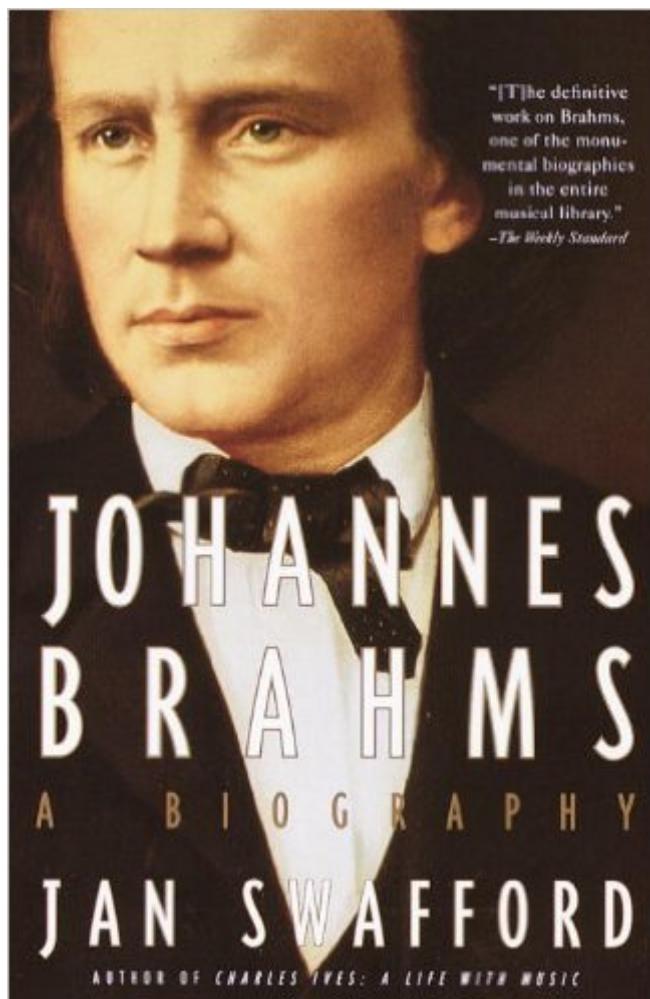


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Johannes Brahms: A Biography



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book"This brilliant and magisterial book is a very good bet to...become the definitive study of Johannes Brahms."--The Plain DealerJudicious, compassionate, and full of insight into Brahms's human complexity as well as his music, Johannes Brahms is an indispensable biography. Proclaimed the new messiah of Romanticism by Robert Schumann when he was only twenty, Johannes Brahms dedicated himself to a long and extraordinarily productive career. In this book, Jan Swafford sets out to reveal the little-known Brahms, the boy who grew up in mercantile Hamburg and played piano in beer halls among prostitutes and drunken sailors, the fiercely self-protective man who thwarted future biographers by burning papers, scores and notebooks late in his life. Making unprecedented use of the remaining archival material, Swafford offers richly expanded perspectives on Brahms's youth, on his difficult romantic life--particularly his longstanding relationship with Clara Schumann--and on his professional rivalry with Liszt and Wagner. "[Johannes Brahms] will no doubt stand as the definitive work on Brahms, one of the monumental biographies in the entire musical library."--London Weekly Standard"It is a measure of the accomplishment of Jan Swafford's biography that Brahms's sadness becomes palpable.... [Swafford] manages to construct a full-bodied human being."--The New York Times Book Review

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Customer Reviews

If you have ever read Maynard Solomon's biographies of Mozart and Beethoven, and enjoyed them,

you will definitely like Swafford's biography of Brahms. The styles have a lot in common. Both authors write mostly with the lay reader in mind, so even someone like me who doesn't have any background in music can still enjoy the books. Both authors are interested in psychological reasons for behavior and, in my opinion, make convincing arguments concerning certain personality traits of these great musicians. However, both authors are also aware that some of the people that read these books are knowledgeable about music, so there are brief sections that get into technical analysis of the music. Solomon did this by including short chapters scattered throughout his book, devoted solely to musical analysis. Swafford chose to incorporate his musical analysis within the general flow of the book, a few paragraphs at a time. As a lay reader, I liked Swafford's approach better. Since I pretty much didn't understand the technical aspects, it was less boring to have this stuff just a little bit at a time! Swafford's book has two great strengths, besides the fact that he writes beautifully. He goes into detail concerning Brahms's relationship with Clara Schumann, a friendship which lasted for approximately 40 years. The second strength is that piece by piece he builds up a picture of Brahms the man so that by the end of the book you will feel that you knew Brahms. The picture is well-rounded, too. Brahms could be rude and arrogant but he also could be sensitive and humble and generous. He also had a tremendous sense of humor. He was very witty, both in his conversation and in his correspondence. He was also a great practical joker.

I read Jan Swafford's monumental 1997 biography of Johannes Brahms (1833 --1897) after reading his biography of the American composer Charles Ives and after reading the 1991 biography of Brahms by Malcolm MacDonald. Swafford has written an outstanding biography of Brahms and a thorough, perceptive consideration of his music. But greater than either of these accomplishments, his book brings Brahms and late nineteenth century Vienna to life. Swafford has given a great deal of thought to Brahms, and his book helped me think about the nature of creative gifts, about the relationship between love and calling, and about many matters that are much broader than either biography or music. Swafford gives a great deal of attention to two formative experiences of young Brahms: 1. his childhood of poverty in Hamburg where he played as a pre-adolescent in dives frequented by prostitutes and sailors (this account has been questioned by some writers) and 2. Robert Schumann's article about Brahms at the age of 20, heralding the young man as the heir to Beethoven and predicting a brilliant future for him. Swafford's book emphasizes Brahms's difficulties throughout life in forming a lasting, sexual relationship with a woman other than prostitutes. Brahms exhibited a sort of behavior towards women frequently described in terms of "The Virgin and the Whore." Brahms could only be physically intimate with women he did not respect. Thus, Brahms

ultimately rejected the romantic opportunities that came his way in the persons of Clara Schumann and Agathe von Siebold, among other women. He withdrew into a protective shell when friendships with women threatened to become romantic. Yet women were the greatest source of inspiration to Brahms as a composer.

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