A smooth-chinned Brahms from around the time of the composition of the Serenade No. 1 in 1857.
When Philharmonia Baroque devoted a concert to Johannes Brahms this month—on the program were Serenade No. 1 in D Major and the Violin Concerto in D Major, with Viktoria Mullova as soloist—some of the instruments looked like those in modern orchestras, but others revealed their age at a glance. No instrument demonstrated how to look old so much as the horn, which, like those of Bach or Mozart, was not complicated by valves.

For a modern music-lover, seeing a valveless horn for the first time can be like finding a photo of Brahms from before he’d grown his beard: a feature we now consider characteristic hadn’t yet come to exist. Brahms’s own perspective was, of course, exactly the opposite. His first two attempts at beards were shaved off quickly—evidently, what seemed Brahmsian to him at the time was a smooth chin. And what seemed normal to him in a horn was valvelessness. The connection may go beyond simile; Brahms may have considered the horn to be as Brahmsian as his own face. As Philharmonia Baroque’s first horn player R.J. Kelley told me, “The horn’s soul was his own soul. He identified with it.”

Further, the horn embodied Brahms’s unease with where history was going. He was not the only horn-fancier with that feeling. The industrial revolutions that Brahms lived through transformed many instruments (pianos, for example), but no makeover produced as much contention as that of the horn. The technology of the valve had clear advantages. It eventually let hornists hit the high notes securely, maintain a homogenous sound throughout their range, and play a chromatic scale in the low register. Above all, says Kelley, it allowed “a singular, open-bell sonority.

Why did Brahms dream of hand horns even after valved ones had supplanted them? How much did this dream reflect the man, how much the era, and how much the instrument?

The valve tradeoff

Inventors first applied valves to the horn in 1814, yet the results still sounded “intolerable” in the 1820s to the foremost composer for the instrument, Carl Maria von Weber. In the 1830s, when Brahms was born, a Viennese inventor patented an essentially modern valve, and the Parisian composer Jacques Halévy published the first orchestral parts conceived purely for valved horns. They were to be played alongside the old and tellingly named natural horns. Such hybrid scoring continued in the 1840s, with examples from Robert Schumann and Richard Wagner. Still, in the same decade, Felix Mendelssohn remained loyal to the natural (also known as the hand) horn. Later, when orchestras retired their hand horns, ambivalence continued, especially in France. Professors in the Paris Conservatory still taught the hand horn as the primary instrument for almost a decade after Brahms died in 1897—the year, by neat coincidence, in which the next advance, the modern double horn, was invented by Fritz Kruspe and Edmund Gumpert (a last name, we will see, that horn players still reckon with).

The technology of the valve had clear advantages. It eventually let hornists hit the high notes securely, maintain a homogenous sound throughout their range, and play a chromatic scale in the low register. Above all, says Kelley, it allowed “a singular, open-bell sonority.
for the low register, simply impossible to contrive on a hand horn.”

But these advantages had countervailing costs, and to a degree rare among players of other instruments, hornists were sensitive to the tradeoffs. Some of them felt that the older instrument, which they often called the forest horn (waldhorn), was more evocative than the valved horn. They missed the waldhorn’s characteristic difference in sound between open pitches that were part of the basic overtone series and stopped pitches produced by hand-insertion. They also missed the varying timbres produced by the waldhorn’s different crooks. And some complained about compromises of “pure” intonation on the valved horn. Brahms was far from unique in his wistfulness when he wrote in an 1869 letter, “I write for the most beautiful waldhorns…but I don’t expect to hear them.”

A Brahms compromise

Reality may have been a little more complicated. Peter Jost argues that Brahms originally wrote his 1865 horn trio so that it could be played on either kind of horn. Only after he convinced the soloists in the first two performances to use the waldhorn did he revise the part to suit the old instrument specifically. But these performances, in which he played the piano part, were exceptional; Brahms’s persuasive powers depended on his being physically present. He couldn’t attend the third performance, held in Leipzig in 1866 and entrusted to a famous horn virtuoso, Friedrich Gumpert, uncle of the aforementioned Edmund. Instead, the pianist was Brahms’s close associate Clara Schumann, and she couldn’t prevail on Gumpert to forego his personal horn, which, like modern instruments, had rotary valves and a wide bore. Schumann nonetheless admired Gumpert’s performance. She wrote to Brahms that in the last movement he really “caught fire.” Besides, she said, he “didn’t crack a single note.” That this seemed so remarkable tells us why most professional horn players came to side with Gumpert in adopting valves.

True, a small band of waldhorn hobbyists have remained devoted to their
instruments without break; and Gumpert, to his death in 1906, championed hand-stopping as a special color on the new instrument. But professional resistance to the new horn and its evolving technique proved futile. In the modern era, however, such well-known horn virtuosos as Hermann Baumann in Germany, Alan Civil in England, and Lowell Greer in the United States revived the waldhorn for professional use. In 1991, Greer became the first to record the Trio using a hand horn; the performance still sounds profound and characterful. (Greer was Kelley’s mentor and later his colleague in Philharmonia Baroque.)

The Philharmonia began the concert with a work that predated the horn trio, the first of Brahms’s orchestral serenades. This piece, written in 1857, openly imitates the sounds of the 18th century. Characteristically, Brahms gives its most important part to a natural horn. He quotes a horn tune from the trio of Beethoven’s Second Symphony and places an 18th-century hunting signal in his scherzo (according to the musicologist Raymond Monelle). But the concert also included a work written 21 years later, Brahms’s violin concerto, and it shows that in the late 1870s, Brahms still dreamed of waldhorns. He wrote all the horn parts in his orchestral works so that they could be played on them.

He recognized as he was writing that waldhorns would not in fact be used (at least by any orchestra that he could foresee). John Humphries points out that the 1880 score of the Academic Festival Overture has to specify “hand-stopped” tone effects that would have been automatic on natural horns — thus demonstrating that Brahms knew that valved ones were certain to be used.

Continued on page 66

Orchestral variety

Indeed, as Brahms completed the violin concerto he knew where its dedicatee, the violinist/conductor/composer Joseph Joachim, was going to perform it the next year. The world premiere would be with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, whose first horn player was none other than Friedrich Gumpert, the man who had rejected the natural horn in the horn trio. The second would be in Prague and the third in Vienna. This information complicates the question of what horn was used, for while all the orchestras used valved horns, the type of valve varied. Gumpert and his fellow Leipzig players used rotary valves, while Vienna’s horn section used double piston valves (the so-called Vienna valves still used in that city). The Vienna horn’s middle tubing was also narrower than that of the Leipzig horn, whose length and width were essentially modern.

As R.J. Kelley puts it, “the 19th century was a free-for-all for horn design”; no standard had emerged.

If modern horn players want to recreate historical practice, then, they can’t find a simple answer even about what instrument to use. The Philharmonia Baroque’s horn section – in addition to Kelley, Paul Avril, John Boden, and Alexandra Cook made up the section – addressed the quandary by adopting Brahms’s avowed ideal, the natural horn. That it remained his ideal is implied by the efforts he took to make his orchestral parts playable on waldhorns — for example, spacing the rests so that one player could keep playing while another changed crooks. Also revealing, says Kelley, is that his writing continued to exploit the differences in sound produced by the varied crooks of the natural horns but not by the more homogenous-sounding modern horn.

Philosophers of performance might note that the achievement of playing

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these parts on old horns is characteristic not of the 1870s but of the 21st century, when it has become possible to assemble four waldhorn virtuosos to play in a Brahms orchestra. That is hardly the only beard-stroking puzzler raised by the historical performance movement in Brahms. For one thing, Brahms, with his musicological passion for old scores, knew the music of the 17th and 18th centuries with an intimacy that was rare among musicians of his day but is possible for many of us now because of groups like Philharmonia Baroque. Perhaps their more usual concerts and recordings enrich our experience of Brahms.

**The horn and history**

Still, we need the help of historians to appreciate how the waldhorn might inform not only the color of Brahms's music but also the meaning. To Roman-tics, writes Raymond Monelle, the horn evoked not only the hunters who once used it and the forests they roamed, but also an attribute of those woodlands: vast distances. The horn similarly came to represent the night and its mysteries, he says, and even nature itself. The horn could also evoke the wooden instruments of herders and the coiled brass ones of postal carriers, and, thus, the valley and the open road. Using the hand horn, unsullied by industrial-era valves, might reinforce the horn's meanings in Brahms—but only if we enrich our musical experience with a little historical knowledge.

Another facet of history we might recall is the era's musical politics. Richard Wagner abandoned the natural horn in 1865 with *Tristan und Isolde*. Brahms was repelled by Wagner's racial-utopian politics. Was the horn of the past symbolic of his rejection of the Wagnerian vision of the future? It's a tempting idea, although it's questionable: Brahms claimed that he admired Wagner's music, and Wagner himself was ambivalent about the triumphant technology of valves. He said that because of the valve, the horn had “lost some of its beauty of tone and ability to slur notes delicately.” Yet except for parts of the horn call in *Siegfried*, Wagner's later music requires valves. That Brahms's works never do may reflect social politics for reasons other than his opposition to Wagner's racial nationalism. Daniel Beller-McKenna shows that in contrast to Wagner, Brahms held a more liberal form of linguistic and cultural nationalism. Perhaps the mythologized German folk culture

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**“I write for the most beautiful waldhorns…but I don’t expect to hear them.”**

– Johannes Brahms

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for which he felt nostalgia included the waldhorn.

Not that Brahms was reflexively antiquarian. He derided pioneering attempts to play early music on period instruments, and while he kept a straight-strung Viennese piano at home, he specified essentially modern Bechsteins or American Steinways for his later public performances. More gener-

ally, a friend wrote, “Even the smallest discovery, every improvement in any sort of gadget for domestic use... delighted him thoroughly.”

It was with the horn that he tried to stand athwart history and yell “hand-

stop.” His motivations were likely multi-

ple. Biographers have mentioned memo-

ries of his childhood, when he and his father had both dabbled in the wald-

horn. Another possibility is Brahms’s love of 18th-century music. Yet another reason, Kelley speculates, was Brahms’s enthusiasm for walking in the wilds, where he might have heard horn calls from genuine woodsmen or herders. He first notated the great horn melody of the finale of his First Symphony on a birthday postcard to Clara – in 1868, eight years before the symphony was completed – with a note suggesting that he’d heard it resounding that day in the Swiss Alps.

Still, musical concerns of tonal and expressive variety, like those mentioned by Wagner, could have been the core of Brahms’s fidelity to the waldhorn. It is above all such musical nuance that can make modern musicians value the old instrument. The Brahms symphony recordings of John Eliot Gardiner and his Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique use the waldhorn exclusively, and the first-hornist, Anneke Scott, told me that the choice originated with the horn players, not the conductor. Meanwhile, in modern standard orches-

tras, horn players are expanding their approaches to the valved horn, influ-

enced in part by those who have mas-

tered the waldhorn. Music lovers will continue to benefit as horn players explore sounds both modern and historical. The nature of history, they show, is as curved and complex as the horn’s tubing, with or without valves.

References


Bernard D. Sherman is the author of *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and co-editor of *Performing Brahms* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). His writings have appeared in *The New York Times, Early Music, the Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, The Cambridge Companion to Conducting*, and many other publications. He works for Iowa Public Radio and can be found on the web at www.bsherman.net. He wishes to thank David Schoenbaum, R. J. Kelley, Walter Frisch, John Ericson, and Daniel Beller-McKenna for their comments on this article, portions of which first appeared in French translation in *Diapason*. They are used with permission.