

CURRENT BOOKS

The Real Charms of the Bourgeoisie

PLEASURE WARS:

The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud.

By Peter Gay. Norton. 301 pp. \$29.95

JOHANNES BRAHMS:

A Biography.

By Jan Swafford. Knopf. 679 pp. \$35

by S. Frederick Starr

Short of outright expletives, few words pack more reproach than *bourgeois*. Adjective or noun, this French import is conveniently at hand whenever you need to dismiss someone as materialistic, vulgar, preachy, egotistic, smug, conventional, repressive, predatory, or philistine. *Middle class* carries some of the same opprobrium, but in the 19th century it was widely used to connote such solid virtues as hard work, practicality, and sound judgment. To get around the ambiguity, the English-speaking world adopted *bourgeois*. The same problem exists in German, where a restaurant might proudly advertise its *bürgerlich* fare. Germans, too, filled the opprobrium deficit by picking up *bourgeois*. So did the Russians: by 1917 any Moscow worker knew that his real enemies were the rapacious and brutal *burzhui* and all the institutions they controlled.

Amazingly, this use of the term *bourgeois*, born in the “bourgeois” 19th century, survived most of the 20th century intact. To Marxists, the historic mission of the proletariat was to overthrow the bourgeoisie, while Lenin, himself a bourgeois whose forebears had been ennobled as a reward for hard work, hated his class so grandly that he was unwilling to await the natural death that Marx predicted for it and set out instead to kill it. Hitler, a petit bourgeois, had only contempt for German *Bürgertum*. Modernists and members of the artistic avant-garde in both Europe and America, no friends of Nazism and for the most part too anarchistic to embrace true Leninism, also despised the bourgeoisie. Somehow all this fed directly into the lexicon of American academia, so that several

generations of presumably baffled middle-class American students learned that it was people just like themselves who oppressed the poor, subjugated women, and imposed imperialism abroad.

Until now. Beginning in the 1970s and with increasing momentum in the '80s and '90s, scholars in Europe and America have looked with fresh eyes at the class their predecessors loved to hate. The recent scholarship seeks not to deny the sins committed by the bourgeoisie—but to understand the dilemmas faced by the men and women of the new capitalist and managerial class and to appreciate their undeniable achievements in the realms of art and culture. Thus, Stefan Collini rehabilitated Britain’s “public moralists” (1991), Thomas Walter Lacquer ruminated on middle-class views on religion (1976), James J. Sheehan wrote appreciatively on 19th-century German liberalism (1978), Thomas C. Owen painted a respectful group portrait of Russia’s merchant princes (1981), and Adeline Daumard comprehensively reassessed the French bourgeoisie who gave rise to all the fuss in the first place (1978).

Many factors today are swelling this stream to flood stage. First, the culture wars of the 1960s have by now largely played out. The partisans have aged and often prospered, causing them to appear to a younger generation more like the bourgeoisie they attack than the cultural radicals they profess to idolize. The natural dialectic between generations has been intensified by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the old bour-

geoisie-baiting parties elsewhere. Neoconservative trends, with their hostility to the state, have also fueled the change, as have neoliberal interests in civil society and the role of voluntary associations. There may as yet be no bourgeois studies departments, but the scholarly materials for such a program are rapidly accumulating.

None in Europe or America is closer to the heart of this rediscovery than historian Peter Gay of Yale University. Beginning with his volume *The Education of the Senses* (1984), followed by *The Tender Passion* (1986), *The Cultivation of Hatred* (1993), and *The Naked Heart* (1995), he has truly chronicled *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*. Now, in the masterly final volume of the series, he deals with the 19th century's great struggles over art in all its dimensions.

Pleasure Wars offers engrossing chapters on the economics of the arts, the strange passion of collecting, and the rise of "critics" as go-betweens linking artist and public. The Freudian analysis of earlier volumes in the series, for which he was both praised and damned, is muted here. Instead, he gives a wonderfully nuanced account of the life of the arts in northern and central Europe, Britain, and the United States, in the age when most of the cultural institutions that surround us today were founded. In passages that read like the histories of many American cities, he recounts the cultural crusades of self-confident Manchester businessmen and those of their less confident peers on the

Continent. While paying close attention to regional differences, the author traces a bigger picture in which many of yesterday's villains emerge, if not as heroes, at least as three-dimensional, risk-taking, often discriminating people. In short, he rescues the much-abused middle class from what he calls "poorly researched and poorly argued anti-bourgeois clichés dressed up as scholarship."

The heart of this volume is Gay's diagnosis and history of "bourgeoisophobia," the tendency—especially widespread among sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie itself—to

see the middle class as the embodiment of everything banal, grim, and repressive. All the usual suspects are included among Gay's bourgeoisophobes, from Flaubert and Marx to Nietzsche. Acknowledging that their poisoned arrows often hit the mark, Gay nonetheless turns the usual story on its head, focusing on the bourgeoisophobes themselves, rather than on the target of their wrath. In the process, he forces several of their number to lie on the psychiatrist's couch where their

victims ordinarily squirm. It makes for immensely entertaining reading.

Judged by the best-known portrait of Johannes Brahms (1833–97), the Viennese composer was the epitome of the stolid bourgeois whom the critics of that class view with such contempt. There he sits at the piano, portly and self-satisfied, wrapped in a gloomy dark frock coat, smoking a cigar, and hiding his personality (if he has one) behind a full beard. Somewhere on a shelf out of sight are the piles of musical manuscripts by the old



Brahms in his study

masters which he collected the way parvenu businessmen collected old paintings.

Brahms's routine was similarly bourgeois. A workaholic, he often began the day by doing counterpoint exercises, the musical equivalent of step aerobics. He would end it with a few friends, gruffly talking politics (he was, of course, a good liberal), swapping nasty jokes over plates of heavy Viennese fare washed down with plenty of wine at the Café Czarda, and occasionally culminating the evening with a visit to prostitutes. In short, he lived the kind of earnest, repressed existence centering on work and self that any misogynist bachelor accountant or lawyer might have lived in the late 19th century. No wonder Brahms became the favorite whipping boy of musical modernists of his own and later generations.

The only problem with this picture is that Brahms's music touches the emotions in a way the work of few other composers can do. Although his contemporaries initially found his chamber music in particular inaccessible and "difficult," they eventually acclaimed him as the "third B," the successor to Bach and Beethoven. When Brahms died, life in Vienna came to a halt as the imperial city mourned the loss of the man who for a generation had expressed the deepest feelings of its musical public. Today, when nearly all the values and institutions of Brahms's world have crumbled, the music of this stolid burgher from Hamburg still exercises a remarkable power over our emotions.

Jan Swafford, whose biography of Charles Ives received warm praise in these pages, set out to discover the wellsprings of Brahms's achievement. He pays due attention to Brahms's extraordinary technical proficiency, the consummate sense of craftsmanship that led the composer to destroy countless works that did not meet his high standards. The author also acknowledges Brahms's profound appreciation for the music of previous masters, which made even his earliest compositions seem like the culmination of a line of succession stretching back centuries.

But if these qualities are necessary ele-

ments of Brahms's achievement, they are by no means sufficient to account for it. They do not help us understand the arresting G Major String Quintet, the rhapsodic F# Minor Sonata for piano, the "dark well" of his Fourth Symphony, or the haunting Quintet for Clarinet and Strings. After all, there were other proficient and historically informed composers in the 19th century whose works are now justly forgotten. And so Swafford carefully examines Brahms's private life in search of what might have imparted the emotional cast to his compositions. Brahms took extraordinary pains to make the biographer's task difficult, burning nearly all of his voluminous correspondence and sidestepping the prying questions put to him by contemporaries. Still, enough survives to enable Swafford to draw a picture of a man immersed in private pain that kept him from the happy, bourgeois family life of which he dreamed.

Employing the kind of "soft" psychoanalytical approach that Peter Gay uses so effectively in his cameo biographies, Swafford traces Brahms's agony to his early youth, when his father, a struggling bandsman, forced him to earn money playing piano for carousing sailors and prostitutes in Hamburg's notorious St. Pauli district. In the 20th century, work as a pianist in New Orleans's red-light district led Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton to create a boisterous music that celebrates earthiness and sensuality. For Brahms, the aspiring young burgher from an impoverished Lutheran family, the experience was markedly different. Something happened at the bordello in St. Pauli—we do not know precisely what, though Brahms sometimes alluded to it—that cast a dark shadow over his private world. He fell in love often, usually with teenage girls from good families who possessed wonderful singing voices, but he never married. His most sustained tie with any woman was with Robert Schumann's widow, Clara, a gifted pianist and composer who was his senior by more than a decade. She loved Johannes, but he kept her at arm's length and at times treated her with a coldness that seems brutal. Brahms remained immersed in his private agony of yearning,

love, and loss.

It is quite possible that Brahms, on one of his frequent walks in Vienna's Prater, encountered young Dr. Sigmund Freud, who was beginning his epochal studies during the last years of Brahms's life. Had Freud taken Brahms as a patient, he might have helped the composer recognize and overcome his inner dilemmas. Instead, Brahms, unable or unwilling to express his agony verbally, allowed it to find expression in his music. As Swafford argues, it guided his choice of themes, harmonic expressions, and metrics, imparting the mood of elegiac lyricism that suffuses so many of his compositions. Here, then, was a classic case of "bourgeois" repression, directed not toward others but toward himself, and with consequences that have

immensely enriched the lives of millions of Brahms listeners from his day to ours.

Just as Gay's book can be seen as less critique than appreciation of the bourgeois culture makers, so Swafford's biography is a warmly sympathetic account of an artist who shrank from sympathy. Delving behind the beard, cigar, raunchy tales, and gruff misogyny, Swafford has rescued a private person who was sensitive, vulnerable, and, in the biographer's word, feminine. By comparison, Brahms's critics among the modernists and "bourgeoisophobes," both in his day and ours, seem repressed, cold, and, yes, philistine.

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Spycraft and Soulcraft

THE FILE:

A Personal History.

By Timothy Garton Ash.

Knopf. 262 pp. \$23

by *William McPherson*

Two years after the opening of the Berlin Wall and one year after the unification of the two Germans, the Bundestag voted to open the files of East Germany's infamously efficient secret police as of January 2, 1992. Thereafter, anyone who had a file could read it (under carefully regulated conditions designed to protect the privacy of the innocent). There were six million of them, a file for one of every three citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)—and one for the British historian, journalist, and author Timothy Garton Ash as well.

The files filled 125 miles of shelves. For the GDR to maintain this archive of shame and keep it current required, in the last year of its operation, more than 90,000 full-time workers and 170,000 unofficial collaborators, giving about one of every 50 adult East Germans a direct connection with the Ministry for State Security. While not unique in the extent of its spying on

citizens, Germany was and is unique in bringing the files to light—which, like the spying, has proved to be a vast and costly undertaking. In 1996 alone, Garton Ash tells us, the budget for the Gauck Authority, which administers the Stasi's voluminous records, was 234.3 million deutsche marks, about \$164 million, more than the entire defense budget of Lithuania.

But the personal costs were something else again. Families were split, lives shattered, friendships destroyed. The sense of betrayal was beyond imagining. To cite one well-known example, East German dissident Vera Wollenberger was constantly harassed by the Stasi, was once imprisoned, and was fired from her job. After unification she successfully ran for parliament, where she was instrumental in formulating the law that provided access to the files. Reading her own, she discovered that the man code-named Donald, who