

claves

BRAHMS

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MUSIKKOLLEGIUM WINTERTHUR

THE SYMPHONIES





JOHANNES BRAHMS AND WINTERTHUR

The Musikkollegium Winterthur rounded off its 2018/19 concert season with a six-day Brahms Festival, during which – besides numerous other works by Johannes Brahms – the composer’s four symphonies were performed under Principal Conductor Thomas Zehetmair. Steeped in tradition and boasting a proud history dating back to 1629, the Swiss orchestra thus commemorated the years when Brahms was a frequent visitor to Winterthur and his compositions were released by the Winterthur music publisher Jakob Melchior Rieter-Biedermann. Eldest son of the successful Winterthur machinery manufacturer Heinrich Rieter, Rieter-Biedermann opened his publishing house in 1849 and the first two compositions appeared in 1856: Theodor Kirchner’s *Albumblätter* op. 9 and Hector Berlioz’s *Les nuits d’été*.

Kirchner, who had been employed as Winterthur’s full-time city organist since 1843, met Johannes Brahms for the first time that same year at the Lower Rhenish Music Festival in Düsseldorf and suggested the Winterthur music publisher to him. Brahms displayed an interest and as early as August 1856 embarked on the first of a total of 14 trips to Switzerland. The journey led to his first face-to-face encounter with Rieter-Biedermann, who first published a work by Brahms two years later – *Volks-Kinderlieder mit hinzugefügter*

Clavierbegleitung, Den Kindern Robert u. Clara Schumann’s gewidmet (Children’s Folk Songs with additional piano accompaniment, dedicated to the children of Robert and Clara Schumann). Kirchner reported how Brahms soon became the talk of the town in Winterthur: “All of us, each in his own way, now revolve around Brahms, whom I am learning to appreciate more and more. Quite apart from his musical talent, the man has an abundance of wisdom and a hardworking attitude that I have rarely seen.”

Brahms was a frequent guest at the *Haus zum Schanzengarten*, where Rieter-Biedermann lived with his family. There would often be music-making, and both daughters of the house were highly accomplished pianists. Brahms enjoyed the fact that Rieter-Biedermann’s wife Louise took care of his well-being and kept his wardrobe in order: “Every morning, I feel grateful for how amiably and entirely maternally you have ensured that I feel at ease – not in my own skin – but very much so in my own clothes.” Mother Louise and daughter Ida also helped the famous composer, who was occupied with the *German Requiem*, to find appropriate passages from the Bible to set to music. They became close. Clara Schumann claimed to have sensed that Ida would have been a suitable wife for Brahms during her first visit to the Rieter-Biedermann household. Her observation to that effect was probably unnecessary. Brahms liked the “honoured and dear Fräulein,” as he addressed her

in his only surviving letter to her: "What did I think I should have to say about how I found people like us to be so especially entitled and qualified for it – and how superfluous everything is in view of this happy event." Superfluous due to Ida's engagement that had just taken place – presumably anything but a "happy event" for Brahms himself...

Between 1858 and 1873, Brahms had a total of 22 compositions published by Rieter-Biedermann in Winterthur. These include such major works as the first Piano Concerto, the song cycle entitled *Die schöne Magelone* (The Fair Magelone), the Piano Quintet op. 34, the *Paganini Variations* op. 35 as well as *A German Requiem*. During these 15 years, Brahms wrote 165 letters to his publisher. Almost all of them are preserved today in the Musikkollegium Winterthur's archives – valuable reminders of an important period in Winterthur's history.

JOHANNES BRAHMS AND THE MEININGEN TRADITION

In the last 16 years of his life, Brahms maintained close links with Duke Georg II of Saxe-Meiningen and his wife Helene Baroness von Heldburg, as well as the Meiningen Court Orchestra. The contact came about through Brahms's friendship with the Meiningen Court Conductor, Hans von Bülow, and was followed by 14 lengthy sojourns in Meiningen

as well as concert tours with the Court Orchestra. Furthermore, Brahms conducted the première of his Fourth Symphony in Meiningen and, although he had in fact intended to give up composing, he wrote three late chamber music works in the 1890s especially for the Meiningen clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld.

Fritz Steinbach was Director of the Meiningen Court Orchestra between 1886 and 1903, and conducted 183 concerts featuring one or sometimes several works by Brahms during this period. It therefore comes as no surprise that Brahms considered him the best interpreter of his symphonies and personally gave him detailed information regarding questions and problems of interpretation. However, he did not wish to include these tips in the printed scores. Steinbach's conducting student Walter Blume faithfully collected them, later publishing them in book form under the title *Brahms und die Meininger Tradition* (Brahms and the Meiningen Tradition). The work is a veritable treasure trove for conductors of Brahms's works.

Thomas Zehetmair describes how, as long as fifteen years ago, he began to explore "this source, which is really important in terms of performance practice. We're extremely interested in Fritz Steinbach's Meiningen concept, recorded by Walter Blume, because it throws doors wide open – rather than closing them. The great Brahms, the classicist, the strict guardian of ancient forms,

thus descends from his pedestal and reveals stark truths and emotions. That beautiful, dense Brahms sound disintegrates, new aspects come to light, and everything suddenly indeed becomes much more than the sum of its parts. Although Brahms was keen to stage his compositions with a large orchestra in Vienna, he was less than satisfied with the carelessness of many performances, whereas he was always highly enthusiastic about the art of the orchestra in Meiningen, which was trained in the discipline of chamber music. He felt considerably greater affinity with the precise disclosure of structure and rhythmical freedom that were easier to achieve with this slightly smaller orchestra."

However, this certainly does not mean that Fritz Steinbach and Walter Blume's Meiningen concept should be accepted without criticism: "Blume adopts an entirely pragmatic approach to problems of balance and articulation. This can sometimes sound rather generalised and has also been the object of fierce criticism from opposing camps. The ideas and descriptions of the latitude permitted in terms of tempo and rhythm, on which Steinbach expressly insisted, are considerably more inspiring. Discovering and correctly balancing an unusual harmonic turn, exposing hidden associations, and revealing the complexity of the sound texture, are a pleasure and sometimes involve precise detective work. For this music has lost none of its topicality and poignancy, and it offers an abundance of

emotional and intellectual gifts. Broadly speaking, there are two extremely divergent interpretative approaches. One shows us how it works, and the other shows us nothing at all but takes us through the incredible miracles that occur in a masterpiece. In other words, the one seeks the rule, the other the exception."

JOHANNES BRAHMS – THE FOUR SYMPHONIES

"I shall never compose a symphony!" wrote Johannes Brahms to fellow conductor Hermann Levi. "You have no idea how it feels for the likes of us to hear such a giant marching behind us." The giant was a reference to Beethoven, by whom Brahms felt persecuted. As early as the 1850s, he had made repeated attempts to write a symphony, but without success. He was already 43 years old when – after almost 20 years of experimentation – he finally presented his **Symphony No. 1 in C minor op. 68** in 1876.

The long wait was worthwhile: Brahms's very first symphonic work was a masterpiece. The conductor Hans von Bülow even called it "Beethoven's Tenth", which shows that it certainly bears comparison with the unassailable example of Beethoven. The slow introduction to the first movement, with its 48 sombre drumbeats, appears to symbolise destiny and is reminiscent of the pathos of Beethoven's

characteristic style. Clara Schumann judged this first movement to be “full of wonderful beauties.” [...] “Everything is so interestingly interwoven, yet at the same time is as rousing as a first outpouring. One really enjoys it to the full without being reminded of the work that has gone into it.”

The slow movement is conceived as a lyrical vocal scene. The highly expressive, flowing principal melody exudes romantic charm. In the middle section, the solo oboe makes its presence felt, and the solo violin and horn sing out in rapturous tones towards the end of the movement. A veritable scherzo movement typical of Beethoven's symphonies is absent. For the third movement, Brahms chose an allegretto in chamber music style – an elegiac mood piece that is gracefully intoned by the clarinet. Playing in thirds, the woodwinds are softly superimposed, and the middle section even features a hint of Hungarian sound.

The slow introduction to the last movement makes reference to the beginning of the symphony. As the movement continues, the music presses energetically ahead until, above the glimmering strings, a horn melody reminiscent of an alphorn rings out. Brahms had heard this instrument on the Wengernalp in the Bernese Oberland, whence he wrote a postcard to Clara Schumann – “The alphorn blew today” – and recorded the melody he had heard while he was about it. This is followed by a panegyric theme reminiscent of the *Ode*

to *Joy* from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and, with festive momentum, the final movement culminates in a brilliant coda. The work was premièred at the Grand Ducal Court Theatre in Karlsruhe on 4 November 1876, with Felix Otto Dessoff at the rostrum.

Only a year later, Brahms presented his **Symphony No. 2 in D major op. 73**. It is often referred to as his “Pastoral” symphony, and its bright key of D major does indeed seem to evoke a sunny atmosphere. It was written during the summer holidays on Lake Wörthersee in 1877, and its jovial mood could certainly have something to do with the place it was written: “There are so many melodies flying about here that you have to be careful not to step on them.” Accordingly, Brahms initially feared that people might think he had “made it too easy for himself this time.” The semitone motif that introduces the first movement is also a constituent component of the three following movements. Brahms thus achieved a new degree of thematic correlation, making all four movements appear as elements of an organically evolved whole, as it were. At the same time, each movement has its own physiognomy. In the second, the only truly adagio movement in Brahms's four symphonies, a cautiously solemn mood prevails; and in the third – a witty genre piece with rondo-type features – a graceful, almost bucolic tone predominates. The fourth is characterised by a classical “last dance” atmosphere that is only once interrupted – during

the transition to the recapitulation – by a serious reminiscence of the slow second movement. The première of the Second Symphony was conducted by Hans Richter in Vienna's Musikvereinssaal on 30th December 1877. It was to be one of the greatest triumphs of Brahms's career: "The orchestra rehearsed and played with such pleasure, and praised me as has never happened to me before."

Antonín Dvořák, a great admirer of Brahms and also largely promoted by him, was of the opinion that **Symphony No. 3 in F major op. 90** surpassed its two predecessors in beauty: "There is an atmosphere that isn't often to be found in Brahms. What delightful melodies are to be found! It is nothing but love and opens one's heart." Bearing in mind the circumstances in which it was written, we should not be surprised. In 1883, after celebrating his 50th birthday, Johannes Brahms went to Wiesbaden for his summer break. He had good friends there, including the owner of a vineyard who also played the violin. Brahms repeatedly made music with him, and together they emptied many a bottle of fine wine from the cellar. On one occasion, the vintner introduced an especially outstanding wine as "the Brahms among my wines." Brahms tasted it, was thrilled by the exquisite beverage, and remarked mischievously: "But now you must bring me your Bach as well!"

When he returned to Vienna after his holidays, he had the finished score in his luggage. A

performance on two pianos for friends met with spontaneous enthusiasm, and the première on 2 December 1883 at a philharmonic concert in Vienna, again under Hans Richter, was a great success, despite being repeatedly interrupted by hissing from Wagnerians in the audience. Brahms's Third is remarkable in several ways: orchestral monumentality and an economical, chamber music style, rousing pathos and a frequently contemplative, simple inflexion are combined in a novel, very personal musical idiom. The creative spark is no longer – as was the case in Beethoven's works – provided by the contrast of two different themes. Instead, everything arises from one and the same motivic nucleus, which determines the compositional structure of all the movements: the dramatic first movement, the songlike andante, with its chamber structure, the brief, intermezzo-like scherzo, as well as the initially powerfully surging finale, which fades away in soft, relaxed major chords and reprises the beginning of the first movement *pianissimo*. The last movement is thus a return to the point of departure and completes the cycle.

"One never tires of listening to and gazing upon the abundance of witty features disseminated throughout this piece, strange illuminations of a rhythmic, harmonic and tonal nature, and of admiring your fine chisel, which is capable of shaping the piece with such determination and at the same time with such delicacy." These words

of praise uttered by Brahms's knowledgeable friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg for his **Symphony No. 4 in E minor op. 98**, written in 1884/85, must have been particularly gratifying. For the composer had long wavered in his own judgement, on one occasion describing this late work as "fundamentally flawed" and on another saying that the symphony "tastes of the climate in Mürrzuschlag, in which the cherries don't ripen and are barely edible."

Even Brahms's well-meaning friends shook their heads in consternation the first time they heard the piece. The concentration on small elements rather than larger-scale motifs and themes, as well as the way they are handled, are indeed particularly witty. The principal motif of the first movement, for example, can be understood as a succession of every conceivable interval of the tonic key of E minor. This already anticipates Schönberg's serial technique. The finale is even more surprising: Brahms employs the baroque form of a *passacaglia*, which is extremely unusual for a symphony. The composer borrowed the sombre, eight-bar theme from the final chorus of Bach's cantata BWV 150, *Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich* (For Thee, o Lord, I long), of which he had received a copy from Philipp Spitta in 1874. Brahms wrote to Hans von Bülow in 1882: "What do you think of writing a symphonic movement on the same theme? But it's too bulky, too straightforward. It would somehow need to be changed chromatically."

The deployment of three trombones lends this theme special weight. There are thirty variations, in ever-changing constellations, on this motif, and the wealth of creative possibilities is inexhaustible. The advent of the recapitulation ultimately leads to an inexorable dramatisation of musical expression that assumes almost catastrophic proportions and culminates in a particularly lugubrious finale. The fact that Brahms, with his recourse to the baroque *passacaglia*, was a reviver of old forms and, at the same time, with his novel technical approach to the motif, an innovator of compositional thought, bears witness to the unique artistic standing of this symphony. Ultimately, even Brahms was convinced, despite expressions of disapproval at the première, which took place under the composer's baton in Meiningen on 25th October 1885: "I've made my bed, and now I must lie in it. I couldn't care less about the hecklers in the stalls..."

Werner Pfister

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

CD 1

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 (1855-1876)

- | | | |
|----------|--|-------|
| 1 | I. Un poco sostenuto - Allegro - Meno allegro | 15:15 |
| 2 | II. Andante sostenuto | 8:03 |
| 3 | III. Un poco allegretto e grazioso | 4:18 |
| 4 | IV. Adagio - Più andante - Allegro non troppo, ma con brio - Più allegro | 15:41 |

Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90 (1883)

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|----------|---|-------|
| 5 | I. Allegro con brio - Un poco sostenuto - Tempo I | 12:09 |
| 6 | II. Andante | 8:08 |
| 7 | III. Poco allegretto | 5:37 |
| 8 | IV. Allegro | 7:40 |

CD 2

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73 (1877)

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|----------|--|-------|
| 1 | I. Allegro non troppo | 19:10 |
| 2 | II. Adagio non troppo - L'istesso tempo, ma grazioso | 8:48 |
| 3 | III. Allegretto grazioso (quasi andantino) - Presto ma non assai | 5:12 |
| 4 | IV. Allegro con spirito | 9:16 |

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98 (1884-1885)

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|----------|---|-------|
| 5 | I. Allegro non troppo | 11:47 |
| 6 | II. Andante moderato | 9:42 |
| 7 | III. Allegro giocoso - Poco meno presto - Tempo I | 5:50 |
| 8 | IV. Allegro energico e passionato - Più allegro | 8:56 |

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THOMAS ZEHETMAIR *conductor*



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Total time:

CD 1 : 77:11 / CD 2 : 78:58

