

Notes on the Program

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String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 51, No. 2 Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98

Johannes Brahms

As a journeyman composer, Johannes Brahms wrote 20 exploratory string quartets and then used their manuscripts to paper the walls and ceilings of his apartment. “I had only to lie on my back to admire my sonatas and quartets,” he reminisced of his room in Hamburg.

They served as preparatory work for the three string quartets of his maturity. Although the **String Quartet No. 2 in A minor** appears to have hatched over a long period, Brahms’s final, intensive efforts with it are documented, especially in his correspondence with his musical surgeon-friend Theodor Billroth. In July 1873, when Brahms was spending the summer at the Bavarian resort of Tutzing on the Starnberger See, he wrote, in the self-deprecating fashion that was characteristic of his discussions about new compositions:

I am in the act of publishing for the first time — but not writing for the first time — a string quartet. It is not only the affectionate thoughts of you and of your friendship which prevail upon me to dedicate this to you. I just happen to think of you with such pleasure as a violinist and sextet player. A volume of tremendously difficult piano variations you would probably take even more to your heart, and they would certainly do you more justice. But there’s no help for it. You have to accept this dedication as it stands.

He announced the piece’s birth to his anxious publisher, Fritz Simrock, in similar terms:

I always take great pains, hoping that I will come up with a great and terrible [work] — and they always turn out small and pitiful! I can’t wait for them to get better!

In fact, Brahms had created a masterpiece, a serious, uncompromising piece that everywhere bears his immediately identifiable language, rich in poignant harmonic suspensions, rhythmic displacements, nervous passion, and melting lyricism.

In Short

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Works composed and premiered: String Quartet No. 2, composed 1866 through the summer of 1873; dedicated to the composer’s physician friend Theodor Billroth; premiered October 18, 1873, at the Berlin Singakademie, by the Joachim String Quartet. 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: this marks the first performance of String Quartet No. 2. Symphony No. 4, premiered December 10, 1886, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928); most recently played, November 15, 2016, Itzhak Perlman, conductor

Estimated durations: String Quartet No. 2, ca. 35 minutes; Symphony No. 4, ca. 44 minutes

The principal theme of the first movement includes the sequence of notes F-A-E, which are the melody's second, third, and fourth notes. This was a musical encoding using the first letters of the personal motto of Brahms's violinist friend Joseph Joachim, "Frei aber einsam" ("Free but lonely"). Some scholars have taken this as evidence that Brahms may have initially intended to dedicate this work to Joachim, whose string quartet played through provisional versions of the piece and then performed its premiere. A misunderstanding clouded their friendship briefly at that time, and this may explain why Brahms inscribed the work instead to Billroth. Brahms's complementary motto was presumably "Frei aber froh" ("Free but happy"), and, in fact, its musical translation (F-A-F, or the inversion thereof) is woven into the musical texture.

Listeners who worry that Brahms's string quartets are severe may take heart in the A-major second movement, a supremely beautiful expanse. Its phrases unroll at a leisurely pace, not wanting to end but rather

developing into extensions of themselves and then, seamlessly, into the phrases of new themes. The effect is magical. A brief change of character inhabits a central *marcato* passage in which the first violin and the cello play a strongly accented melody in canon — with emphatic dotted-note rhythms and violently disjunct intervals — after which the spacious calm returns for the movement's conclusion. Among this movement's particular admirers was Arnold Schoenberg, who found this piece altogether admirable in the subtle complexity of its interlocking phrases.

Brahms quaintly casts his third movement in terms of the old-fashioned minuet, even if only *Quasi minuetto* ("To some degree a minuet"). Here the main "minuet" is ominous, even spectral, and the central trio section is an animated *Allegretto vivace*; when the opening material returns, Brahms invests it with an added degree of contrapuntal braininess.

The *Finale* is not less intense than what has come before, but Brahms seasons it, sparingly, with an audience-friendly Magyar

Brahms and Chamber Music

Chamber music was more central to Brahms than to any other composer of his time. It occupied him steadily from his years of apprenticeship to his fullest maturity. The 24 full-scale chamber compositions he completed (not counting vocal ensembles or pieces for piano duet or four-hands) are without question the most imposing body of such work from the post-Beethoven era. Brahms found the precedent of Beethoven as intimidating when it came to string quartets as he did with symphonies. So it is that one finds Brahms producing two piano quartets, two string sextets, a piano quintet, and a horn trio — none of them for a combination that invited comparison to Beethoven — before finally signing off on his first two string quartets (Op. 51, Nos. 1 and 2) in 1873, when he was already 40 years old.



Illustration of the Joachim String Quartet, which premiered Brahms's String Quartet No. 2, in performance at the Berlin Singakademie, with violinist Joseph Joachim depicted at third from left

flavor. In fact, this movement is every bit as uncompromising and intellectual as anything previous to it in this quartet, filled as it is with complicated rhythmic dissonances and with tight junctures worked out according to strict canonical procedures.

“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, and although his music provided essential inspiration for Brahms, it also set

Travelogue



Brahms found that his creative juices flowed most freely during his summer vacations, which he spent in a succession of villages in the Austrian, German, Swiss, or Italian countryside. He spent the summers of 1884 and 1885 — the summers of the **Fourth Symphony** — at Mürzzuschlag, a charmed Styrian village about a two-hour train trip southwest from Vienna.

He rented rooms that met his basic requirements: a decent view (in this case toward the town square rather than the surrounding mountains), large enough to hold a good piano, near a worthy restaurant. Brahms instantly became a local celebrity, and he was amused one day to witness two passersby 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 in the same house.

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 contains memorabilia relevant to the composer’s vacations and sponsors innumerable mostly Brahms concerts — before or after fetching a refreshment from the Brahms-Bar.



From top: Brahms statue in Mürzzuschlag; a sign along the town’s Brahmsweg trails where he hiked