

## **Brahms' First Symphony**

### **ONE-MINUTE NOTES**

**Wagner: Prelude to *Die Meistersinger*.** The opera is about a singing contest, and song is at the heart of its majestic prelude. Wagner introduces three memorable tunes, then combines them ingeniously at the close.

**Mahler: *Songs of a Wayfarer*.** The song cycle expresses the feelings of a jilted lover who has turned to travel to see where fate leads him. Mahler re-used the second and fourth songs in his First Symphony.

**Brahms: *Symphony No. 1*.** In its day, this symphony was called "Beethoven's 10th." Brahms *did* emulate Beethoven's rigorous command of form and counterpoint, and the finale's main theme recalls the "Ode to Joy." But the harmonic richness and emotional content are pure Brahms.

### **WAGNER: Prelude to *Die Meistersinger***

#### **RICHARD WAGNER**

**Born:** May 22, 1813, in Leipzig, Germany

**Died:** February 13, 1883, in Venice, Italy

**Composed:** 1861–62

**World Premiere:** June 21, 1868, in Munich

**NJSO Premiere:** 1936–37 season; Rene Pollain conducted.

**Duration:** 9 minutes

The earliest prose sketches for the libretto of Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* date from the mid-1840s. The idea of prose sketches may inspire questions: wasn't Wagner a composer, and wouldn't his sketches have been on music paper? The answer to both is yes. Wagner was also a gifted and prolific writer. His musical efforts were focused almost exclusively on opera, but he also crafted all his own librettos, and he wrote about other topics as well. Before embarking on the composition of a large musico-dramatic work for the stage, he began with the plot outline and the dialogue that would eventually be sung.

In the mid-1840s, Wagner held the position of Kapellmeister in Dresden. Long before he embarked on *Tristan und Isolde* or the *Ring* cycle, he had begun work on an operatic scenario about a medieval singing contest. Most of its music, however, was not composed until the 1860s, after Wagner had become famous for *Tristan* and completed *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, the first two *Ring* operas. He interrupted work on *Siegfried* (part three of the *Ring*) to compose *Die Meistersinger*.

The subject matter of *Die Meistersinger* surprised Wagner's contemporaries because he broke with his personal philosophy of finding appropriate subject matter in legend. The setting of *Die Meistersinger* is 16th-century Germany, among real people, not mythological beings. It is also Wagner's only mature comic opera. Similarly, the music came as a surprise, especially after the extreme chromatic tension of *Tristan*. Wagner returned in *Die Meistersinger* to a more diatonic musical vocabulary, with memorable melodies and straightforward harmonies.

His majestic, pompous Prelude incorporates several of the opera's major themes, a technique characteristic of French grand opera. Wagner's model would have been Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864), the leading composer at the Paris Opéra in the mid-19th century. Listeners familiar with *Die Meistersinger* will recognize the opening theme of the Mastersingers, the "Prize Song" and the "March of the Mastersingers." These tunes are woven together with great ingenuity, indicating contrapuntal skill not generally associated with Wagner's music. The Prelude is unmistakably symphonic, with a dense orchestral fabric that commands attention through the sheer force of its imposing sound.

*Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets in B flat, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, harp, strings and voice.*

## **MAHLER: *Songs of a Wayfarer***

### **GUSTAV MAHLER**

**Born:** July 7, 1860, in Kalischt, Bohemia

**Died:** May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

**Composed:** 1883–85; revised 1891–96

**World Premiere:** March 16, 1896, in Berlin

**NJSO Premiere:** 1982-83 season. Maureen Forrester was the soloist; Roger Niernberg conducted.

**Duration:** 16 minutes

During the two decades before he met and married Alma Schindler, Gustav Mahler led one of the most tempestuous love lives of any composer. Because he was so successful as an opera conductor early in his career, biographical details are more readily available for Mahler than they are for many of his contemporaries. He was such a celebrity by the 1890s that people who interacted with him were already retaining memorabilia.

That is the reason we have so much information about Johanna Richter, a singer with whom Mahler became romantically involved in 1884, while he was working in Kassel, Germany. Ultimately, she jilted him, but he remained enthralled for a while and poured his passion into music. In a letter to Fritz Löhr, he wrote: “I have written a cycle of songs, six of them so far, all dedicated to her. She does not know them. What can they tell her but what she knows? ... The idea of the songs as a whole is that a wayfaring man, who has been stricken by fate, now sets forth into the world, travelling wherever his road may lead him.”

Eventually the set was pared to four, becoming the cycle we know as *Songs of a Wayfarer*. Generally considered to be Mahler’s first masterpiece, the cycle is his earliest work to gain a permanent place in

the repertoire.

The songs deal with the plight of a jilted lover who remains haunted by the maiden who rejected him. Because of that premise, *Songs of a Wayfarer* has been likened to Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*, as well as to Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Songs of Travel* (which they preceded by more than a decade).

Mahler's original score was for voice and piano, but he clearly thought of these songs as orchestral from the beginning. He wrote them in the 1880s, long before he had developed into a symphonist. Significantly, the orchestration dates from sometime in the 1890s—there is some discrepancy among various editions and manuscripts—but almost certainly *after* Mahler had penned both of his first two symphonies. By then, he had achieved a considerable command of instrumentation technique. Those familiar with the First Symphony will immediately recognize the second and fourth songs, whose melodies were repurposed in the first and third movements of that symphony, respectively. In fact, the entire plan of the First Symphony is closely related to these songs.

The texts are Mahler's own, although they bear the clear imprint of the German folk poetry known as *The Boy's Magic Horn*. The progression of the four movements is decidedly grim. In the first, the woman is marrying another man; the singer perceives his own grief in nature. In the second song, the beauty of nature fails to touch his injured heart. Memory of her blue eyes begets thoughts of death in the next movement: a burning knife is the metaphor illustrated in this jarring and violent music. Finally, in the closing song, Mahler's stricken lover is driven to a funeral march.

While the tunes Mahler uses are relatively simple, his music is highly sophisticated and complex. The scoring is chamber-like, emphasizing the intimacy of the singer's thoughts, despite the large orchestra. Further, each song ends in a different key from the one in which it began. Such a plan, which British musician, musicologist and broadcaster Deryck Cooke calls "progressive tonality," was quite daring in the 1880s. It is but one way in which Mahler demonstrates in this early cycle so many of the distinctive characteristics that so brilliantly mark his mature compositions.

*Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam tam, glockenspiel, harp, and strings.*

## **BRAHMS: Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68**

### **JOHANNES BRAHMS**

**Born:** May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

**Died:** April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

**Composed:** 1855–1876; the intensive work took place between 1874 and 1876

**World Premiere:** November 4, 1876, in Karlsruhe, Baden. Otto Dessoff conducted.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1931–32 season; Rene Pollain conducted.

**Duration:** 45 minutes

The moniker “Beethoven’s 10th” has long been attached to Brahms’ First Symphony. The eminent conductor, pianist and composer Hans von Bülow (1830–94) is responsible for thus dubbing the C-minor symphony. He was recognizing Brahms’ fulfillment of a prophecy articulated nearly a quarter century before, when Robert Schumann hailed then-20-year-old Brahms as the great Beethoven’s successor.

Brahms took the legacy of Beethoven very seriously. He was a brutal critic of his own compositions and destroyed a large number of sketches and completed works that did not satisfy him. Nowhere was his self-criticism more merciless than in the realm of orchestral music, because he was keenly aware that his first symphony would be compared to Beethoven’s work. “You do not know what it is like hearing his footsteps constantly behind one,” Brahms wrote.

In that sense, everything orchestral that Brahms composed up until the First Symphony was a form of preparation for him to fulfill the daunting legacy Schumann had bequeathed to him. He produced four

large symphonic works while he honed his orchestral skills: the D-minor Piano Concerto, Op. 15 (1854–58), the two Serenades, Opp. 11 (1857–58) and 16 (1858–59, revised 1875), and the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, Op. 56a (1873). The orchestral fabric of the major choral works he worked on during the 1860s and early 1870s was also significant in strengthening Brahms' command of symphonic resources. *A German Requiem*, Op. 45 (1857–68), was followed by the dramatic cantata *Rinaldo*, Op. 50 (1869), the *Alto Rhapsody*, Op. 53 (1869), *Song of Destiny*, Op. 54 (1868–71) and *Song of Triumph*, Op. 55 (1870–71). Each of them became a repository for important instrumental as well as vocal ideas.

All along, Brahms had the goal of a symphony in mind. As early as 1854, probably with Robert Schumann's encouragement, Brahms was at work on symphonic sketches. Two decades elapsed before that music found its way into any permanent form. Clara Schumann and Albert Dietrich both saw a draft of the first movement in 1862, in a version not yet preceded by slow introduction. Some five years later, Brahms wrote a letter to Clara including the famous horn theme that became the transition to the hymn of the finale. Not until 1873, however, did he concentrate seriously on the completion of his First Symphony. He waited until the age of 43 to contribute to the symphonic canon.

Brahms completed the symphony at Lichtenthal during the autumn of 1876. The premiere took place at Karlsruhe in November. Brahms chose the smaller town because it was a less politically stressful musical community than Vienna or Leipzig. He wrote to Otto Dessoff, conductor of the Karlsruhe orchestra: "It was always my cherished and secret wish to hear the thing first in a small town which possessed a good friend, a good conductor and a good orchestra."

Dessoff was delighted by the honor accorded his orchestra. Brahms foresaw that the symphony might not have direct popular appeal, writing to Carl Reinecke of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra: "And now I have to make the probably very surprising announcement that my symphony is long and not exactly amiable."

He need not have worried. Dessoff's first rendition was successful enough to warrant repeat performances under the composer's direction in Mannheim and Munich shortly thereafter. The First

Symphony cured Brahms' orchestral writer's block. For the next 11 years, his orchestral harvest was bountiful: three additional symphonies, three more concertos and two overtures.

Von Bülow had good reason to hail the symphony as Beethoven's 10th. Because of its heroic stance and C-minor tonality, the work is most often compared with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Both pieces have a general progression from tragic struggle to triumph and victory. Brahms' First bears equal comparison to Beethoven's Ninth (Beethoven's other minor-mode symphony), primarily because of the obvious parallel in hymn-like finales.

Brahms' good friend Theodor Billroth likened the C-minor symphony's first movement to "a kind of Faustian overture" that might be thought of as a grand introduction to the whole work. Indeed, its complicated chromatic themes and inexorable timpani at the opening are hardly the stuff of which popular "singable" tunes are made.

Hans Gál offers an insightful commentary as to why Wagner and his followers would have experienced impatience listening to the opening movement: "The nobility of this first movement rests on qualities that were alien to the dramatic composer: a thematic interplay worked out to the smallest detail and based on polyphonic structure; a delicate balancing, from beginning to end, of tonal relationships—and a formal design whose grandiose dimensions only become apparent when one experiences the whole movement as a single, great continuum."

The perspective is significant because Wagner's followers comprised a major portion of the listening public in the 1870s.

One unusual feature of this symphony is the presence of two slow introductions, one for each of the outer movements. Slow introductions are rare in Brahms' music, and this double occurrence is unique among his compositions. Both introductions signal something portentous and monumental. It is a measure of Brahms' genius that the effect is entirely different in the two: ushering in heroic conflict in the opening movement; introducing serene exaltation in the finale. By contrast, the inner movements

are both shorter and lighter in emotional weight. In the slow movement, Brahms indulges in some orchestral decoration, embroidering his already rich music with a rare, breathtakingly lovely violin solo. Here and in the graceful *Un poco allegretto* we have a welcome emotional breather between the mighty pillars of the outer movements.

If there were any shortage of melodies early on, Brahms compensates with abundance in the expansive finale. From the magical horn call to the majestic closing chords, unforgettable tunes vie with one another, providing this noble movement with some of his most beloved original themes.

*Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.*