Johannes Brahms did much of his best work during his summer vacations, which he usually spent at some bucolic getaway in the Austrian countryside. His modus operandi was to find a spot that agreed with him, spend a summer or two or three there, and then move on to another vacation locale, never putting down roots in his summer residences as he did in his adopted city of Vienna. He spent the summer of 1880 in Bad Ischl, a charming town in the Salzkammergut, a favorite getaway for aristocrats (including Emperor Franz Josef), celebrities, and persons who wanted to be in their orbit. His months there would not prove to be especially productive. The weather was unusually cold and rainy, and when he came down with an ear infection he dashed back to Vienna, terrified that he might be going deaf like Beethoven before him. His surgeon-friend Theodor Billroth took him to an ear specialist and Brahms promptly recovered and returned to Bad Ischl. Still, amid all the distractions he did manage to compose his two orchestral overtures, the jolly Academic Festival and the brooding Tragic.

The Academic Festival Overture came first. One of Brahms’s old friends was a conductor and composer named Bernhard Scholz, who lived in Breslau and arranged for the University of Breslau to bestow an honorary doctorate on Brahms. The event took place on March 11, 1879, at which time Brahms’s diploma declared him to be Artis musicae sevrioris in Germani nunc principi (“the most famous living German composer of serious music”). Few honors are really free, and in this case Scholz made it clear that the university would expect a new composition in acknowledgement. “Compose a fine symphony for us!” he wrote to Brahms. “But well orchestrated, old boy, not too uniformly thick!” A symphony was too much to hope for, but Brahms did at least come up with a piece that was far from thick in its orchestration — or excessively intellectual, or gloomy, or other attributes that probably would have been wrong for the occasion.

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany
Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Works composed and premiered:
Academic Festival Overture, composed in summer 1880, in Bad Ischl, Upper Austria; premiered January 4, 1881, in Breslau, Germany (today Wrocław, Poland), with the composer conducting the Breslau Orchestral Society. Symphony No. 4 composed in the summers of 1884 and 1885; premiered October 25, 1885, in Meiningen, Germany, with the composer conducting the Meiningen Ducal Chapel Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances: Academic Festival Overture, premiered November 3, 1881, with Leopold Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928); most recently performed November 3, 2010, at the Philharmonie Luxembourg in Luxembourg, Alan Gilbert, conductor. Symphony No. 4, premiered December 10, 1886, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony; most recently played May 30, 2015, Manfred Honeck, conductor

Estimated durations: Academic Festival Overture, ca. 10 minutes; Symphony No. 4, ca. 44 minutes
but back in 1853 he had spent a lot of time hanging around the University of Göttingen with his friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, and therefore had a pretty good idea about what might delight the young scholars in Breslau. The resulting work is one of Brahms’s most delightful inspirations, one that incorporates no fewer than four student songs popular at the time, cleverly draped in robes bespeaking musical knowledge. Brahms described it as “a pretty medley of songs à la Suppé.” Possibly he was recalling that in 1863 the overture to Franz von Suppé’s operetta Flotte Bursche had employed the tune “Gaudeamus igitur,” which also caps off the Academic Festival Overture in the style of a grand chorale. The other student songs heard are “Wir hatten gebauet ein staatliches Haus” (“We Have Built a Stately House”), which trumpets and horns sing out, dolce, in the introduction (Allegro); “Hört ich sing” (a.k.a. the “Landesvater”) as the second theme in the main section (L’istesso tempo, un poco maestoso); and “Was kommt dort von der Höh” (a.k.a. the “Fuchsi Lied”), announced by bassoons (animato). Song quotations notwithstanding, this is anything but an idle potpourri; after a serious introduction (rather akin to the celebrated Rákóczi March), Brahms fashions his material into an evolved sort of sonata form — a marvelous melding of the popular and the academic.

“I shall never write a symphony!” Brahms famously declared in 1872. “You can’t have any

Listen for … Brahms’s Battery

Brahms was not enamored of percussion instruments. Timpani were a part of his symphonic arsenal, but apart from them the percussion section has little to do when Brahms is on the program. The exception is the Academic Festival Overture, which finds Brahms at his most unbuttoned, employing with joyful abandon the triangle, cymbals, and bass drum, in addition to timpani. He also called for a triangle in his Variations on a Theme by Haydn and in his Fourth Symphony, but this work is the only instance of bass drum or cymbals in his entire oeuvre.

Beethoven had used them, after all, so at least Brahms felt “allowed” to employ them, too. In Beethoven, and in the generations surrounding him, the combination of bass drum, cymbals, and triangle was often used to evoke what was described as Turkish music, the colorful and percussive sounds of the Janissary bands that the Viennese found exotic and captivating. In fact, Brahms even considered titling this work the Janissary Overture before he settled on its eventual name.

Principal Percussion Christopher S. Lamb on cymbals, and Assistant Principal Percussion Kyle Zerna on bass drum in 2012
idea what it’s like to hear such a giant marching behind you.” The giant was Beethoven, of course, and 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.

Four more years passed before Brahms would finally sign off on his First Symphony. But once he had conquered his compositional demons he moved ahead forcefully. Three symphonies followed 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, while introspective and idyllic on the whole, mixes in a hefty dose of heroism. With his Symphony No. 4, 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,

Sources and Inspirations

Brahms spent the summers of 1884 and 1885 — the summers of the Fourth Symphony — at Mürzzuschlag — a charming Styrian village at the southern end of the Semmering Pass, about a two-hour train trip southwest from Vienna. He rented rooms that met his basic requirements: a decent view (in this case oriented toward the town square rather than the surrounding mountains), large enough to hold a good piano, and near a worthy restaurant. He instantly became a local celebrity, and he was amused one day to witness two passers-by stopped in front of the house, one whispering ecstatically to the other, “Do you hear? Brahms is playing.” He was able to witness this because the sounds actually emanated from another musician who happened to be lodging there.

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 memorabilia relevant to Brahms’s vacations, including the piano he rented while he was in town — the one the passersby were not listening to.
“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 the places 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 he perfectly evoked the bittersweet quality that pervades many of the Fourth Symphony’s pages.

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 repeated insistence on the interval of the third, especially the minor third), and its movements accordingly proceed with a 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, quite a contrast to the lighter, even wistful allegretto intermezzi that had served as the third movements of his first three. And for his finale, Brahms unleashes a gigantic passacaglia, a neo-Baroque structure in which an eight-measure progression (here 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 to several of his trusted friends and was miffed when they all responded with concern over this or that. His confidante Elisabet von Herzogenberg insisted that she respected the piece, but she 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 Brahms throw away the third movement entirely, use the finale as a free-standing piece, and compose two new movements to replace them. The composer did not cave in, but he anticipated the symphony’s premiere with mounting apprehension. His music had long been criticized as “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:** *Academic Festival Overture* calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, and strings. Symphony No. 4 employs two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, and strings.