

Fritz Reiner was one of the most acclaimed conductors of the 20th century -- noted for the vast range of his repertoire, which included both symphonic and operatic pieces spanning from the traditional canon to contemporary material, he was also an influential educator who counted among his pupils Leonard Bernstein. Reiner was born in Budapest, Hungary, on December 19, 1888; despite earning a law degree from the University of Bucharest, he pursued a career in music, and at age 21 was named chorusmaster of the Budapest Opera. A stint as conductor with the Budapest Volksoper followed before Reiner was chosen in 1914 to serve as principal conductor of the Royal Opera in Dresden, where he collaborated with Richard Strauss on productions of several of the composer's early operas.

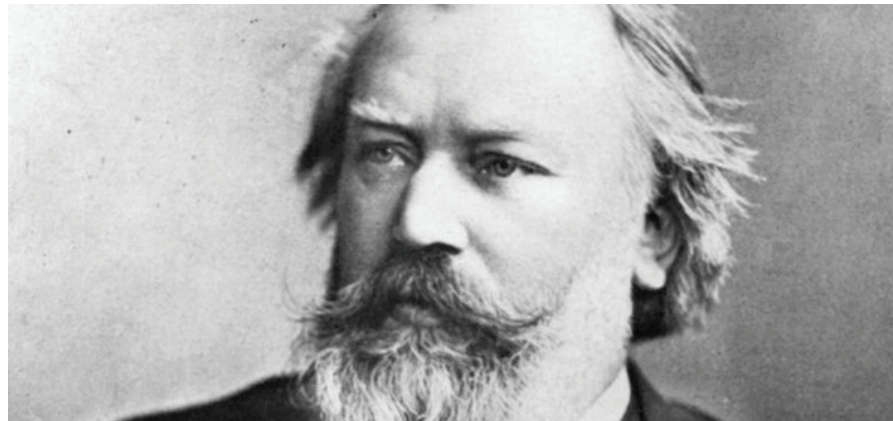
In 1922 Reiner left Europe to relocate to America, settling in Cincinnati, OH, and signing on as conductor with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; a decade later he was tapped to head the orchestral and opera departments at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, where his students included Bernstein. After next serving as the music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony between 1938 and 1948, he served five years with the Metropolitan Opera. While Reiner's frequent migration might have been attributed largely to a restless creativity, he was also a notoriously difficult personality who frequently alienated those around him -- many of the musicians under his command openly loathed him, although he inevitably inspired the best work of their careers.

Reiner's own best work was undoubtedly his tenure with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which he elevated into one of the most celebrated ensembles in the world. Moving over to the CSO in 1953, he not only established the orchestra as a top-flight live attraction but also as a popular recording entity -- the countless albums they made for RCA's Living Stereo series during Reiner's decade-long tenure were much acclaimed by collectors for both the power of the performances and the unusually high fidelity of the recordings themselves. Releases like Fritz Reiner Conducts Richard Strauss and Fritz Reiner Conducts Bartók in particular remain definitive interpretations of the composers in question. Health problems forced Reiner to resign his position in 1962, and he died in New York City on November 15 of the following year.



Brahms Symphony No. 4

Fritz Reiner
Royal Philharmonic



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

Symphony No. 4

Fritz Reiner conducts the Royal Philharmonic

1. **Allegro non troppo 11:22**
2. **Andante moderato 12:53**
3. **Allegro giocoso - Poco meno presto - Tempo I 6:35**
4. **Allegro energico e passionato - Più allegro 9:43**

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