

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68

Johannes Brahms

In 1872 Johannes Brahms famously declared to the conductor Hermann Levi, “I shall never write a symphony! 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 such a high standard that the younger composer found it easy to discount his own creations as negligible in comparison.

Nonetheless, the young Brahms proved relentless in confronting his compositional demons. Rather than lead to a creative block, his self-criticism pushed him to forge ahead even when his eventual path seemed obscure. He drafted the first movement of this symphony in 1862 and shared it with his friend Clara Schumann. She copied out the opening and sent it along to their friend Joseph Joachim (the violinist), with this comment:

That is rather strong, for sure, but I have grown used to it. The movement is full of wonderful beauties, and the themes are treated with a mastery that is becoming more and more characteristic of him. It is all interwoven in such an interesting way, and yet it moves forward with such momentum that it might have been poured forth in its entirety in the first flush of inspiration.

She then jotted a musical example — essentially the spot where the main section of the first movement begins (*Allegro*) following the slower introduction. Calling the opening “rather strong” is surely an understatement. That first movement’s introduction is one of the most astonishing preludes in the entire symphonic literature, with throbbing timpani underpinning the orchestra’s taut phrases — a texture that seizes the listener’s attention and remains engraved in the memory.

Word got around that Brahms was working on a symphony, and he found himself having to deflect inquiries about his progress, most pointedly from his eager publisher, Fritz Simrock. Eleven years later, Simrock wrote a beseeching letter to the composer: “Aren’t you doing anything any more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in ’73 either?” No, he was not — nor in ’74 or ’75 either. Not until 1876 would Brahms finally sign off on his First Symphony, at least provisionally, since he would revise it further prior to its publication the following year. He was 43 years old and had been struggling with the piece on and off for 14 years.

“My symphony is long and not particularly lovable,” wrote Brahms to his fellow composer Carl Reinecke when this piece was unveiled. He was right about it being long, at least when compared to other symphonies of his era. He was probably also right about it not being particularly lovable. Even the warmth of the second movement and

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: on and off for about 14 years beginning in 1862; provisionally completed in September 1876 but revised substantially prior to its publication in 1877

World premiere: November 4, 1876, in Karlsruhe, Baden, Germany, with Otto Dessoff conducting the Grossherzogliche Hofkapelle

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 22, 1877, Theodore Thomas, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 24, 2015, Semyon Bychkov, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 46 minutes

the geniality of the third are interrupted by passages of anxiety, and the outer movements are designed to impress rather than to charm. Brahms's First is a big, burly symphony, certainly when compared to his next two. It is probably no more "lovable" than Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, or Goethe's *Faust*.

The symphony's "purpose" is essentially articulated in its outer movements; against these, the second and third movements stand as a two-part intermezzo, throwing the weighty proceedings that surround them into higher relief. The four movements proceed according to a key arrangement of ascending thirds (remembering that A-flat

The New York Philharmonic Connection



Following its World Premiere, Brahms's First Symphony took more than a year to arrive in America — but when it arrived, it did so with a fury. The US Premiere fell to conductor Leopold Damrosch and his namesake orchestra at Steinway Hall on December 15, 1877. Within a week it was also performed by the Brooklyn Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic, with Theodore Thomas conducting on both occasions. Walter Damrosch, Leopold's son and his successor as director of the New York Symphony Society (a post Walter relinquished when it merged with the New York Philharmonic Society in 1928), reported in his memoirs (*My Musical Life*, 1923):

The first production of the First Symphony by Brahms became a subject of intense rivalry between the two conductors. My father went to see old Gustav Schirmer at his store on Broadway and asked him whether the orchestral score of the work had yet arrived. Schirmer told him that it had, but that he was in honor bound to give it to Theodore Thomas, as he had promised it to him. My father ... spoke of this very regretfully to a pupil of his in composition, Mrs. James Nielson, member of an aristocratic old family in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and a woman of great beauty and distinction. ... Mrs. Nielson said nothing at the time, but went quietly down to Schirmer's and inquired of the clerk whether the orchestral score of the Brahms symphony had arrived, and when he answered in the affirmative, she asked whether it was for sale. "Certainly," answered the clerk.

She thereupon purchased a copy of the score and sent it up to my father with her compliments. ...

This left but little time to obtain the necessary orchestral parts, and Schirmer naturally would not sell him any. He therefore cut the score into three parts and divided them among three copyists who worked day and night and managed to have the parts ready in time for rehearsal. Great was the triumph in the Damrosch camp at this victory.



Symphonic rivals:
conductors Leopold Damrosch (top)
and Theodore Thomas

is the enharmonic equivalent of G-sharp): the first movement in C minor, the second in E major, the third in A-flat major, and the finale in C minor again. Brahms was decidedly not following any model he could have found in Beethoven's symphonies, which for the most part still operated according to the harmonic relationships of the Classical era — relationships that tended to set movements at the degree of a fourth or fifth away from the work's overriding tonic key. In

contrast, Brahms explores an architecture based on thirds-relationships that increasingly interested composers as the 19th century progressed, an evolution in harmonic practice that would shortly lead to radical, new stances about the nature of tonality itself.

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

Listen for . . . a Bow to Beethoven

Even at the first hearing of Brahms' First Symphony, informed listeners could not have overlooked how deeply beholden Brahms really was to Beethoven. Any symphony that begins in C minor and, following considerable struggle, concludes in C major invites comparison with Beethoven's Fifth. Brahms almost never used slow introductions, preferring instead to jump right into the fray: yet, here he begins both his first and last movements with exordia that cement his place in the Beethoven tradition. And when people leapt to point out how the main tune of Brahms's finale resembled the corresponding theme in Beethoven's Ninth, Brahms responded, "Any ass can see that."

Beethoven's Symphony No. 9

Allegro assai

Cellos and Basses

p

cresc. p

cresc. p

Brahms's Symphony No. 1

Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

1st Violins

poco f

p

tr

p

Precisely what Brahms meant when he made such a reference in this context is up for debate. Surely he did not evoke Beethoven merely to be provocative. The late scholar Reinhold Brinkmann argued that, in alluding to Beethoven's famous choral finale, but now in a strictly instrumental symphony, Brahms took back the implications of his model, restoring the tradition of the Beethovenian symphony to a purely instrumental world of expression.