

Notes on the Program

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Tragic Overture, Op. 81

Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms did much of his best work during his summer vacations, which he usually spent at some bucolic getaway in the Austrian countryside. He spent the summer of 1880 in Bad Ischl, a charming town in the Salzkammergut. It had been an unremarkable, if beautiful, crossroads until the mid-19th century, when Archduke Franz Karl and Archduchess Sophie were drawn by its forests for hunting and its mineral springs for soaking. Before long the place blossomed into a proper spa.

The summer of 1880 would not prove especially productive for Brahms. The weather was 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, his only essays of the type.

Over and over in Brahms's career one finds him working simultaneously (or in quick succession) on pairs of pieces that complement each other in their complete emotional contrast. So it is that his chest-beating *Tragic Overture* stands at 180 degrees from his jovial *Academic Festival Overture*, its exact contemporary. In fact, it was included in the same program in Breslau (on January 4, 1881) at which the *Academic Festival* was premiered. That was not, however, the premiere of the *Tragic*, which had already been introduced by the Vienna Philharmonic more than a week earlier.

On August 28, 1880, Brahms wrote from Bad Ischl to his friend Dr. Billroth (who had seen him through his ear infection), "The

Academic has led me to a second overture which I can only entitle the *Dramatic*, which does not please me." Three weeks later he informed Bernhard Scholz in Breslau, "You may include a 'dramatic' or 'tragic' or 'Tragedy Overture' in your program for January 6; I cannot find a proper title to fit it." To his composer-friend Carl Reinecke he commented, "One weeps while the other laughs."

The music critic Herrmann Dieters, an early Brahms biographer, wrote:

In this work we see a strong hero battling with an iron and relentless fate; passing hopes of victory cannot alter an impending destiny. We do not care to inquire whether the composer had a special tragedy in his mind, or if so, which one; those

In Short

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: summer 1880 in Bad Ischl, Upper Austria, perhaps drawing on earlier sketches

World premiere: December 26, 1880, at the Musikvereinsaal in Vienna, by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Hans Richter, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 12, 1881, Theodore Thomas, conductor, which marked the New York Premiere

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 22, 2018, Semyon Bychkov, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 13 minutes

who remain musically unconvinced by the unsurpassably powerful theme, would not be assisted by a particular suggestion.

an enthusiast of this piece, took the composer at his word:

The Brahms scholar Max Kalbeck felt that the composer did have a special tragedy in his mind: Goethe's *Faust*. Brahms was supposed to write incidental music for a production comprising both parts of that literary dramatic monument at the Vienna Burgtheater, although the project came to naught. (According to Kalbeck, Brahms also conceived the second and third movements of the Third Symphony for that project.)

For his part, Brahms maintained that this piece was not connected to any tragedy in particular. That should be the end of the discussion, but Brahms so often spoke falsehoods about his compositions, whether for ironic or other reasons, that one has trouble knowing when to believe him and when to shrug him off. The musical commentator Donald Francis Tovey,

Brahms's *Tragic Overture* is certainly not written at the dictation of any one tragedy, either in literature or in his own experience; and any tragic characters of which it may remind us can be safely regarded as our own illustrations of its meaning.

There were a number of Beethovenian precedents for such a piece, such as the overtures to *Coriolan* or *Egmont*; and Schumann's *Manfred* Overture might be cited as a work of a similar sort — from Brahms's own mentor, no less. It requires little stretch of the imagination to assume that Brahms was carrying out a strictly musical exercise within that distinguished lineage.

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

Travelogue

Bad Ischl, where Brahms composed his *Tragic Overture*, was an odd vacation choice for the composer, who ostensibly wanted to be ignored during his summer holidays. The town was overrun with aristocrats (including Austrian Emperor Franz Josef), celebrities, and persons who wanted to be in their orbit. Brahms couldn't really hide from "the music crowd" in a place populated by the likes of Giacomo Meyerbeer, Anton Bruckner, Hugo Wolf, Johann Strauss II, Oscar Straus, Otto Nicolai, Franz von Suppé, and Franz Lehár, to name a few. At least it was a Viennese getaway. "If half of Berlin or Leipzig were here, I'd probably run away," Brahms wrote to his friends Heinrich and Elisabet von Herzogenberg, "but half of Vienna is very pretty and very easy to look at."



After 1880 he returned there again in the summers of 1882 and 1889. It was during the last of those summers that Alice Strauss (daughter of Johann II) asked Brahms to sign her fan — that is what one did back then — and he obliged by jotting the opening measures of the *Blue Danube Waltz* and the inscription "Unfortunately not by yours truly, Johannes Brahms."

A view of Bad Ischl by Ernst Welker, ca. 1857