

Johannes Brahms

Symphony No. 2 in D, Opus 73

JOHANNES BRAHMS was born in the free city of Hamburg on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He composed his Symphony No. 2 during a productive summer stay at Pörschach in Carinthia (southern Austria). The first performance took place in Vienna on December 30, 1877, under the direction of Hans Richter.

THE SYMPHONY IS SCORED for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

In a letter to Clara Schumann, Johannes Brahms offhandedly revealed something fundamental about himself: "I always write only half-sentences, and the reader...must supply the other half." He was talking about his letters, which were often misread, and were often intended to be. In person and on the page, Brahms was chronically given to the oblique, the ironic, the unspoken. Likewise in some of his music we find an ironic play of surface appearance and hidden import; but in his art the irony was no joke, rather a symptom of his own thickly shrouded inner world.

Another example is the celebrated Brahmsian lyricism. When we think of his warmly lyrical moments we usually think of his instrumental works, rather than where we would expect to find that warmth, in his songs. When Brahms was setting words with their inescapable emotions, he pulled back; he only warmed fully within the abstractions of instrumental music. Yet despite his historical reputation as a creator of "pure" music, his life and feelings always went into his work, where they could at once lie hidden and sing for all the world.

Perhaps the most regularly misread of Brahms's major works is his Second Symphony. From the beginning, critics hailed it as a sunny and halcyon vacation from the turbulent First Symphony. The Second, everybody said, is Brahms's counterpart to Beethoven's *Pastoral*, and looks back further to Haydn and Mozart at their most congenial.

But if the Second paints an idyll, it is a lost idyll. Brahms himself hinted at its tangled import. To friend and critic Eduard Hanslick he wrote, "It'll sound so cheerful and lovely that you will think I wrote it specially for you or even your young lady." He cited the benevolent influence of his composing spot on the Wörthersee: "[there are] so many melodies flying around that you have to be careful not to step on them." Meanwhile, having just finished the First Symphony after some fifteen years of wrestling with it, Brahms completed the Second—and several smaller works—during one delightful four-month working vacation in the summer of 1877.

To Clara Schumann, however, Brahms described the symphony as "elegiac." To his publisher he wrote, "The new symphony is so melancholy that you won't be able to stand it. I've never written anything so sad...The score must appear with a black border." There the presumable joke is that the symphony usually strikes listeners as suave and enchanting. After all, every movement is in a major key.

The deeper irony hidden in Brahms's words is that the elegiac black border is as much a part of the symphony as its more explicit cheeriness. Brahms's Second is like a vision of nature and youth troubled by shadows that come and go like dark clouds in a summer sky.

In his book on the Second Symphony, *Late Idyll*, Harvard scholar Reinhold Brinkmann calls this supposed hymn to nature and serenity a "questioning of the pastoral world, a firm denial of the possibility of pure serenity." Brahms's testament to the past is haunted by a skepticism and foreboding that seem prophetic.

The questioning begins within the gentle opening. We hear a little three-note turn in the basses (D–C-sharp–D), a melodic shape that will pervade the symphony. The basses are answered by an elegant wind phrase that at once suggests a Strauss waltz (Brahms admired the Waltz King) and the hunting horns of a Haydn symphony or divertimento. But all this gracious simplicity is deceptive. Anyone trying to waltz to this opening will fall on his face: the phrasing of the basses and the answering winds are offset by one measure, with neither predominating. At times the movement falls into tumultuous stretches where the meter is dismantled. The breezy and beautiful first theme is followed by a fervent second theme that, in itself, is in A major—but harmonized in F-sharp minor. Throughout the symphony, the brightness of major keys will be touched by darker minor-key tints.

The more salient voices disturbing the placid surface are the trombones and tuba. After the balmy opening, the music seems to stop in its tracks; there is a rumble of timpani like distant thunder, and the trombones and tuba

whisper a shadowy chorale, in cryptic harmonies. That shadow touches the whole symphony. Later, the development section is intensified by braying brasses—startling for Brahms, more startling in this halcyon work.

From the beginning of the symphony's career there were some who saw the shadows. One of them, conductor and Brahms acquaintance Vincenz Lachner, complained to the composer about "the gloomy lugubrious tones of the trombones" intruding on the tranquility. Brahms replied with one of the most revealing statements he ever made about his music or about himself:

I very much wanted to manage in that first movement without using trombones....

But their first entrance, that's mine, and I can't get along without it, and thus the trombones.

I would have to confess that I am...a severely melancholic person, that black wings are constantly flapping above us, and that in my output—perhaps not entirely by chance—that symphony is followed by a little essay about the great "Why."...It casts the necessary shadow on this serene symphony and perhaps accounts for those timpani and trombones.

The "little essay" Brahms mentions is another product of the same summer, the motet "Warum ist das Licht gegeben" (Opus 74, No. 1: "Wherefore is the light given to them that toil?") in which the chorus proclaims Job's anguished question, "Why? Why?" Thus the trombones, the necessary shadow, the great "Why."

The second movement begins with a sighing high-Brahmsian cello theme. While the tone throughout is passionate and Romantic, the movement's languid beauties are unsettled by rhythmic and harmonic ambiguity. It ends with a chromatic haze like an expansion of the first movement's trombone chorale—and underneath, the relentless strokes of timpani that for Brahms were an image of fate, and the thought of fate always ominous. The final sustained chord sounds remarkably frail and uncertain for B major.

If the keynote of the first two movements is tranquility compromised, in the last two movements gaiety and frivolity break out. Brahms was generally influenced by the vacation spots where he composed, for example the cliffs and crashing seas of Rügen that helped complete the stormy First Symphony. This time the pleasures of the Wörthersee have the last word. The third movement unfolds as a charming and jocular scherzo marked by sudden shifts of rhythm and meter: an elegant Allegretto grazioso leaping into a skittering Presto.

The finale is a romp, with one droll and delicious theme after another, ending unforgettably with a triumphant D major blaze of trombones. Here Brahms does something he was not supposed to know how to do—make an instrument the bearer of meaning. The trombones as harbingers of fate have become the heralds of joy; avant-gardists of the next century would call that "tone-color composition." If the great "Why" is ultimately unanswerable, this time Brahms was happy to lay aside the question in favor of *joie de vivre*, flourishing his trombones like a wineglass.

Of Brahms's four symphonies the Second often seems the most atavistic, the least ponderous and self-conscious. Yet in its pensive irony as in its masterful craftsmanship, in its dark moments as in its jubilation, the Second is essentially Brahms. He was a composer who looked back to the giants of the past as an unreachable summit, and who looked to the future of music and civilization with increasing alarm. He was a man who felt spurned by his beloved hometown of Hamburg, who called himself a vagabond in the wilderness of the world. So midway through his journey as a symphonist, Brahms wrote a serenely beautiful masterpiece whose secret message is that you can't go home again.

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