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Brahms Symphony No. 1 and Double Concerto

Tonight's concert initiates this week's Brahms series with two major works, the First Symphony and the Double Concerto. These two pieces, of course, are the beginning- and end-points of Brahms's remarkable contributions to the symphonic literature, for the most part carried out between about 1875 and 1888, toward the late-middle and end of his career. After steering clear of these high-prestige orchestral genres for more than twenty-some years, the fully mature Brahms finally overcame these anxieties….and produced nine stout pillars of the repertory in those fourteen years: four symphonies, two overtures (the *Academic Festival* and the *Tragic*), and three concertos (the Violin Concerto, the Piano Concerto No. 2, and the Double Concerto). Premiered in 1876, the First Symphony was the gateway to this extraordinary final flowering. The Double Concerto, from 1888, brought it to a close: it was Brahms's last work for orchestra.

Today's concertgoers are familiar with so many symphonies and concertos from the 1870s onward (Brahms, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky, Dvorák, Mahler, Sibelius, Nielsen, and so on—not to mention all of the later twentieth-century contributions) that it's easy for us to forget how endangered a genre the symphony was at one point. When Brahms decided to return to his long-shelved First Symphony in 1875 and 1876, many of his contemporaries thought that, as a genre, the "abstract symphony" was not only old-fashioned (perhaps even dead) but had also been so for some twenty or thirty years—or more. This was the much-debated "crisis of the Austro-Germanic symphony after Beethoven," as though the genre had been largely played out by the 1840s, if not earlier. Imagine Brahms in 1875 and 1876, completing the First Symphony and reflecting back over the past decades. What he would have known was that the last truly *significant* Germanic symphony to have been composed was Schumann's Third, the "Rhenish," way back in 1851—over two decades earlier. And the biggest "recent news" in the world of the traditional symphony—if any "news" there was—would have been the recovery and posthumous publication of important works by two composers long dead: Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, unknown to the world until it came to light in 1865, and Mendelssohn's Fifth, the "Reformation," published in 1868. Other than that, Brahms would have seen only a scattering of minor works, such as a handful of programmatic symphonies by Joachim Raff, and two almost-successful attempts by the young Max Bruch from 1868 and 1870.

In Germanic countries the struggle for musical supremacy was now highly charged, bitterly partisan—quite literally a set of musical "culture wars." On the one side were the beleaguered traditionalists, generally favoring a more restrained "absolute music" and the perpetuation of such honored genres as the string quartet and symphony: Brahms had far and away been their *de facto* leader for a decade or more. On the other side was an aggressive "youth movement"— radicals of the "New German School," centered around their idols, Liszt and Wagner: this faction regarded traditional abstract symphonies, concertos, and chamber music to be old-fashioned, obsolete, boring, mere chalkboard exercises. They favored instead program music, innovative approaches to form, sensational orchestration, displays of virtuouso hypertechnique, and so on.

For traditionalists in the musical culture wars around 1870, one pressing question was: Can the traditional symphony and concerto (absolute music) be revalidated? Was it possible to write a "great symphony" this late in the game? Or was this genre dead, as the Lisztians and Wagnerians were insisting? All eyes were on Brahms, who, as the traditionalist faction's great hope, had been regularly pressured to produce one. As for Brahms, of course, he felt the weight of history—what it would mean either to succeed or to fail in the composition of a symphony. We have all heard Brahms's famous remark to Hermann Levi in 1871: "I will never compose a symphony! You have no idea how it feels to one of us when he continually hears behind him such a giant [as Beethoven]!"

The 1876 premiere of Brahms's First Symphony was a bold and sudden thrust into this controversy—and traditionalists, once having given up hope—cheered. Brahms's First was something of a manifesto in sound. In a stroke, it reinvigorated the concept of the absolute symphony and helped to launch an unanticipated new wave of symphonies and concertos by several composers, including Brahms.

As we've all probably read many times, the First Symphony had been a long time in appearing. Brahms had composed most of the first movement more than a decade earlier, then had put it aside. In the summer of 1862 Brahms had sent to Clara Schumann a copy of the Allegro of the first movement. At that point the movement had no slow introduction. It had begun directly with an impulsive plunge into the exposition, pushed forth by the famous rising chromatics of the "Fate Motive," into the turbulent sea of symphonic discourse itself—and in C minor, no less, the key of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. What Clara Schumann had seen in 1862 began like this:

MUSIC: beginning of exposition. (ca. 43''—Sawallisch, London Philharmonic)

But by 1875 Brahms had decided to precede this plunge-forward with a lengthy and momentous slow introduction—a full five-minute introduction whose tense earnestness raises the

historical stakes for the symphonic wager that is to follow. (In other words, the first movement now consists of five minutes of 1875 followed by nine minutes of slightly revised 1862.) And the symphony now begins with heart-pounding tension, as if called forth by history itself into the accomplishment of a near-impossible task: the task of revalidating the eclipsed symphony in much-altered modern times.

MUSIC: opening of the introduction—ca. 45''

Brahms's First is nominally an abstract symphony without a program, yes—but in responding to its intense musical drama, recent commentators have found possibilities of what might be a personal but suppressed program. Most writers along this line suggest that the work must have something to do with the composer's mostly-suppressed feelings of love for Clara Schumann (hearing in it something of a tragically doomed love scenario, opening the floodgates for armchair psychoanalytical speculation, neo-Freudian and otherwise). Some have claimed to find musical ciphers of Clara's name in the piece, others find tormented allusions to Robert Schumann's *Manfred* music, and so on. Perhaps the most compelling of the Clara evidence is the well-known horn call in the introduction to the fourth movement:

MUSIC: Fourth Movement, Alphorn Theme (ca. 40''….starts at 2:35)

You may have heard the famous story of this "alphorn" melody. It first surfaced as an isolated birthday greeting from Brahms to Clara Schumann. Brahms wrote it on a postcard from Switzerland on the 12th of September, 1868: "Thus blew the alphorn today," Brahms wrote to Clara—and then he noted down the alphorn music and supplied it with words: "Hoch auf'm Berg, tief im Thal, grüss ich dich viel tausendmal." ("High on the mountain, Deep in the valley, I greet you a thousand times over.")

Does this mean that at this point in the finale—seven years after the postcard—Brahms was still "greeting" Clara Schumann, calling her attention, perhaps, to additional hidden allusions that only she would understand? Maybe so, but there are other ways to understand why Brahms included this melody as the climactic event of the finale's introduction. Since Brahms had felt the weight of history for so many decades… since he had taken so long to scale the mountain of symphonic composition… since he knew the historical importance that his "statement" was in the process of making—one can imagine that here at the end of the finale's introduction—just before launching into the Allegro non troppo proper—Brahms addresses not merely Clara Schumann but all of us, that is,

you and me: "Hoch auf'm Berg, tief im Thal, [High on the summits of the symphony, and in the deepest valleys of its meaning] grüss ich dich [I, Johannes Brahms, now poised now at the edge of the finale, greet all of you] viel tausendmal [a thousand times over!]." The real alpine-sublime task is now staged as nothing less than producing the finale of this symphony—bringing it to completion…. And Brahms also reminds us here—through the resonant sounds of a solemn trombone-chorale—that to the Germanic way of thinking at that time, this was nothing less than a sacred task:

MUSIC—Trombone chorale + final varied allusion to the alphorn music [SING TEXT]…
+ the first two phrases of P (with its allusions not only the Beethoven's Ninth but also to the finale of Bruch's Second Symphony, from 1870)---ca. 1'20''

If this is one of its larger meanings, then we can also understand the reappearance of the "solemn chorale" ten minutes later, as the great climactic moment of the end of the fourth movement, in the coda. Brahms seems to be declaring that the sacred task has now been completed—successfully—and the once-solemn "sacred chorale" blazes forth this time turns as an ecstatic, celebratory capper—"I've done it! Mission accomplished! ... the symphony itself, as a genre, is still alive!"

MUSIC: Chorale-Climax of Coda

Once completed—and it was a grand success—the First Symphony in 1876 opened the door to a new round of symphonic works. While this big C-minor symphony was the first of these Brahmsian works, the last of them was the big Double Concerto of 1888. By now the musical culture wars in and around Vienna had grown even more intense. 1888 was a high-water mark of the hostile Brahms/Bruckner controversy, musically and politically dividing the city's artistic community—pitting chamber-music Viennese liberals against the more aggressively radical nationalists and populists. In 1888 the recently-built Bayreuth Festspielhaus was now a Wagnerian shrine for devout pilgrims, and *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal* were the New Music of the day. The unknown young Mahler, a radical early modernist, was then composing his own First Symphony. And young Richard Strauss was about to stun audiences the following year with *Don Juan* and *Death and Transfiguration*. Once again, the musical world, was about to turn.

In this electric atmosphere Brahms's sturdy Double Concerto was not only a statement of consummate mastery, but was also, again, something of a protest—an "anti-modernist" manifesto-by-example. Or perhaps we could hear it today as a last, masterly embrace of a style and expressive tone that Brahms knew was on its way out forever. If the First Symphony had harbored latent "Clara Schumann" implications, this Double Concerto from 1888, like the Violin Concerto, connects instead more with the violinist Joseph Joachim. For the now-aging Brahms, the Double Concerto was a kind of peace offering after a breach in their formerly close friendship in 1881.

But again, the work was more than that. From another perspective, it was also a sober commentary—almost a scholarly treatise—on the current state of art music and Viennese musical politics. On the one hand, the concerto is "about" the difficulty of composing a concerto for two very different instruments (violin and cello—some have argued, evoking a consciously gendered interplay of feminine and masculine instrumental voices). On the other hand, the concerto is <u>also</u> "about" trying to reinvigorate the old or traditional classical concerto format—the rather bulky or turgid format, with its "surplus" opening orchestral tutti, a two-minute (or longer) affair in which the soloist does not traditionally participate. (This older concerto-first-movement format had long been replaced by the more "modern" and trimmer procedure of omitting the opening orchestral tutti—as in many works from the Mendelssohn concertos onward.). The ever-retrospective Brahms, of course, paid homage to the bulkier, older concerto-type (the traditional classical concerto) by including an opening tutti in all of his concerto's first movements.

Brahms's Double has been the least played of Brahms's concertos, and in some ways it is not an easy work to get to know. The challenges of comprehension start at the very beginning of the first movement. For one thing, just when things ought to drive boldly forward, at the opening of the first movement, Brahms seems to arrest all progress at once with not one but <u>two</u> cadenzas. He suddenly slams on the brakes—shouts "Stop!"— <u>before</u> the piece seems even to have started. Here's how the first movement begins:

MUSIC (first cadenza only: "Stop!")—ca. 20'' [Bruno Walter, Columbia..Francescatti, Pierre Fournier]

What an odd strategy! Beginning a piece vigorously, then seeming to pull the plug and shut it down! Why would Brahms do this? Let's recall again the idea of the "old-format" of the traditional concerto, the format that begins with an opening orchestral tutti. In this archaic format, remember, the orchestra was to start the piece with a parade of themes for a minute or two. Then, only <u>after</u> that was to concerto to "rebegin" with the soloist, launching the "real" or essential sonata structure. Put another way, in a traditional concerto, the movement <u>begins</u> with orchestra, then <u>rebegins</u> with the

soloists. But here in the Double Concerto Brahms has provided not only one "preliminary" passage at the opening—as in the traditional concerto—but two of them. Brahms gives us two initial blocks (each about two minutes long) before the "real structure" of the piece actually gets underway. The movement begins, then rebegins, then rebegins again!

In this movement the actual "exposition" of the main structure, the sonata form—the traditional start of the sonata structure proper by the soloists—sets forth only after about four minutes of preliminary material. So let's now begin some four minutes into the piece. Here's the start of the impassioned, A-minor primary theme, played in a quasi-chamber-like fashion by the cello, then joined in by the violin:

MUSIC: Solo 1 Exposition Opening….ca. 20'' [starts at 4:12]

But in front of this "final start"—four minutes in (!)—Brahms gives us two separate blocks of preparatory material to get through (not just one). Even more surprising, the "standard" preliminary orchestral block is itself delayed by some two minutes. Put another way, Brahms could easily, and much more traditionally, have begun this concerto by lopping off the first two minutes entirely and beginning directly with the orchestral tutti's peremptory statement of the primary theme, *fortissimo* in A minor. In fact—now two minutes into the movement—this would have been the most natural place to begin this concerto:

MUSIC: Tutti 1 opening (mm. 57ff)—ca. 20'' [starts at 2:40…recalls the tone, perhaps of the *Tragic Overture*]

But instead of starting here, Brahms chose to precede this traditional orchestral "beginning" with yet another separate block—a two-minute preface that includes those two cadenzas for the soloists: our "roadblock" in the progress of the piece. So we have (in summary): the essential sonata structure itself (with soloists) beginning four minutes in [HANDS]….and placed before that the traditional orchestral ritornello block, two minutes into the piece [HANDS]…but before that the somewhat "stalled" preface, occupying the movement's first two minutes [HANDS].

But why would Brahms include that preface at all? (Especially since it seems to stop the work in its tracks before it gets started?) Well, what happens in it? Four things, actually: **FIRST**, a bold but short orchestral statement of what will later be the primary theme; **SECOND**, the long cello cadenza; **THIRD**, the orchestra again, now more quietly, playing four bars of what will be the secondary theme of the movement; and **FOURTH**, the long second cadenza, begun by the "other" soloist, the violin, but soon joined in by the cello. Here are the four things:

MUSIC ….. [20''] "then about thirty seconds or so more of cadenza…until….:"
MUSIC ….. [20''] "then another forty seconds of cadenza…preceding the the opening tutti, which we heard a bit earlier, the one that started two minutes in"

What Brahms seems to have wanted to do here, in this two-minute preface at the opening, is to accomplish two things simultaneously—and it was a bit of a risk. First, "before the beginning," as it were—in this self-consciously "scholarly" work, like a book or treatise—he gave us something of a table-of-contents of what is to follow. As we hear this music one last time, we could now almost "translate" it into word-equivalents….at the opening, Brahms seems to declare, "This will be the primary theme of a big piece to follow!"

SAME MUSIC AS BEFORE ("…and it will be a concerto including the cello…." fade-out and:
SAME MUSIC AS BEFORE ("And this, for reference, is the second theme—remember it--….and this will be a double concerto, including violin and cello—a kind of merger of chamber music and concerto."—TAPE INCLUDES ENTRY OF CELLO, IF TIME)

What Brahms has composed here is a two-minute table of contents "before the beginning." Its second purpose is that of shifting the obligatory first-movement cadenza—usually placed near the end of the first movement—to the very beginning….getting it out of the way, as it were, particularly because he will not want to interrupt the intensity of the discourse later in the movement. This extreme forward-shift of the cadenza, of course, is the precise device that also permits the "table-of-contents effect" at the beginning.

All of this is to suggest—and in conclusion—that Brahms's music very much refers to the tradition of concerto-writing itself. In the politically charged musical culture wars of the 1870s and 1880s, these pieces, and much of the rest of Brahms's works, could also be heard as music about music. Apart from their Clara references or Joachim references and other things like that, this was also music "about" the majesty of the Beethovenian tradition and what Brahms thought had happened to it. All of the Brahms orchestral works—including those to be heard tonight—are both a celebration of the grand tradition and a valedictory farewell to it, paying a last homage to the great symphonic past at a time of extraordinary change.

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