

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98

Johannes Brahms

“I shall never write a symphony!” Johannes 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 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 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, though often introspective and even idyllic, 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. Brahms’s friend and musical confidant, 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 the 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. 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 — 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 (largely through the pervasive 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

In Short

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: summers of 1884 and 1885

World premiere: October 25, 1885, in Meiningen, Germany, with the composer conducting the Meiningen Ducal Chapel Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 10, 1886, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 15, 2016, Itzhak Perlman, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 44 minutes

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; a view of the town, ca. 1900

Brahms included a real scherzo in a symphony, quite a contrast to the lighter, even wistful *allegretto* intermezzos 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 he throw away the third movement entirely, use the finale as a free-standing 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 "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.

Views and Reviews



Hans von Bülow, ca. 1885

Brahms conducted the World Premiere of his Symphony No. 4, leading the Meiningen Ducal Chapel Orchestra, and he subsequently took the work on tour with that group to several cities in Germany and the Netherlands — but not before the orchestra's conductor, Hans von Bülow, conducted a second performance in Meiningen. Von Bülow was one of the most prominent conductors and pianists of the day — he conducted the World Premiere of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865 and performed the World Premiere of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 in 1875 — and a champion of Brahms's music. He offered effusive praise of the symphony during initial rehearsals, jotting these notes:

Difficult, very difficult. No. 4 gigantic, altogether a law unto itself, quite new, steely individuality. Exudes unparalleled energy from first note to last.

— The Editors