

Program Notes

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

- Born:** May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany
- Died:** April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria
- Work composed:** Although the first signs of this symphony go back to 1862, he seems to have begun to put the entire work together in earnest about 1874, finishing it the summer of 1876.
- World premiere:** November 4, 1876, conducted by Otto Dessoff in Karlsruhe, Baden
- New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 22, 1877, with Theodore Thomas conducting

On July 1, 1862, Clara Schumann wrote to Joseph Joachim, quoting four bars of music that Brahms had recently sent her, which she identified as “the first movement of a symphony with [a] bold opening.” She continued that the phrase “is rather strong, but I have become used to it.”

The *Allegro* of the First Symphony’s opening movement still began with those four bars when Brahms completed the piece 14 years later—”rather strong” and, as the composer put it to Carl Reinecke (then the conductor at the Leipzig Gewandhaus), “not exactly lovable.” By then the symphony had acquired an introduction and had undergone who knows what other changes. Brahms had begun a symphony in 1854, but that work eventually turned into his First Piano Concerto. The years passed. On February 22, 1873, Brahms’ publisher, Fritz Simrock, asked: “Aren’t you doing anything any more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in ’73 either?” Only the year before, Brahms, haunted by the ghost of Beethoven, had said: “I shall never write a symphony! You can’t have any idea what it’s like always to hear such a giant marching behind you!”

The giant he had heard marching behind him—Beethoven—had died six years before Brahms was born, but his shadow fell the length of the 19th century and some way beyond. Brahms’ real First Symphony is still within earshot of the giant’s echoing footsteps. To write a C-minor symphony with a triumphant C-major conclusion was anything but a trivial decision, and Brahms knew just what he was about when, at the great arrival in C major, he evoked the *Ode to Joy*.

Beethoven’s fist-shaking C-minor gestures and sheer physical energy are vividly present in the *Allegro* that Brahms sent—in some form or other—to Clara Schumann in 1862. Much in the introduction speaks in a new voice: the hardness that results from the way the lines move in contrary motion; the way the strings insist on a strangely ambiguous C-minor chord that has no C in it; even the “medium” tempo. Brahms sensed that the “beginning” he had sent to Clara was no beginning at all but rather a release, a resolution, the articulation with untrammelled energy of an idea darkly forming itself during the introduction.

The music reaches a point of high tension; then the oboe and the cellos, in a more lyric mood, coax the music forward to a moment of hushed expectancy. This is harshly broken by a firmly rapped-out C, the keynote. The introduction is over, the *Allegro* has begun. In the introduction, Brahms set phrases covering a broad gamut against tight chromatic lines; as we have already seen, he continues that contrast in the *Allegro*. Almost immediately, he arrives at an arresting feature of marked profile, a sequence of plunging sevenths and sixths in *fortissimo*. These set abrupt punctuation marks to many sentences, and they even permeate the second theme, begun by the oboe and somewhat—only somewhat—calmer in mood. Three descending notes introduced by the violas, *marcato* against *pizzicato* chords, generate a firestorm of energy that brings the exposition to its close. This excited close is highly original. Usually, when a sonata-form movement is in minor, the exposition will end in the relative major. For a movement in C minor, that would be E-flat major; here, however, Brahms rings a change on this convention by going to E-flat minor.

The move forward into the development is also managed by a dramatic turn of harmony, but one not so “strong,” to borrow Clara Schumann’s adjective. The emphatic E-flats and G-flats at the close of the exposition are suddenly reinterpreted as D-sharps and F-sharps. This allows the music to plunge into B major, thus opening a harmonic window whose existence we had not suspected at all.

As the strings sweep up and down what have now become the familiar arpeggios we first heard in the introduction, the energy continues unabated. Suddenly the music sinks to *pianissimo*, initiating a long voyage through dense thickets. A couple of times there is clarity, as when mists part momentarily to reveal a sought-for landmark. More of the time, however, this is music of searching, of struggle. The bass increasingly tends to settle on or near the dominant, G: the moment of homecoming is being prepared. The forward motion is powerful, but so is the harmonic resistance. Tension builds to enormous heights; Brahms’ sense of timing is consummate. Finally, the break-through: the home key and the main theme make a triumphant re-entry.

The events of the recapitulation correspond clearly to those of the exposition. Toward the end, the music builds to one final great cresting, which subsides into the brief but spacious, perfectly timed coda. How did this movement end when Clara Schumann first saw it? Were the 17 measures of coda an afterthought that came along with the introduction? As it now stands, the coda is a wonderful recapitulation by suggestion. We tend to think of it as a sort of return to the introduction, but in fact just a few touches suffice to create that impression: the slower tempo (just *Meno allegro*, not necessarily the *poco sostenuto* of the beginning), the pulsing drum, the first notes of the passage in contrary motion, and, finally, the incomplete broken chord. We first hear the woodwinds play this arpeggio; then it is gloriously resolved as the strings climb up a sonorous and complete chord of C major.

The first chord of the *Andante sostenuto* sounds miraculously fresh: E major is a long way from the C-minor/major world we have just left. Brahms learned that from Beethoven, whose Third Piano Concerto presents the same relationship between its first and second movements (and Beethoven had learned it from Haydn). Everything else is equally fresh: the triple meter; the clear, diatonic harmony; above all, the serene mood. It is characteristic of Brahms to arrange matters so that the beginning of his first melody can serve as a bass to accompany the new theme in the oboe. This leads to blazingly impassioned music for the first violins, into which they draw the second violins and violas. From this grows another oboe melody, like music from a Bach cantata but from the perspective of 150 years later.

In her letter to Joachim about the *Allegro*, Clara Schumann commented on how skillfully Brahms had managed the transition from the development into the recapitulation. Assuming it was then the way it is now, one can only agree: Brahms sweeps you home and into C minor with splendid élan. But how much more special is the veiled entrance into the recapitulation of the *Andante*: ambiguous harmonies blur the moment, as do the *pianissimo* drumroll and the unexpected off-beat entrance of the woodwinds. We listen more to the lovely curve of the violins' and violas' slow arabesque than to the flutes and oboes and clarinets who carry the melody, and we seem to become aware of the moment of recapitulation only in retrospect. This is Brahms "at his Brahms-most," as the Brahms-era music critic and Boston Symphony program annotator William Foster Apthorp liked to say. The second theme makes a final appearance in a magical scoring for solo violin, oboe, and horn, but it is the violin alone, with a faraway remembrance of pulsing drums, that sings the movement to its tranquil close. The perfection of form is the result of a severe reworking after the first performance.

Beethoven's scherzos were quite a bit faster than the minuets from which they had evolved, though it is undoubtedly true that symphonic minuets were played more quickly in the 18th century than through most of the 20th. Brahms, on the other hand (perhaps with Schumann's "Rhenish" Symphony as a model) slowed these movements down again. His *allegretto* here, neither slow nor fast, is in the gentle, lightly sentimental mood we encounter often in his intermezzos for piano. The pulse for the middle section continues the same, but it seems faster because the rhythmic subdivisions are smaller. The way the middle section softly haunts the coda reveals a lovely Brahmsian touch.

Harmonically, the third movement was the same distance from the second as the second was from the first. Now another step of the same size carries us from the third movement's key of A-flat to C, the key of the finale, of the first movement, and of the whole symphony. It is the minor mode of C at first, and there is a darkness, a strangeness, a mood of mystery we have not encountered since the symphony's introduction. Marked *Adagio*, it is also the first truly slow music in the symphony. In part, the minor harmonies and the character of the gestures create the mysterious ambience, but the way Brahms juxtaposes highly disparate elements in quick succession also contributes to this effect.

The movement begins with an outcry similar in character to the music with which the symphony began. This is followed by an accelerating passage for plucked strings. Both these ideas are immediately repeated in dramatically condensed form. Next, a passage of swirling, syncopated music rises to an urgent climax. A sudden parting of the storm clouds reveals, in the major mode, a horn call that is luminously continued in the flute. Bassoons and trombones declaim a solemn phrase that could come from a hymn. The horn call is heard again, half as long as before, but more elaborate because another horn, flute, oboe, and clarinet add a series of overlapping imitations. It will be the task of the finale to integrate this diversity of material into a cohesive movement, something Brahms will accomplish with sovereign command and stunning originality.

Now comes the *Allegro* and, with it, the tune, in Brahmsian understated *poco forte*. This melody, both deeply personal and greatly in debt to Beethoven's Ninth, is an expansion and clarification of the outcry that began the movement. When people offered to point out the Beethoven resemblance, Brahms' response was entirely appropriate: "Any ass can hear that."

A contrasting melody, *dolce* and *animato*, leads to a rise in temperature and to music that approaches the first movement in agitation. A return of the grand melody starts the development. As before, the dynamic marking is only *poco forte*, but this time Brahms asks to have it played with breadth (*largamente*). He also gives it a wonderful new sound. Earlier, it was played by the

first violins accompanied by the other strings with two horns and bassoons; now cellos along with horns and bassoons in alternation join the violins, and the full orchestra (except the trombones) accompanies. Enjoy the melody now: it will not return, at least not whole.

Brahms actually continues as though he meant to give us the melody once more, in a new key, E-flat, but he abandons it almost immediately. The pizzicatos from the introduction appear in ghost form and insist on attention. Fragments of the great melody—specifically, its second, third, fourth, and fifth notes—stay in the air. The mood becomes ever more restless and excited. The surprising vehicle for this heightening is a musical idea that we first met in an atmosphere of sovereign calm, the luminous horn call from the introduction. With violent rhythmic dislocations, this theme propels the music into the recapitulation. Nothing is more exciting than the one beat of silence—a downbeat at that—just before the horn call returns, *fortissimo*, with the passionate quality that was always latent in it now fully realized.

The recapitulation itself is fiercely compressed, the most notable point of compaction being the omission of the great “Beethoven Ninth” theme. First, the tensions generated in the preceding couple of minutes of the development are released in a passage of spacious broadening and calming. From this, Brahms moves directly into the graceful *dolce-and-animato* theme. Shimmering string tremolandos remind us of the introduction, and we hear the first few notes—but only the first few notes—of the “Beethoven” melody. Then Brahms accelerates into a driving coda, at whose high point the solemn hymnal phrase from the introduction blazes its way across the stage in a final, triumphant transformation.

For his successors, Beethoven was a presence both scary and inspiring. Brahms was neurotic, but when at last he brought himself to move, he moved surely. Joachim, writing to him in March 1877, just after introducing the First Symphony in Cambridge, England, referred to it as a piece that “really gets to people.” That has not changed.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

—Adapted from a note by Michael Steinberg

Michael Steinberg’s note on the Brahms Symphony No.1 originally appeared in the program books of the San Francisco Symphony.

Michael Steinberg was Program Annotator for the New York Philharmonic from 1995–2000. He is the author of The Symphony and The Concerto, both published by Oxford University Press.