

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born

May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died

April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed

the summers of 1884 and 1885

World premiere

October 25, 1885, in Meiningen, Germany, with the composer conducting the Meiningen Ducal Chapel Orchestra — this a couple of weeks after he played in a two-piano reading of it for a private audience

New York Philharmonic premiere

December 10, 1886, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic to become today's New York Philharmonic)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

July 27, 2007, Lorin Maazel, conductor, in Vail, Colorado

Estimated duration

ca. 42 minutes

Four more years would pass before Brahms would finally sign off on his First Symphony. However, once he had conquered his compositional demons he moved ahead forcefully. Three symphonies would follow that first effort in relatively short order: the Second in 1877, the Third in 1882–83, and the Fourth in 1884–85. Each is a masterpiece, and each displays a markedly different character. The First is burly and powerful, flexing its muscles in Promethean exertion; the Second is sunny and bucolic; and the Third, although introspective and idyllic on the whole, mixes in a hefty dose of heroism. With his Fourth Symphony, Brahms achieves a work of almost mystical transcendence born of opposing emotions: melancholy and joy, severity and rhapsody, solemnity and exhilaration. Clara Schumann recognized this play of duality already in the first movement, observing, “It is as though one lay in springtime among the blossoming flowers, and joy and sorrow filled one’s soul in turn.”

Brahms was well aware of his distinct achievement in this work. He composed it during two summer vacations at Mürzzuschlag in the Styrian Alps — the first two movements in the summer of 1884, the second two in the summer of 1885. On many occasions he was known to suggest that his compositions reflected in some way the place in which they were written, and in this case he wrote from Mürzzuschlag to the conductor Hans von Bülow that his symphony-in-progress “tastes of the climate here; the cherries are hardly sweet here — you wouldn’t eat them!” Brahms was given to disparaging his works (in fact, he once described this symphony as “another set of polkas and waltzes”), but in this case his description perfectly evokes the bittersweet quality that pervades many of the Fourth Symphony’s pages.

“I shall never write a symphony!” Brahms famously declared in 1872. “You can’t have any idea what it’s like to hear such a giant marching behind you.” The giant was Beethoven, of course; although his music provided essential inspiration for Brahms, it also set such a high standard that the younger composer found it easy to discount his own creations as negligible in comparison.

Although it is cast in the same classical four-movement plan as his earlier symphonies, Brahms's Fourth seems more tightly unified throughout its duration (largely through an insistence on the interval of the third — especially the minor third), and its movements accordingly proceed with a terrific sense of cumulative power. The opening movement (*Allegro non troppo*) is soaring and intense, and the second (*Andante moderato*) is by turns agitated and serene. The *Allegro giocoso* represents the first time Brahms included a real scherzo in a symphony, in contrast to the lighter *allegretto* intermezzos that had served as the third movements of his first three. For his finale Brahms unleashes a gigantic passacaglia, a neo-Baroque structure in which an eight-measure progression (derived from the last movement of Bach's Cantata No. 150) is subjected to 32 variations of widely varying character.

As soon as he completed the work, Brahms sent copies of it to several of his trusted friends and was miffed when they all responded with concern over this or

that. His confidante, Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, insisted that she respected the piece, but allowed of the first movement that "at worst it seems to me as if a great master had made an almost extravagant display of his skill!" His friend Max Kalbeck suggested he throw away the third movement entirely, use the finale as a freestanding piece, and compose two new movements to replace them.

Brahms did not cave in, but he anticipated the symphony's premiere with mounting apprehension. His music had long been criticized as being "too intellectual," and Brahms knew that his Fourth Symphony was at least as rigorous as anything he had previously composed. To his amazement the symphony proved a success at its premiere, and audience enthusiasm only increased in subsequent performances.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, and strings.

Travelogue

Brahms found that his creative juices flowed most freely during his summer vacations. The summers of 1884 and 1885 — the summers of the Fourth Symphony — he spent at Mürzzuschlag, a charming Styrian village at the southern end of the Semmering Pass, about a two-hour train trip southwest from Vienna, roughly midway between Vienna and Graz.

A visitor today could not pass through Mürzzuschlag without being reminded of the village's Brahmsian past: the community conservatory is the Johannes Brahms Musikschule; the ring of hiking trails the composer once followed is now the Brahmsweg; and the town square is graced



with a large statue of the composer setting off on one of those very hikes. And, of course, there is a Brahms Museum "in the genuine summer residence of Johannes Brahms," which sponsors innumerable mostly Brahms concerts and contains all manner of memorabilia relevant to Brahms's vacations, including the piano he rented while he was in town.