

Like so many Russian musicians, Mravinsky seemed first headed toward a career in the sciences. He studied biology at St. Petersburg University, but had to quit in 1920 after his father's death. To support himself, he signed on with the Imperial Ballet as a rehearsal pianist. In 1923, he finally enrolled in the Leningrad Conservatory, where he studied composition with Vladimir Shcherbachov and conducting with Alexander Gauk and Nikolai Malko. He graduated in 1931, and left his Imperial Ballet job to become a musical assistant and ballet conductor at the Bolshoi Opera from 1931 to 1937, with a stint at the Kirov from 1934. Mravinsky gave up these posts in 1938, after winning first prize in the All-Union Conductors' Competition in Moscow, to become principal conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic. He remained there until his death, long ignoring many guest-conducting offers from abroad. Under Mravinsky's direction the Leningrad Philharmonic came to be regarded as one of the finest orchestras in the world, although the world had comparatively few opportunities to hear it aside from the rare tour (about 30 performances in 25 years, starting in 1956), some dim Soviet recordings, and a very few highly acclaimed records for such Western European companies as Deutsche Grammophon and, in the end, Erato. Mravinsky was made People's Artist of the U.S.S.R. in 1954, and in 1973, he received the order of Hero of Socialist Labor. But his more lasting international acclaim came for his performances of Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, Wagner, Sibelius, Bartók, Stravinsky, and anything Russian or Soviet. His reputation only rose upon his retirement from the Leningrad Philharmonic.



Mravinsky's rehearsal manner was said to be autocratic and brutal, and the resulting performances were tightly clenched. Yet they were also technically precise, finely detailed, subtly colored, and highly dramatic -- and this not always because he was in the habit of whipping fast finales into a frenzy. His readings had an intensity, concentration, and -- despite the arduous rehearsal -- spontaneity comparable to those of Wilhelm Furtwängler. In the West, Mravinsky was particularly noted as an interpreter of Shostakovich, whose Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth symphonies he premiered, and of Tchaikovsky. His recordings of the Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies, made in 1960 for Deutsche Grammophon while the orchestra was on tour in London, are touchstones of the Russian repertory.

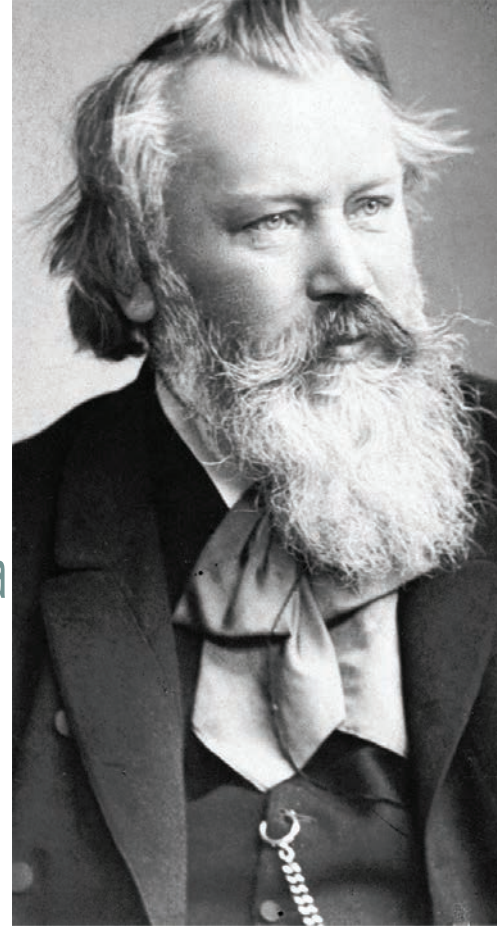


Brahms Symphony No. 4

Evgeny Mravinsky

Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

Live Recording



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.

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- 1 Allegro Non Troppo 12:26
- 2 Andante Moderato 10:05
- 3 Allegro Giocoso 6:04
- 4 Allegro Energico E Passionato 10:20
- Total Time: 38:55

Recorded by Meloydia Live at the Grand Hall of Leningrad Philharmonic 1973



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