

One of the great unsung conductors of the middle twentieth century, Rudolf Kempe enjoyed a strong reputation in England but never quite achieved the international acclaim that he might have had with more aggressive management, promotion, and recording. Not well enough known to be a celebrity but too widely respected to count as a cult figure, Kempe is perhaps best remembered as a connoisseur's conductor, one valued for his strong creative temperament rather than for any personal mystique.

He studied oboe as a child, performed with the Dortmund Opera, and, in 1929, barely out of his teens, he became first oboist of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. His conducting debut came in 1936, at the Leipzig Opera; this performance of Lortzing's *Der Wildschütz* was so successful that the Leipzig Opera hired him as a répétiteur. Kempe served in the German army during World War II, but much of his duty was out of the line of fire; in 1942 he was assigned to a music post at the Chemnitz Opera. After the war, untainted by Nazi activities, he returned to Chemnitz as director of the opera (1945-1948), and then moved on to the Weimar National Theater (1948-1949). From 1949 to 1953 he served as general music director of the Staatskapelle Dresden, East Germany's finest orchestra. He then moved to the identical position at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, 1952-1954, succeeding the young and upwardly mobile Georg Solti. During this period he was also making guest appearances outside of Germany, mainly in opera: in Vienna (1951), at London's Covent Garden (1953), and at New York's Metropolitan Opera (1954), to mention only the highlights. Although he conducted Wagner extensively, especially at Covent Garden, Kempe did not make his Bayreuth debut until 1960. As an opera conductor he was greatly concerned with balance and texture, and singers particularly appreciated his efforts on their behalf.

Kempe made a great impression in England, and in 1960 Thomas Beecham named him associate conductor of London's Royal Philharmonic. Kempe became the orchestra's principal conductor upon Beecham's death the following year, and, after the orchestra was reorganized, served as its artistic director from 1963 to 1975. He was also the chief conductor of the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra from 1965 to 1972, and of the Munich Philharmonic from 1967 until his death in 1976. During the last year of his life he also entered into a close association with the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

BRAHMS

SYMPHONY No. 1 in C minor

BERLIN PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Conductor RUDOLF KEMPE



Brahms composed this work between 1855 and 1876. Otto Dessoff led a "tryout" first performance in Karlsruhe, Germany, on November 4, 1876. At Düsseldorf in 1854-1856 -- where he helped Clara Schumann with her seven children while terminally mad Robert, her husband, wasted away in an asylum -- the young Brahms undertook on two separate occasions to sketch a symphony. By the end of 1858, one set of sketches had been assimilated into the First Piano Concerto, that gargantuan "serious" piece with Baroque underpinnings, in the tradition of Beethoven's Grosse Fuge and "Hammerklavier" Sonata. Sketches for a C major Allegro movement, in sonata form and 6/8 time, were saved for subsequent expansion and development. When, in 1862, he showed the results to now-widowed Clara, she expressed admiration but also concern that it ended too abruptly. For the next 12 years, Brahms kept this music close at hand. Finally, in 1874, he willed himself to complete the First Symphony that friends and admirers (beginning with Schumann in 1853, shortly after their first meeting) had been urging him to compose.

He polished the Allegro of 1855-1862, now in C minor, then wrote a solemn introduction hinting at themes already 12-20 years old. These included a recurring motto of three ascending semitones, repeated in the slow movement. Having created a horse to pull the cart, Brahms addressed the middle movements: one slow (Andante moderato, in E major, then C sharp minor), the other quasi-scherzoid (Un poco allegretto e grazioso, pleasant and graceful, in A flat, F minor, and

finally B major), respectively in triple and duple meters. Certain kinds of performance can make the central movements sound out-of-place, which is not meant, however, to impugn their intrinsic quality. Both exemplify a master of musical art in his time, who had reached a rarefied synthesis of conflicting creative forces. Their substance and style bespeak maturity no less than the monumental finale created to trump them. There an ominous preface in C minor leads to a C major Allegro non troppo ma con brio (not too quickly but spiritedly), which remains in 4/4 time until a climactic alla-breve acceleration into the coda.

Brahms' decade of residence in Vienna had smoothed as well as ripened him: the middle movements could be called Schubertian, by way of Schumann. The finale, however, pays homage to the Germany's Baroque masters: Scheidt, Froberger, Buxtehude, Bach, and expatriated Handel. Simultaneously it honors the symphonic architectonics of Beethoven without regressing. Although he belonged to the generation that succeeded Chopin and Schumann, Brahms liberated music as much as they from the traditional Germanic tyrannies of bar-lines, four- and eight-bar phrasing, downbeat accents, and rhythmic squareness. While none of the music by his colleagues sounded richer (not even Bruckner's with augmented winds and brass), Brahms achieved his ends with astonishingly simple means -- the basic Beethoven orchestra, sans bass drum, cymbals, or piccolo -- plain to the point of abstemiousness on paper, but inimitably sonorous in performance.

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1 Un Poco Sostenuto; Allegro 14:23

2 Andante Sostenuto 9:19

3 Un Poco Allegretto E Grazioso 5:03

4 Adagio; Allegro Non Troppo 16:49

Recorded by HMV 1959



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