

concert overtures, the Haydn Variations, and transcriptions of three Hungarian Dances from the 21 composed for four-hand piano between 1868 and 1880. No opera, though, or ballet or incidental theater music. Furthermore, from 1859 to 1874, he limited his orchestral writing to seven choral pieces (which, however, included A German Requiem, his longest work in any form).

On March 11, 1879, the University of Breslau -- Wroclaw today, in Poland -- awarded him an honorary doctorate, for which he thanked them on a postcard. A friend replied that the University expected "a doctoral symphony...at the very least a solemn ode" quid pro quo. What they received 19 months later was this 10-minute Academic Festival Overture. To start the New Year, Brahms himself premiered it in the Silesian capital.

This music is arguably the crusty composer's most ebullient, scored for the largest orchestra in his oeuvre: piccolo, contrabassoon, a third trumpet, tuba, bass drum, triangle, and cymbals, in addition to the usual wind pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. For subject matter to fill a flexible sonata structure, he chose four student drinking songs. In the order of their appearance, these are "What comes therefrom on high" (staccato triads and off-center accents in C minor), "We have built a stately house" (three trumpets, solemnly in C major), "Der Landesherr" (The Sovereign; legato violins in E major), and finally, after the seriatim reprise of one, two, and three in tonic C major, the most famous song of all, the medieval student song "Gaudemus igitur" (Let us therefore rejoice), in the coda. This may not have been what Breslau expected, but for global audiences ever since, the Academic Festival Overture ranks alongside the keyboard Waltz, Op. 39/16, as Brahms' most beloved instrumental music.

BRAHMS

Symphony No. 4

Academic Festival Overture

Rudolf Kempe / The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra



That Brahms initially approached the symphonic form with trepidation is fairly evident from the chronology of his works. It wasn't until the age of 43 that he completed his First Symphony. Indeed, the composer's output to that point suggests a conscious process of self-education. A number of smaller-scale orchestral works, including the Variations on a Theme of Haydn and the proto-symphonic Piano Concerto No. 1, suggest preparation for what Brahms clearly saw as the elusive of compositional enterprises. He was to meet the challenge with a skill and individual spirit, one of Classicism refracted through the prism of high Romanticism, that led many to pronounce him heir to Beethoven.

Brahms' Fourth Symphony (1885), his last, provides with its serious tone, striking complexities, and inspired construction a fitting valedictory to his work in this genre. That its impact was immediate if initially puzzling is clear from the account by the biographer Max Kalbeck of its first run-through (at two pianos) for a small and distinguished audience:

"After the wonderful Allegro...I expected that one of those present would break out in a loud 'Bravo.' Into his blond beard [conductor Hans] Richter murmured something that from afar would be taken as an expression of approval.... The others remained persistently quiet.... Finally Brahms grumbled, "So, let's go on!" and gave a sign to continue; whereupon [eminent critic Eduard] Hanslick heaved a sigh and quickly exploded, as if he had to relieve his mind and yet feared speaking up too late: 'For this whole movement I had the feeling that I was being given a beating by two incredibly intelligent people....'"

Each of the movements bears the distinct stamp of the composer's personality. The first begins with a theme in E minor based upon the interval of a third, which

also provides a structural and motivic foundation for the remainder of the work. There is a notable sense of unrest from beginning to end, and the tragic, even fatalistic atmosphere is further and stunningly underlined by the final, minor-key plagal (IV-I) cadence. The second movement, which opens with a brief, melancholy sort of fanfare, gives way to the quietly accompanied winds in perhaps one of the loveliest of any of the composer's themes, granted particular plangency through the use of the flat sixth and seventh scale degrees borrowed from the minor mode. This material is gradually developed into soaring, tutti lyricism that fades into ethereal quiet. The third movement, a lusty, stomping, duple dance, proved so popular in Brahms' lifetime that audiences constantly demanded that it be repeated. The last movement is perhaps most notable of all, cast as it is in the "archaic" Baroque form of a chaconne -- variations over a ground bass. The chaconne's subject is in fact a slight modification of that used by Bach in his Cantata No. 150; though deceptively simple -- essentially an ascending minor scale segment from the tonic note to the dominant, then a leap back to the tonic -- Brahms uses this skeleton as the basis for an increasingly elaborate and thematic harmonic framework. From its first presentation, which is not as a bass line, but as a theme in the winds, Brahms gradually weaves some 34 variations that steadily build in intensity, as though in defiance to the oppressive, insistent rotation of the ground. The final variations lead directly into an ending which reconfirms the weight of tragedy and pathos borne by the first movement.

Brahms composed this work and the Tragic Overture in the summer of 1880 in Bad Ischl, Austria, and conducted the first Academic Festival performance in Breslau on January 3, 1881. Despite Brahms' catalogue of 122 numbered works and at least 40 more works without, he wrote only 14 for orchestra: four symphonies, two early serenades, two piano concertos, two string concertos, two

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Brahms Symphony No.4 In E Minor Op.98 (39:56)

1 Allegro Non Troppo

2 Andante Moderato

3 Allegro Giocoso

4 Allegro Energico E Passionato

5 Academic Festival Overture (10:17)

Recorded by EMI 1962



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