

## **JOHANNES BRAHMS Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68**

*Un poco sostenuto–Allegro*

*Andante sostenuto*

*Un poco allegretto e grazioso*

*Adagio–Più andante–Allegro non troppo, ma con brio*

Born: May 7 1833, in Hamburg,

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna

Work composed: 1854–76

World premiere: November 4, 1876, in Karlsruhe, Germany; Otto Dessoff conducting

During his lifetime, **Brahms** was widely regarded as the principal heir of Beethoven's musical legacy, the composer who, more than any other, carried forward into the middle and late 19<sup>th</sup> century Beethoven's ideals of heightened musical drama within expanded classical forms. (That opinion remains generally held today.) Comparisons with so great an artist as Beethoven may have been flattering, but they were daunting also. In particular, the precedent of Beethoven's symphonic weighed heavily on the creation of Brahms' **First Symphony**.

Brahms conceived this work very much in the shadow of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which he first heard in 1854. He spent more than two decades completing it, continually revising the score, submitting it to trusted friends for criticism and ignoring their pleas that he bring it before the public. His hesitation was due in no small part to his awareness of the imposing standards set by Beethoven. "A symphony is no laughing matter," he declared. "You cannot imagine what it is like to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like him," referring to Beethoven. Not until 1876 was he sufficiently satisfied with the work, a towering composition in C minor, that he released it for performance.

It is hardly surprising that, as the symphony became known, similarities to Beethoven's Ninth were noted by many musicians. The stormy opening movement, the broad anthem-like theme of the finale and the dramatic progression over the course of the work from struggle to exultation all have obvious precedents in Beethoven's last symphony.

The first movement begins with a dramatic introduction in slow tempo. In its opening measures two melodic lines — one rising, the other descending — pull roughly at each other while timpani and bass instruments toll somberly below. A plaintive melody introduced by the oboe then leads to the main *Allegro* portion of the movement. "This is rather strong," wrote Brahms' friend and confidant Clara Schumann (widow of the composer Robert Schumann and a superb musician in her own right), "but I've grown used to it. The movement is full of beauties, the themes are treated masterfully." They are indeed. And had she known the complete symphony at that time, Frau Schumann might have added that the sense of turmoil and conflict which fills this movement serves to prepare the composition's exultant finale.

The inner movements are less turbulent but no less moving. A religious serenity pervades the second, while the third is breezy and melodious. Its initial measures provide an example of Brahms' fondness for thematic relationships and symmetries: the second phrase of clarinet melody is precisely an inversion, a mirror image, of the first.

With the onset of the finale, Brahms returns to the drama established in the first movement. Its initial section is shrouded in dark C minor harmonies. Suddenly, however, a clarion horn call dispels the shadows and leads to the movement's broad principal theme. The triumphal character and anthem-like simplicity of this subject inevitably brought comparisons with the "Ode to Joy" melody in Beethoven's Ninth. Brahms dismissed the similarity as incidental and obvious. "Any[one] can see that," he reportedly exclaimed when the resemblance was pointed out. Clearly of greater consequence is how Brahms, in his own way, takes this theme to heights of exultant expression in the symphony's concluding minutes.

### **What to Listen For**

Like Beethoven's *Egmont* Overture, this symphony begins with a moderately paced introduction in which somber harmonies give way to lamenting phrases from woodwind instruments (particularly oboe). A slow introduction also precedes the finale. Here, too, minor-key harmonies shroud the initial moments. The horn call that pierces this darkness seems a call from heaven, and Brahms reinforces that impression with a phrase for trombones harmonized in the manner of a church chorale. A return to the horn-call music and a suspenseful pause leads to the anthem-like theme of the finale proper.

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