Program Notes on *Brahms v. Radiohead*
by Steve Hackman

*Brahms v. Radiohead* is a synthesis of the Brahms First Symphony (1882) and Radiohead's *OK Computer* (1997), two masterpieces separated by over a century. Eight songs from the Radiohead album are interspersed throughout the Brahms symphony. What a thrilling process of analysis, discovery, deconstruction, reconstruction, and creation this has been.

I chose these two works because they are among my favorites; I have a strong personal connection to each. The Brahms is the first piece I ever conducted, at my Juilliard School audition, and Radiohead's *OK Computer* is an album that forever changed my relationship with music.

Marrying these two musics seemed possible to me for a few reasons. First, they share a certain pathos- a brooding feeling- and the balance of tension and release weighs heavily toward the former (but what release!). Secondly, they both represent to me 'invention within convention'- adhering to structures and forms set up by their predecessors but innovating within those parameters (in Brahms' case, the symphony form, and in Radiohead's, the concept album). Finally, I heard distinct musical similarities; beyond their sharing great density in the music, they even had melodic and harmonic devices in common.

I began the process by simply listening and playing through each with the eventual amalgamation on my mind. Having *OK Computer* on in my headphones walking around the city or at the gym, and reading through the Brahms score a couple times was enough to come up with an initial plan of which songs could be combined with which movements. Then the real work begun- a technique I would call 'musical alchemy': distilling each of the separate works down to their purest forms and analyzing those elements- melody, harmony, rhythm and form - then identifying the common elements and attempting to overlap/combine. Much of this was done at the piano, and by simply imagining and imagining.

What I am most excited about is that true synthesis occurs often in this work. Instead of straight-ahead arrangements of Radiohead songs, we have 'Airbag', layered over the music of the first movement introduction. 'Subterranean Homesick Alien' picks up right where the first movement concludes, with the pedal tones in low horns and strings. The opening music of the Brahms symphony adds to the frenzied 'you don't remember my name' section of Paranoid Android. The second theme of the first movement weaves into 'Karma Police'. Soaring string lines of the second movement are superimposed over 'No Surprises', and the final line, 'such a pretty house and such a pretty garden' floats over the gorgeous conclusion of the movement. Themes of the third movement are evoked in the
distance during the middle section of 'Let Down'. Assorted motives from the fourth movement introduction meld with 'Exit Music (For a Film)', and finally, the ostinato bass figure of the fourth movement coda provides the undercurrent of 'Electioneering'.

A final note; many would purport that these two pieces are separated by more than just time. They would seek to label and categorize them, and perhaps judge their respective and comparative values based on convenient and stereotypical judgement.

In my opinion, an individual who takes the time, and intimately understands the processes that resulted in these works, would never take such a perfunctory position. They would instead recognize the brilliance in each, and realize, in fact, how similar the processes are - we just call them different things. 'Composing' parallels 'songwriting', 'orchestrating' parallels 'arranging' and 'producing', the many detailed indications in the score parallel the hours and hours in the studio rehearsing and refining, the 'orchestra' parallels the 'band', and the 'concert hall' mirrors the 'recording studio'.

Ultimately, when you distill them, they are made of the same twelve notes. If this work does anything, I hope it encourages open-mindedness, curiosity, understanding, and the breaking down of destructive barriers.