

Notes on the Program

Johannes BRAHMS

Hamburg, May 7, 1833 — Vienna, April 3, 1897

Brahms accepted the Classical tradition substantially without question. His contribution to the development of Romantic music was to put “new wine into old bottles”; he infused the standard forms with all of the Romantic devices of his craft. Even more so than Beethoven, whom Brahms both revered and feared, his formal treatments stretch the limits of Classical practice while simultaneously remaining generally faithful to the original models. In this sense, Brahms was often considered a musical conservative. His music was structured according to various formal and technical principles rather than along literary or dramatic lines. Not for him were the programmatic symphonies and single-movement concertos of Mendelssohn and Berlioz.

Brahms worked constantly under “the shadow of Beethoven,” whose monumental contributions to music were beyond question. This keen awareness of historical perspective, judging his own achievement against that of Beethoven, made of Brahms a severely self-critical composer. No one knows how much music Brahms actually wrote. Brahms destroyed many complete works and other unfinished and unpublished compositions which did not meet his own scrupulous standards of excellence. Many of these works would likely have passed as masterpieces in any eyes other than the composer’s, and the repertoire is undoubtedly poorer for their absence.

—Biographical Note by Edmund Trafford

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G major, Op. 78

Johannes Brahms (1833–97) completed his Violin Sonata in G Major, Op. 78 in 1879, the same year in which the German firm Simrock in Bonn published the musical score. In three movements, the sonata has many stylistic contrasts and rhythmic ingenuities. Brahms frequently used such elements in his larger orchestral settings, and he completed the sonata in the interlude between his symphonies No. 2 in D Major (1871) and No. 3 in F Major (1881). Brahms composed Op. 78 for his close friend Joseph Joachim, a violinist, conductor, composer and teacher who worked with Brahms on Brahms’s Violin Concerto, Op. 77 (1879). Celebrated as the successor to chamber music after Robert Schumann (1810–56), Brahms wrote a total of twenty-four chamber works over a period of four decades, beginning with the beloved Piano Trio, Op. 8 (1854) and ending with the Clarinet Sonatas, Op. 120 (1894).

The historical link between Brahms and Schumann was predicted by none other than Schumann himself. In his famous essay

from 1853 entitled “New Paths,” Schumann’s unabashed reverence of Brahms is obvious to any reader. Not surprising for the creator of the *Davidsbündler*, or the League of David—an imaginary society that Schumann introduced in his writings to promote Romantic music—Schumann praised Brahms as a hero of Biblical proportions. In Schumann’s eyes, Brahms’s compositional path had profound implications, for he believed that Brahms was the “chosen one.” Schumann wrote:

Following the paths of these chosen ones with the utmost interest, it has seemed to me that, after such a preparation, there would and must suddenly appear some day one man who would be singled out to make articulate in an ideal way the highest expression of our time, one man who would bring us mastery, not as the result of gradual development, but as Minerva, springing fully armed from the head of Cronus. And he is come, a young creature over whose cradle graces and heroes stood guard. His name is Johannes Brahms, and he comes from Hamburg . . . Even outwardly, he bore in his person all the marks that announce to us a chosen man.

Schumann’s words reflect not only the spiritual connotations associated with concert attendance that writers fervently reported with increasing tendency in the nineteenth century but also the universal appeal of a composer such as Brahms, who would be an ideal candidate for rendering that very type of otherworldly message.

Frequently characterized as pastoral, the first movement opens with a rhythmic motive that reappears in each movement. The return of this motive makes the Sonata a cyclic work: an opening idea continually transforms and develops not only within the course of the movement in which it is introduced but also throughout the entire piece. Soon after the first movement begins, Brahms develops the rhythm itself, frequently using hemiola, or a temporary metric displacement. Some scholars have noted similarities between the end of the slow movement and possible source material in Schumann's violin concerto in D Minor (1853). Meanwhile, the finale features musical borrowing from Brahms's own *Regenlied* ("Rain Song," op. 59).

--Notes by Kathryn White

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART **Salzburg 27 January 1756–Vienna, 5 December 1791**

What we know (or think we know) about Mozart is frequently contradictory. His life has been romanticized to such an extent that he is often remembered as no more than the sickly former child prodigy who died in poverty, buried in a pauper’s grave. The popular stage play *Amadeus* and the Oscar-winning film based on it have given us the portrait of a Mozart whose personal quirks included thoroughly scatological language and an infantile sense of humor—traits seemingly

at odds with the composer of so much sublime music. Personalities are complex things, however, and artistic personalities perhaps more so than those of most mortals. It is true that Mozart was frequently penniless and it is also true that some of his racier correspondence cannot be quoted with propriety. But the reality of the man lies not in romanticized history nor in popular portrayal but in the music itself, the symphonies, concertos, operas, and vast body of chamber music he produced. The fact is that, despite external tragedies and personal shortcomings, Mozart composed some of the greatest music ever written.

Quintet for Piano and Winds in E-Flat Major, K. 452

On 30 March 1784, Mozart made an entry in his thematic catalogue to record the completion of a new work, known today as K452, the famous quintet for piano and winds in E-flat. It was first performed two days later, 1 April 1784, at the Imperial and Royal National Court Theater in Vienna. Mozart referred to it in a letter of 10 April 1784 to his father in Salzburg:

“[The] quintet produced the very greatest applause. I consider the quintet to be the best work I have ever composed. It is written for oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon and pianoforte. I wish you could have heard it yourself.”

This quintet was first brought out in Vienna in 1794 (three years after Mozart’s death) by Artaria, in a version for piano and string trio. In 1799, Mozart’s widow, Constanze, sold the rights to her husband’s manuscripts to the publisher Johann Anton André, who noticed that this quintet was missing—by reference to the same thematic catalogue in which Mozart originally recorded its composition. Its whereabouts thereafter are somewhat murky, helped not in the least by Constanze’s protestations to André that a certain Polish count had purchased the quintet (and it was he who was responsible for issuing the quintet as a spurious piano trio in 1794!). Constanze later changed this somewhat suspicious story to say that a secretary to the Hungarian consulate had the piece in his possession. Fortunately for music lovers, at some time after Constanze’s death in 1842, the original manuscript found its way to Paris’ Bibliotheque Nationale.

Of special note is the fact that this is the first major work which employs the clarinet, an instrument which Mozart came to love following his acquaintance of the famed virtuoso Anton Stadler. It was for Stadler that Mozart composed a number of other late works, including the Clarinet Quintet K. 581 and the glorious Clarinet Concerto K. 622.

--Notes by Edmund Trafford