

# Tumbling in the Godless Deep: Brahms and the Sense of an Ending

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Received: 01/01/2020

Institution (Martin Ennis): University of Cambridge; Faculty of Music and Girton College

Published: 05/02/2020

Last updated: 05/02/2020

How to cite: Martin Ennis, Tumbling in the Godless Deep: Brahms and the Sense of an Ending, Musicologica Austriaca: Journal for Austrian Music Studies (February 05, 2020)

Tags: [19th century](#); [Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund](#); [Brahms, Johannes](#); [Elegies](#); [Endings](#); [Gesang der Parzen](#); [Nänie](#); [Schicksalslied](#); [Vier ernste Gesänge](#)



*Music in Context*



# Brahms's Elegies

The Poetics of Loss in  
Nineteenth-Century German Culture

NICOLE GRIMES

Nicole Grimes, *Brahms's Elegies: The Poetics of Loss in Nineteenth-Century German Culture*  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019

[1] The writer Salomon Hermann Mosenthal quipped that when Brahms was in really high spirits he would sing to himself “The grave is my delight.”<sup>[1]</sup> Max Kalbeck, who conveys the anecdote, presents it as an attempt to poke fun at the composer. However, no-one could reasonably challenge the idea that Brahms possessed one of the most pessimistic dispositions of nineteenth-century composers or that his oeuvre is dominated by works that engage, one way or another, with loss and mourning. In a series of compositions ranging from his first work for choir, the *Begräbnisgesang*, Op. 13, to the last opus published during his lifetime, the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121, Brahms returned time and again to the themes of death and grief.

In *Brahms's Elegies: The Poetics of Loss in Nineteenth-Century German Culture*, a bold and imaginative book, Nicole Grimes takes the idea of Brahms's obsession with mortality and probes it from new and, at times, unexpected angles. The volume reveals an author who reads unusually widely and who uses her learning to challenge well-established interpretations. The originality of her approach is evident not least in the choice of repertoire. The first three chapters are devoted to elegies based on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts—*Schicksalslied*, Op. 54; *Nänie*, Op. 82; and *Gesang der Parzen*, Op. 89. The fourth focuses on the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, a setting of words from Luther's translation of the Bible. In Chapter 5, “The Sense of an Ending,” and in the Epilogue, Grimes strikes a nice balance between recapitulation and broadening out. The book concludes with a translation of a 1934 essay by Theodor Adorno, “Brahms aktuell,” presented here as an appendix.

As laid out above, *Brahms's Elegies*, with its three different “time zones”—Brahms's lifetime, the 1930s, and today—might seem unfocused. However, Grimes persuades us otherwise. As she explains at the start of the Epilogue, the purpose of the book is to examine two linked themes: Brahms's repeated return to “the human condition in fate-related works” and the “question of how Brahms's music is inextricably interwoven in the fabric of musical modernism.” According to the author, these two themes “intersect in the realm of the human, that is both the sense of humanity and the aesthetic humanism which Brahms's elegiac output embraces” (242). The rationale for Grimes's broad canvas is thus firmly established.

Questions about the volume's scope and purpose present themselves nonetheless. Two spring immediately to mind. What, other than the theme of mortality, links the four main works explored here? More particularly, should a setting of words from the Bible for solo voice and piano sit next to works for choir and orchestra based on secular texts by Hölderlin, Schiller and Goethe? For Grimes, the answer to the latter question is an unqualified “yes.” All four works have traditionally been seen as containing problematic endings, and in each case Grimes casts new light on vexed hermeneutical issues. Indeed, it's through her analysis of the works' “problems” and of the ways in which these have been addressed over the years that Grimes provides compelling answers to the question of commonality.



**Figure 1: Johannes Brahms in his study in Vienna, photograph by Ludwig Grillich (ca. 1892); by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, [Bildarchiv Austria](#)**

Endings have long preoccupied musicians. Indeed, Adorno was particularly drawn to the way in which Brahms finished his finales—the endings of his endings, so to speak—claiming that they are imbued with “splendid resignation” (15). But it’s not just pioneering critics who have obsessed over endings: every student of nineteenth-century music is likely to be exposed at one point or another to the so-called finale problem.<sup>[2]</sup> This is usually traced to the gauntlet thrown down by Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony. However, some such as Maynard Solomon in “Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony: The Sense of an Ending” have brought other works—in this case, the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, Op. 106, and the B flat major String Quartet, Op. 130—into the equation.<sup>[3]</sup>

Awareness of the challenges posed by endings took root early in nineteenth-century critical discourse.<sup>[4]</sup> Writing less than a decade after Beethoven’s death, in 1836 (the year of his Op. 17 *Fantasie*), Schumann declared:

A genuine musical art-form always has a focal point towards which all else gravitates, on which all imaginative impulses concentrate. Many place it in the middle (like Mozart); others (like Beethoven) reserve it for after the structural cadence. Wherever it lies, the effect of any composition is dependent on its dynamic influence.<sup>[5]</sup>

Schumann’s sensitive critical antennae had detected a shift from balanced to teleological structures. His musings were perhaps inspired by something he had read in a recent issue of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. Here, Gottfried Wilhelm Fink, despite his fundamentally conservative stance on musical politics, seems to accept a new concentration in recent music (specifically, symphonies) on a single focal point reached only by means of concerted effort:

The whole must have a definite and clearly expressed character that binds the separate parts together into the most intimate relationship, so that, just as in Beethoven's symphonies, the individual movements may often seem to be quite heterogeneous but on closer inspection turn out to have been created from one element only; for everything works towards *one* goal, and everything blends to express *one* inner state of emotion.<sup>[6]</sup>

Liszt touched on the same theme when he argued in 1837 that, with the exception of Beethoven and Weber:

instrumental music [has been] conceived until now ... [as] directly regulated by a symmetrical scheme and ... could be measured in cubic feet, so to speak.<sup>[7]</sup>

The music of the future, Liszt implies, will necessarily involve transformation: a simple, balanced return at the end of a composition to the *status quo ante* is no longer acceptable.

For Wagner, at least according to the diary kept by his wife Cosima, what started as a trend in the earlier part of the century had by 1881 turned into a paralysing dilemma:

Last movements are a cliff, and I'll take care, I'll write only one-movement symphonies.<sup>[8]</sup>

[2] When addressing issues such as these, Brahms scholars have usually focused on the last movement of the First Symphony. From the time of the work's first performance in 1876, its manifest allusions to Beethoven's Ninth have been viewed as problematic. As Mark Evan Bonds put it, many of Brahms's contemporaries—including, of course, Wagner—found the thematic similarities between the finales of the two symphonies “plainly scandalous, a clear manifestation of the composer's inability to escape Beethoven's influence.”<sup>[9]</sup> Even the Brahms acolyte Max Kalbeck admitted that the relationship between the two movements was key to “fully understanding” Brahms's First Symphony.<sup>[10]</sup> Occasionally, the finale problem surfaces in discussions of other works: Arnold Whittall, for example, focused on the two Op. 51 string quartets.<sup>[11]</sup> However, the issue has never received thorough treatment in Brahms scholarship. Grimes's decision to tackle it through the medium of a relatively neglected corpus of texted works is therefore particularly welcome.

Inventive perspectives abound in *Brahms's Elegies*. For this reader, the chapter on the *Schicksalslied*, Op. 54, was most consistently insightful. Here Grimes argues persuasively for a broadly based interpretation of “Hyperions Schicksalslied,” the poem from Friedrich Hölderlin's novel *Hyperion* on which Brahms's composition is based.<sup>[12]</sup> Most critics have tended to view “Hyperions Schicksalslied” as a fragment divorced from its context. For Grimes, however, the context is essential to understanding Brahms's surprising decision to begin and end his setting in different keys. First heard in E flat major—Brahms's tonality of choice for works of mourning, as Grimes repeatedly points out—the opening material comes back at the close in C major. However, it's not just the tonality that changes: the scoring is also transformed. The opening bars of the *Schicksalslied* are dominated by an ostinato rhythm in the timpani, reinforced by the cellos; at the end of the work, the throbbing effect is abandoned in favor of gossamer arpeggios in the strings. The material is thus the same but not the same. This, according to Grimes, reflects the trajectory of *Hyperion* as a whole. As a *Bildungsroman*, it charts the spiritual journey undertaken by a hero forced to confront moral and philosophical challenges. The novel, we are told, traces a sort of spiral, a typically Romantic shape that, in the author's eyes, finds perfect

expression in Brahms's musical transfiguration. Grimes makes a powerful case, delving deep into the writings of Schiller and Kant, not to mention modern theorists. It's a thrilling ride. She concludes that the *Schicksalslied*, like the other Brahms elegies explored in the book, is a manifestation of what Constantin Behler once termed, in a cleverly phrased oxymoron, "nostalgic teleology" (4).

Grimes's readings are mostly rooted in the writings of nineteenth-century German philosophers and critics and in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Anglophone scholarship. She largely avoids engagement with the responses of nineteenth-century composers such as Schumann and Wagner to the challenges of endings. She also leaves to one side the corpus of literature on the finale problem itself; no account is taken of the taxonomies that scholars such as Karl H. Wörner and Bernd Sponheuer have put forward in an attempt to explain the nineteenth century's uneasy relationship with endings.<sup>[13]</sup> Such taxonomies are generally built on abstract theoretical frameworks. Wörner, for example, argues that, in terms of its content, the last movement of a symphony must be "a sort of answer" to the first movement and, looking back at the history of the genre, he distinguishes between three different types of response, to which he ascribes the labels "Decrescendo," "Equilibrium" and "Crescendo." Unsurprisingly, nineteenth-century finales are placed firmly in the last of these categories.<sup>[14]</sup>

Wörner's approach is, however, far from exhaustive. If one were to categorise Brahms's elegiac endings with reference to repertoire by the composer's immediate predecessors, a different, perhaps complementary, picture might emerge. The *Schicksalslied* could, for example, be evaluated in the light of the emotional fractures encountered in some of Schumann's endings. After all, the way in which Brahms revisits the material of the opening section at the end of the *Schicksalslied* has more than a hint of the conclusion to *Frauenliebe und -leben*, Op. 42. True, there is no shattering of monotonicity in Schumann's song-cycle. However, the expressive intent is very similar: in both cases, a fundamentally negative outcome in the text is subverted by an unexpected turn in the music. Or, to adopt another tack, by returning to music associated with blissful states, the composer provides solace where the poet offers none. Both composers, Brahms and Schumann, conclude with a wordless restatement of the opening material—necessarily so in the case of the *Schicksalslied*, since the work starts with a purely orchestral introduction. An exclusively instrumental ending moves the music into a sphere of disembodied sensibility.





**Figure 2: Johannes Brahms, *Schicksalslied* (Op. 54, 1871), autograph (p. 26); by courtesy of [Library of Congress, Music Division ML96 .B68 Case](#)**

Most interpretations of the *Schicksalslied* are strongly colored by the available documentary evidence. In this case, we possess unusually rich material about Brahms's compositional process. Correspondence with Hermann Levi and Carl Reinthaler reveals a composer uncertain how to respond to the grim outcome of Hölderlin's poem. The poet contrasts the beatific existence of the gods, bathed in heavenly breezes, with the travails of humankind, whose lot on earth affords no certainties.<sup>[15]</sup> Hölderlin ends in despair with a description of mortals plunging from cliffs into unmeasured depths.<sup>[16]</sup> Faced with this deeply pessimistic image, Brahms decided ultimately to translate the two sections of Hölderlin's poem into a piece of music in ABA' form where the A' section, as we have seen, is a transfigured, textless version of the opening.<sup>[17]</sup> Inevitably, perhaps, the composer's uncertainty over how to respond to Hölderlin's denouement has dominated hermeneutic approaches ever since. One can't help wondering whether the reception of the *Schicksalslied* would have been rather different—more Schumann-centered?—if history had failed to provide this unusually helpful biographical perspective.

[3] A similar interpretation could be advanced for *Nänie*, Op. 82. Here too Brahms returns at the end of the work to something close to his starting point. And here too critics have fretted about the slant this strategy imposes on the literary source, a free-standing poem by Schiller dating, like "Hyperions Schicksalslied," from the turn of the nineteenth century. Schiller ends this most ravishing of texts with the bleakest of lines: "Denn das Gemeine geht klanglos zum Orkus herab" (For all that is common sinks soundless to Hades). Brahms, however, is anything but "klanglos." For his setting of Schiller's last couplet, he returns to the music that accompanied the opening of the poem. However, he uses Schiller's final line, with its gloomy descent to the underworld, only once, preferring to wreath around it a meditation on the penultimate line, "Auch ein Klaglied zu sein im Mund der Geliebten ist herrlich" (Even to be a lament on the lips of the beloved is glorious). In the course of Brahms's rhapsodizing, the last word of the line ("herrlich"—glorious) is



heard almost thirty times in the vocal parts. What has become of Schiller's bitter outcome? The music leaves us deeply moved but far from devastated. As Grimes points out, Brahms seems to have recognized his radical repurposing of the text. At least, he was determined that the audience at the 1881 premiere in Zurich's Tonhalle should understand the nuances of Schiller's poem, arranging for interpretative details to be included in a program note.

The choice of a text by Schiller provides Grimes with the opportunity to explore in more detail the aesthetic theories first adumbrated in the chapter on the *Schicksalslied*. In her account of *Nänie*, Grimes draws heavily on Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind; 1794–95) and *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry; 1795–96). Her account of the way in which Schiller reconciled opposing notions of reason and sensuality makes for absorbing reading. Schiller contends that reason is the primary cause of humanity's alienation from nature, its deracination, and that art and culture bear responsibility for the destruction of a sense of totality in our innermost being. According to Schiller, wholeness must be restored through a higher art. Grimes argues that Schiller's theories of mourning rest on the conceit that art lives on only through lamentation. The issue is summarized in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung* as follows:

Reason has purged herself of both the illusions of the senses and the delusions of sophistry, and philosophy itself, which first seduced us from our allegiance to nature, is now in loud and urgent tones calling us back to her bosom.<sup>[18]</sup>

Schiller's solution lies in a return to the past and to lost ideals. For Grimes, the notion of a circuitous route home, one traced through the categories of the elegy and the idyll and through the phenomenon of what Grimes calls aesthetic rupture, is crucial to any profound understanding of Brahms's *Nänie*.

Spirals or circles? Symmetry or teleology? Katabasis or upwards twist? Perhaps questions such as these are, ultimately, of little consequence. A single turn of a spiral is, after all, a type of transfigured circle. Bartók once argued that symmetrical forms must take some account of the journey travelled, that mechanistic reversals are insufficient in the realm of music. Similarly, no composer of Brahms's generation (and sophistication) could ever regard a simple restatement of the opening material after a contrasting middle section as entirely satisfactory. Despite the composer's tendency in later sonata-form movements to offer literal recapitulations of his second groups, the outcome of a work as a whole surely cannot remain unaffected by its trajectory. Composer, performers and audience are all changed in some way by the vicissitudes borne by the material.<sup>[19]</sup> In her readings Grimes stresses the novelty of Brahms's conclusions. However, it would have been interesting to read how she reconciles the idea of the spiral with that of *ouroboros*, the snake that bites its tail. After all, the concept of *ouroboros*—the ultimate self-consuming and self-perpetuating circle—was well-known to Brahms. He famously mentioned it in connection with the last of his 49 *Deutsche Volkslieder*, WoO 33, a setting of an old German folksong, "Verstohlen geht der Mond auf," that also featured in the C major Piano Sonata, Op. 1. Surveying the span of his compositional career from 1853 to 1895, Brahms seemed happy to invoke the idea of a route that returns to its starting point.



**Figure 3: Anselm Feuerbach, *Jugendliches Selbstbildnis* (1852/53); by courtesy of Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, inv. no. 946**

*Nänie* was written as a memorial to the painter Anselm Feuerbach (1829–80). The particular circumstances of the work’s creation enable Grimes to triangulate three different art-forms—music, poetry and painting. In so doing, she goes beyond most previous critics who, typically, content themselves with an exploration of the word/music relationship. Grimes uses *Nänie*’s status as a memorial for an artist as the stimulus for a discursive treatment of Brahms and the visual; indeed, her account embraces a survey of the role of classical antiquity in the careers and oeuvres of both Feuerbach and Brahms, and of late nineteenth-century Germany more generally. As Grimes puts it, Feuerbach and Brahms shared “a propensity toward the great, the exalted, and the ideal in classical figures. Both prized the importance of form, rigour of

thought, dominance of the line, and sculpted design” (74). Statements such as these clearly build on foundations laid down by Brahms’s contemporaries: Eduard Hanslick and Julius Allgeyer, for example, highlighted similarities in the artistic outlooks of Brahms and Feuerbach. However, Grimes takes the debate in novel directions, focusing in particular on the painter Adolph Menzel, another friend of the composer.

[4] It is the treatment of musical allusions in *Nänie*—links to Brahms’s compositional heritage—that is perhaps most fascinating. Grimes provides a helpful summary of well-established connections between *Nänie* and Beethoven’s Piano Sonata, Op. 81a, “Les adieux.” (This account might have been extended by bringing into play Hugo Wolf’s “Lebewohl;” in this song the falling tones of Beethoven’s and Brahms’s openings are changed to semitones as the very idea of farewell turns into a source of torment.) Allusions in the central section of *Nänie* to Beethoven’s song-cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, Op. 98, are also thoroughly investigated. Given the unambiguous way in which Beethoven revisits the opening of his cycle in its closing bars, these links are, of course, particularly relevant to *Brahms’s Elegies*.

Further Brahms-related references to the song-cycle are, however, unexplored. Pointing to paths not taken in a volume so rich in its range of reference is perhaps churlish. However, the very phrase from Beethoven that Grimes picks out in the middle section of *Nänie* was used repeatedly in the first movement of Schumann’s *Fantasie*, Op. 17. Even more germane to the present context, the same theme played a prominent role in the original version of the finale of Brahms’s Op. 8 Piano Trio, a work completed in early 1854 and first revealed to the composer’s circle while he was living in the Schumann household. As the second subject of the finale, this Beethovenian melody was effectively the work’s last thematic utterance. Though no words are voiced, the Piano Trio (like Schumann’s Op. 17 *Fantasie* before it) appears to take its lead from the Alois Jeitteles text that Beethoven set in the final song of his cycle—“Nimm sie hin denn, diese Lieder, / Die ich dir, Geliebte, sang” (Accept then these my songs, / Which I sang for you, my beloved). By virtue of its position within the Op. 8 finale, the theme plays a retrospective, even summarizing role. And, given the circumstances of the Trio’s genesis, the work is surely to be read as an offering to Clara Schumann. Nevertheless, in a startling twist Brahms removed the reference to *An die ferne Geliebte* when, a few years after the premiere of *Nänie*, he reworked the Op. 8 Piano Trio. In the revised version of Op. 8, musical poetry is abandoned for a passage of shallow bluster. We don’t know why Brahms made such a drastic change, but the removal of the Beethovenian allusion almost certainly indicates that homage to Clara was no longer deemed appropriate or desirable. What implications, if any, should this have for our understanding of *Nänie* or, indeed, of Brahms’s changing approach to endings?

The references to Beethoven in *Nänie* are, for the most part, widely accepted. The links that Grimes draws between *Nänie* and *Ein deutsches Requiem* are more tenuous. The shared material in this case consists of no more than a falling fourth. It is certainly true that this motif features prominently in the middle section of *Nänie*. That falling fourths are used with similar intent in the fifth movement of the *Requiem* is by no means certain: the notes in question appear to be simply a scalar fragment extracted from the middle of a phrase. Acknowledging the historically well-established parallel between the falling tetrachord, both diatonic and chromatic, and the topic of mourning would have been more helpful here. Indeed, it would have been particularly useful to connect the four-note scale with the opening bars of the *Schicksalslied*; these are built on an unambiguous falling diatonic tetrachord found in its traditional location, the bass.<sup>[20]</sup>

Possible parallels with Beethoven and Schumann, not to mention the use of time-honored

compositional elements such as the falling tetrachord, might encourage us to probe further Grimes's view that Brahms's approach to death, and to memorializing death, changed radically over the course of his career. In the Introduction, Grimes rightly draws attention to developments in German idealism during the nineteenth century, claiming that the power of idealism's "aesthetic force at the beginning of the century was matched only by the degree to which it ... completely disappeared as an aesthetic category at the century's end" (8). Later in the volume Grimes links the relatively dissonant harmonic style of the *Gesang der Parzen* to these developments. Later still, she argues that exposure in 1895 to Nietzsche's *Der Antichrist* played a similarly galvanizing role in the composition of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*.

The *Gesang der Parzen*, Op. 89, may well contain passages of unusually astringent harmony, but the work as a whole reveals, once again, a composer determined to sweeten the pill. The composition is based on a free-standing poem, extracted from Goethe's play *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, that tells of damnation passed down the generations. Wagner likened finales to dangerous cliffs. According to Goethe, however, precipices pose existential challenges. For Goethe, as indeed for Hölderlin, humankind is destined to spin out an existence on "cliffs and clouds," in fear of arbitrary gods who may send them tumbling "reviled and dishonoured" into the abyss.<sup>[21]</sup> At the end of Goethe's text, an unnamed exile—clearly, Tantalus—is confined to a gloomy cavern shaking his head in despair over the fate of his children and grandchildren. It is hard to imagine a more desolate conclusion. Yet Brahms strikes a note of consolation, ending his setting with swathes of warm D major harmony. Why?





**Figure 4: Anselm Feuerbach, *Iphigenie* (1862); photo and courtesy of Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt**

In dealing with the *Gesang der Parzen*, Grimes turns on its head the procedure she adopted for the *Schicksalslied*. There, critics were taken to task for failing to consider the broader context—that is to say, Hölderlin's novel. Here, Grimes argues that a satisfactory interpretation can be reached only by laying to one side Goethe's play. At first glance, the change of approach

might appear arbitrary, even wrong-headed. However, Grimes finds justification in Brahms's own words. In his correspondence with Theodor Billroth, Brahms contended that it would be wrong to equate *Iphigenie* with the Fates, or to suggest that *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, the play, traverses the same ground as the "Gesang der Parzen," the poem. Brahms was keen to suppress any link with *Iphigenie auf Tauris* on the title page of his score; indeed, he appears to have torn out of his Reclam edition of the play the pages on which the poem appeared. As a result, the rich intertextual backdrop that Grimes brings to this chapter is rooted not in the remaining sections of Goethe's play, but in the various versions of the Tantalus myth, ranging from Homer to Ovid, with which Brahms was familiar.

[5] Grimes also grounds her argument in what she calls a "trajectory of melancholy" within Brahms's output from 1877, the date of the Second Symphony, to 1882, the premiere of the *Gesang der Parzen*. The publication during this period of "Warum ist das Licht gegeben," Op. 74 No. 1, and "Mir lächelt kein Frühling," WoO 25, certainly helps support the idea. However, it is surprising that no account is taken (or given) of the early origin of the music of the Op. 74 motet, or of the possibility that the WoO 25 canon may, like "Warum," go back to the 1850s. Grimes rightly places the birth of "Warum" in the late 1870s, but she fails to mention the music's lengthy gestation—surely, a relevant factor in any argument based on diachronic change. As for "Mir lächelt," the earliest documentary evidence dates from 1877; however, the circumstances in which the canon is first mentioned suggest once again an earlier origin.<sup>[22]</sup> Moreover, the compositional preoccupations revealed in the canon are remarkably similar to those found in Brahms's study period, the period in the later 1850s that Albert Dietrich memorably dubbed "Brahms's years of withdrawal" (71). Can a fundamentally new disposition be revealed by the publication of works whose musical essence may well have been defined a quarter of a century earlier?

In the case of the *Gesang der Parzen*, arguments about a new approach to dissonance are difficult to sustain when tested against the backdrop of Brahms's broader output.<sup>[23]</sup> It's not clear that the pungent dissonances built on diminished-seventh sonorities that determine the *tinta* of the *Gesang der Parzen* are replicated to any significant degree in the Third Symphony (1883) or in the thirty-five songs that make up the bulk of Brahms's publications in the years immediately following the *Gesang der Parzen*. Given this, can one reasonably maintain that this period is marked by a new musical approach?

As for the issue of mortality, Brahms claimed continuity in his views at least between the late 1860s and the mid 1890s. According to Max Kalbeck, the composer stated only a few months before his death that "neither at the time he wrote the *Requiem*, nor now [did he believe] in the immortality of the soul."<sup>[24]</sup> In short, does a position of nihilism, such as Brahms appears to have espoused throughout this long period, allow for any revisionist interpretation? Every possible fraction of zero is zero.

Similar doubts might be raised about the novelty of Brahms's outlook in the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121. Grimes, like generations of scholars before her, puzzles over Brahms's decision to cap a sequence of starkly pessimistic Old Testament texts with the famous passage from the First Letter to the Corinthians in which St Paul extols faith, hope and charity. The mismatch here lies as much in the music as in the texts: "Wenn ich mit Menschen- und mit Engelszungen," the last song of the cycle, abandons the heavy, earth-bound idiom of the first three songs, opting for sweeping—at times, barnstorming—melodies. One of the singer's last utterances, perhaps uniquely in Brahms's oeuvre, spans almost two octaves.



Grimes rapidly casts aside Malcolm Boyd's idea that the last of the *Vier ernste Gesänge* has "no place in this cycle." She is drawn to Daniel Beller-McKenna's argument that the song suggests rejection of Schopenhauer's pessimism, but abandons this interpretation on the grounds that it opens up as many questions as it answers (164). For Grimes, the solution lies in Nietzsche's *Der Antichrist*, of which Brahms acquired a copy in 1895: "Brahms's confrontation with the candid and urgent nature of Nietzsche's pronouncements in this book is quite likely to have contributed to his final and most pronounced turn inward" (164-65).

Brahms's annotations and marginalia certainly indicate interest in *Der Antichrist*, a volume built round a remarkably "vociferous" attack on Luther's Reformation (170). What's more, Grimes's reading of the way in which Nietzsche's book may have led Brahms back to the Bible in his last years is subtle, involving interplay between religion and politics. Ultimately, however, her argument rests on the understanding that Brahms added the words from First Corinthians to his pocket notebook of Biblical texts in response to reading *Der Antichrist*. Well over a century later, hard evidence will probably never be found to prove or disprove this theory. That said, by using an exceptionally wide range of materials—everything from musical sketches to annotations in Brahms's library and evidence of broad cultural phenomena—Grimes advances a powerful case.

Viewed as a whole, the chapter on the *Vier ernste Gesänge* contains much that is memorable. Indeed, the various sections on Brahms and religion provide one of the best summaries in English of the composer's stance on belief. It might be argued that an extrapolation of Brahms's views from opinions expressed by friends such as Theodor Billroth, Josef Viktor Widmann and Eduard Hanslick is dangerous; that, however, is to confuse sensitive hermeneutical insight with binding legal proof. The weight of circumstantial evidence brought to bear in this section is compelling, and Grimes is clearly aware of the risks involved in imputing the views of friends to the composer. Throughout the chapter, she builds persuasively on the writings of Jan Brachmann and Hanns Christian Stekel, scholars whose work deserves much greater exposure in Anglophone circles than it has received to date.

One possible explanation for the remarkable conclusion to the last opus Brahms himself published is not explored here. The posthumous collection of chorale preludes for organ, Op. 122, and several other late collections contain evidence of Brahms gathering together work that may have lain in or on his desk for decades. In the case of the chorale preludes, stylistic evidence alone forces one to conclude that the bulk of the music reaches back into Brahms's study period. Might something similar be true of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*? A full treatment of this issue will have to await a future study, one that most likely relies on charting Brahms's stylistic development. However, if the two last opus numbers, Op. 121 and Op. 122, are to be taken together, as Grimes proposes, it's hard to resist the conclusion that Brahms grouped his four last songs as he did because he was staring death in the face.



**Figure 5: Johannes Brahms's cortege from Karlsgasse to Lothringerstraße (June 6, 1897); by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, [Bildarchiv Austria](#)**

[6] In “Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony: The Sense of an Ending” Maynard Solomon argued that Beethoven’s capacity for endless metamorphosis—just as much a feature of Brahms’s compositional process, of course, as of Beethoven’s—“runs the danger of yielding to the chaotic; it defeats form, and makes endings improbable, for it will not accept any ultimate resting-place, or any implication of finality.”<sup>[25]</sup> There’s more than a hint of this phenomenon in several of the works considered here, not least the *Vier ernste Gesänge*. Brahms’s spirals—or circles—repeatedly invoke the idea of unfinished business. After all, the completion of one rotation, to hijack James Webster’s term, does not preclude the possibility of further travel.

Solomon goes on to claim that the alternative finales Beethoven provided or contemplated providing for the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, the late B flat major String Quartet and the Ninth Symphony enabled him to “ward off his own death, dispel his fears, calm his doubts.”<sup>[26]</sup> Brahms may not have been a Scheherazade who postponed death by perpetual storytelling. However, by challenging expected conclusions, by spinning out material that seems to have run its course, by retelling the poets, he cast “uncertainty on his story’s outcome,” demonstrating an acute awareness of his own mortality, a desire to postpone the inevitable descent into the abyss.<sup>[27]</sup>

Schumann once described Chopin’s *Preludes*, Op. 28, as a “wild motley of pieces,” adding that the composer nonetheless “is and remains the boldest and proudest poetic mind of the time.”<sup>[28]</sup> I was reminded of this description when reading *Brahms’s Elegies*. In some respects, the different parts of the book—historical and philosophical excursions, close readings of individual works, analysis of an essay by Adorno—sit oddly together. However, *Brahms’s Elegies* is built on strong foundations, and one comes away from it educated, challenged and, above all, exhilarated. It’s a fine piece of writing by a scholar who clearly relishes broad horizons.

# References

1. "Wenn Brahms einmal recht lustig ist, singt er: Das Grab ist meine Freude." Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1914), iv:131. Brahms cites the same *bon mot* in a letter to Elisabet von Herzogenberg dated November 1879: *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Heinrich und Elisabet von Herzogenberg*, ed. Max Kalbeck (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1907), i:106. For more on Rosenthal's relationship with Brahms, see Peter Clive, *Brahms and his World: A Biographical Dictionary* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 318–19. ↑
2. The term 'Finalproblem' seems to have appeared for the first time in Paul Bekker, *Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien* (Berlin: Schuster and Loeffler, 1921). For recent studies of the phenomenon, see Sascha Wegner and Florian Kraemer, eds., *Schließen – Enden – Aufhören: Musikalische Schlussgestaltung als Problem in der Musikgeschichte* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2018); also, Kathrin Kirsch and Siegfried Oechsle, eds., *"Finalproblem": Große Form zwischen Apotheose und Suspension*, Kieler Schriften zur Musikwissenschaft 56 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2019). ↑
3. See Siegfried Kross, ed., *Probleme der symphonischen Tradition im 19. Jahrhundert: Kongreßbericht [des Internationalen Musikwissenschaftlichen Colloquiums Bonn 1989]* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1990), 145–56. For another version of the same piece, see Maynard Solomon, "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: The Sense of an Ending," *Critical Enquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 289–305. ↑
4. The nineteenth century's preoccupation with unfinished works is surely a further illustration of the challenge posed by endings. ↑
5. "Ein echter musikalischer Kunstsatz hat immer einen gewissen Schwerpunckt, dem Alles zuwächst, wohin sich alle Geistes-Radien concentriren. Viele legen ihn in die Mitte (die Mozartsche Weise), Andere nach dem Schluß (die Beethovens). Aber von seiner Gewalt hängt die Totalwirkung ab." The comment was made with reference to Ignaz Moscheles's Piano Concerto No. 5 in C major, Op. 87. See [Robert Schumann, \*Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker\* \(Leipzig: Georg Wigand, 1854\), 272](#). The translation is adapted from *Schumann on Music: A Selection from the Writings*, transl. and ed. Henry Pleasants (New York: Dover, 1965), 108. ↑
6. "Das Ganze muss einen bestimmten und festgehaltenen Charakter haben, der die verschiedenen Theile in ihrer innersten Verwandtschaft unter einander verbindet, so dass, wie in den Beethoven'schen Symphonieen, deren oft heterogen scheinende, einzelne Sätze bei näherer Betrachtung doch nur aus einem Element erzeugt sind, Alles nur auf *einen* vorgesetzten Zweck hinarbeitet und sich zum Ausdruck *einer* innern Anregung des Gemüthes verschmilzt." [Gottfried Wilhelm Fink, "Ueber die Symphonie, als Beitrag zur Geschichte und Aesthetik derselben," \*Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung\* 34 \(1835\): col. 557–58](#); emphasis original. For further details about Fink's conservative reputation, see Ora Frishberg Saloman, "Fink, Hach, and Dwight's Beethoven in 1843–44," *The Musical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (1992): 491–92. ↑
7. Franz Liszt, *An Artist's Journey: Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique, 1835–1841*, transl. and ed. Charles Suttoni (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 19. The quotation is taken from a letter to George Sand dated January 1837. ↑

8. "Die letzten Sätze sind die Klippe, ich werde mich hüten, ich schreibe nur einsätzig Symphonien." Cosima Wagner, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (Munich: Piper, 1977), ii:827. ↑
9. Mark Evan Bonds, *After Beethoven: Imperatives of Originality in the Symphony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 138. ↑
10. Bonds, *After Beethoven*, 171. ↑
11. Arnold Whittall, "Two of a kind? Brahms's Op. 51 finales," in *Brahms 2: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies*, ed. Michael Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 145–64. The main "problem" explored here is the relationship between the two finales. Also relevant in this context is Werner Czesla's doctoral dissertation, "Studien zum Finale in der Kammermusik von Johannes Brahms" (PhD diss., Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1966). ↑
12. Grimes points out that Brahms was "perhaps the only nineteenth-century composer to have set Hölderlin" (19–20). Hölderlin is therefore to be set alongside Theodor Storm who, it would appear, was also first recognised by Brahms; see Natasha Loges, *Brahms and his Poets: A Handbook* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), 385. ↑
13. See Karl H. Wörner, *Das Zeitalter der thematischen Prozesse in der Geschichte der Musik* (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse, 1969), especially 1–64; also, Bernd Sponheuer, *Logik des Zerfalls: Untersuchungen zum Finalproblem in den Symphonien Gustav Mahlers* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1978); also, Michael Talbot, *The Finale in Western Instrumental Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). ↑
14. Wörner, *Das Zeitalter der thematischen Prozesse*, 3 ("eine Art Antwort;" "Decrescendo;" "Gleichgewicht;" "Crescendo"). Wörner goes on to consider character development in stage works. Here he posits another tripartite taxonomy, one based this time on "psychological development," "polarity of character" and "equilibrium of character" ("psychologische Entwicklung;" "Polarität des Charakters;" "Statik des Charakters") – or, to expand a little, characters who develop over the course of the drama, characters who are prey to conflicting impulses, and characters who are unaffected by any blows they may suffer (Wörner, 4). ↑
15. "Doch uns ist gegeben / Auf keiner Stätte zu ruh'n." Hölderlin seems to echo here the phrase from Hebrews 13 that Brahms set in the sixth movement of *Ein deutsches Requiem*: "Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt." According to Albert Dietrich, Brahms first came across the Hölderlin text in the summer of 1868, only a few weeks after the Bremen premiere of *Ein deutsches Requiem*, so he may well have been struck by the verbal parallel. For details of Brahms's initial response to Hölderlin's text, see [Albert Dietrich, \*Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms in Briefen besonders aus seiner Jugendzeit\* \(Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1898\), 65.](#) ↑
16. "Es schwinden, es fallen / Die leidenden Menschen ... Wie Wasser von Klippe / zu Klippe geworfen, / Jahrlang ins Ungewisse hinab." ↑
17. The poem is in three stanzas, with the first two devoted to the gods and the third to humans. ↑
18. Quoted in Grimes, *Elegies*, 81. ↑

19. For more on Brahms's changing approach to recapitulation, see James Webster, "The General and the Particular in Brahms's Later Sonata Forms," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 49–78. [↑](#)
20. Indeed, variants on the figure are found repeatedly throughout the A and A' sections of the *Schicksalslied*. [↑](#)
21. "Klippen und Wolken"; "So stürzen die Gäste, / Geschmäht und geschändet / In nächtliche Tiefen." [↑](#)
22. See David Brodbeck, "On Some Enigmas Surrounding a Riddle Canon by Brahms." *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 1 (2003): 83. [↑](#)
23. In the Introduction, Grimes advances the even more radical argument that Brahms's "approach to tonality had altered considerably" by the time of the *Gesang der Parzen* (9). [↑](#)
24. Quoted in Grimes, *Elegies*, 180. [↑](#)
25. Solomon, "Beethoven's Ninth," 305. [↑](#)
26. Alternative finales, Solomon suggests, "defeat mortality by constantly creating new endings, revising old ones, and finding forgotten ones" (ibid.). [↑](#)
27. Ibid. [↑](#)
28. "alles bunt und wild durch einander"; "ist und bleibt der kühnste und stolzeste Dichtergeist der Zeit." Robert Schumann, "Phantasieen, Capricen etc für Pianoforte (Schluß)," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 11, no. 41 (1839): 163. [↑](#)