MUSICAL DEBATE

Brahms Playing Piano in Brothels

The first detailed biography of Johannes Brahms, published between 1904 and 1914 by Max Kalbeck (himself an acquaintance of the composer), contains a disturbing account of Brahms’s youth in the city Hamburg. Relying largely on stories that he had heard from Brahms himself, Kalbeck depicted an utterly impoverished family in which the teenager Brahms had to earn money by playing piano in smoke-filled bars and brothels. He was often paid in drink, abused by prostitutes, and developed then a jaded view about women that endured for his entire life. Other acquaintances of Brahms joined in with similar tales, usually based on stories that Brahms had told them when he reminisced about his adolescent years. Klaus Groth remembered Brahms saying that after an evening of drinking and playing “he could only walk along an avenue by staggering from tree to tree, otherwise he would have fallen.”

This account of Brahms’s childhood went virtually unchallenged until the 1980s, when the German musicologist Kurt Hofmann, in studies of Brahms’s early years, concluded that the accepted story—the one that Brahms himself had told in his later years—was exaggerated at best and untrue in its most important details. There is good evidence that Brahms’s parents were not so impoverished as the composer had stated and that they provided Brahms with many educational and musical opportunities. From the age of eight Brahms and his family lived in a good middle-class suburb of Hamburg, not in the St. Pauli (red-light) district of Hamburg, and entering a brothel in that area was strictly illegal for anyone under the age of twenty.

Still, the debate continues. Did Brahms accurately recall the circumstances of his youth? Or did he embellish upon and exaggerate those circumstances, and, if so, why?