



# Johannes Brahms: A Biography

By Jan Swafford

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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 Dealer*

Judicious, 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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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

The brilliant biographer of a quintessentially American, prototypically modern musician (Charles Ives) proves just as masterful in probing the life and art of a 19th-century German composer. Writing with passionate clarity that perfectly matches the genius of Brahms (1833-97), Jan Swafford traces the emotional wellsprings of this secretive man's music without trivializing art into mere autobiography. A composer himself, Swafford understands and lucidly conveys Brahms's unique position in musical history: beloved by many, emulated by few, the triumphant yet melancholy heir of a tradition coming to an end in his lifetime.

### From Kirkus Reviews

A definitive work about one of the 19th century's most influential classical music composers. Books coming out in anniversary years too often don't live up to the subject they celebrate. Such is most definitely not the case in Swafford's biography of Brahms, published on the 100th anniversary of his death. This is an exceptionally well written chronicle of this musical master, an extraordinary work, guaranteed to inform and entertain classical music aficionados and tyros alike. That Swafford (Charles Ives: A Life in Music, 1996) had no easy task is clear. Where some leave long paper trails, Brahms, hoping to let his music rather than his personal life be the legacy on which later generations judged him, destroyed countless personal documents, letters, and music scores he deemed unworthy or compromising. But where Brahms was exceptionally careful--he even signed his name "J. Br" to thwart hungry autograph seekers--those around him were not, notably Clara Schumann. A brilliant professional pianist, Frau Schumann, who was married to composer Robert Schumann, was the love of Brahms's life. In their decades-long relationship, they exchanged hundreds of letters, many of which still exist despite Brahms's attempts to get them returned. The letters are simultaneously touching revelations of their relationship--likely never consummated--and perceptive journals of an exciting musical era. Swafford uses the correspondence and other research to paint an exhaustive picture of that era and of Brahms himself. What emerges is a stimulating view of a living paradox, a misogynist who used women as his muse, a generous spirit whose barbed tongue often alienated his best friends. In between, Swafford cleverly uses some 64 musical examples to illustrate Brahms's many musical developments. For readers of Swafford's biography, Brahms's Lullaby will never sound the same. (16 pages of illustrations, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

### Review

"A mighty attempt to integrate [Brahms's] puzzling persona ... with the human reality [of] Brahms's music.... Absorbing".

-- THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

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**Anthony Muller:**

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