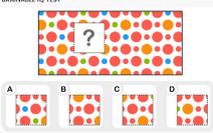


AD BRAINABLE IQ TEST



Avg IQ is 100. What is yours?

Answer 20 questions to find out!

OPEN

MY FAVORITE PAGE

‘There’s Nothing Quite as Distressing as This Piece’

The pianist Paul Lewis picks his favorite page of Brahms’s late solos, a work of “abject anguish.”



The pianist Paul Lewis, a specialist in music of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, turns on his new album to Brahms works written in 1892 and 1893. Michelle V. Agnes/The New York Times

By David Allen
Jan. 30, 2022

The British pianist [Paul Lewis](#) has made his name primarily in the music of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. His breakthrough on recordings came with the sensitive [cycle of Beethoven sonatas](#) he set down for the label Harmonia Mundi in the late 2000s. He followed that with a [Schubert survey](#) that remains a prime recommendation.

Schubert is still Lewis’s great interest — he is about to return to the studio to round out his set, before he tours the complete series of sonatas in concert — and he has been pushing into earlier music, exploring Haydn in [two volumes](#) that treat the composer with almost [symphonic grandeur](#).

But his [most recent album](#) takes us to the end of the 19th century — indeed, to music that in its aphoristic brevity and experimental chromaticism anticipates the innovations of the 20th: the four groups of short pieces, Op. 116-119, that Brahms wrote in 1892 and 1893, not long before his death in 1897.



These works of desperate sadness distill Brahms’s typical ambiguity into the most concentrated of forms. They also have an unsparing emotional directness — albeit one that Brahms reveals with characteristic, uneasy ambivalence.



Lewis’s favorite passage of the late Brahms piano works, from the Intermezzo in E flat Minor (Op. 118, No. 6), suffused with “absolute gloom.” (MSL:P)

Asked to select a favorite page from the scores, Lewis, 49, chose a section from the sixth piece in the Op. 118 set, an [Intermezzo in E flat minor](#), that the booklet notes to the recording describe as being suffused with “absolute gloom.” Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Is this music that you have lived with for a long time, or is it a more recent discovery?

It’s music I’ve known since I was a teenager, but I never learned it back then. In fact, I had a bit of a Brahms problem. I’ve spoken to a lot of musicians who do, so that’s probably not that unusual.

I didn’t play much Brahms until I turned 40, when I suddenly thought, you know what, I really want to play the [D minor concerto](#). I’d learned bits of it years before, but I never really got anywhere with it. But I thought, let’s just do it — and [I loved it](#). It’s the best concerto experience you can have, really.

The late pieces, I hadn’t played any of them until I decided to do a Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms series [in concert](#) a few years ago. So it’s not music that I’ve played a lot. I’ve worked at it over the years, I just didn’t want to do it until it felt right — and then in my mid-to late 40s, it felt right.

I’ve asked myself, what was my Brahms problem? It sounds terrible, but it’s pieces like the [fourth piece of Op. 118](#), where you get this very strict canon all the way through. Everything you hear in the top you hear in the bottom or the middle a beat later. He never drops a note; it’s perfect. With pieces like that, the brilliance of the craft is so extreme I used to wonder if he’d forgotten to write music at the same time.

I look at that now and think, you get this first section, which is sort of underground, a little bit vague, and then this middle section that is very still and doesn’t really go in any particular direction, and then a last section in which all hell breaks loose. Later on, that’s what I found interesting about Brahms. It’s incredibly passionate music, which seems to push against the restraints of the perfection of its craft. That’s what makes it Brahms.

What were you trying to convey in this music?

With these late pieces, what’s significant about them is the power of introspection. Of course, they do touch rather raw nerves from time to time, but the real power is in their introspective nature. It’s a little bit like Schubert in that respect. What stays with you most of all is what Brahms whispers, rather than what he shouts.

You anticipated my next question — whether you see connections between the respective late works of Schubert and Brahms? Both were to some extent writing in the shadow of death, even if neither’s last pieces were exactly valedictory, and their music has a distinctive sadness, though of course of different brands.

With Schubert, it’s more a feeling of nostalgia, a longing for something that you can’t have any more — a sadness which may or may not have been his health, or his life. Whereas with Brahms, with his late music, it’s more a feeling of resignation. With Op. 117, he described them to Clara Schumann as lullabies to his sorrows. It sounds a bit like navel-gazing, but I don’t think it is; it doesn’t come across that way. It’s certainly not self-indulgent, or even sentimental; it’s just deeply, deeply sad. That resignation is what you get in Op. 118, No. 6.

The opening of Op. 118, No. 6
Paul Lewis (Harmonia Mundi)



That’s the piece you chose to talk about. It’s built around a motif that is often thought of as a quotation of the “Dies Irae,” the music of Judgment Day. Was that deliberate?

We’ll never know; he didn’t leave us any particular clues other than the theme itself. But there’s certainly something reminiscent of it, and in the character of the piece. It’s abject anguish — the anguish that breaks out in the middle section is raw, for me the real power is when he writes far fewer notes, like he does in the opening and at the end.

What Brahms sets up in the first section is so hugely despairing. The middle section summons a bit of inner courage; there’s a sense of dignity about it. But where that goes is unique in the late pieces. There’s nothing quite as distressing as this piece.

You picked out one particular moment, marked “sff” (suddenly fortissimo), as that defiant middle section collapses.

What happens before this moment is a gathering of courage, but as soon as you get to this downbeat, it’s like you start to exhale. There’s suddenly a feeling of losing energy; you can’t scream any more. This whirlwind of distress just takes over. It’s scary — it’s about as dark as he gets.

Brahms’s “whirlwind of distress”
Paul Lewis (Harmonia Mundi)



What I find heartbreaking is the fleeting, almost Schubertian turn to the major a few bars later.

It’s major, but it’s C flat major — who the hell writes in C flat major? Not even Schubert, and if anyone would, it would be him. Why would Brahms choose to write in C flat major? It’s such a flattened major key, and it really does sound like that. It doesn’t sound like a moment of light, particularly. It sounds like a memory of a moment of light.

You have your own, consciously restrained style, but the listeners here must be to write the music for all its worth. A lot of listeners associate this music with the famous recording by Radu Lupu, with its profound expressivity. Do you admire that kind of playing?

I do, I love Lupu’s Brahms. I listen to [Julius Katchen’s](#) Brahms, as well. There are so many ways you can do it. For me, the thing with this type of introspective music is that it’s very important not to impose what you might think of as your own experience directly on top of it. You take your own experiences with you everywhere, of course, but the music is at its most powerful when you allow it to speak for itself.

It must not become sentimental, because I think that devalues it. There are moments where Brahms pushes to the edge. In the [first piece of Op. 117](#), any other composer would have gone over the line, it would have become a little bit cheesy, but he doesn’t; he steps back.

It has to retain a certain kind of dignity, even at its lowest points. No matter how personal, and how anguished the expression is — he’s just so damn clever, all the time. There’s this tendency to think that things that are intellectual are not that expressive. I think Brahms puts that argument to bed.