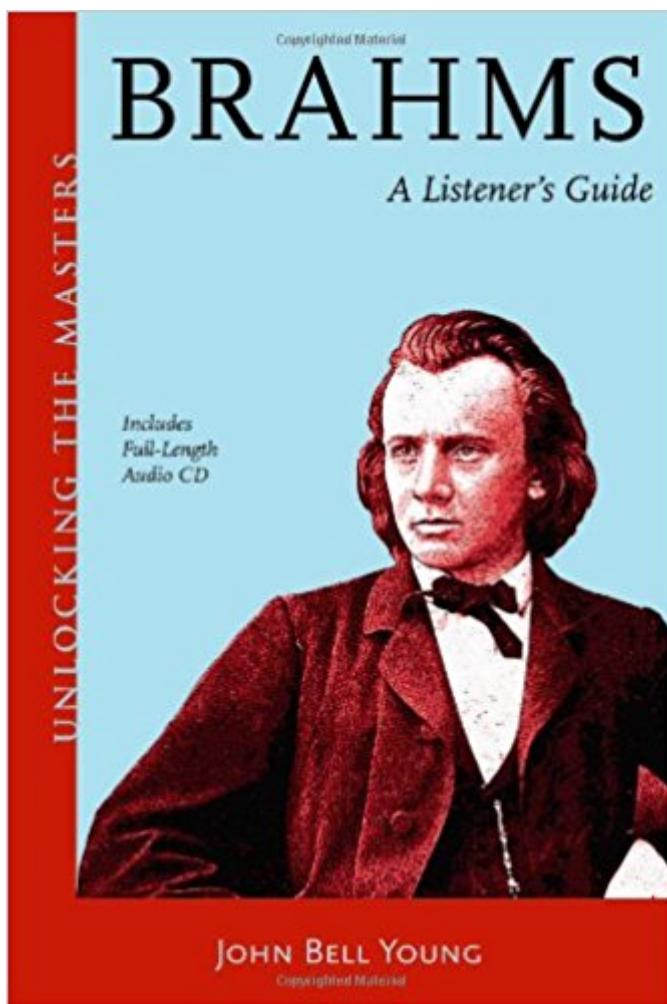


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Brahms - A Listener's Guide: Unlocking The Masters Series



Synopsis

In this survey of Brahms's music, John Bell Young explores in depth the composer's private world of musical intimacies that infuriated Wagner, but inspired Schumann, Schoenberg, and millions of music lovers for generations to come. He also addresses a controversial issue long-neglected by biographers and critics: Did Brahms sire an illegitimate child, and in the absence of concrete evidence, did he leave behind clues in his allusion-rich music? Accompanying the book is a CD featuring rare performances of Wilhelm Furtwangler, alongside brand new recordings of three extraordinary pianists.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

John Bell Young is an American concert pianist, music critic, and author. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

I have enjoyed many "Unlocking the Masters" books from Amadeus, especially those by David Hurwitz. The reviews of Mr. Young's Beethoven Symphonies book were good enough, so I tried it along with his Brahms overview. Prospective purchasers should know that Young gets far more technical than Hurwitz. Having no technical music training myself, I found much of the text hard to follow and it did not sustain my interest as much as Hurwitz' writing. Neither Young nor Hurwitz uses musical notation, but Young often describes changes in key and uses many words that send me to

my antique, hard-bound, very physical dictionary. Young has a wide knowledge of music history and broader culture. While his Beethoven book is limited to the symphonies and the CD has widely admired samples of recordings by Wilhelm Furtwangler, this Brahms book covers (in less depth, obviously) symphonic, instrumental, and chamber music; the CD mostly offers solo piano music by admired friends of the author whose careers he would clearly like to advance. Young takes confident stances on more than music. While putting Brahms' life in its historical context on page 6 he alludes to the European revolutionaries in 1848 as "freedom fighters - what we would today call insurgents..." This cute insertion of the word "insurgents", as if our current-day Islamic attackers rehash European social movements of old, was pedantic and irritating in a book about Brahms (of all composers!). This further dis-inclines me to purchase other books by Young.

Just terrible, unless you like the ramblings of the self-absorbed. And the few selected works chosen by the author to highlight are, for the most part, so out of the main stream that only those intimate with them as musicians would be drawn to buy this book, as I did, but this book is not for the musician it is supposedly for those who are not but who want to find a greater appreciation of classical music, Brahms in particular. And, I doubt those looking for that appreciation have the scores to follow the author's thought process. Just terrible.

After reading other books in this series, particularly those of Dave Hurwitz and John Bell Young's survey of the Beethoven Symphonies, I was eager to get my hands on this latest volume about Brahms. As I am in the publishing business, I had been privy to some great "buzz" about this one from the book's publicists, including superlative recommendations of it from such august luminaries as Hugh Downs and the famous British pianist and MacArthur "genius grant" recipient, Stephen Hough. It seems that Hough is not the only one to be honored. The Kittredge Foundation out of Harvard University recognized Young with a grant of its own for this and the other books he wrote for the series. However, I also read an unfavorable review here at recently by a non-musician, who was evidently looking for a more run-of-the-mill biography or maybe something simple minded. He complained that Young's book is too technical and that he couldn't understand it. That's a legitimate complaint if you're unwilling to take the trouble to learn something new about something complex (this book is mostly about the composer's music, not his life), and that will require at least some minimum effort from the reader. It's a book for adults, after all, not four year olds. As I do have some background in music theory, that critique didn't worry me too much, though I have to admit to some bias. Even so, I enjoyed Young's book on Beethoven enormously so I thought I'd give this one a

read, too. I can say unequivocally that Young's prose style is phenomenal, even poetic; just have a look at his breathtaking description of the slow movement of the Violin Concerto. The CD attached to the book includes a performance of it with an amazing French violinist from the 1940s, Ginette Neveu, who I had never heard of until now. There are also performances by Furtwangler which, though beautiful, sound a bit worn and scratchy. There are also several very exciting performances by three newcomer pianists who Young praises in his introduction as worthy of attention. I have to agree, as they play beautifully. He explains in a brief sidebar that the "Unlocking the Masters" series is committed to providing opportunities to lesser known artists, rather than promoting famous names for the umpteenth time. That's commendable no matter how you slice it. In fact, I found most of the book is exceptionally reader friendly, and even provocative (there's a lengthy and fascinating discussion about Brahms's possible paternity, for example.) Where there is technical discussion of the music (its structure and harmony), it is laid out in such a way as to be self-explanatory, and eminently understandable; anyone who really loves music, and especially the music of Brahms, ought to be willing to make the effort if they want to learn something more substantial. I speak only for myself when I say that I read this book, and others in the series, in order to learn something, not to be entertained. This is not a superficial study, though it IS a most enjoyable read. Young also provides a comprehensive glossary of musical terms at the end of the book, which clearly describes many musical concepts and terms in a way that anyone can understand. No one will have to run to a dictionary to look anything up, as the glossary includes everything you may need to know. It's the few minutes it takes to learn something more. He also makes a number of historical references that are both entertaining and relevant -- his discussion of gypsy culture and music and its influence on Brahms is particularly stimulating -- and places Brahms in a context that helps us understand why he wrote the kind of music he did. For musicians and those who love the music of Brahms, this book is a must-have. Those who are looking for a simple biography, or who are not up to challenging themselves intellectually with a bracing read, had better look elsewhere. This book is not for them. For those who want to look deeply into Brahms the composer and his music, Young's book is as good as it gets, and a tremendous asset.

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