of "artist," and, as the violinist

[14] Bauernfeld, *Die Virtuosen*.
[15] Riehl, "Gradus ad Parnassum." For more on this, see Chapter 5.
[16] See Hunter, "'To Play as if from the Soul of the Composer,'" 357–98.

Joseph Joachim himself told Brahms, "Artists should not be servants of the public, but rather priests."[17]

This relationship also creates an ontological paradox: the artist's subjectivity is subsumed in channeling a force from beyond. To some extent, one might infer parallels between a Romantic notion of priestliness and the self-denial of monasticism, which had garnered praise from Novalis: "self-denial is the source of all humiliation, but also the source of all genuine exaltation."[18] That is, priestly artists might suppress a sense of subjectivity and ego in order to access something greater than themselves—ultimately, an act of self-denial. The bodily implications of this ideology, wherein a monk abjures the pleasures of the sensual world, also relate directly in narratives of certain musical figures, as we will see in the case of performers who suppressed the overt, embodied theatricality of performance. In its most extreme manifestation, this sense of self-denial crossed the line into self-sacrifice; Ludwig Tieck's and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder's German Romantic novella about fictional composer Joseph Berglinger imagines the young man dying after completing his magnum opus.[19]

While the art-religious ethos was theoretically available to all who listened, the musical priesthood represented an occluded, elite group with access to the esoteric realm of transcendental understanding. When in 1870 Eduard Hanslick dubbed Clara Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Joseph Joachim, and Julius Stockhausen "priests of music," it set them apart from other musicians and composers. In an attempt to rehabilitate such composers, author Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl coined the term "godly philistines" to distinguish a group of early nineteenth-century composers who had created music for dilettantes, in contrast to the holy realm of Bach and other luminaries.[20] The revolutionary feminist Louise Otto critiqued the exclusivity of the musical elite at mid-century; she lamented that music had become especially divorced from "the public" because of the increasing training and knowledge needed to engage meaningfully with music as well as the attitude of the "Pharisees and scribes of music."[21] She and others at mid-century would call for the "curtain of the temple of art" to be torn down.[22] The solution, according to

[17] Brahms attributed the quote to him in his notebook of collected aphorisms. See *Des jungen Kreislers Schatzkästlein*, 58.
[18] Novalis, "Pollen," 13.
[19] Wackenroder, *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, 228–75.
[20] Riehl, *Musikalisches Charakterköpfe*, 193.
[21] Otto, *Die Kunst und unsere Zeit*, 14.
[22] Ibid., v.

Otto, was to have more public concerts and operas; as Marie Sumner Lott has suggested in her study of nineteenth-century chamber music, the "threshold of musical accessibility" was dropping by the third quarter of the century.[23] In this way, the art-religious realm of music could include more receptive listeners in audiences, while outstanding performers and composers could communicate transcendental values through music.

Art Religion and Gender

Nineteenth-century Austro-German discourses of art religion were entangled with notions of gender and implicitly with sexuality. In addition to explicitly gendered terminology, critics also made use of rhetoric that resonated with ideals of both femininity and masculinity. These ideals were generally represented as a dichotomy of complementary oppositions between "masculine" reason, strength, and action, and "feminine" emotionality, weakness, and passivity. While German speakers in the nineteenth century would most likely agree that there were fundamental, essential differences between men and women, defining the characteristics and gender roles of these groups was a continually negotiated process. This process furthermore relied on numerous socio-ideological factors, such as class or religion, and it played out in a number of arenas, including music criticism.

Views of gender did not remain unchanged over the course of the nineteenth century, and historians of gender have acknowledged that the second half of the century saw hardening lines and more prescriptive ideas of what constituted manly and womanly behavior. Even the general polarity described previously was not particularly valued in German Romantic thought; male characters in novels and poems often displayed a wide range of emotional states. These values speak to what Martina Kessel has noted as the patriarchal vision of the "whole man," which included characteristics of both masculine and feminine nature, in contrast to the relational model of gender produced by the masculine-feminine dichotomy.[24] The relational model, which held that men needed women to become whole (and vice versa), would become increasingly prominent in the middle-class worldview

[23] Sumner Lott, *The Social Worlds of Nineteenth-Century Chamber Music*, 74.
[24] Kessel, "The 'Whole Man,'" 1–31.

in the second half of the nineteenth century. This model depended on essential differences between masculinity and femininity.

The artistic priest developed in a German Romantic intellectual milieu in which the Philistinism of mundane bourgeois existence was to be avoided; the exceptionality extended to gendering of the role as well.[25] In short, artistic priesthood was a slippery concept that could accommodate various characteristics and values along the gender spectrum. In Butlerian terms, continual iterations of gendered utterances in some ways reinforced the masculine-feminine dichotomy but also offered opportunities for ambiguity, if not outright resistance.[26] The act of tending to a flock of laypeople might be interpreted as masculine; on the other hand, the degree of devotion and receptivity needed for the role might be gendered feminine. The obeisant supplicant in the temple of art could be a masculine or feminine figure but sometimes eschewed these identities entirely in a kind of purification, denying the self a sensual presence in the world, an embodiedness as male or female.

Moreover, values and aesthetics relating to music in particular helped to complicate the gendered space of the artistic priesthood. As an art described as "both ethereal and sensual," music presented a potentially transgressive space for those who partook in its performance and composition. As Beatrix Borchard has concluded after reviewing the "masculine" song cycles performed by Amalie Joachim, the concert hall could be a gender-free zone.[27] Special artists might be received with rhetoric that transgressed the masculine-feminine dichotomy, such as Clara Schumann with her purported power to shake the audience to its core.[28] In the case of Beethoven, as Matthew Head has shown, it was possible that "heroines served as emblems of the male artist as a self-transcending, boundary-crossing individual. . . . Constructions of heroism by Beethoven, his contemporaries, and his collaborators focused as much on women as on men and involved ambiguous gendering."[29] All three of these individuals appeared as special artists who transcended societal and specifically gendered norms in some way.

One means of obscuring gender roles was through the rhetoric of purity, which was considered a middle-class value for both women and men, and it

[25] See Pikulik, *Romantik als Ungenügen an der Normalität*.
[26] See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
[27] Borchard, *Stimme und Geige*, 441–42.
[28] Dr. Beck, *Wiener Morgen-Post*, December 2, 1872.
[29] Head, "Beethoven Heroine," 98, 104.

could apply to styles of music as well as performance aesthetics and styles of self-presentation. In most cases, the purity in question was negatively defined as the avoidance of theatricality, sentimentality, and sensuality; at the same time, it suggested a moral superiority for the performer, composer, or initiated audiences. Joseph Joachim, for example, might perform Bach's D Minor Chaconne in what seemed to commentators to be a pure style, while other critics might note the pure, even "astringent" nature of the piece separate from any performance practice. It is important to note that the ambiguous nature of purity itself could be marshalled by unsympathetic commentators into an attack, seen implicitly in criticisms of "coldness" or "sterility."[30]

The so-called feminization of religion, which saw a gradual relocation of religious expression to the domestic sphere and particularly to women, produced an association of religious introspection with the feminine, and rational, public discourse with the masculine.[31] Despite confessional differences, both Protestants and Catholics viewed religious practice as a domain more suited to women, and the concomitant characteristics of humility and modesty—desirable qualities in priests of music—were coded increasingly as feminine.[32] Clara Schumann's own experience resonated with this trend, as she wrote in her daybook in 1854 that "Almost all of my (female) friends speak piously, they write of Lord Jesus and that he carried the cross for us humans, therefore we must patiently abide all woes, etc., etc."[33] She, however, chose to express her art-religious spirituality in a way that did not entirely conform to gender norms of the time, namely through public and more abstract performance of music. Thus, for Schumann and later Brahms, the artistic priesthood offered both of them spaces where gendered ambiguity supported a sense of transcending quotidian expectations.

Despite an intermingling of male and female participants, the musical priesthood has yet to be fully examined in the context of changing notions of gender and identity over the course of the nineteenth century. Teasing out the nuances of meaning requires a sophisticated discourse analysis that explores how notions of gender intersect with art-religious ideologies. These critics and commentators tried generally to persuade readers of their aesthetic

[30] In this way Hugo Wolf could joke that Amalie Joachim performed Brahms lieder "as coldly and ponderously as the compositions were," January 10, 1886. Cited in *Hugo Wolfs musikalische Kritiken*, 235.

[31] See for example, Werner, ed., *Christian Masculinity*; McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe*.

[32] See McLeod, "Weibliche Frömmigkeit—männlicher Unglaube?" 135; Kormann, "Bildungsroman und geschlechtsspezifische religiöse Erziehung," 256.

[33] Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: ein Künstlerleben*, 320.

viewpoints, thereby contributing to a broader discourse on contemporary German music. Although "discourse" has become a slippery term in the past half century, here it generally refers to a domain of statements or utterances on a given topic, which may express ideological content. In this context, in which discourse assumes an attempt on part of the writer to persuade an audience, "rhetoric" takes on a narrower definition, generally referring to individual words or phrases that contribute to the meaning. For the purposes of this study, I will be focusing more on published articles and feuilletons than private utterances preserved in correspondence, which were directed usually to one particular individual or set of individuals. The social nature of public discourse requires that the utterances must be examined within context, especially in relation to other groups of statements.[34]

Discourse analysis has also proved valuable in interpreting the construction of gender roles and identities. Looking back on the impact of her important work, "Gender as a Useful Category of Analysis," Joan W. Scott lamented that through the 1980s and 1990s too often "gender studies" had focused on women rather than "how the meanings of 'women' and 'men' are discursively established, what contradictions trouble these meanings, what the terms exclude."[35] To some historians such as Kathleen Canning, however, the shift in emphasis from the experience of women and men to the discursive constructions of femininity and masculinity—the so-called *linguistic turn*—had actually taken place.[36] Nonetheless, discourse and experience are interconnected because of how historical actors created, internalized, and recreated discursive constructions in their "real" lives. Perhaps a more useful lens through which to understand collective experience is the everyday performance of gender, which has been most extensively theorized by Judith Butler. Butler's work centers the iterative and mutable nature of constructing gender; each gesture, movement, and utterance contributes to an ongoing constitutive process.[37] In this case, gender discourse in music criticism can also be viewed as a kind of performative process, including the contributions of actors who wrote reviews as well as those whose performances, on-stage and beyond, influenced the tone of that reception.

This study considers that performative, discursive process as it relates to the reception of bachelor Brahms and to a lesser extent the performing

[34] See discussion in Mills, *Discourse*, 11–13.
[35] Scott, "Millennial Fantasies," 34.
[36] Canning, *Gender History in Practice*.
[37] See Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, *Undoing Gender*; Butler and Weed, *The Question of Gender*.

mothers Clara Schumann and Amalie Joachim. More work has been done in relation to these two women and gender; however, musicologists conflating "gender studies" with "women" inadvertently position men as the normative, as above and beyond these critical analyses, in the way that the notion "music is apolitical" protects it from inquiry.[38] Musicologists have examined Brahms's portrayal of gender stereotypes in his music, but there is less work on the reception of gender in his own biography and image. Brahms scholarship that does address these issues often makes heavy use of the masculine-feminine dichotomy as an interpretive framework. Marion Gerards's study of Brahms and gendered discourse compiles reviews as she makes the case that Brahms consciously crafted a masculine persona and was received in this way by supporters. Women did not figure other than as muses for Brahms, manifested in a traditional interplay of masculine and feminine musical characteristics in his lieder.[39] Heather Platt likewise has noted that many of Brahms's girls' songs (*Mädchenlieder*) employed a simplistic folk style that evoked a bourgeois, romanticized ideal of emotionally restrained, pure maidens.[40] Gerards allows that Brahms himself may have felt ambivalent toward women, but does not fully explore this ambiguity in the reception or in his music. Similarly, Marcia J. Citron's pioneering work has noted that much Brahms reception performed a masculinizing function.[41] These approaches embrace the masculine-feminine dichotomy as a framework of analysis, thereby privileging an idealized norm and minimizing the deviations from it. Ironically, this route tends to reify the masculinity proposed by the most heteronormative of Brahms supporters and does not take into account the gendered ambiguity of much art-religious rhetoric.

Brahms in a Post-Romantic Landscape

Brahms offers a case study in the intersection of art-religious values with a gender dichotomy that became increasingly prescriptive over the second half of the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, the historical ethos had shifted away from Romanticism toward scientific progress, bourgeois rationality,

[38] Some major studies include Borchard, *Stimme und Geige*; Borchard, *Clara Schumann*; Reich, *Clara Schumann*; Klassen, *Clara Schumann*; Kreutziger-Herr und Finke, "Studies in Music History: No/More Gender?"

[39] Gerards, *Frauenliebe–Männerleben*.

[40] Platt, "The Construction of Gender and Mores in Brahms's *Mädchenlieder*."

[41] Citron, "Gendered Reception of Brahms."

and religious secularization, yet certain elements of German Romantic art-religious ideology persisted, including the notion of the artistic priesthood. Ironically, the art-religious notion of self-sacrifice persists in Brahms biography today as an explanation for his not marrying. The priesthood of art thus functioned as an exceptional space for individuals who worked against gender norms in a changing time. Scholars looking at gender in Brahms reception have simplified this problem in a way that emphasizes only the most masculinized, heteronormative rhetoric of Brahms supporters. This explicit masculinization occurred, I argue, in response not only to negative rhetoric from the opposing camp of musical personalities, but also to the very ambiguity of the priestly role itself. Further complicating the matter is that the final decades of nineteenth-century Vienna saw developments in scientific fields (psychology and sexology) that forced a re-conception of earlier art-religious values.

In particular, Brahms's decision to remain a bachelor flew in the face of middle-class ideals of family, and the notion of the self-sacrificing artist offered an acceptable exception. As a friend wrote in a memorial essay following the composer's death in 1897, "Brahms saw personal liberty as a condition of his free musical creation and therefore did not marry."[42] This explanation has persisted in Brahms literature since then, appearing in biographies and the *Grove Music* article on the composer.[43] Matthias Kornemann aptly summarized the problem in his critical take on Brahms mythology: Brahms supposedly sacrificed his life for his work.[44] Although the scholars disseminating these myths claim they are based on Brahms's stated reasons for not marrying, his own statements on the subject varied over time.[45] Ultimately, iterations of this biographical explanation reinforce an art-religious rhetoric from which Brahms himself seems to have retreated by the end of his life. As I argue in this book, art-religious hermeneutics gave way to more modern psychological interpretations by avant-garde critics of the *fin de siècle*.

[42] "S.," "Johannes Brahms," *Neue Musik-Zeitung* 18 (1897): 99.

[43] George S. Bozarth and Walter Frisch, "Brahms, Johannes," *Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed August 10, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.51879. Constantin Floros bases his entire Brahms biography on this trope, naming it after a catch-phrase Joseph Joachim had invented—"frei aber einsam" (free but alone). Floros, *Johannes Brahms: "Free but Alone."*

[44] Kornemann, *Johannes Brahms*, 133–34.

[45] According to his fiancée, Agathe von Siebold, Brahms said that he could not "wear fetters"—by the end of his life, he told Josef Viktor Widmann that he could not marry when he wanted to because he had no money and could not bear the thought of being married while a public failure as a composer. See Chapter 6 for more discussion of this point.

Brahms's identity as a musical priest developed in the context of a major aesthetic conflict that dominated the music world for most of his adult lifetime. The cultural landscape of German-speaking lands changed after the failed political and social revolutions of 1848/49, with an initial darker pall cast over the dashed hopes of achieving utopia; in music aesthetics, the 1840s advocates of "progress" established an ongoing adversarial relationship with proponents of tradition. This conflict has been construed as the "War of the Romantics," or as an ideological battle between composers of "program" music (Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner) and "absolute" music (Brahms).[46] However, as Sanna Pederson has shown, the term "absolute" (*absolute*) did not take hold in the critical discourse until the late nineteenth century; rather, the term appearing more often was "pure" (*rein*).[47] For Brahms and friends, to perform or compose music in a pure style was a defining characteristic of the artistic priesthood and a mark of superiority over mere virtuosos and proponents of Wagnerian aesthetics.[48] Wagner's own aesthetic theories and attempts to reform opera with a sensual imperative further irritated those who clung to art-religious values of pure music. By the same token, much of Brahms's negative reception originated with critics and musicians who agreed with Wagner's demand that music be a sensual art.

This aesthetic conflict unfolded against the backdrop of an increasingly industrialized society that fostered a growing appreciation for technological and scientific progress.[49] Some of these developments influenced the musical debates, such as the emergence of scientific materialism from 1840s Young Hegelian philosophy, which held that the physical world, rather than an abstract ideal or divine one, held the key to human development. The most extreme scientific materialists argued that there was no independent human soul; personality and feelings, they claimed provocatively, were the result of tiny molecules.[50] At the same time, the expansion of the railway system came to represent modern technological distance from the "more natural" Romantic period of the early nineteenth century; one commentator lamented in 1876, looking back on Robert Schumann's fairy-tale worlds, "We

[46] The idea of Brahms as a composer of absolute music (i.e., music without extra-musical reference) has been steadily deconstructed and debunked. See Reynolds, *Motives for Allusion*; Berry, *Brahms Among Friends*; Sholes, *Allusion as Narrative Premise*.

[47] See Pederson, "Defining the Term 'Absolute Music' Historically," 252.

[48] Alexander Stefaniak has also noted how the Schumanns blended virtuosic festivity with priestly solemnity. See *Schumann's Virtuosity*, 195–238.

[49] See Blackbourn, *History of Germany, 1780–1918*.

[50] See Vogt, *Physiologische Briefe*, 206.

have no more cozy nooks, no pleasant chit-chats, no 'Twilight spreads her wings.' The locomotive roars through the Roman Campagna."[51] In light of these developments, the clinging of Brahms supporters, many of whom shared these progressive values, to an outmoded Romantic rhetoric of artistic priesthood might seem contradictory.[52]

Another outgrowth of the 1840s upheaval was an attempt by women's rights activists to advocate for expanded work and educational opportunities, which in turn sparked a reification of the masculine-feminine dichotomy and further delineation and separation of the gender roles. As activists tried to redefine women's roles, some social conservatives and others in the scientific establishment sought to prescribe more limited roles in the name of the "natural."[53] Historian Martina Kessel argues that the relational model of gender strengthened, because for men, the "soldier of labor" replaced the "man of the world" as the new masculine ideal: a man who worked hard all day required the emotional labor of a woman to complete him.[54] In a similar vein, historians of emotion note that beginning around mid-century, emotionality became increasingly associated with women (with the exception of anger belonging to the expressive realm of men). One might see an example of this shift in Brahms's attempts to suppress public display of emotion in reaction to the death of his mother.[55] Although he spent much of his youth steeped in the ambiguities and expressiveness of Romantic literature, he nonetheless came of age as an artist during this time of increasingly prescriptive gender ideology. The priesthood offered a kind of alternative masculinity whose religious overtones implicitly situated Brahms in a tradition of asexual holy figures above and beyond the expectations of normal bourgeois life. This situation could be problematic, and, as historians of gender have noted, alternative masculinities were often seen as pathological.[56] In this case, the ambiguous priesthood offered the vague values of purity, a passive trait often associated with ideal femininity, and of sequestered self-discipline,

[51] Louis Ehlert, "Robert Schumann und seine Schule," *Deutsche Rundschau* (December 1876): 425. The quoted text appears to refer to Joseph von Eichendorff's "Zwielicht," which Schumann set in his *Liederkreis*, Op. 39. For more on the cultural impact of the steam engine, see Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*.

[52] For Brahms's own views on trains, see Quigley, "Johannes Brahms and the Railway."

[53] See Schmersahl, *Medizin und Geschlecht*.

[54] Kessel, "The 'Whole Man,'" 14.

[55] The Brahms biographer Max Kalbeck includes an excerpt of a letter by Rosa Lumpe describing an exchange with Brahms: "As Mama offered him condolences on the death of his mother and said, 'You bear it so well and quietly, Johannes!' he said simply, 'Yes, well, that's being a man.'" Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, vol. 2/1, 3rd ed., 235.

[56] Schmale, *Geschichte der Männlichkeit in Europa*, 229.

harkening back to Romantic notions of interiority, which could and already had been gendered feminine.[57]

The book is structured according to major currents in Brahms reception relating to the overarching themes of purity, sensuality, and gender ambiguity. The roughly chronological progression demonstrates how certain of these themes, such as musical purity, underwent different aesthetic valuations in conjunction with other social trends. Chapter 1 establishes the aesthetic themes of purity and sensuality that provided the framework for much of Brahms's reception. The rhetoric of a "pure" style of music originated in early nineteenth-century German Romantic valuations of early religious vocal music, that of Bach and before; a range of commentators from E. T. A. Hoffmann to Justus Thibaut to Dominicus Mettenleiter praised this early music for its "pure" contrapuntal techniques and mostly diatonic harmony. In his 1854 treatise *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*On the Musically Beautiful*), Eduard Hanslick's attempt to divorce music from its extra-musical and political contexts nonetheless retained these moral connotations while claiming purity for contemporary instrumental music. Revolutionary agitation during the 1840s heralded a new valuation of sensuality, best articulated in Richard Wagner's own writings from mid-century, which helped to establish among self-avowed progressive critics and composers a new imperative for sensually immediate and communicative art. With this stage set for these competing aesthetic currents, we can better analyze Brahms's "induction" into the priesthood of art from his association with the Schumanns, his "pure" contrapuntal style, and the national success of the *German Requiem* (Chapter 2). Thus, the moral connotations of the pure style aligned with the moral authority of the priest of art.

Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the nuances of gendered rhetoric in terms of music performance and genre. Chapter 3 focuses on the feminine gendering of artistic priesthood through the case studies of Clara Schumann and Amalie Joachim. Priestesses were invested with a kind of natural sensual authority that was suited only to women as primordial life-givers, a notion described in Johann Jakob Bachofen's work on ancient matriarchal societies. At the same time, contemporary German feminization of religion increasingly prescribed private religious devotion as the province of women, which aligned further with the art-religious ideal of the performer humbling themselves before the music. The critique of purity as neither feminine nor

[57] See Pederson, "Romantic Music Under Siege in 1848," 57–74.