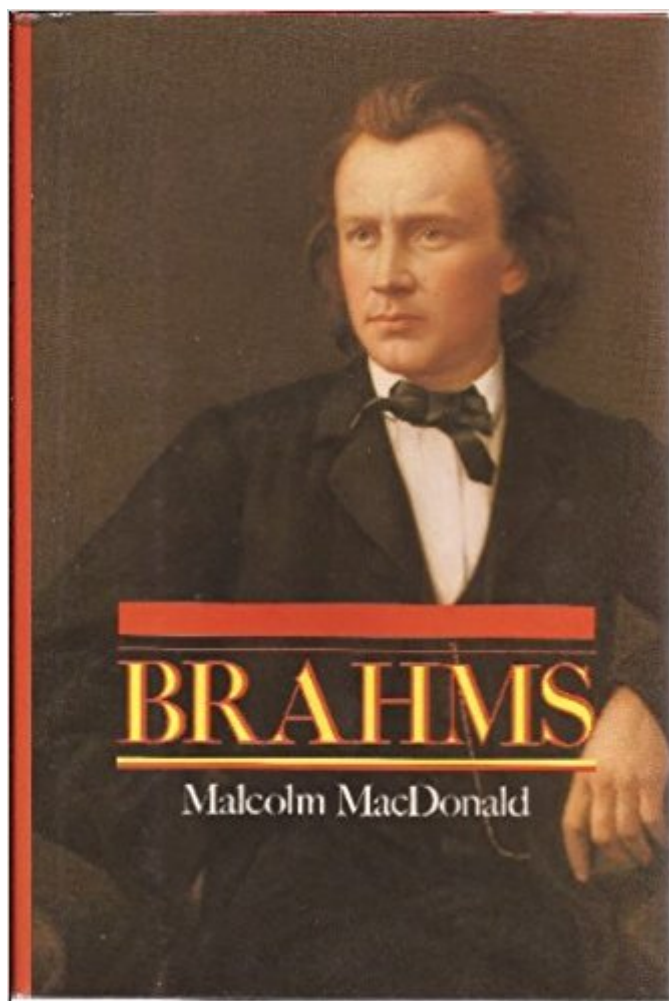


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Brahms (The Master Musicians Series)



Synopsis

Celebrating its 100th anniversary, this extraordinary series continues to amaze and captivate its readers with detailed insight into the lives and work of music's geniuses. Unlike other composer biographies that focus narrowly on the music, this series explores the personal history of each composer and the social context surrounding the music. In a precise, engaging, and authoritative manner, each volume combines a vivid portrait of the master musicians' inspirations, influences, life experiences, even their weaknesses, with an accessible discussion of their work--all in roughly 300 pages. Further, each volume offers superb reference material, including a detailed life and times chronology, a complete list of works, a personalia glossary highlighting the important people in the composer's life, and a select bibliography. Under the supervision of music expert and series general editor Stanley Sadie, Master Musicians will certainly proceed to delight music scholars, serious musicians, and all music lovers for another hundred years. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

This is certainly the most thorough of the English-language biographies of Johannes Brahms.

MacDonald relates all known facts about the composer, his relationship with friends and acquaintances, and his music. Biography and creative output are interwoven throughout the book, as the author rather laboriously discusses each composition in chronological order. It is assumed

that the reader has a fair knowledge of Brahms's works and can read music, for MacDonald includes 68 musical examples that are important to the discussion. MacDonald's verbose style may put off the casual reader, but for a real Brahms lover, the book is a treat.- Timothy J. McGee, Univ. of Toronto Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"The life and music blend revealingly, with keen intelligence applied to both, in this wonderfully human and refreshingly written new biography. I will read it again and wish it twice as long."--Arts Beat --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

It is a very good book to learn about his life and his music. is GREAT!!!! Thank you.

A colleague of mine noticed the picture of the young Brahms on the cover of MacDonald's biography. She remarked with surprise on his handsome, vigorous appearance. Too often people tend to think of Brahms as an old, bearded, somewhat overweight composer of conservative romantic music. The text of MacDonald's ambitious study, together with the cover portrait, aims to dispel stereotypes held by many about Brahms. For MacDonald, Johannes Brahms (1833 --1897) was an unabashedly romantic composer (granting the difficulties of defining that notoriously difficult term, "romantic"), with strong ties to the musical past who looked forward to and helped create the linear, contrapuntal, and decidedly unromantic music of the twentieth century. MacDonald's interest in the relationship between Brahms and Schoenberg is understandable as he has written a companion volume on Schoenberg for the "Master Musicians" series. The book is both a biography of Brahms and a musical study with heavy emphasis on the latter. In the biographical sections of his account, MacDonald covers briefly Brahms's childhood in the rough, seafaring districts of Hamburg, his early musical instruction, and his wide reading. He describes Brahms's relationship with the Schumanns and the ambiguities of his lifelong love for Clara Schumann. There is a great deal of emphasis on Brahms's inability to marry, despite several flames in his youth. MacDonald describes how love and passion inform Brahms's work throughout and how music helped Brahms give voice to feelings that, for whatever reason, he could not express in his life. MacDonald also places Brahms in a musical context that includes his extensive study of his predecessors, from his contemporaries through Schubert, Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn, to the baroque and earlier. Brahms was undoubtedly the most musically learned of the great composers and he was able to integrate his learning with his own romantic voice. MacDonald finds that Brahms remained throughout his life a romantic composer. This means, I think, that Brahms saw music as an

essentially spiritual calling, somewhat of a substitute for the role revealed religion plays in the lives of many, which emphasizes romantic and physical love, the unity of man with nature, and the value of the past. Bach used the past in his devotion to early music and to folksongs of many types. Brahms's romanticism, and the manner in which he integrated it with counterpoint and variation, paved the way for the destruction of romanticism and for the creation of a more recognizably modern sensibility. I found the most valuable part of MacDonald's book to be the detailed analyses he offers of virtually all Brahms's major works. The discussion is presented chronologically. The musical discussions generally follow the biographical sections of the book and deal with Brahms's compositions by categories: orchestral music, chamber music, choral music, piano, song. MacDonald offers numerous musical examples, discusses the history of each work, and integrates each work nicely into a discussion of the entirety of Brahms's output. Reading this book impressed upon me the wide variety of masterpieces Brahms composed during his life. MacDonald's accounts can be followed by the nonspecialist and give an inspiring picture of Brahms and his music. While reading, I thought of the works of Brahms with which I am familiar and wanted to revisit them in light of MacDonald's discussion. I also thought of the many works of Brahms I don't know but would love to explore in light of what I learned from the book. Little more can be asked from a musical study. MacDonald writes with a deep affection for Brahms which he conveys well to his readers. He writes that Brahms "has been my favorite composer ever since I was old enough to think about music" (at x) and it shows in the deep thought and work represented in this study. MacDonald's closing discussion of Brahms's output captures well his view of Brahms. He writes: "Aware of the tragedies, paradoxes, and imponderables of existence, Brahms wrote to provide sustenance for the here and now. His music seeks to give beauty, nobility, a sense of meaning to the brute fact of human transience." (p. 401) This is an outstanding study which should inspire the reader to hear Brahms, or to rehear him with an awakened heart.

This work is half-biography and half-musicology. For the readers of musical score and musicologists, I would give this book a five-star rating. For more casual readers who are simply interested in the life of Brahms, it only rates three. (I rated it four stars because I'm very familiar with Brahms' music and I play music as well, but I cannot read sheet music.) Most folks would say that you can't talk about Brahms without discussing his music and with that thought, I wholly agree; however, in a more traditional and general interest biography, his music would have been discussed in a less technical sense which is more pleasing to folks who do not read music and/or for those who are not all that familiar with Brahms' numerous works. In the author's defense, this latter

purpose was clearly not his objective in writing the book -- I just wish to alert casual biography readers that about four chapters of the book will put them to sleep in a hurry. The author has also included many examples of musical scores throughout the text to illustrate his points. I found the author's commentary on Brahms' life, including his numerous relationships with other period artists and with his family members, (musical and otherwise), to be informative and well-written. I toughed it out through the more technical chapters as MacDonald had a great deal to say about the old Master throughout that text as well but there it was much spottier. The unorthodox relationship between Brahms and Clara Schumann is well-documented and scattered throughout the book. And I must say, having completed my reading, that I now harbor a real sense of Brahms, the Man. This is the chief strength of the work. The several black-and-white photographs and art illustrations were immensely helpful to me and the list of Brahms' works near the conclusion of the book was equally informative. A chronology of his life is additionally included as an appendix. In summary, while author Malcolm MacDonald's 490-page, 1990 Brahms book probably does not stand as the ultimate authority on this complex man, I still found it to be a fine biography and can recommend it to others noting the caveats which I previously outlined.

MacDonald's biography of Brahms is insightful and informative benefiting from findings in recent Brahms scholarship as well as from the author's command of language and knowledge of the art of music. Its only fault, albeit a rather prominent one, is the author's need to comment at least a few words on every work of Brahms's. This becomes tedious and the reader is left with a feeling of unsatisfied curiosity as if he or she is reading program notes to a concert he will not hear.

MacDonald, however, reserves his more detailed accounts for Brahms's more important and popular major works (his all too brief analysis of the Fourth Symphony leaves one wishing he would write a book entirely devoted to that masterpiece) a trait which reveals the author's keen analytical mind. The book would have benefited greatly if the author had devoted space given to smaller or less significant pieces to a more extensive discussion of the composer's major works.

As of this writing, (in its "Product Details" section) mistakenly states the Schirmer 1990 hardcover edition comprises only "220" pages. In actuality, this admirable, largish tome (including about 10 prefatory pages) comprises about 500 pages.

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