

The Boston Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1881 by Henry Lee Higginson. Its first conductor was George Henschel, who was a noted baritone as well as conductor, and a close friend of Johannes Brahms. For the orchestra, Henschel devised innovative orchestral seating charts and sent them to Brahms, who replied approvingly and commented on the issues raised by horn and viola sections in a letter of mid-November 1881 .

The orchestra's four subsequent music directors were all trained in Austria, including the seminal and highly influential Hungarian-born conductor Arthur Nikisch, in accordance with the tastes of Higginson. Wilhelm Gericke served twice, from 1884 to 1889 and again from 1898, to 1906. According to Joseph Horowitz's review of correspondence, Higginson considered 25 candidates to replace Gericke after receiving notice in 1905. He decided not to offer the position to Gustav Mahler, Fritz Steinbach, and Willem Mengelberg but did not rule out the young Bruno Walter if nobody more senior were to accept. He offered the position to Hans Richter in February, 1905, who declined, to Felix Mottl in November, who was previously engaged, and then to previous director Nikisch, who declined; the post was finally offered to Karl Muck, who accepted and began his duties in October, 1906. He was conductor until 1908 and again from 1912-1918.

The music director 1908-12 was Max Fiedler. He conducted the premiere of Ignacy Jan Paderewski's Symphony in B minor "Polonia" in 1909.

During World War I, Muck (born in Germany but a Swiss citizen since childhood), was arrested, shortly before a performance of the St. Matthew Passion in 1918, and interned in a prison camp without trial or charge until the end of the war, when he was deported. He vowed never to return, and conducted thereafter only in Europe. Its next two music directors were French: Henri Rabaud, who took over from Muck for a season, and then Pierre Monteux from 1919 to 1924. Monteux, because of a musician's strike, was able to replace 30 players, thus changing the orchestra's sound; the orchestra developed a reputation for a "French" sound which persists to some degree to this day. Alsatian maestro Charles Munch had made his conducting debut in Boston in 1946. He led orchestra on its first overseas tour, and also produced their first stereo recording in February 1954 for RCA Victor. In 1952, Munch appointed the first woman to hold a principal chair in a major U. S. orchestra, flutist Doriot Anthony Dwyer, who remained as BSO principal for 38 years.



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HIGH DEFINITION TAPE TRANSFERS

Brahms Symphony No. 2

Boston Symphony Orchestra / Erich Leinsdorf



Johannes Brahms composed his Symphony No. 2 in the summer of 1877, less than a year after the premiere of his Symphony No. 1 (Op. 68 in C minor) -- an astonishing fact given that the former had taken him fifteen years to complete. Finally confident in his abilities as a symphonist, and less troubled by the looming shadow of Beethoven, Brahms created a much more spontaneous work that was well received by both critics and audiences. When compared with the works of his contemporaries, this piece is conservative in both orchestration and formal structure. But it is by no means reactionary. Rather, Brahms revised and expanded upon the eighteenth century model, largely replacing thematic contrast with transformation and variation, and adding his distinctive richness of harmony and rhythm.

There is both unity and variety in this symphony: Brahms manages to combine the light and dark, the lyrical and forceful, the extroverted and introspective -- all the while growing the piece organically from the "seed" of the very first three notes (D-C sharp-D, heard in the cellos and the double basses). This compositional economy is instinctively apparent to the ear, and helps to make the entire work intelligible without sacrificing interest or spontaneity.

Brahms's orchestration is full, rich, and often ingenious. He chooses to make the ensemble one unified voice, and has introduced his entire spectrum of instrumental colors after only 40 bars; however, one never gets the sense that he is overusing the orchestra. Instead he creates a texture in constant flux, shifting the focus of the ear, and extracting individual colors to great effect.

The piece opens with the three-note germinating cell and a simple horn melody; we are then introduced to two subjects in turn, the first announced by the violins, and the second by the cellos and violas in a luxurious duet. After developing both themes, Brahms creates an interesting recapitulation by briefly combining the initial horn melody and the first subject, and then dwelling extensively on the second subject. A short coda is attached to the end.

Two bassoons color the second movement's opening cello theme with a dark counterpoint, creating an immediate contrast to the first movement. It is here that we begin to see the more introspective side of Brahms, although this is by no means a brooding movement; there a surprising variety of expression within the slow prevailing tempo.

With the third movement, Brahms for the first time departs from a string-dominated texture, and allows a solo oboe to introduce the opening theme, while pizzicato cellos and a woodwind choir provide accompaniment. Full of rhythmic interest, this movement has frequent meter changes, expectant fermatas, and Brahms' distinctive cross-rhythms.

The moody and unpredictable finale oscillates between manic energy and somberness; Brahms is constantly changing direction, sometimes so abruptly as to pull the rug out from beneath your feet. The motion never stops, and when the final D major fanfare arrives, one has the sense of having been on a wild ride.

Brahms Symphony No. 2

Boston Symphony Orchestra / Erich Leinsdorf

- I - Allegro Non Troppo 14:42
- II - Adagio Non Troppo 9:36
- III - Allegretto Grazioso 5:35
- IV - Allegro Con Spirito 9:15
- Total Time 39:08

Recording Info: Transferred from a 15ips tape

Recorded 1965 at Boston Symphony Hall by RCA Records



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admin@highdeftapetransfers.com
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