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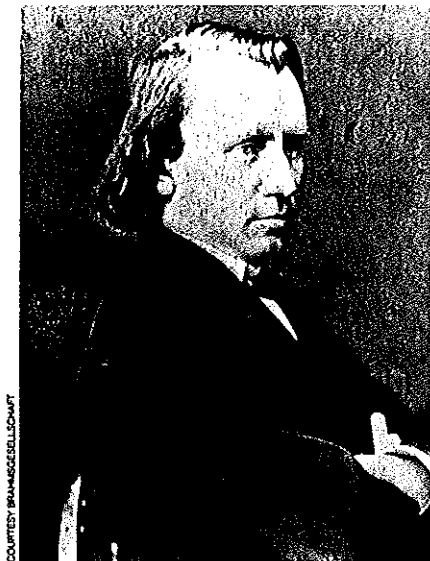
HISTORIC HOUSES: JOHANNES BRAHMS

The Composer's Summer Sanctuary in Baden-Baden

By Nicholas Fox Weber

WHEN YOU PICTURE Johannes Brahms summing in Baden-Baden, don't get the wrong impression. What life during the warmer months in the German spa meant for most people is not what it signified for the great composer. For a majority of visitors, Baden-Baden offered a peak of nineteenth-century grandeur. The idea was quintessential opulence, from the train station that resembled a palace to the casino where the velvets and brocades were even more dramatic than the clicking of roulette chips. Above all, people were drawn to Baden-Baden by its waters. Those underground mineral springs—icy, steaming or simply comfortably warm—could be enjoyed in the enormous neo-Roman bathhouse.

The center of Baden-Baden offered the necessary accoutrements to the life of "the cure." There were fanciful houses and spectacular luxury hotels, stopping places where people like



When German composer Johannes Brahms (above), who was perhaps best known as the master of 19th-century symphony and sonata styles, wanted solitude away from bustling Vienna, he would often retreat to a simple house located outside of Baden-Baden.

Queen Victoria or courtiers to the czars would feel suitably at home. There were the sort of shops and hair salons where Ivan Turgenev's characters—the Russian novelist was a regular in town—might have obtained the materials and services to which they were generally accustomed. And there were even hideaways where the black sheep of wealthy families could drink themselves to oblivion after yet another evening of squandering their fortunes at the baccarat tables or pawning their villas with a roll of the dice at craps.

What brought Johannes Brahms to Baden-Baden, however, was not primarily its baths or casinos or shops. What attracted the composer was a woman—Clara Schumann, the great pianist who was Robert Schumann's wife. And the place where Brahms stayed was by no means grandly adorned. For the life the composer craved was not that of a dandy or bon



ABOVE: During the summer months of the years 1865 through 1874, Brahms would rent rooms in a residence in Lichtental. The high-gabled wood house was saved from demolition in 1966 and then restored.

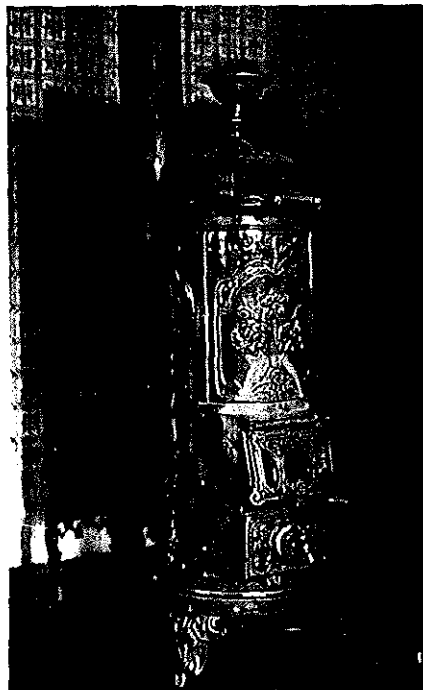
Although the exterior of the house remains unchanged, the interiors were completely redone by the Brahms Society and opened to the public as a small museum in 1968. BELOW: The drawing room of the Brahms House was recreated to reflect the proper period. The famous portrait of the composer is by Willy von Beckerath.



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BELOW: An enameled cast-iron stove, which dates to Brahms's time, stands in the drawing room corner. The geometric-patterned wallpaper was copied from an original fragment that a Brahms admirer had saved as a relic.



vivant but rather one of quiet and solitude. So although his destination at the start of each July was the elegant train station in Baden-Baden, the locale to which Brahms directed his carriage driver after the trek from Vienna was not, in fact, the center of town but an essential few kilometers into its outskirts.

There, in the section of the resort community that is called Lichtental, Brahms rented simple rooms in a white wooden house that overlooked the mountains of the Black Forest. He referred to the place as "*das hübsche Haus auf dem Hügel*"—"the beautiful house on the hill." Inside its front door, the composer had, in only a couple of small rooms, everything he wanted for his summertime accommodations. He was in close proximity to the people he cared about, and there was an adequate if somewhat rudimentary place to live. More important, the house provided a peaceful haven for work.



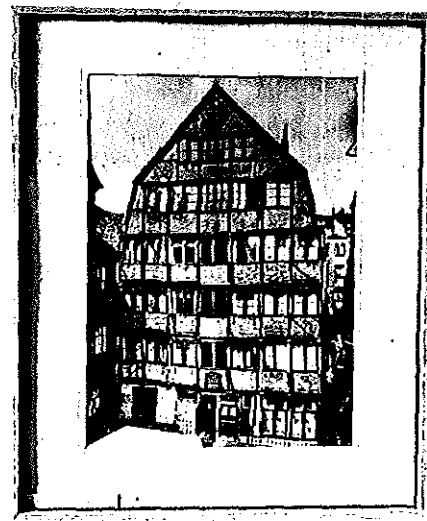
ABOVE: Brahms would sometimes give lessons to students of Clara Schumann, noted pianist and wife of Robert Schumann. Both Brahms and the Schumanns are pictured in the photographs and daguerreotypes. The bust of Brahms is by Maria Fellingner.

Brahms first visited Clara Schumann in Baden-Baden in 1863, when he was thirty and she was forty-four. By the next year he had made it part of his summer routine. That season he stayed in Anton Rubenstein's villa, and the following years he rented the rooms in Lichtental.

Clara Schumann's circle of friends may not have included the card-playing-and-baths set, but it was not without its luminaries. For instance, Turgenev periodically paid a call. Composer Jakob Rosenhain and artist Anselm Feuerbach, both of whom Brahms admired, were also among her friends. Talented musicians came from the nearby city of Karlsruhe. Another visitor was Pauline Viardot-García, a singer and a composer whose operettas—for which Turgenev wrote the texts—were performed privately by her children and by students in her miniature theater, located in town. She owned Mozart's autograph score of *Don Giovanni*, and Brahms composed and conducted a choral serenade for her birthday.

Princess Anna of Hesse was yet an-

other distinguished visitor. Brahms and Clara Schumann played his Sonata for Two Pianos in a private performance in Baden-Baden that she attended in the summer of 1864. The piece had not been well received in Vienna, but the princess was so enthusiastic about it that Brahms called



ABOVE: A photograph shows the Hamburg house where Brahms was born on May 7, 1833. First tutored in music by his father, he was sent away for piano lessons at age seven.

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on her the next day to ask permission to dedicate it to her. She granted this, and when the work was published the next year in its final form—as the Quintet in F Minor for piano and strings, op. 34—her name appeared on the title page. To acknowledge the compliment, the princess presented the composer with her autograph score of one of Mozart's G minor symphonies. Enjoying the blend of social encounters and ideal working conditions, Brahms regularly spent summers in his mountain retreat until 1874, the year after Clara Schumann sold her house.

To visit Baden-Baden today and see the Brahms house is to get a very clear picture of what the composer's private quarters must have been like. Much about the place and its furnishings makes it seem the same as it was in Brahms's day, although the interiors are not exactly as they once were.

In 1966, shortly before the house was scheduled to be torn down, a local man named Gustav Abel saved it from the wrecker's ball. Fortunately, the structure itself wasn't damaged, but its insides were a mess. Brahms's personal effects were long gone. What was possible was to imagine and, to a considerable degree, recreate. A year and a half later, Abel and his Brahmsgesellschaft, or Brahms Society, opened their small museum, having done a remarkable job of approximating Brahms's living space. Moreover, they had also created a studio for visiting artists, musicians, composers, musicologists or writers in search of the same sort of tranquil working conditions the great composer had once enjoyed. For three-week periods, it is available to applicants the Brahmsgesellschaft deems most worthy.

At the very beginning of their project, Abel and his associates had a pivotal bit of good luck. There was an old woman in Baden-Baden who had revered the composer. She came forth to say she had saved a sample of the wallpaper that Brahms had had in his living room; she had rescued it when

the place was being gutted. The society found a painter who, by using stencils, could reproduce its geometric block pattern. With an unvarying pattern and constant repetitions, the design also provides a continuous beat and rhythm that may have, whether by plan or by accident, aided the composer in his work.

Abel and his fellow Brahms devotees also acquired suitable furnishings from a local hotel that was being torn down. And to further emphasize the correct period style, they found just the sort of piano on which Brahms would have worked—a 135-year-old walnut-cased upright, its ivory keyboard an octave shorter than on pianos today. The instrument rests in the room where Brahms actually played some of his melodies for the first time. His prolific output in Baden-Baden included the Trio for piano, violin and horn in E-flat Major, op. 40; lieder and choral works; his first symphony; and various pieces of chamber music.

The part of the Brahms house where the beneficiaries of the visiting artists' program pursue their work is scaled similarly to the composer's rooms and is equally bucolic. There is a studio outfitted with a Bechstein grand piano; an extensive inventory of Brahms's recordings; and a Brahms library. In addition, there is a bedroom and cooking facilities. It is little wonder that applications are submitted years in advance, and that this is a creative person's paradise.

One imagines not just Johannes Brahms's physical presence in the house, but the way he worked with others—showing every new musical phrase to his beloved Clara, sending manuscripts to fellow performers he most admired. Brahms didn't always heed their advice, but there was an extraordinary camaraderie between them. That atmosphere of a warm and productive life, that mix of serenity and work going well, is what makes this enclave atop a hilly path such a fine piece of history and a welcome slice of the present. □