

PROGRAM NOTES

The movements that constitute Ludwig van Beethoven's Violin Concerto are standard for a concerto of its time: an opening sonata-ritornello form with double exposition (one for the orchestra and one for the soloist); a serene, soulful, even hymn-like slow movement; and a finale in rondo form that is lighter and faster than the opening movement. Yet the piece did not please audiences of the time, and it took nearly forty years for the work to achieve critical and popular success. According to an 1807 review by the Viennese critic Johann Nepomuk Mösler,

"With regard to Beethoven's [sic] concerto, the opinion of all connoisseurs is the same: while they acknowledge that it contains some fine things, they agree that the continuity often seems to be completely disrupted, and that the endless repetitions of a few commonplace passages could easily lead to weariness. It is being said that Beethoven ought to make better use of his admittedly great talents...."

We can only speculate about the reason for such reactions, but Beethoven's strengths as a composer of symphonies and a master of motivic development and thematic coherence likely counted against him in this work. Rather than giving his audience a violin piece with orchestral accompaniment, Beethoven created a symphonic composition with a prominent violin part. And foremost among the ideas of this symphonically conceived concerto is the drumbeat motif that begins the piece and unifies the whole of the first movement. How it must have irritated Mösler to hear that drumbeat of the lowly timpani echoed time and

again by the orchestra and violin, but that motif reflects an important French influence on Beethoven, in which stirring march-like opening movements marked the musical style of the revolutionary era. Against the backdrop of that unifying device, the main themes of the opening movement are some of the most lyrical and inspired by Beethoven: an expansive first theme and stirring anthemic second theme, both in the tonic key of D major in this spacious orchestral exposition. The violin solo, like the opening movement, bears characteristics that are seen in French violin concertos of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, such as broken-octave figures and melodic embellishments in triplets. However, the overall character of Beethoven's violin solo is not one of technical virtuosity, but instead of an expressive lyricism that is well integrated into the thematic plan of the sonata form.

The *Larghetto* second movement in G major presents an unorthodox theme and variations form, made unorthodox by cadential extensions of the variations, or perhaps interludes or digressions from them. But underlying the cadential extensions and new melodies introduced by the violin is the unifying motif of a dotted figure, which is taken from the beginning of the main theme. That motif, in doubly dotted form and in a thunderous fortissimo, signals the transition to the rondo-form finale in D major, which follows without a break in the music. The solo violin introduces the main theme, a catchy tune in a rollicking 6/8 meter that will provide the refrain in this rondo form. In the typical plan of a concerto's rondo form, the refrains feature the main theme and tonic key; episodes

PROGRAM NOTES

offer thematic and tonal digressions. Beethoven follows this plan, but with a few surprises in key and scoring: for instance, the dip into the parallel minor of the main key in the second refrain (the first of several always surprising shifts to minor), and the concerted treatment given to the bassoon in the second episode. The third episode, which is a variant of the first episode, leads to the soloist's cadenza. The orchestra's return, a cello-bass outburst beneath the soloist's ongoing cadential trill, leads to a final refrain, but with a further tonal surprise of modulation to the distant key of A-flat major before final recollections of the main theme in the tonic key.

No account of Johannes Brahms' First Symphony neglects its years-long gestation between the early 1850s and premiere in 1876, or the homage that Brahms made in his finale to the "Ode to Joy" melody of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Although particular to Brahms' symphony, the two elements also reflect the remarkable history of the symphony in the nineteenth century, Beethoven's singular contribution to it, and the daunting challenges his work posed for later composers, especially Brahms. Before Beethoven, the symphony had evolved into the foremost of instrumental genres, a large-scale and public work distinguished as a locus of the "sublime," as Johann Georg Sulzer wrote in the 1770s. Beethoven's historic accomplishment, which weighed heavily on his successors, lay in vastly expanding the scale of the symphony (i.e., the length of the work, the size of the orchestral ensemble) and its expressive potential to represent ideas that powerfully,

if abstractly, captured profound and monumental experiences. Largely because of Beethoven's symphonies, music without words came to be perceived as a superior form of artistic expression, one that was uniquely capable of transcending specific or particular meanings, aiming instead for all-encompassing and universal themes.

Given Beethoven's example and the new status of the symphony after his death, the expectations placed on any would-be composer of symphonies were enormous. By the time of Brahms' maturity in the early 1850s, the genre seemed in crisis. One path forward lay in programmatic symphonic composition, and Hector Berlioz and then Franz Liszt pursued that option vigorously. Otherwise, largely forgotten composers—Wilhelm Taubert, Georg Goltermann, Heinrich Esser, Fritz Spindler, and many others—were producing symphonies that garnered little success, as attested by contemporary reviews. According to an anonymous review of 1855 in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*,

"The creation of a symphony nowadays is a rock on which, with only a few exceptions [perhaps those of Robert Schumann?], most composers suffer a complete shipwreck."

Brahms, who was encouraged toward symphonic composition from the early 1850s by his friends (Schumann in particular), struggled with the symphony and with the precedent established by Beethoven. Throughout the '50s and '60s his efforts yielded other orchestral genres—two serenades, the Piano Concerto in D Minor (originally conceived as a symphony), and the Haydn Variations—but no symphony.

PROGRAM NOTES

We know, however, from the survival of sketches and the testimony of those who knew Brahms that the ideas for the First Symphony took hold in the early 1860s, from which point he worked fitfully toward his goal of a symphony worthy of Beethoven's standard. By 1862 Brahms had drafted the complete first movement and then produced almost nothing over the next several years. As late as 1871, despairing of ever completing what he had started, Brahms wrote to the conductor Hermann Levi, "I will never compose a symphony! You have no idea how it feels to one of us when he continually hears behind him such a giant." Nonetheless, the composer pressed on and completed the piece in the fall of 1876. The first performance took place in November of that year, but even after that point, he made revisions to the second and third movements, ever in search of his self-imposed post-Beethovenian standard of perfection.

On its surface, Brahms's music offers a lush array of orchestral colors and rhythmic vitality that are the composer's irresistible signature. But beneath that surface lie a multitude of musical ideas, networks of motivic interrelationships, and inexhaustible variants and combinations of the thematic material. After a portentous introduction, the opening movement offers, not clear-cut tunes as first and second themes within its sonata form, but a sequence of related ideas. These are a short but intense chromatic motive that begins the Allegro, an arpeggiated main theme, and a repeated-note motif (an homage to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and the first of several references to the earlier composer's music that Brahms

makes in this symphony). These ideas and their variants in numerous combinations make up the content of the exposition, which plays with these ideas in the main key of C minor, in the related key of E-flat major, and then in a concluding section in E-flat minor. Further transformations and combinations of these basic ideas comprise the development section, which touches on keys as remote from the main key as B major, B-flat minor, and G-flat major. The recapitulation brings back the main key but prefigures the tonal course of the whole of the symphony by playing out the principal ideas in C major, the key of the eventual finale to the symphony before concluding in C minor.

The second movement, although completely different in mood (an elegiac andante as opposed to the scherzo-like first movement), also begins with a group of related ideas instead of a single main tune. A unifying thread among these ideas is a dotted-rhythm figure. As an accompaniment, the horns gently add the Beethovenian repeated-note motive from the previous movement, and the cellos and basses play an inverted form of the chromatic motive, also from the first movement. The whole of the second movement is an A-B-A' form with coda whose contrasting sections feature the keys of E major and C-sharp minor, respectively. For as different as the A- and B-sections are—delicate filigree melodies in B; hymn-like in A—the two are connected by their accompanimental ideas: the dotted-rhythm figure and the chromatic motive. The return of the A-section demonstrates Brahms's mastery of textural, timbral, and motivic variation

PROGRAM NOTES

in which music that is familiar to us from a previous hearing is otherwise completely transformed.

An Allegretto and Trio in A-flat major follows as the third movement, which forms another A-B-A' form with the reprise of the Allegretto after the Trio. Brahms pairs the gently flowing opening theme with a dotted-rhythm contrasting theme, and a second pair of themes follows in a new key F minor. We can hear, however, that the first of this second pair, in its accompaniment, keeps the dotted rhythm heard earlier, and the second theme of this second pair is a transformation of the theme that began the movement. The Trio changes meter from 2/4 to 6/8 and key to B major, and introduces a new theme, but one whose flowing eighth notes in the woodwinds again recall the opening theme of the movement. The tonal plan of the third movement illustrates not only a symmetrical plan of thirds within the movement—A-flat down to F, and A-flat up to B (the enharmonic equivalent of C-flat)—but also a continuing thirds-pattern within the main keys of the whole symphony: C minor (mvt. 1), E major (mvt. 2), and now A-flat major (mvt. 3). The fourth movement will complete the cycle with a return to C, but transformed from minor to major.

It bears repeating: beneath the breath-taking beauty of the surface of Brahms' music, lies an overwhelming wealth of motivic detail, thematic connections and transformations, and now, sophisticated tonal patterns. And, in addition to its internal coherence, Brahms' First Symphony also advertises its inspiration in

Beethoven's symphonies. This is most audible in the hymn tune that serves as the main theme of the fourth movement, which, as noted above, is a conscious reworking of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" theme. There are other connections too: the repeated-note motif already mentioned that evokes Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; the overall tonal plan of minor key transformed into major (Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies); the use of introductions for the opening and concluding movements (Beethoven's Ninth), and a racing coda to the finale that bears a genetic resemblance to the conclusion of both the Fifth and Ninth of Beethoven.

It is in the introduction to the finale that Brahms makes the transformation from C minor to C major, from turbulence and struggle to confidence and affirmation, and the marker of that profound change is his famous Alphorn theme, which he first jotted into a birthday postcard he sent to Clara Schumann in 1868, with the caption: "Thus blew the alphorn today, high in the mountains, deep in the valley. I greet you a thousand times over!" The form of the movement that follows this momentous introduction can be described as a sonata form without development section, or better, a sonata form in which the development has been redistributed to different positions within the movement. The hymn theme predominates in the finale, but throughout the movement the consequential Alphorn theme recurs at crucial moments of transition. After the opening statements of the hymn theme, the developmental section that follows

PROGRAM NOTES

draws in material that we have in heard before in different forms and at different points in the symphony: for instance, the main theme of the first movement now cast in a dotted rhythm. The Alphorn theme signals the arrival of a second theme, which itself leads to a closing section of new developmental activity whose content comprises driving triplets that are a reworked motif from the first movement.

With restored calm comes the recapitulation of the hymn theme. This time, Brahms states it more briefly and creates the longest developmental section of the movement in which we hear the hymn tune in different keys and in fragmented form. The same swirling sixteenth-note accompaniment heard in the transition section of the exposition occurs here, but the tumult lasts longer this time and traverses

a wider expanse of tonal space. The effect is dizzying, as if forces are spinning out of control, and it is only the calming power of the Alphorn theme that brings the main key back and a quick statement of the second theme and closing section. That closing section, as it had before, winds up the developmental energy of the movement, leading to a coda on a hymn-theme motive. The coda thus rounds out the movement with this final and most powerful evocation of the hymn theme. We can appreciate this vigorously triumphant coda both as the culmination of a detailed but sweeping story of tonal explorations and thematic interrelationships within this historic work, and as the conclusion of a remarkable personal journey for Brahms in his quest to master the symphony.

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