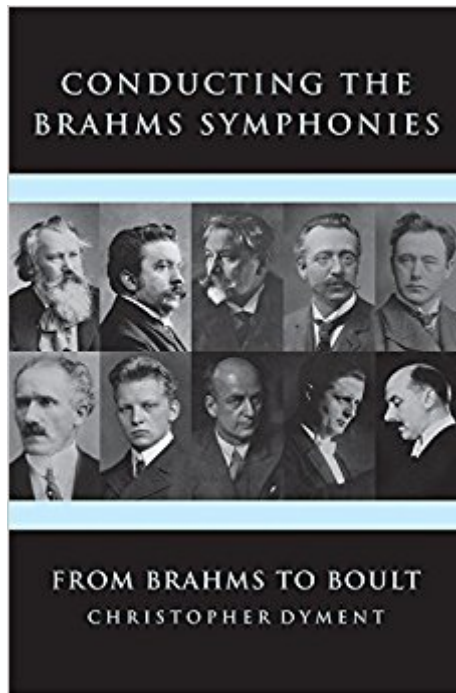


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Conducting The Brahms Symphonies



Synopsis

How did Brahms conduct his four symphonies? What did he want from other conductors when they performed these works, and to which among them did he give his approval? And crucially, are there any stylistic pointers to these performances in early recordings of the symphonies made in the first half of the twentieth century? For the first time, Christopher Dymont provides a comprehensive and in-depth answer to these important issues. Drawing together the strands of existing research with extensive new material from a wide range of sources - the views of musicians, contemporary journals, memoirs, biographies and other critical literature - Dymont presents a vivid picture of historic performance practice in Brahms's era and the half-century that followed. Here is a remarkable panorama showcasing Brahms himself conducting, together with those conductors whom he heard, among them Levi, Richter, Nikisch, Weingartner and Fritz Steinbach, and their disciples, such as Toscanini, Stokowski, Boult and Fritz Busch. Here, too, are other famed Brahms conductors of the early twentieth century, including Furtwängler and Abendroth, whose connections with the Brahms tradition are closely examined. Dymont then analyses recordings of the symphonies by these conductors and highlights aspects which the composer might well have commended. Finally, Dymont suggests the importance of his conclusions for those contemporary conductors who are currently attempting to rediscover genuine performance traditions in their own re-creations of the symphonies. This major study is complemented with forty photographs and a frontispiece. It is sure to fascinate musicians, Brahms enthusiasts and those interested in the history of recorded music.

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Customer Reviews

This study is a major addition to Brahms Scholarship. It is most comprehensively recommended. MUSICAL OPINION Presents an engaging and thorough discussion. . . . This book will be of interest to students of Brahms and his symphonies, performance practice and aesthetics (of) the late 19th century, the many conductors referenced, and the history of recorded music. CHOICE "It would be hard ... to describe how detailed and impressive Dymant's research is ... Of great interest ... to lovers of Brahms and followers of early conductors. AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE

CHRISTOPHER DYMENT is author of Felix Weingartner: Recollections and Recordings (Triad Press 1976) and Toscanini in Britain (The Boydell Press 2012). He has published many articles about historic conductors over the last forty years.

I really appreciated this book, although I did not agree with the argument and conclusion. Brahms is interesting because he lived just on the verge of recording, but we do not have recordings of him conducting, or his "next of kin" conducting. So it is a very near but tantalizing example of the question "What would Brahms have liked his symphonies to have sounded like?" What I found enlightening about this book was that the author essentially proves that it is impossible to answer this question even for Brahms, much less Bach or Beethoven. There is so much variation among reports of conductors who Brahms appreciated and early recordings that there is simply no answer. And when Brahms said he liked a performance it may just mean he appreciated the time that was spent on rehearsal, not that it was the definitive performance in his mind. The problem with the analysis here, provocative as it is, is that the author has an axe to grind and is somewhat biased by his own biases. He wants to win the old Toscanini vs. Furtwangler battle. He tries mightily to show that Toscanini is more "authentic" than Furtwangler, but his analysis fails. If Toscanini is closer to how Brahms liked things done, that is definitive proof for Dymant. But if Furtwangler is closer, well that must be a transcription error or misunderstanding. However, Dymant is pretty clear about the biases he had going into this project, and the fact that his research proved all his biases is at least transparent. Personally I think Dymant has poor taste. Toscanini is pretty good, although oddly Dymant ignores the greatest Toscanini recordings -- the 1952 London recordings on Testament. But far and away the greatest Brahms symphony recordings were by Furtwangler and by Fielder, all of which Dymant mistakenly dismisses. One of the problems with Dymant's approach is that he is

obsessively fixated on rubato and tempo changes. The fewer the better. But there is a psychological element to Brahms as well, which Brahms himself acknowledged. It is pretty important to acknowledge the melancholic aspects of the movements, such as in the first movement to symphony 2. Dymant tends to discount this, but in fact that is part of what makes the Furtwangler or Fielder recordings so satisfying, if not definitive. So definitely a must-read for Brahms lovers. But I would recommend the Walter Frisch book as the place to start in this repertoire, and his short discussion of performance practice is more accurate and more telling than Dymant's much longer exegesis.

purchased as a gift for our father who loves Brahms. He enjoyed the book very much.

How did the four symphonies of Brahms become established as the great works they are recognized as today? Until the late 1920s, for instance, they were rarely recorded in toto, unlike the symphonies of Beethoven, which had been put on disc complete as early as 1910? In this amazing and comprehensive work, Christopher Dymant traces the history of how Brahms symphonies were interpreted by their earliest podium advocates, and how these performances were regarded by critics and other listeners, including the composer himself. The story upends conventional wisdom about the critical reception of these symphonies, demonstrating in painstaking and comprehensive detail how an authentic performance tradition (a dangerous word, but in Dymant's work for once a trustworthy one) emerged from interpreters close to the composer himself, such as Fritz Steinbach in Meiningen, and by conductors such as Fritz Busch and Arturo Toscanini, whose insight into the music matched Steinbach's. Dymant also considers conductors such as Hans von Bulow and Hans Richter, whose interpretations moved in different directions, as well as later performers who were influenced by all of these pioneers. Containing a wealth of new information and a keen analysis of historical and musical matters, Dymant's work is an essential addition to any music lover's collection, and a mandatory acquisition for music and performance libraries. Sweeping aside received wisdom, Dymant has provided the definitive version of how Brahms symphonies became a part of the core of the musical canon.

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