

Johannes Brahms

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Opus 98

JOHANNES BRAHMS was born in the free city of Hamburg on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. The first mention of his Fourth Symphony is in a letter of August 19, 1884, to his publisher, Fritz Simrock. The work must have been completed about a year later, and in October 1885 he gave a two-piano reading of it with Ignaz Brüll in Vienna for a small group of friends including the critic Eduard Hanslick, the surgeon Theodor Billroth, the conductor Hans Richter, and the historian and Haydn biographer C.F. Pohl. Brahms conducted the first orchestral performance on October 25, 1885, at Meiningen.

THE SCORE OF BRAHMS'S SYMPHONY NO. 4 calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, and strings. Piccolo and triangle appear in the third movement only, contrabassoon in the third and fourth movements only, and the trombones in the fourth movement only.

When Brahms was finishing a big piece he would usually notify friends that something was forthcoming. In that process he was apt to be most flip and ironic concerning the works he most cared about, such as the Fourth Symphony. In August 1885, from mountainous Müzzuschlag, Brahms sent his adviser Elizabeth von Herzogenberg the first movement of a symphony: "Would you...tell me what you think of it?...Cherries never get ripe for eating in these parts, so don't be afraid to say if you don't like the taste. I'm not at all eager to write a bad No. 4." Back in Vienna, when a friend asked if he'd done a string quartet or the like over the summer, Brahms replied, "Nothing so grand as that! Once again I've just thrown together a bunch of polkas and waltzes."

Like any composer, Brahms worried about the reception of a new work. He was more anxious than usual about the Fourth Symphony. His previous two symphonies had scored immediate successes, and that upped the ante for this one. Meanwhile, Brahms perhaps suspected he did not have a Fifth in him. And in its tone and import, the Fourth was the darkest and most densely crafted symphonic work he had put before the public. His relief was manifest when its early performances, starting in Meiningen on October 25, 1885, found tremendous acclaim.

The symphony's inception went back several years. In 1880 Brahms played friends a bass line from a Bach cantata on which Bach had built a chaconne, a work consisting of variations over a repeated bass pattern. Brahms queried, "What would you think of a symphonic movement written on this theme someday?" Thus the finale of the Fourth. For that movement he was thinking of other models, including Bach's Chaconne in D minor for solo violin, of which Brahms once said: "If I had written this piece...the emotions excited would have driven me mad."

All of these are clues to how Brahms conceived the Fourth, a work of whose expressive import he never spoke directly. Instead, he said: the cherries never get ripe in these mountains; writing a piece like Bach's chaconne would drive me mad.

How do these hints play out in the Fourth Symphony? Three of its movements are in the minor mode, or a haunting, minor-tinted major. As he often did, Brahms concealed truth behind irony when he called the symphony "a bunch of polkas and waltzes." Most of the music reflects, however distantly, the rhythms and gestures of dance. These dances, however, are not blithe but grave.

The piece begins with a lilting E minor theme, its melodic profile a chain of thirds that will permeate the melodic material of the symphony. Soon the music verges into elaborate contrapuntal variations, which will also characterize the piece. The overall tone of the first movement might be called somber nobility, with subtle shades of emotion washing through the texture.

The second movement, with its incantatory leading melody, has a tone primeval and ceremonial, like a procession for a fallen hero. In their mournful beauty, the orchestral colors are unique in Brahms, revealing his long study of Wagner and looking forward to Mahler and even Ravel. Then comes an almost shocking contrast—a leaping, pounding, two-beat C major "Allegro giocoso" that has been called "bacchanalian," and "tiger-like."

All of that is to set up the last movement: mostly minor, at times hair-raisingly intense. It is the chaconne about which Brahms had once speculated for a finale: an introduction and thirty variations over the steadily repeating Bach theme (which Brahms adapted, adding a chromatic note). In its treatment of a ruthlessly disciplined form the finale is a triumphant tour de force, and many critics have taken it for little else. But Brahms used the idea of the chaconne to evoke—as in its model, the Bach D minor—a sense of relentless, mounting tragedy. The end, where tradition says

the darkness of minor should be lightened by a final turn to major, is a searing minor chord, the timpani pounding out the Brahmsian fate-motif.

After Brahms died, conductor Felix Weingartner offered an interpretation: “I cannot get away from the impression of an inexorable fate implacably driving some great creation, whether of an individual or a whole race, toward its downfall....[The finale is] a veritable orgy of destruction, a terrible counterpart to the paroxysm of joy at the end of Beethoven’s last symphony.”

Is that excessive—a race driving toward its downfall? In 1883, when the Fourth was taking shape, Brahms wrote his publisher: “In [Austria], where everything...tumbles downhill, you can’t expect music to fare better. Really it’s a pity and a crying shame, not only for music but for the whole beautiful land and the beautiful marvelous people. I still think catastrophe is coming.”

What catastrophe was Brahms talking about for Vienna, for Austria, for music? We can trace that mounting concern (despair is not too strong a word) in pieces from the late 1860s on. It is there in the sorrowful beginning of the Alto Rhapsody: “Who can heal the pains/Of one...who sucked hatred of mankind/From the abundance of love?” Two years later came the choral *Schicksalslied* (*Song of Fate*), with its shattering middle section: “Suffering mankind/Wastes away, falls blindly...down into endless uncertainty.” Those works end not exactly with hope, but with the possibility of it. By 1882 and the *Gesang der Parzen* (*Song of the Fates*), even a tenuous hope has vanished. It begins “Let the race of man/Fear the gods!” and ends in bleakness. In choosing those texts, was Brahms talking about himself, childless and lonely and aging? To a degree, certainly. But the real catastrophe he saw coming was not just his own.

In 1895 Vienna elected a new mayor, Karl Lueger, who made reactionary antisemitism the formula for political success. His election marked the end of power of the wealthy liberals who had largely built and run modern Vienna—and who were its most passionate music lovers. In Austria and in Germany, the most dynamic faction within that class were well-to-do, assimilated Jews. Those Jews above all were the targets of the ascendant Austro-German right wing. The night Lueger was elected, Brahms barked to friends: “Didn’t I tell you years ago that it was going to happen? You laughed at me then....Now it’s here....Antisemitism is madness!”

What had come was the beginning of the catastrophe Brahms had foretold. He did not just mean antisemitism. He meant the agenda that came with it: the exalting of the “world-transforming” antisemite Wagner, and his disciple Bruckner; the doctrine of racial purity and blood instinct; the suppression of the liberal, music-loving middle class, Jewish and otherwise. Brahms could not have known where the madness was heading, but we do: toward Hitler. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote about how Vienna had shaped his consciousness, especially concerning the Jews.

In his last years Brahms saw his class being destroyed, and he believed that music—his own music, and the great tradition he loved—would be consumed along with it. In 1896, in the *Vier ernste Gesänge* (*Four Serious Songs*) that were his last testament, Brahms took the first notes of the Fourth Symphony, the chain of thirds B-G-E-C, and set to them the words “O death! O death!”

None of this is to say that Brahms prophesied the Nazis, or that he was the only person in Vienna who saw something malevolent taking shape. No one could have foreseen the final, incredible shape of the catastrophe. Nor is this to say that the Fourth Symphony is a literal story or prophecy.

For good reason, in his last years Brahms feared for his music, for all music, for his class, for his civilization. So in his last symphony he sang of that despair, sang in music of the highest craft of a craft he saw dying, and composed his elegy in the forms of solemn and mournful dances.

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THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of Brahms’s *Symphony No. 4* would have been given by Wilhelm Gericke and the Boston Symphony Orchestra on November 27, 1886, but upon conducting the work at the public rehearsal on the 26th of that month, Gericke cancelled the scheduled performance after making highly critical remarks to the

audience about the new score. He rescheduled the work for the following month, but in the meantime the first American performance was given by Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony on December 11, 1886.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES of Brahms's Symphony No. 4 were conducted by Wilhelm Gericke on December 22 and 23, 1886, subsequent BSO performances being given by Arthur Nikisch, Emil Paur, Carl Wendling, Max Fiedler, Karl Muck, Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitzky, Eugene Goossens, Stanley Chapple, George Szell, Charles Munch, Leonard Bernstein, Richard Burgin, Vladimir Golschmann, Erich Leinsdorf, Rafael Kubelik, Carlo Maria Giulini, William Steinberg, Michael Tilson Thomas, Joseph Silverstein, Edo de Waart, Klaus Tennstedt, Colin Davis, Andrew Davis, Václav Neumann, Seiji Ozawa, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Bernard Haitink, Marek Janowski, Zdenek Macal, Itzhak Perlman, Daniele Gatti, Christoph von Dohnányi, James Levine, and Emmanuel Krivine. The most recent Tanglewood performance, led by Levine, was on July 23, 2005; the most recent subscription performances, also led by Levine, were in February 2007.