

Johannes Brahms

Serenade No. 2 in A, Opus 16

JOHANNES BRAHMS WAS BORN IN HAMBURG, GERMANY, ON MAY 7, 1833, AND DIED IN VIENNA ON APRIL 3, 1897. HE COMPOSED HIS SERENADE NO. 2 IN DETMOLD IN 1858 AND 1859, REVISING IT (MOSTLY BY ADDING DYNAMIC MARKINGS) IN 1875. BRAHMS CONDUCTED THE FIRST PERFORMANCE ON FEBRUARY 19, 1860, IN HAMBURG (HAVING ALREADY HEARD A PRIVATE RUN-THROUGH IN HANOVER THE PRECEDING MONTH).

BRAHMS'S SERENADE NO. 2 IS SCORED FOR A SMALL ORCHESTRA THAT ENTIRELY OMITTS VIOLINS: TWO FLUTES (WITH PICCOLO ADDED IN THE LAST MOVEMENT), TWO OBOES, TWO CLARINETS, TWO BASSOONS, TWO HORNS, AND A STRING SECTION OF VIOLAS, CELLOS, AND BASSES.

It is one of the best-known facts of Brahms's life that he put off the completion—or at least the performance—of a symphony for many years, even decades. He was by no means unpracticed in orchestral writing, however, since, in addition to sketches and drafts for the symphony to come, he produced material originally considered symphonic that subsequently found its way into his D minor piano concerto and into the *German Requiem*; and he completed and performed the two serenades, Opus 11 and Opus 16, and the *Haydn Variations*. The first of his two orchestral serenades, in D major, was originally conceived as a nonet and later expanded into full orchestral form; the A major serenade seems to have been planned from the beginning in its final scoring, woodwinds and horns in pairs and strings without violins.

Much has been made of the fact that Brahms banished the violins from this score. Some writers insist that he was influenced by Etienne-Nicolas Méhul's little-known one-act opera *Uthal* (1806), in which the composer wrote for an orchestra lacking violins to suggest the dark, Nordic setting of its Ossianic tale. But Brahms is hardly likely to have known the piece, though his wide-ranging familiarity with the musical repertory of preceding decades and even centuries continues to astonish. It seems more likely that his own predilection for darker tone-coloring, combined with a desire to throw the woodwinds into high relief, led to the choice.

We can be sure that Brahms had completed at least the first movement in some form by the end of 1858, since he sent the score along with several others to Clara Schumann for her reaction, and her comments, contained in a letter of December 20, are specific enough to identify the A major serenade without any doubt. The composition of the rest of the work appears to have taken much of 1859, since it was not until Clara's birthday (September 13) that Brahms sent her the Adagio and minuet (the third and fourth of five movements). The first performance came only a few months later, though, characteristically, Brahms insisted on hearing it privately before allowing the public premiere. The reception in Hamburg was favorable, and before many more months had passed the work was in print.

When Brahms went to Vienna in the fall of 1862 (hoping to be called back to Hamburg as conductor within a few months at most, and not expecting that he would live in Vienna the rest of his life), he undertook to produce the A major serenade in a concert there, where its novelties upset the members of the orchestra. Some of the players complained of the difficulty of their parts during rehearsals, and open mutiny broke out at the dress rehearsal, when the first clarinetist stood up and announced that he and some of the other musicians refused to play the piece. The conductor, Brahms's friend Otto Dessoff (who in November 1876 would lead the first performance of the composer's First Symphony), promptly threw down his baton and announced his resignation. He was followed just as promptly by other Brahmsians, the concertmaster Joseph Hellmesberger and the first flutist Franz Doppler. The immediate and enthusiastic support of these musicians convinced the malcontents to give way and return to the rehearsal. The performance itself was a great success for Brahms and helped establish him at once in his new residence.

The designation “serenade” hearkens back to Haydn and Mozart, by whom the term was frequently used for works of a lighter sort for a small orchestra or large chamber ensemble. While there is no denying the relaxation of some of the movements of Brahms’s two serenades, it is equally clear that his powers of musical construction have not been set aside. It seems most likely that Brahms purposely chose a genre that suggested lightness and a casual approach to avoid the expectations inherent in the notion of “symphony.”

The opening *Allegro moderato* is in a normal sonata form with a pair of melodies presenting contrasting motives, one climbing upwards in leisurely steps, the other descending in triplet motion. The theme played by the clarinets in the secondary key is contrasted to both of these, since it tends to hover lazily around a middle register with just a little touch of dotted rhythm to keep it moving. The development ranges as far afield as D-flat (a passage that Clara Schumann especially liked), but then it returns to the home key with a pedal on the tonic for some twenty-six measures (over which oboe and flute converse) before the return of the opening thematic material. Brahms has, in fact, brought us home without highlighting the fact and lets us realize only belatedly how long we have been there.

The lively scherzo plays on typically Brahmsian cross-rhythms throughout, even in the legato theme of the Trio, where the rhythmic background reminds us continually of the metrical ambivalence. The great *Adagio* is not only the middle movement of the serenade but also its expressive high point, revealing the contrapuntal skill that will become consummate mastery in Brahms’s next orchestral work, the *Haydn* Variations. The minuet—or rather “almost-minuet”—is in D major, a key that Brahms used later (in his Second Symphony and Violin Concerto) for moods of richly mellow lyricism; we find the same spirit here, though somewhat darkened in the Trio, where the main motive of the scherzo becomes an accompaniment figure to the sustained plaintive song. The finale, a delightful, high-spirited rondo, provides no problems. The level of energy never drops, and Brahms, normally the most undemonstrative of composers, goes so far as to add a piccolo for increased brilliance.

Steven Ledbetter