

SEASON 15: A BOUNTY OF BRAHMS

Program Notes

Notes on the Program by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

Johannes Brahms

(1833-1897)

DOUBLE CONCERTO FOR VIOLIN AND CELLO IN A MINOR, OP. 102

Composed in 1887.

Premiered on October 18, 1887 in Cologne, with Joseph Joachim and Robert Hausmann as soloists and the composer conducting.

Johannes Brahms first met the violinist Joseph Joachim in 1853. They became close friends and musical allies — the Violin Concerto was not only written for Joachim in 1878 but also benefited from his careful advice in many matters of string technique. Joachim was a faithful champion of Brahms' music, playing it at every possible occasion and doing much to help establish the young composer's reputation across the Continent. In 1880, however, when Joachim was suing his wife for divorce over an alleged infidelity, Brahms took it upon himself to meddle in the family's domestic affairs. He believed that Frau Joachim was innocent of the charges and sided with her. Joachim was, understandably, enraged, and broke off his personal relationship with Brahms, though he continued to play his music; the two did not speak for years.

On July 19, 1887, when he was 54, Brahms, a curmudgeonly bachelor who found it difficult to make friends, sent Joachim a terse postcard from Thun, Switzerland, where the composer was summering that year: "I should like to send you some news of an artistic nature which I heartily hope might more or less interest you." Joachim replied immediately: "I hope that you are going to tell me about a new work, for I have read and played your latest works with real delight." Brahms sent his news: "I have been unable to resist the ideas that have been occurring to me for a concerto for *violin and cello*, much as I have tried to talk myself out of it. Now, the only thing that really interests me about this is the question of what your attitude toward it may be. Would you consider trying the work over somewhere with [Robert] Hausmann [the cellist in Joachim's string quartet] and me at the piano?"

Joachim agreed to Brahms' proposals. On July 26th, Brahms sent him the solo parts and asked for his advice. Five days later the violinist replied: "Herewith I am posting you the parts with some proposed minor alterations with which I hope you will agree. It is very playable, generally. What's to be done now? Hausmann and I are most anxious to go on with it." As he had with the Violin Concerto, Brahms accepted only a few of Joachim's suggestions, though he did rework

some passages on his own after the violinist had pointed out their difficulties. Brahms had a fair copy of the score and parts made, and arranged to have the formal premiere given by the Gürzenich Orchestra in Cologne in October. Though it has come to be regarded as a worthy equal to his other masterworks for soloist and orchestra, the “Double Concerto,” Brahms’ last composition for orchestra, was at first given a cool reception. Concerning the personal relationship between the composer and the violinist, however, it was an unqualified success. Brahms’ dear friend Clara Schumann noted with pleasure in her diary that “this Concerto was in a way a work of reconciliation — Joachim and Brahms have spoken to each other again after years of silence.”

The opening movement largely follows Classical concerto-sonata form, though Brahms prefaced it with a bold paragraph introducing the soloists. The main theme, given by the entire orchestra, is a somber but majestic strain that mixes duple and triple rhythms. The second theme is a tender, sighing phrase introduced by the woodwind choir. The soloists then join the orchestra for their elaborated re-presentation of the themes. A development section (begun by the soloists in unison) and a full recapitulation and coda round out the movement. Two quiet summons from horns and woodwinds mark the beginning of the *Andante*. The principal theme of the movement’s three-part form (A–B–A) is a warmly lyrical melody for violin and cello in unison; sweet parallel harmonies in the woodwinds usher in the central section. The finale is a playful rondo heavily influenced by the melodic leadings and vibrant rhythms of Gypsy music.

SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN D MAJOR, OP. 73

Composed in 1877.

Premiered on December 30, 1877 in Vienna, conducted by Hans Richter.

In the summer of 1877, Brahms repaired to the village of Pörschach in the Carinthian hills of southern Austria. He wrote to a Viennese friend, “Pörschach is an exquisite spot, and I have found a lovely and apparently pleasant abode in the Castle! You may tell everybody this; it will impress them.... The place is replete with Austrian coziness and kindheartedness.” The lovely country surroundings inspired Brahms’ creativity to such a degree that he wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, “So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them.” Brahms plucked from the gentle Pörschach breezes a surfeit of beautiful music for his Second Symphony, which was written quickly during that summer — a great contrast to the fifteen-year gestation of the preceding symphony. He brought the finished manuscript with him when he returned to Vienna at the end of the summer.

After the premiere, Brahms himself allowed that the Second Symphony “sounded so merry and tender, as though it were especially written for a newly wedded couple.” Early listeners heard in it “a glimpse of Nature, a spring day amid soft mosses, springing woods, birds’ notes and the bloom of flowers.” Richard Specht, the composer’s biographer, found it “suffused with the sunshine and warm winds playing on the waters.” The conductor Felix Weingartner thought it the best of Brahms’ four symphonies: “The stream of invention has never flowed so fresh and spontaneous in other works by Brahms, and nowhere else has he colored his orchestration so

successfully.” To which critic Olin Downes added, “In his own way, and sometimes with long sentences, he formulates his thought, and the music has the rich chromaticism, depth of shadow and significance of detail that characterize a Rembrandt portrait.”

The Symphony opens with a three-note, neighboring-tone motive, presented softly by the low strings, which is the germ seed for much of the thematic material of the movement. The horns sing the principal theme, which includes, in its third measure, the three-note motive. The sweet second theme is given in duet by the cellos and violas. The development begins with the horn’s main theme, but is mostly concerned with permutations of the three-note motive around which some stormy emotional sentences accumulate. The placid mood of the opening returns with the recapitulation, and remains largely undisturbed until the end of the movement.

The second movement plumbs the deepest emotions in the Symphony. Many of its early listeners found it difficult to understand because they failed to understand that, in constructing the four broad paragraphs comprising the Second Symphony, Brahms deemed it necessary to balance the radiant first movement with music of thoughtfulness and introspection in the second. This movement actually covers a wide range of sentiments, shifting, as it does, between light and shade — major and minor. Its form is sonata-allegro, whose second theme is a gently syncopated strain intoned by the woodwinds above the cellos’ pizzicato notes.

The following *Allegretto* is a delightful musical sleight-of-hand. The oboe presents a naive, folk-like tune in moderate triple meter as the movement’s principal theme. The strings take over the melody in the first trio episode, but play it in an energetic duple-meter transformation. The return of the sedate original theme is again interrupted by another quick-tempo variation, this one a further development of motives from Trio I. A final traversal of the main theme closes this delectable movement.

The finale bubbles with the rhythmic energy and high spirits of a Haydn symphony. The main theme starts with a unison gesture in the strings, but soon becomes harmonically active and spreads through the orchestra. The second theme is a broad, hymnal melody initiated by the strings. The development section, like that of many of Haydn’s finales, begins with a statement of the main theme in the tonic before branching into a discussion of the movement’s motives. The recapitulation recalls the earlier themes, and leads with an inexorable drive through the triumphant coda (based on the hymnal melody) to the brazen glow of the final trombone chord.