

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

JOHANNES BRAHMS

B. May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany

D. April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria

Premiered December 30, 1877 in the Vienna Musikverein with the Vienna Philharmonic under the baton of Hans Richter.

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings (approx. 45 minutes).

There are many contrasts in both Johannes Brahms's life and music. Brahms was an introvert with a prickly temper, but he felt the loss of loved ones deeply. And though he became quite wealthy in his life and lavished generous financial support on those around him, he himself lived as a spendthrift and dressed as a pauper. In his *oeuvre*, certain pairs of Brahms's pieces stand out as representatives of this dual nature. The *Academic Festival Overture* and *Tragic Overture* are examples of such pairings. So too are the first two symphonies.

The story of the first symphony's completion is bound to another "B" — Ludwig van Beethoven. Brahms, looking over his shoulder at Beethoven's symphonic legacy, grappled with so much anxiety that he did not complete his first symphony until 1876, when he was 43 years old, after working on the piece for more than a decade. This inaugural symphony is clearly a tribute to Beethoven, battling with musical vestiges of the old master in an epic style.

The second symphony was completed in a whirlwind of energy following the premiere of the first, during the next summer (1877). Brahms spent those months in the Austrian resort town of Pörschach, on the Wörthersee. His second symphony has often been described as conjuring images of the idyllic countryside - his "landscape" symphony - and this description holds much truth. However, it is also true that Brahms's second symphony serves as a counterpart to the first; whereas the first symphony struggled to come to terms with a tradition of greatness, the second relaxes in the knowledge that it is a valuable work, built to last. In other words, the first symphony looks on a great past, while the second exists in a peaceful present and future.

The first few measures of the work are especially important; simple and understated, two themes are presented which form the basis of most of the melodic material in the entire symphony. The first is the four-note motive played by the cellos and basses, and the second follows in the horns, transformed immediately in the woodwinds. The presentation of these themes forms the introduction of a sonata-allegro form. The sonata's first full theme, played first by the violins and then echoed by the flute, is derived from the first bass notes of the introduction. The second theme, reminiscent of Brahms's famous lullaby, *Wiegenlied* Op. 49, No. 4, is a continuation of the organic transformation of themes already presented.

The soaring cello theme that begins the second movement is as fine an example as any of a late-Romantic adagio. This is contrasted by the second theme, presented first in

the woodwinds, which is distinctly lighter in character. The change is set off further by an alteration in time signature and instrumentation. The movement is a weighty one, as the two different themes take time to develop with Brahms's characteristic depth of emotion.

The third movement is a light respite from the heaviness of the first two movements. It is a stylized *Ländler*, which was a popular Germanic folk dance for couples. Its principle theme is interrupted by hints of a symphonic scherzo in the middle section, creating sonic interplay between the popular and elevated forms commonly explored in the third movement.

The fourth movement is marked *Allegro con spirito*, and what spirit it has! After a quiet, unassuming start, a sudden, forceful forte employing most of the orchestra drives the music forward, ramping up energy that hardly lets off until the end. The compact sonata form usually lasts only half as long as the first movement, and all is resolved in a triumphant D-major chord that is heralded by the trombones with the full orchestra following suit.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Brahms' Symphony No. 2 on April 2, 2005 with Jerzy Semkow conducting.

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Program note by Sarah Gerk, doctoral student in musicology at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance.