

# Visiting with Brahms in Hamburg

BY JAYNE I. HANLIN

**W**hen I rang the doorbell at Peterstraße 39 in Hamburg, Germany, Liese-Lotte Neumann, one of the friendly staff members of the Brahms Museum, welcomed me inside.

The main display room on the left has family photographs, including ones of this composer's parents and siblings. Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) was the middle of three children. His father, a contrabass player, was 17 years younger than his mother, a seamstress. Brahms's younger brother, who was also a pianist and piano teacher, emigrated to Venezuela for a while. Of particular interest is a photograph of his stepbrother, who recovered some of Brahms's compositions from the wastebasket and saved them. Otherwise, Brahms, known to be a perfectionist, would likely have burned these compositions as he had others.

One of many fascinating tidbits to discover is that his mother knitted clothing for all of her children; a unique silver case used for her knitting needles is displayed next to the silver spoon from Brahms's christening.

On New Year's Day 1842, when only eight, Brahms wrote a letter in elegant penmanship to Otto Cossel. This is the translation from German:

*Dearest Teacher,*

*Another year has passed, and yet again I am only too aware how indebted I am to you for my musical progress during the past year. I cannot thank you enough! However, I do realize that I have not always done everything quite as you would have wished since I did not practice as much as I should have. I do promise however that in the coming year I shall work harder in order to fulfil your aspirations. Wishing you much good fortune in the New Year, I remain*

*Your obedient pupil,*

*J. Brahms*

What teacher wouldn't love to receive such a letter? Yet, only two years later, Cossel said he had no more to teach this young prodigy. Imagine that. So Brahms went to the institute in Lübeck to study with Eduard Marxson to whom, many years later, Brahms dedicated his second piano concerto.

My guide said that Brahms, a musical giant, was only 1 meter 65 cm tall (or 5 feet 5 inches). He had gray-blue eyes. I couldn't resist buying a color postcard portrait to remind me.



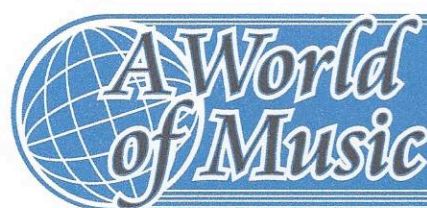
The Johannes Brahms Museum in Hamburg, Germany.

Displayed near the staircase in the main room is an interesting newspaper article written by Robert Schumann declaring twenty-year-old Brahms "destined to give ideal expression to the very highest artistic manifestation of the times." Because there had been yet no print edition of his compositions, this acclaim was both a benefit and a burden.

The famous conductor Hans von Bülow recommended that Brahms be named an honorary citizen of Hamburg. Pictured on the document given to the composer is Harmonia, the patron of the city. Even after this somewhat belated local recognition, however, Brahms left the city and spent half his life in Vienna where he became very famous, more so than in his native town.

Brahms liked social activities but lived by himself. He never married though had once been engaged; my guide assured me that contrary to a juicy rumor, Brahms and Clara Schumann were not lovers.

Brahms dedicated his violin concerto to Joseph Joachim (1831-1907). The two musicians were lifelong friends and even decided to grow beards at the same time. An 1878 photo on display is proof of their joint venture. At the bottom of the museum's staircase, stands an original marble bust of Brahms sculpted by Ilse Conrad. On the wall as you climb to the second story, there are photos of the summerhouses in which Brahms lived and composed. No doubt the air in Baden-Baden, Pörschach, Wiesbaden,



Mürzzuschlag, Thun, and Bad Ischl was fresher than in the city itself.

On the second level of the museum is another original item, his death mask. But the facsimiles in the other exhibits look much more like originals than mere copies of documents. At the gift shop, I purchased a calling card that, for all intents and purposes, looks like the real one Brahms would have distributed himself.

During my museum visit, the changing exhibit was about Altenstein Castle where Brahms performed his two clarinet sonatas with Richard Mühlfeld in November 1894. But for me, the most special display in the upstairs library is the 1859 Baumgarten & Heins *tafelklaveir* (square piano) on which Brahms gave lessons. I paused—then reverently fingered the keys. My late brother, concert pianist Malcolm Frager, took piano lessons from Carl Friedberg who was a friend of Brahms and also had turned pages for Joachim.

About ten minutes away from the museum by foot is a plaque on an upright column. This memorial stela marks the location of the building where Johannes Brahms was born and spent

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the first six months of his life. It was destroyed in 1943. This site is close to Brahms Platz, the location of Laeiszhalle, an extraordinary concert venue where I heard Jun Märkl conduct the Philharmoniker Hamburg. Serendipitously, after the performance, when I was trying to find the stela, Mr. Märkl himself walked toward me from the opposite direction and kindly pointed out the landmark.

The Brahms Society, which meets bi-

monthly, has been responsible for maintaining this wonderful museum since it opened in 1971. Easily accessible by public transportation, the former merchant house built in 1851 is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 AM to 5 PM. Adult admission is 4 euros; students and seniors pay half price. Available for purchase is an inexpensive 76-page exhibition guidebook with fascinating information about 138 of the items on display. Quite a few illustrations are in color. For those who don't read German, there are

English labels in all the cases. Guided tours are also available.



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