

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.

RAFAEL KUBELIK



conducting

The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Brahms Symphony No. 2 in D Major Opus 78

BRAHMS

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.

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1 Allegro non troppo 13:55

2 Adagio non troppo - L'istesso tempo, ma grazioso 8:48

3 Allegretto grazioso (quasi andantino) - Presto ma non assai 4:58

4 Allegro con spirito 8:45

Total Time: 36:26

Recorded by Decca 1957 at the Sofiensaal, Vienna
Engineer - James Brown Producer - John Culshaw



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