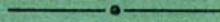


PITTS SANBORN



BRAHMS
and some of his works



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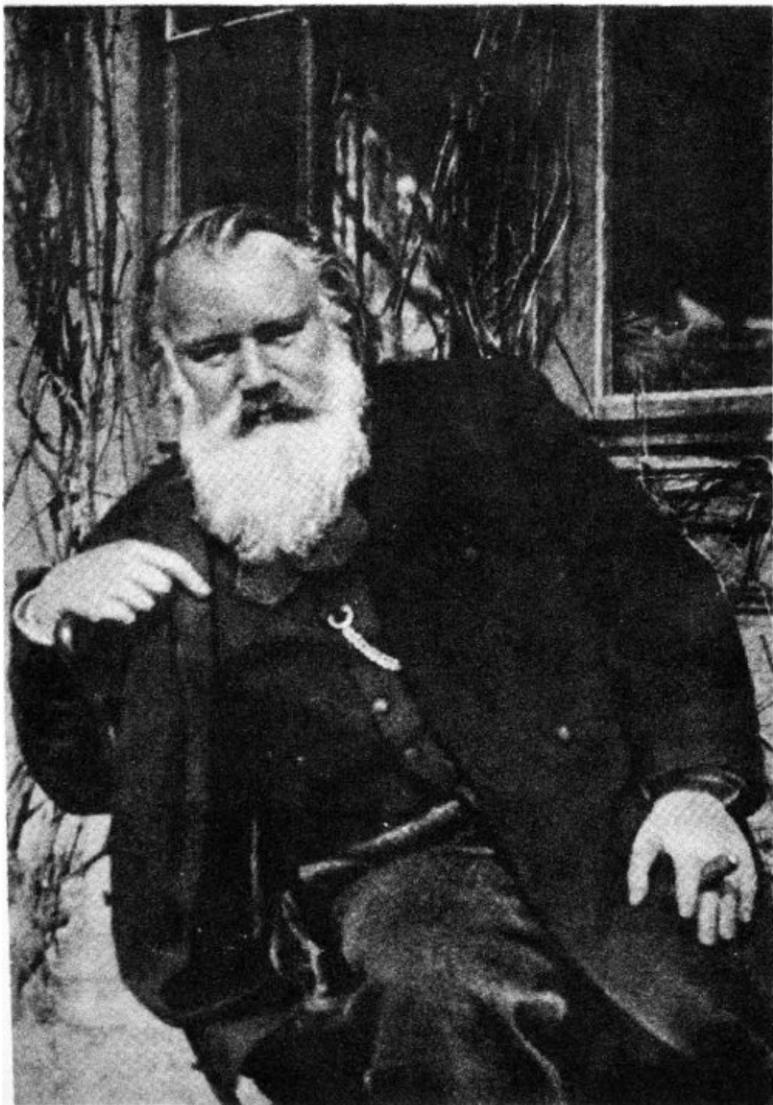
PITTS SANBORN

BRAHMS and some of his works



Written for and dedicated to
the
RADIO MEMBERS
of
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of NEW YORK

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JOHANNES BRAHMS

FOREWORD

This pamphlet about the most important compositions in which Brahms employs the orchestra, like its predecessor about Beethoven's symphonies, makes no claim to originality and no secret of indebtedness to treatises that are open to us all. It is addressed to the radio audience of The Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York, and its only object is to present in concise form some information concerning an inexhaustible subject that radio listeners may find of service.

BRAHMS and some of his works

By
PITTS SANBORN

In the then free city of Hamburg Johannes Brahms was born on May 7, 1833. His parents were in humble circumstances, and Johannes was born in a poor part of the city. But his father was a well-trained musician and an accomplished double-bass player, and his mother, seventeen years his father's senior, was a woman of fine spirit and unusual intelligence.

From an early age Johannes was clearly destined for a musical career, and at six he had already begun to learn the rudiments of music from his father, who purposed making an orchestral player of him. When he was eight he began to take piano lessons of Otto Cossel, his father feeling he had nothing more to teach the child. Cossel pronounced him an excellent pupil, but complained that he wasted time on his "everlasting composing."

Two years later Cossel, convinced that he deserved more advanced instruction, took him to his own teacher, Eduard Marxsen, the royal music director in the adjacent city of Altona. Marxsen accepted the new pupil unwillingly, but presently he was impressed with the keenness of the boy's mind. Beginning with piano lessons, he later studied composition, and Marxsen, thorough about all instruction, encouraged him to compose as well as to perfect himself as a pianist. Incidentally, Johannes became a great reader of books.

At the age of eleven Johannes appeared, together with his father, as pianist at a private subscription concert organized to raise money to continue his education. Then and there an impresario wanted to engage him for a concert tour that was to include America. But Cossel protested effectively against his being exploited as a prodigy. Nevertheless, the Brahms family was so poor at this time that Johannes was obliged to add to their income by playing the piano in sailors' resorts. This work, which often lasted into the morning hours, affected his health adversely.

He continued to compose, however, and a turning point came when he had the chance to undertake a tour with the young Hungarian violinist Eduard Remenyi. In the course of this association he not only got acquainted with Hungarian national dances, which were to influence considerably his compositions, but he met a variety of important musicians, among them Joachim, Liszt, Cornelius, Raff, Berlioz, and, above all, Robert and Clara Schumann. Thereafter Robert Schumann, until his tragic death, was the young man's champion and mentor, and Clara Schumann became his devoted lifelong friend.

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in D Minor, No. 1, Op. 15

Although Brahms's earlier works included not only compositions for the piano, songs, and chamber music, but also the Serenade for Full Orchestra in D, it was not till the spring and summer of 1854 that we find him engaged on a symphony. This made such progress that in January, 1855, he could write to Robert Schumann: "I have been trying my hand at a symphony during the past summer, have even orchestrated the first movement and composed the second and third."

The symphony was never completed as such, however, but turned into a sonata for two pianos. Still, this was not the end of the matter. Advised that the musical contents of the sonata deserved a more imposing form, Brahms was persuaded to mould the material into a concerto. Accordingly the first two movements took up a corresponding position in the D minor Piano Concerto, the third becoming the chorus "Behold All Flesh" in "A German Requiem."

The first public performance of the concerto took place in Hanover on January 22, 1859, at one of the Court subscription concerts in the Royal Theatre, Brahms being the pianist, Joachim the conductor. Though the cognoscenti admired the new work, the public in general found it a hard nut to crack. And as a matter of notorious fact the concerto was to make its way slowly. Only in the present century, for instance, has it won full recognition in this country.

The first movement (Maestoso, D minor, 6-8) has a long orchestral introduction before the piano enters. Over a roll on the kettledrums the chief subject is announced in the strings:



play music

The second subject is given out by the piano in F major. The movement ends with an extended and brilliant coda. The second movement (Adagio, D major, 6-4) bears in the manuscript score the motto: "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini." Max Kalbeck, Brahms's biographer, says that this inscription refers to Robert Schumann, whose death had affected Brahms deeply and whom he had sometimes addressed as "Mynheer Domine." The first theme, to which the fanciful may fit the Latin words, appears in the strings and bassoons, to be taken up later by the solo instrument. The movement has a contrasting middle section. The finale is a long and elaborate Rondo (Allegro non troppo, D minor, 2-4), ending in a majestic and triumphant coda.

This concerto, owing to the exceeding prominence given to the orchestra, really ranks as an orchestral composition, and it was years before Brahms attempted another on a like scale. In 1873 he brought out the "Variations on a Theme by Haydn." Though meanwhile he had written copiously, only the two modest Serenades had been composed for orchestra.

Variations for Orchestra on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a

Now a permanent resident of Vienna, Brahms spent his summer holiday in 1873 at Tutzing on the Starnbergersee in southern Bavaria. A version of the Variations for two pianos Brahms marked "Tutzing, July, 1873." Whether it was the first of the two versions we do not know. On November 2 the orchestral version was brought out in Vienna at a Philharmonic Concert, Otto Dessoff conducting.

The theme by Haydn comes from an unpublished divertimento for wind instruments, preserved at the State Library in Berlin, which is inscribed "Divertimento mit dem Chorale St. Antoni." Though the melody of the chorale is usually supposed to be Haydn's own, we cannot be sure that he had not taken it from a chorale that has now disappeared.

In Haydn's key of B-flat major the theme

The image shows three staves of musical notation in 2/4 time, marked '1st time' and '2nd time'. The first staff is marked '1st time' and contains a melodic line with a repeat sign. The second staff is marked '2nd time' and contains a different melodic line. The third staff is a continuation of the melodic line from the second staff.

play music

is given out *andante* in 2-4 time and repeated. Eight variations follow:

I. (*Poco piu animato*, major mode). Throughout the initial variation the concluding notes of the introduction ring like a tolling of bells.

II. (*Più vivace*, minor mode). The clarinets and bassoons take the lead. The violins supply an arpeggio figure.

III. (*Con moto*, major mode). The theme in this tranquil section is given first to the oboes and bassoons.

IV. (*Andante con moto*, minor mode). New melodic material enters. Oboe and horn announce the theme.

V. (*Vivace*, major mode). Flutes, oboes, and bassoons have the melody.

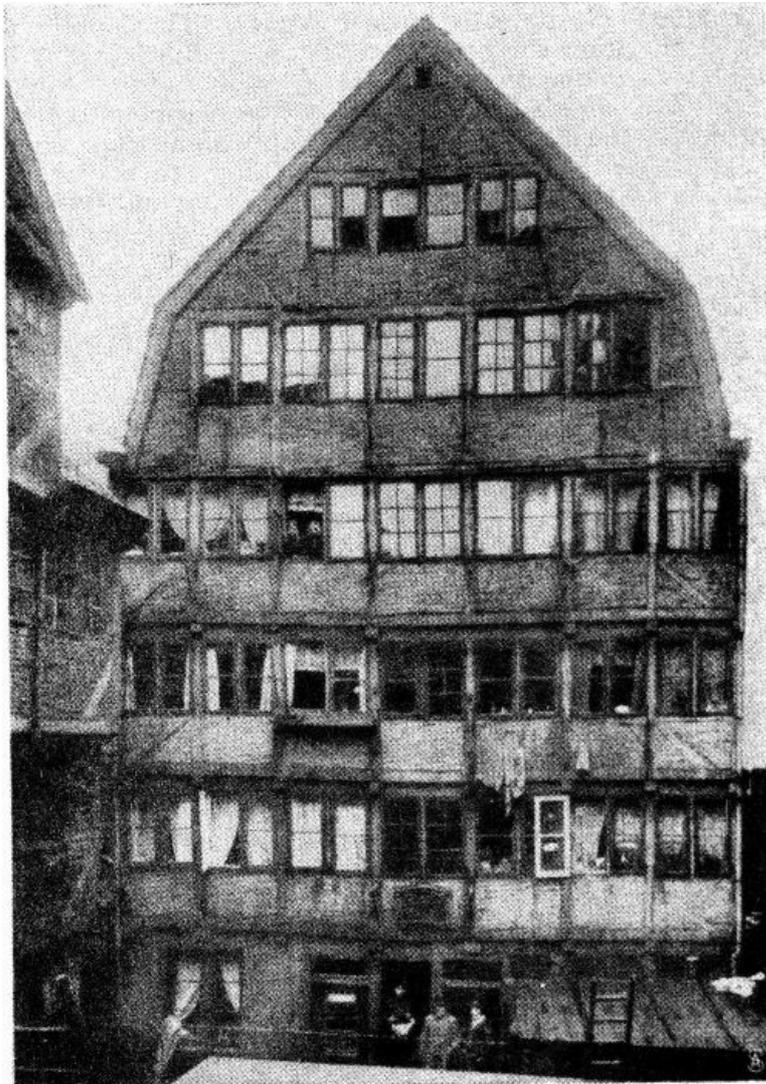
VI. (*Vivace*, minor mode). Brilliant like its predecessor, this variation introduces a new figure.

VII. (*Grazioso*, major mode). In *Siciliano* rhythm (6-8), the seventh variation is generally regarded as the crowning glory of the set. Against a descending scale for first violins and clarinets, violas and piccolo play the melody. Then the first violins give out a theme whose first four notes provide the movement with its rhythmic basis. There is a wealth of fascinating detail.

VIII. (*Presto non troppo*, minor mode). In a mysterious whisper of muted strings the last variation leads darkly to the *Finale*. (*Andante*, major mode). A ground bass, five measures long and repeated twelve times below a variety of harmonies, occupies much of this summing up. At a signal from the triangle an outburst of vernal life sweeps through the orchestra, ending with the theme in *fortissimo* proclamation.

Symphony in C Minor, No. 1, Op. 68

Owing, no doubt, to the experience with the symphony that at last became a piano concerto, Brahms was cautious about trying his hand again at a symphony. In 1862 he had made, however, a version of the *Symphony in C minor*, without the introduction, of which he wrote to his friend Albert Dietrich, the composer. According to his biographer Walter Niemann, he once remarked it was "no laughing matter" to write a symphony after Beethoven, and the same authority points out that when he had finished the first movement of the *C minor symphony* he declared to another friend, Hermann Levi, the noted conductor: "I shall never compose a symphony! You have no conception of how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him (Beethoven) behind us."



BRAHMS'S BIRTHPLACE IN HAMBURG

This extreme modesty persisted, for Niemann assures us that ten years after the completion of the Fourth Symphony Brahms alluded to that majestic work as "halbschürig" ("mediocre").

Opening Brahms's series of four, the Symphony in C minor was given for the first time on November 4, 1876, at the Grand Ducal Theatre, Karlsruhe. It seems that immediately before the orchestral parts were copied for the first rehearsal Brahms abridged the Andante and the Allegretto, saying that he had the Finale to think of. Otto Dessoff, who had left Vienna for Karlsruhe, conducted the performance, as he had done in the case of the "Haydn" variations at Vienna. Brahms had a low opinion of him. He had even written while Dessoff was still in Vienna:

"Now Dessoff is absolutely not the right man for this, the only enviable post in Vienna. There are special reasons why he continues to beat time, but not a soul approves. Under him the orchestra has positively deteriorated." Three days after the première at Karlsruhe the symphony was repeated at Mannheim, this time with the composer as conductor.

At first the C minor Symphony won little more than a success of esteem. Even Hanslick, Brahms's Viennese prophet, was not wholly enthusiastic. Typical is the judgment expressed by the revered John S. Dwight in his *Journal of Music* after the symphony had been made known to Boston, when it was scarcely fourteen months old. He felt it as something "depressing and unedifying, a work coldly elaborated, artificial; earnest, to be sure, in some sense great, and far more satisfactory than any symphony by Raff or any others of the day which we have heard, but not to be mentioned in the same day with any symphony by Schumann, Mendelssohn, or the great one by Schubert, not to speak of Beethoven's.... Our interest in it will increase, but we foresee the limit; and certainly it cannot be popular; it will not be loved like the dear masterpieces of genius."

In spite of this dark prophecy, the symphony has long been one of the most popular, and it is now the established fashion to find in it not only magnitude and ruggedness, but pathos, tenderness, and a profound humanity.

A portentous introduction (*Un poco sostenuto*, C minor, 6-8) prefaces the first movement (*Allegro*, C minor, 6-8). The first theme is given out by the violins in the fifth measure. The second theme (E-flat major) appears in the woodwind. The character of the movement is austere and epic.

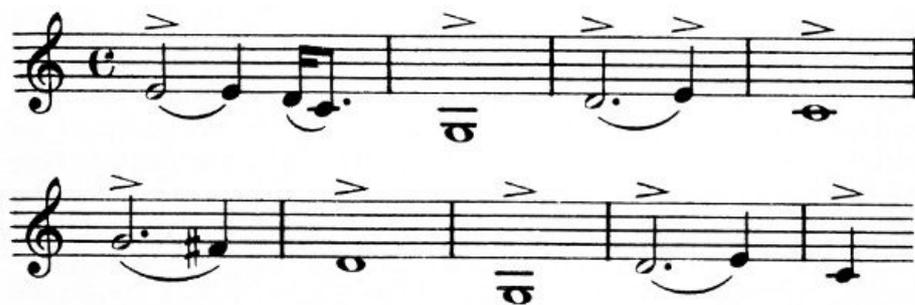
The second movement (*Andante sostenuto*, E major, 3-4) is imbued with a profound lyricism, which flowers into some of the loveliest pages in all Brahms.

Instead of a scherzo there follows a movement marked "*Un poco allegretto e grazioso*" (A-flat major, 2-4), which Grove aptly characterizes as "a sort of national tune or Volkslied of simple sweetness and grace." The opening subject is sung first by the clarinet. The place of a trio is delightfully filled by a contrasting middle section (B major, 6-8).

The stupendous finale begins with an introductory section (*Adagio*, C minor, 4-4) that touches briefly on thematic material to be developed later, and here that distinguished American critic, the late William Foster Apthorp, must have our attention:

"With the thirtieth measure the tempo changes to *più andante*, and we come upon one of the most poetic episodes in all Brahms. Amid hushed, tremulous harmonies in the strings, the horn and afterward the flute pour forth an utterly original melody, the character of which ranges from

passionate pleading to a sort of wild exultation according to the instrument that plays it.



play music

The coloring is enriched by the solemn tones of the trombones, which appear for the first time in this movement.

“It is ticklish work trying to dive down into a composer’s brain and surmise what special outside source his inspiration may have had; but one cannot help feeling that this whole wonderful episode may have been suggested to Brahms by the tones of the Alpine horn as it awakens the echoes from mountain after mountain on some of the high passes in the Bernese Oberland. This is certainly what the episode recalls to anyone who has ever heard those poetic tones and their echoes. A short, solemn, even ecclesiastical interruption by the trombones and bassoons is of more thematic importance. As the horn tones gradually die away and the cloudlike harmonies in the string sink lower and lower—like mist veiling the landscape—an impressive pause ushers in the *Allegro non troppo, ma con brio* (in C major, 4-4 time).”

Concerning the rest of the movement Apthorp adds: “The introductory *Adagio* has already given us mysterious hints at what is to come; and now there bursts forth in the strings the most joyous, exuberant *Volkslied* melody, a very *Hymn to Joy*, which in some of its phrases, as it were unconsciously and by sheer affinity of nature, flows into strains from the similar melody in the *Finale* of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*. One cannot call it plagiarism: it is two men saying the same thing.”

With regard to this symphony, Hans von Bülow has often been misquoted. As Philip Hale puts it: “Ask a music-lover, at random, what von Bülow said about Brahms’s *Symphony in C minor* and he will answer: ‘He called it the *Tenth Symphony*.’ If you inquire into the precise meaning of this characterization, he will answer: ‘It is the symphony that comes worthily after Beethoven’s *Ninth*’; or, ‘It is worthy of Beethoven’s ripest years,’ or in his admiration he will go so far as to say: ‘Only Brahms or Beethoven could have written it.’”

What Bülow actually set down in words was this: “First after my acquaintance with the *Tenth Symphony*, alias *Symphony No. 1*, by Johannes Brahms, that is since six weeks ago, have I become so intractable and so hard against Bruch pieces and the like. I call Brahms’s first symphony the *Tenth*, not as though it should be put after the *Ninth*; I should put it between the *Second* and the ‘*Eroica*,’ just as I think by the *First Symphony* should be understood not the *First* of Beethoven but the one composed by Mozart which is known as the ‘*Jupiter*.’”

Symphony in D Major, No. 2, Op. 73

Having launched a first symphony, Brahms composed a second within a year. However, he kept the writing of it so secret that nobody, we are told, knew anything about it till it was completed. Then, when he did divulge the secret, he was very demure. In September, 1877, he wrote to Dr. Billroth of Vienna, who was a patron of music as well as an eminent surgeon: “I do not know whether I have a pretty symphony; I must inquire of skilled persons.” He meant Clara Schumann, Otto Dessooff, and Ernest Frank. Mme. Schumann recorded on September 19 that he had written out the first movement. Early in the following month he played it to her, as well as part of the finale.

Meanwhile he had delighted in mystifying his friends before letting them hear any of the work by describing it as gloomy and awesome and referring to its key as F minor instead of D major. To Elisabeth von Herzogenberg he wrote in November, 1877: “The new symphony is merely a *Sinfonie*, and I shall not need to play it to you beforehand. You have only to sit down at the piano, put your small feet on the two pedals in turn, and strike the chord of F minor several times in succession, first in the treble, then in the bass, fortissimo and pianissimo, and you will gradually gain a vivid impression of my ‘latest’.” The day before the first performance he again wrote to Frau von Herzogenberg: “The orchestra here play my new symphony with crepe bands on their sleeves because of its dirge-like effect. It is to be printed with a black edge, too.” Such were Brahms’s little jokes.

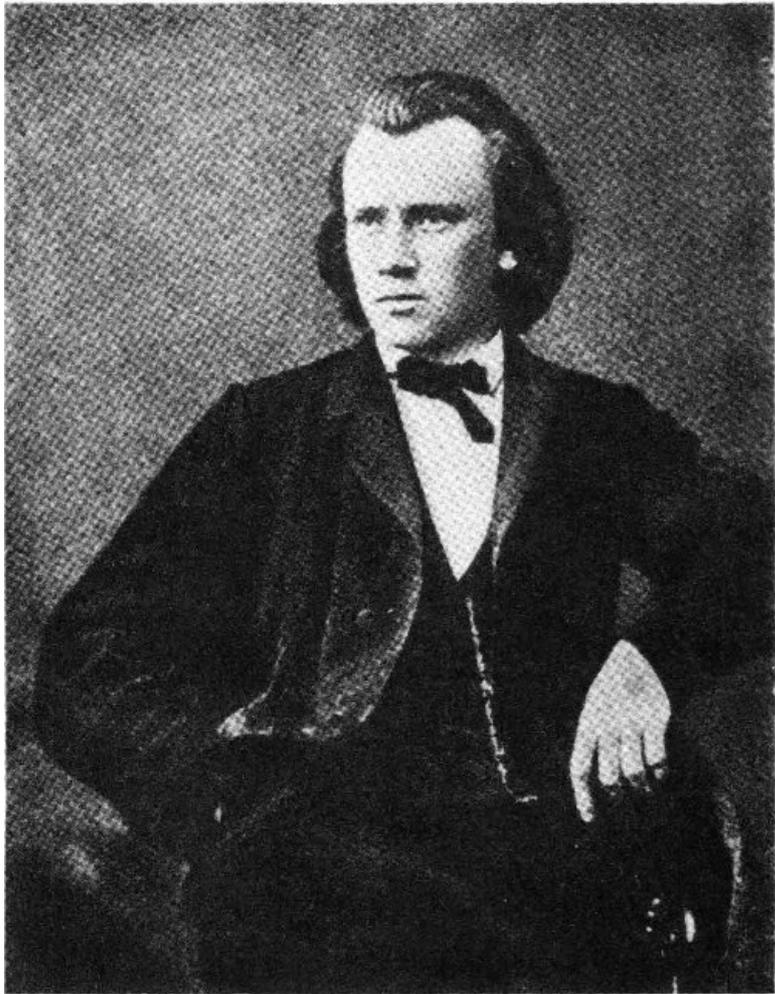
When the symphony was actually performed in public, at a concert of the Vienna Philharmonic, under the direction of Hans Richter, Brahms’s friends found it anything but a lugubrious and forbidding composition. The date of that first performance, by the way, is variously given as December 20, 24, and 30, 1877, and January 10, 1878, of which December 30 is favored. The success with the audience at the première was progressive. If at first the response was lukewarm, when the *Allegretto grazioso* was reached there came an insistent demand that it be repeated, an encore which Richter granted.

Today the *Second Symphony* is usually regarded as lyrical, suave, even Mendelssohnian, a work of serenity and sweet peacefulness, bearing much the same relation to the austere, dramatic, and often tempestuous *First Symphony* that Beethoven’s “*Pastoral*” bears to the preceding *Fifth*, with its conflict between Man and Fate.

Still, not everybody views the D major symphony in quite this gentle light. Walter Niemann in his life of Brahms maintains that the D major is by no means a blameless, agreeable, cheerfully sunlit idyl. Nothing, he declares, could be further from the truth! He describes the period between the 1860’s and 1880’s as having a heart-rending pathos and a monumental grandeur as its artistic ideal. “Nowadays,” he goes on, “regarding things from a freer and less prejudiced point of view, we are fortunately able to detect far more clearly the often oppressive spiritual limitations, moodiness, and atmosphere of resignation in such pleasant, apparently cheerful, and anacreontic[!] works as Brahms’s *Second Symphony*.”

He points out that the *Second*, though nominally in the major, has a veiled, indetermined, Brahmsian major-minor character, hovering between the two modes. “Indeed,” he adds, “this undercurrent of tragedy in the *Second Symphony*, quiet and slight though it may be, is perceptible to a fine ear in every movement.” And he sums up the whole matter by putting down the *Second Symphony* as really a “great, wonderful, tragic idyl, as rich in sombre and subdued color as it is in brightness.” He even sees mysterious visions of Wagner, who was by no means a friend of Brahms, in the mystic woodland atmosphere of the work, recalling “*Das Rheingold*” and “*Siegfried*,” and in many sombre and even ghostly passages.

The opening movement (*Allegro non troppo*, D major, 3-4) is remarkable for the lyricism of its themes. After the so-called fundamental motive of the first measure ('cellos and double-basses), the melodious chief theme is given out by horns and woodwind.



BRAHMS AT THE AGE OF 34



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A graceful subsidiary theme is heard in the violins. The second subject, nostalgic in its wistfulness, appears in the violas and 'cellos. A horn solo in the coda evokes the mystery of forest deeps from an old and bardic time.

The second movement (*Adagio non troppo*, B major, 4-4) is of a profoundly romantic and yet somewhat elusive character. Not a scherzo, but rather the old-time minuet, is hinted at in the third movement (*Allegretto grazioso—Quasi Andantino*,—G major, 3-4). The engaging melody



play music

is sung immediately by the oboes over chords in the clarinets and bassoons and pizzicato arpeggios in the 'cellos. Each of the two trios that the movement boasts is a variation on this theme. An acute critic has said of the *Allegretto*: "Like many well-known things, it is not always remembered in its full variety and range, or we should hear less of its being too small for its place in a big symphony."

The finale (*Allegro con spirito*, D major, 2-2) is in sonata form. Thematically it is both rich in invention and reminiscent of passages in the earlier

movements. A kinship to the finale of Haydn's last "London" symphony has also been remarked. Of the four movements this Allegretto con spirito is the most vigorous and vivacious, concluding, after pages of Olympian struggle, in a victorious coda of overwhelming brilliance.

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, Op. 77

Pörschach-am-See, a picturesque place in Lower Austria, on the Wörthersee, near the Italian frontier, appealed to Brahms as ideal for a summer holiday. To Hanslick he once wrote that the air at Pörschach was so charged with melodies that he must "be careful not to tread on them." There he began the D major symphony and composed (in 1878) the violin concerto (also in D major).

And even now, with his characteristic modesty and still uncertain about the value of his own work, he could say in a letter to Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, the day announced for the first performance of the violin concerto being only a fortnight away: "Joachim is coming here and I shall have a chance to try the concerto through with him and so to decide for or against a public performance."

Hanslick once quite justly called this concerto "the ripe fruit of the friendship between Joachim and Brahms." For Joachim it was written and to him it stands dedicated. He, furthermore, was the soloist when at a Gewandhaus Concert in Leipzig, on January 1, 1879, it was given to the world. A local reviewer, on good terms with both the composer and the violinist, remarked after the first performance that only too evidently Joachim found the solo part extremely difficult.

The influence of Joachim on the concerto must have been considerable, for Brahms often consulted him with regard to the practicability of this or that passage, and he supplied not only a cadenza but the fingering and the indications for bowing as well. Subsequently Joachim went still further. After he had played the concerto a number of times in public, he advised Brahms to make alterations in the score that he thought were required, and Brahms consented to the alterations before the concerto was published in October, 1879. To Brahms Joachim wrote from London, where he had performed the work twice with the Philharmonic Society:

"With these exceptions the piece, especially the first movement, pleases me more and more. The last two times I played without notes. That a solo composition has been performed at two London Philharmonic Concerts in succession has happened in the history of the society only once, when Mendelssohn played his G minor piano concerto (manuscript)."

It has been pointed out that Brahms's biographers disagree about the reception accorded the violin concerto at the première. Florence May quotes Dörrfel, critic of the Leipziger Nachrichten, as follows: "Joachim played with a love and devotion which brought home to us in every measure the direct or indirect share he has had in the work. As to the reception, the first movement was too new to be distinctly appreciated by the audience, the second made considerable way, the last aroused great enthusiasm."

Max Kalbeck, a devotee of Brahms, declares: "The work was heard respectfully, but it did not awaken a particle of enthusiasm. It seemed that Joachim had not sufficiently studied the concerto or he was severely indisposed. Brahms conducted with visible excitement."

J. A. Fuller-Maitland emphasizes Brahms's going back to the tradition of the older concerto form in giving a long exposition of the material of the first movement before the entry of the solo instrument. "When the violin does come in, it is with a kind of breathless passage, on which there was some discussion between the composer and Joachim.

"We cannot fail to trace in the passages for solo the special points in which Joachim was without a rival, such as the handling of several parts and other things. The absence of the slightest trace of passages written for mere effect is as characteristic of the player as of the composer; and, like the other concertos, the work for violin is to be judged first and foremost as a composition, not as a means of display.

"Occasionally it may have happened that in the desire to avoid the meretricious Brahms allowed himself to make the violin part so harsh as almost to repel the general public at first; even in the short time since the death of Joachim, who was, of course, unrivalled in it, the work has come increasingly into favor with violinists, and nowadays even the prodigies are bold enough to attempt it."

The first movement of the concerto (Allegro non troppo, D major, 3-4) has a chief subject of idyllic nature, announced by violas, 'cellos, bassoons, and horns. The peak of the movement comes with the merging of the cadenza into the return of the first subject.

The second movement (Adagio, F major, 2-4) has been compared to a serenade or a romanza. The principal melody is sung first by an oboe, then in altered form by the solo violin,



play music

which also introduces an emotional and highly ornamented second theme. After extended development the original melody comes back in the solo instrument.

The finale (Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace, D major, 2-4) is a rondo on three themes, demanding brilliant execution from the soloist. Compact in its formal body, the movement ends in an elaborate coda. Fuller-Maitland points out the Hungarian flavor of this finale, "as if a dedication to the great Hungarian violinist were conveyed in it."

"Academic Festival Overture," Op. 80

According to a plaque on the outer wall of a house at Ischl in Upper Austria, "the great tone poet Dr. Johannes Brahms" occupied the house for

twelve summers. Indeed, Brahms had a marked fondness for Ischl. In spite of the fact that it was one of the most fashionable of spas and that he disliked fashionable life, his attachment to the town persisted, and in the aforesaid house, in the summer of 1880, he composed two overtures, the "Tragic" and the "Academic Festival." Notwithstanding the opus numbers, the "Tragic" was composed first and also performed first.

The origin of the "Academic Festival Overture" is explained by its name. The University of Breslau, on May 11, 1879, conferred on Brahms an honorary doctor's degree. Though not a university man, Brahms had had a taste of university life in 1853 when, with Remenyi, he had paid a visit to Joachim, who was then at Göttingen, the university bitinglly satirized by Heine. There, during his stay of several weeks, he became familiar with the songs best liked by the students. Nearly three decades later the songs were present in his memory ready for use in an overture intended as the composer's tribute to the university honoring him.

Brahms himself conducted the first performance of the "Academic Festival Overture" on January 4, 1881, at Breslau, before an audience that included in the front seats the Rector and Senate of the University and members of the Philosophical Faculty. The honorary Doctor of Philosophy, so often mystifying and coy about a new composition, described the overture to Max Kalbeck, in the autumn of 1880, as a "very jolly potpourri on students' songs à la Suppé." When Kalbeck, a bit sarcastic, inquired whether he had used the "Fox Song" (a freshman song), he replied eagerly, "Yes, indeed!" Kalbeck, taken aback, declared that he could not think of such academic homage to the "leathery Herr Rektor." "That is also wholly unnecessary," answered Brahms.

Minus an introduction, the overture (Allegro, C minor, 2-2) begins immediately with the principal subject given out softly by the first violins. A quieter section follows, the melody in the violas. The first of the students' songs, "Wir hatten gebauet ein stättliches Haus" ("We had built a stately house, and trusted in God therein through bad weather, storm, and horror"), is impressively intoned by the three trumpets (C major, 4-4).

The second students' song, "Der Landesvater" ("The Father of the Country"), appears in E major in the second violins. The mood changes now to one of frank jollity with the ragging of the freshman. The "Fox Song," "Was kommt dort von der Höh" ("What Comes There From On High"), is introduced in G major by the two bassoons to an accompaniment of violas and 'cellos. The fourth and last students' song, "Gaudeamus Igitur," famous wherever there are students the world over, (Maestoso, C major, 3-4), is proclaimed by all the wind against rushing scales in the upper strings, ending the overture brilliantly.

"Tragic Overture," Op. 81

Although the "Tragic Overture" had a place on the program of the concert in Breslau at which Brahms, conducting, brought out the "Academic Festival Overture", the "Tragic" had already been played in Vienna at a Philharmonic Concert on December 20, 1880, under the direction of Hans Richter.

There has long been discussion as to what tragedy this overture sets forth. It has been called "a tragedy not of actual happenings but of soul life. No hero, no event, suggested program music or any specific musical portrayal, although Hanslick says that if it be necessary to associate the overture with a particular tragedy, that tragedy is 'Hamlet'." The Hamletians identify the second theme, in F, with Ophelia and the episode in B-flat with Fortinbras.

It has also been said that though the composer denied that in writing this work he had any specific tragedy in mind, he may have received the impulse from a production of Goethe's "Faust" given by Franz von Dingelstedt in 1876 at the Burgtheater in Vienna, especially since Dingelstedt had asked Brahms to consider supplying incidental music and Brahms, it is said, had consented. To some, then, this is a Faust overture.

Perhaps it is best to allow the overture to stand by itself untroubled by the hazards of literary identification. Heinrich Reimann finds in it the grandeur, the loftiness, the deep earnestness of tragic character, "Calamities, which an inexorable fate had imposed on him, leave the hero guilty; the tragic downfall atones for the guilt; this downfall, which by purifying the passions and awakening fear and pity works on the race at large, brings expiation and redemption to the hero himself."

Another biographer of Brahms, Dr. Hermann Deiters, sums up the essence as follows: "In this work we see a strong hero battling with an iron and relentless fate; passing hopes of victory cannot alter an impending destiny. We do not care to inquire whether the composer has a special tragedy in his mind, or if so, which one; those who remain musically unconvinced by the unsurpassably powerful theme would not be assisted by a particular suggestion."

The overture opens (Allegro ma non troppo, D minor, 2-2) with two fortissimo chords, after which the strings give out the first theme. The quieter second theme is uttered by the violins. A more moderate section, in part new and in part derived from earlier material, suggested to Grove a funeral march.

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in B-flat Major, No.2, Op. 83

It took Brahms some time to complete his second piano concerto. The first sketches were made on May 6, 1878, at Pörschach on the Wörthersee in southern Austria, but the work was not finished till the summer of 1881, when he gave it the finishing touches at Pressbaum, near Vienna.

On the day of completion he wrote to his friends the Herzogenbergs with his customary misleading humor: "I don't mind telling you that I have written a tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo." A few days later he sent the four movements of the work to another friend, Dr. Theodor Billroth, telling him, "I am sending you some small piano pieces."

In October Hans von Bülow, then director of the Meiningen Orchestra, conducted at Brahms's request a rehearsal of the concerto with Brahms as pianist. The first public performance took place in Budapest at the Redoutensaal on November 9, 1881. Alexander Erkel was the conductor.

This "tiny, tiny piano concerto" or group of "some small piano pieces," as you prefer, is really a concerto of exceptional dimensions. Not only has it the three usual movements of the classical concerto, each large in plan, but a highly developed scherzo (though it does not bear that name).

The first movement (Allegro non troppo, B-flat major, 4-4) begins with the initial statement of the first subject in dialogue for horn, piano, and woodwind.

Horn Piano answers

Horn Piano answers

Wood Wind

play music

A cadenza for the piano leads to a tutti, in which both the first and the second subjects are given full play. The development section is long and elaborate.

The fiery scherzo (*Allegro appassionato*, F major, 3-4) Max Kalbeck believed had been written for the violin concerto and then discarded. The piano gives out the first theme fortissimo. The strings sing the second theme tranquillo e dolce.

play music

After a trio in D major, the first part is repeated, but much altered.

The third movement (*Andante*, B-flat major, 6-4) opens with an expressive melody, given first to a solo 'cello (an instrument that has a particularly important part in this movement), which resembles Brahms's song "Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer," not written, however, till 1886. A second melody, introduced by piano and clarinet in F sharp, recalls another song by Brahms, "Todessehnen," written in 1878. The first melody comes back in the 'cello and dominates the coda, against trills and arpeggios in the piano.

The finale (*Allegretto grazioso*, B flat major, 2-4) is a rondo on a grand scale, the first of whose three themes follows:

play music

Symphony in F Major, No. 3, Op. 90

Brahms finished the third of his symphonies at Wiesbaden in the summer of 1883. In October he returned to Vienna with the completed score, which he immediately took to Hans Richter, by that time the conductor of nearly everything in Vienna. Richter brought it out at a Philharmonic Concert on December 2. The reception was mixed. Though Brahms's adherents applauded fervently, groups of Wagnerian followers of Anton Bruckner and Hugo Wolf were there to hiss, and hiss they did! It remains for Berlin, where Joachim conducted the second performance of it anywhere at an Academy Concert on January 4, 1884, to bestow the "unqualified approval" that Brahms had written Hans von Bülow he desired.

Such was the enthusiasm in Berlin that Brahms himself conducted two more performances of the symphony there later in the month, and he also

conducted it successfully at Wiesbaden on January 18. The triumph of triumphs, however, came at Meiningen on February 4, when Bülow actually led the work twice through at the same concert, and the repetition won an even greater ovation than the first performance. Before the year 1884 was out the Third Symphony had been performed in many places on the Continent, in England, and in the United States, and always with acclaim. Yet it annoyed Brahms that many critics should pronounce this symphony by far the best of his compositions. Expectations that he feared would not be fulfilled were thus aroused, for Brahms, with all his background of achievement, had in his nature a streak of incorrigible modesty.

The adjective “heroic” has often been associated with the Third Symphony of Brahms, as in its Italian form “eroica,” it is attached to the Third Symphony of Beethoven. Indeed, Richter, in a toast, christened this symphony, while it was still in manuscript, Brahms’s “Eroica.” Hanslick, though concurring with Richter, points out that the heroic quality is limited to the first and the last movements. This “heroic” element, however, “is without any warlike flavor; it leads to no tragic action, such as the Funeral March in Beethoven’s ‘Eroica.’ It recalls in its musical character the healthy and full vigor of Beethoven’s second period, and nowhere the singularities of his last period; and every now and then in passages quivers the romantic twilight of Schumann and Mendelssohn.”

So much for Richter and Hanslick. Joachim discovered a different heroism in the finale—nothing less than the valiant fable of those antique lovers, Hero and Leander! The second subject, in C major, with its rhythmic conflict between four quarter notes to the measure and two groups of triplets, he identified with the ardent swimmer battling victoriously against the waves of the Hellespont.

Another view of the work is taken by Clara Schumann. She called it a “forest idyl,” saying specifically of the second movement: “I feel as though I were watching the worshippers round a little woodland chapel, the rippling of the brooklet, the play of beetles and gnats—there is such a swarming and whispering round about that one feels all surrounded with the joys of nature.”

The first movement (Allegro con brio, F major, 6-4) begins with a motto theme which at once suggests its heroic character and recurs frequently. It consists of three great ascending chords for horns, trumpets, and woodwind, the top voice of which, F, A-flat, F, is said to be emblematic of the “Frei aber froh” (“Free but happy”) that Brahms had chosen as his personal motto. These three notes are then used immediately as the bass against which the real first subject comes streaming downwards in the violins.



play music

The second subject, in A major, is of a gracefully lyric quality. Just before it enters there is an apparent allusion to the Venusberg scene in “Tannhäuser”—“Naht euch dem Strande, naht euch dem Lande”—which Hugo Riemann insists is an intentional tribute to Wagner, who died while the symphony was taking shape in Brahms’s mind.

The second movement (Andante, C major, 4-4) opens with a hymnlike theme, giving out by clarinets and bassoons, which hints at a prayer heard in the overture and again in the finale of Herold’s opera “Zampa.”



play music

A second theme, in G major, with its typical Brahmsian octaves and its air of hushed mystery, sustains Mme. Schumann's woodland comparison.

The third movement (Poco allegretto, C minor, 3-8) is not a scherzo, but a romanza touched with melancholy. The first section is followed by a trio of similar mood, after which the first section is repeated with changed orchestration.

The finale (Allegro, F minor, 4-4) starts softly but menacingly in the strings and bassoons. Subsidiary material is employed before we hear the subject that caused Joachim to think of Leander conquering the Grecian waters. Whether or not Brahms had such an idea in mind, this finale is a colossal struggle between titanic powers, culminating in a tremendous climax. Then peace and the major mode. With respect to this tranquil coda Hanslick remarks: "The raging ocean waves calm down to a mysterious whisper. In an enigmatic strangeness, in marvellous beauty, the whole thing dies away...."

Symphony in E-Minor, No. 4, Op. 98

When this symphony was brought out at Meiningen, under the direction of Hans von Bülow, on October 25, 1885, there was a great deal of discussion about the choice of key and actually some dismay. E minor as the key for a symphony was looked at askance, even though Haydn and Raff had both used it. The suggestion has been made that Brahms picked out E minor because of its "pale, wan character, to express the deepest melancholy." This key has also been described as "dull in color, shadowy, suggestive of solitude and desolation."

Haydn perhaps felt strongly the key's doleful implications, for his E minor symphony is the "Symphony of Mourning." Raff's E minor symphony, on the other hand, is by no means the autumnal affair that Brahms's has been called. Its title, "In Summer," tells us that!

Whatever the motives may have been that determined Brahms's choice, it fell on E minor, and he proceeded to compose. The work was written at Mürz-zu-Schlag in Styria in the summers of 1884 and 1885. And at Mürz-zu-Schlag in the latter year the manuscript was endangered by fire. Brahms had gone out for a walk. On his return he found that the house where he lodged was burning. Fortunately he had devoted friends there who were rushing his papers out of the building. Brahms pitched in with the rest and helped get the fire under control. The precious manuscript was saved.

Brahms, in spite of his mature years and all the important work that he had put to his credit, was again somewhat timid about a new symphony. In a letter to Hans von Bülow he described it, oddly enough, as "a couple of entr'actes"; he also termed it "a choral work without text." Yet he was eager for opinions from such valued friends as Elisabeth von Herzogenberg and Clara Schumann. He felt that the symphony had failed to please a group of men, including Hanslick, Billroth, Richter, Kalbeck, to whom he had played a four-hand piano version with Ignaz Brüll. To Kalbeck he said: "If persons like Billroth, Hanslick, and you do not like my music, whom *will* it please?" Had he forgotten Elisabeth and Clara?

The audience that heard the Meiningen première liked the symphony. Indeed, a vain effort was made to have the scherzo repeated. Nevertheless, the symphony was slow in winning general favor. In Vienna, where Brahms resided, it disappointed his friends and delighted his enemies. Hugo Wolf, an arch-enemy, was then writing musical criticism. He devoted a bitter article to the work, in particular poking fun at the key—at last a symphony in E minor! Brahms's friends, on the contrary, celebrated the key, in order, it is said, to help cover up their disappointment in the music. It was usual to hear the symphony called grim, austere, forbidding, granitic. However, eventually it made its way, and now there are those who would rank it first among its author's four.

The initial theme of the first movement (Allegro non troppo, E minor, 4-4), given out by the violins answered by flutes, clarinets, and bassoons, is of a thoughtful and somewhat mournful character, but it could hardly be termed forbidding. Rather it invites to meditation. The second theme, introduced by the wind instruments, is harmonically and rhythmically one of Brahms's most fascinating inspirations. Some undiscourageable seekers after resemblances have discovered a likeness in the thirteenth and fourteenth measures to a passage in the second act of Puccini's opera "Tosca," which followed the symphony after fifteen years. Such resemblances are often mere coincidences.

The second movement (Andante moderato, E major, 6-8), with its unearthly melody announced in the Phrygian mode by the horns, to be taken up immediately by oboes, bassoons, and flutes,



play music

has been called the most hauntingly beautiful page in all of Brahms. Of this section Elisabeth von Herzogenberg wrote to the composer: "The Andante has the freshness and distinction of character with which only you could endow it, and even you have had recourse for the first time to certain locked chambers of your soul."

Kalbeck, who finds that the whole symphony pictures the tragedy of human life, compares the Andante to a waste and ruined field, like the Campagna (as it then was) near Rome. But in the ensuing scherzo (Allegro giocoso, C major, 4-4) he sees the Carnival at Milan. The finale reminds him of a passage in the "Oedipus Coloneus" of Sophocles: "Not to have been born at all is superior to every other view of the question."

Yet there are those who deny the pessimistic interpretation; who find a rugged, full-blooded vigor in the finale as well as in the scherzo, and who attribute the more specifically thoughtful portions of the work to the reactions inevitable to any sensitive and meditative spirit.

Be all that as it may, the finale (*Allegro energico e passionato*, E minor, 3-4) is of special interest because it is cast in the classic form of the passacaglia or chaconne. It is built up on a majestic theme eight measures long, a noble progression of chords, which recurs thirty-one times, appearing in the high, middle, and low voices alternately.



play music

As to the distinction between those old, patrician dance forms, passacaglia and chaconne, the doctors remain in absolute contradiction, some maintaining a chaconne to be what the others define as a passacaglia, and vice versa.

The curious may be interested to know that Simrock, the music publisher, is said to have paid Brahms 40,000 marks for the symphony—the equivalent in 1885 of \$10,000.

Incidentally, the E minor symphony was the last of Brahms's compositions that their author heard performed in public. It was played at a Philharmonic Concert in Vienna on March 7, 1897, less than a month before his death. This was the last concert that Brahms, already fatally ill, ever attended. Miss Florence May in her "Life of Brahms" gives an affecting account of the occasion:

"The fourth symphony had never become a favorite work in Vienna. Received with reserve on its first performance, it had not since gained much more from the general public of the city than the respect sure to be accorded there to an important work by Brahms. Today, however, a storm of applause broke out at the end of the first movement, not to be quieted until the composer, coming to the front of the artists' box in which he was seated, showed himself to the audience. The demonstration was renewed after the second and third movements, and an extraordinary scene followed the conclusion of the work.

"The applauding, shouting house, its gaze riveted on the figure standing in the balcony, so familiar and yet in present aspect so strange, seemed unable to let him go. Tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there, shrunken in form, with lined countenance, strained expression, white hair hanging lank: and through the audience there was a feeling as of a stifled sob, for each knew that they were saying farewell. Another outburst of applause and yet another; one more acknowledgment from the master; and Brahms and his Vienna had parted forever." He died on April 3, 1897.

Concerto for Violin, Violoncello, and Orchestra in A Minor, Op. 102

After the Fourth Symphony Brahms wrote only one more work in which he employed the orchestra, the double concerto for violin and 'cello. Thenceforth until his death his creative activity was devoted to chamber music, piano compositions, and songs for chorus or for solo voice.

This concerto he composed at Thun in Switzerland during the summer of 1887. To Elisabeth von Herzogenberg he referred to it in a letter of July 20: "I can give you nothing worth calling information about the undersigned musician. True, he is now writing down something that does not figure in his catalogue—but neither does it figure in other persons'! I leave you to guess the particular form of idiocy."

The "particular form" Walter Niemann calls an experiment in the revival of the old Italian orchestral concerto, the "concerto grosso" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so signally illustrated by Handel and Bach, in which the orchestral tutti of the concerto grosso is contrasted with a concertino for a group of soloists.

But here Brahms was experimenting also with a curious concertino consisting of a violin and a 'cello and with unaccustomed combinations of instrumental timbres. In effect his concerto grosso is distinctly late Brahms and a far cry from the concerto grosso of musical antiquity.

Hardly was the double concerto completed before it was performed privately at the Baden-Baden Kurhaus, Brahms conducting and Joachim and Robert Hausmann, a distinguished 'cellist, playing the solo instruments. The same artistic confraternity took part in the first public performance, on October 18, 1887, at Cologne. On a copy of the work that Brahms presented to Joachim he wrote: "To him for whom it was written."

The first movement (*Allegro*, A minor, 4-4) opens with an introductory passage in which the orchestra alludes to the chief subject and the 'cello follows with a rhapsodic recitative. The woodwind give out in A major the initial phrase of the second subject. Both subjects are heard in the first tutti. A rising syncopated theme in F major is also to be carefully noted.

The slow movement (*Andante*, D major, 3-4) is described by Niemann as "most lovely ... a great ballade, steeped in the rich, mysterious tone of a northern evening atmosphere." Four notes for the horns and woodwind bring on the flowing chief melody



play music

broadly sung by the solo instruments in octaves.

The finale (*Vivace non troppo*, A minor, 4-4), which has been called the “clearest of rondo types,” abounds in thematic material. The first subject



play music

announced by the 'cello and repeated by the violin, has the gypsy flavor so dear to Brahms. It can be detected in another melody assigned to the clarinets and bassoons against rising arpeggios by the solo instruments, which is prominent in the development. The coda, tender at first and then exuberantly joyous, concludes the double concerto, and at the same time the composer's employment of the orchestra, in a triumphant A major.

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