Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Symphonies 1–4, Serenades, Overtures, Violin concerto, Intermezzi, Haydn Variations, Liebeslieder Waltzer, Hungarian Dances

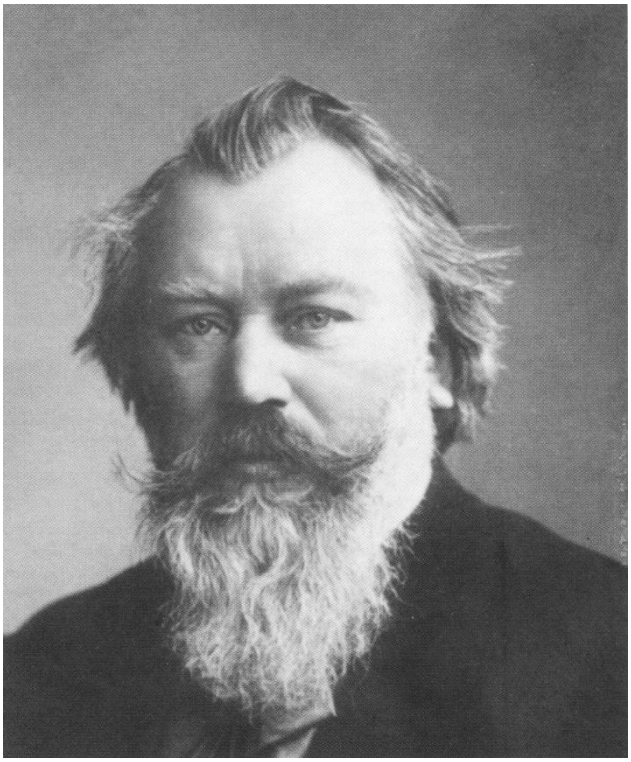
Again and again we hear the tale about Brahms, who was born in Hamburg but Viennese by choice, feeling Beethoven breathing down his neck as he struggled with that titan among genres, the symphony. This, and the many years he spent liberating himself from his overpowering predecessor, has given rise to posterity's cliché that he was Beethoven's legitimate heir, that he carried on where the great man laid down the torch, pouring Beethoven's wine into new bottles and becoming the standard-bearer of the symphonic tradition. The impression was further reinforced by the trench warfare that raged between the self-styled "progressives" and the conservatives, who rallied around Brahms (much against his will) like a figurehead on the prow of their ship.

Yet Brahms, in whose piano music Schumann detected "symphonies in disguise" had already discovered his own resources by the time he completed his First Symphony in 1876 (by which time he was a celebrated composer of forty-three). And these resources differed in kind from Beethoven's. Granted, Beethoven too built his material out of minuscule germ-cells, but he used them to mould themes that he went on to treat more or less as required by sonata form. Brahms, in contrast, built entire symphonies from these cells, thereby creating the "developing variation" admired by Schoenberg and his disciples to such an extent that they abandoned his alleged adversary Bruckner and made Brahms the patron saint of the modern symphony – yet another cliché, and yet another misappropriation against which Brahms was unable to protest.

It was in the stuffy, conservative circles of Leipzig of all places that the purportedly conservative Brahms suffered one of his bitterest setbacks – the premiere of his First Piano Concerto, whose convoluted gestation and material made it a major stepping-stone *en route* to the symphony. Though the concerto had been respectfully received in Hanover in 1859, the repeat performance in the Leipzig Gewandhaus a few days later was an unmitigated fiasco. Brahms poured out his feelings in a letter of 2 February to Clara Schumann: "You probably already know that it was a complete failure. Deep silence in the rehearsals, proper catcalls at the performance, where barely three people bothered to clap."

One day later the critic of the Leipzig *Signale für die musikalische Welt* vented his spleen: "And all this retching and wrenching, this lugging and tugging, this stitching together and ripping apart of phrases and snippets: all this had to be endured for more than three-quarters of an hour." It may have been treatment of this sort that prompted Brahms, when he was offered the post of cantor at the Leipzig Thomaskirche, following in the footsteps of Bach, whom he so admired, to reply: "I am seriously grateful for the high distinction which I feel your proposal has bestowed upon me; and feeling as warmly as I do, my 'No' is all the more difficult to pronounce." Yet pronounce it he did, "without a question mark".

Nevertheless, it was then that the world's oldest bourgeois orchestra began to cultivate Brahms's music on a regular basis. Ten years later the Leipzig Gewandhaus witnessed the first complete performance of the *German Requiem* – another milestone *en route* to the symphony. It was also here that the Violin Concerto received its premiere in 1879. And the symphonies have belonged to the core repertoire of every Gewandhaus conductor since at least the days of Arthur Nikisch.



Johannes Brahms

Yet this, too, is a tale of misappropriation. Leipzig stood at the forefront when it came to bloating Brahms's music with pathos and everything that a large part of the German tradition understood as "significance". This is what Riccardo Chailly, the head of this greatest of the world's professional orchestras since 2005, finds often at odds with the things Brahms set down in his scores. His second Brahms cycle on CD is intended to put these matters to rights. Chailly is concerned with "questioning a hundred years of accretions", adding that they stood "for beauty and much profundity, but also for blotches on the scores".

Here the Maestro hearkens back to his great forebear, Felix von Weingartner (1863–1942), who recorded all four of Brahms's symphonies in the late 1930s. For Chailly the Weingartner recordings, still available from EMI, are nothing less than "the essence of these works: pure, devoid of extremes, firmly rooted in a tradition that seems buried today. Weingartner conducted the Second at his Viennese debut with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1896. After the concert Brahms thanked him profusely for his interpretation. And anyone who knows how gruff Brahms ordinarily was towards conductors can well imagine how accurately Weingartner must have satisfied his wishes".

Arturo Toscanini and Bruno Walter followed along these same lines, but with the next generation pathos truly took over. For decades it led to impressive results and dominated listening habits, even at the Gewandhaus, for example under Kurt Masur. But it definitely had to be questioned. That is why Chailly feels that "the time is ripe for Brahms".

The orchestra's musicians responded "sometimes with puzzlement when details took on a different slant. But their willingness to follow me on this path was great. It helped that I had already conducted all the Brahms symphonies since taking over the helm of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in 2005. So my leanings were already discernible. They are the result of my constant study of the past, including a study of the work of fellow conductors who were as close as possible to the composer. Even without knowing that Weingartner's work received Brahms's blessing, the freshness, the clarity

of his interpretations still have the power to convince. A top-calibre orchestra senses that. I regard the great Leipzig tradition as a source of strength, but it also harbours a collective desire for renewal".

The differences lie "in innumerable details, which we keep seeing especially in tempo relations. Brahms's tempos cannot be renegotiated with each new section of the piece. The tempo one chooses for the first bar has repercussions for the rest". This is because Brahms introduces his musical germ cells in distilled form at the outset of his symphonies. It's also because the constant subdivision and re-emergence of these cells will only work if the music follows an uninterrupted evolutionary flow rather than being sliced up into discreet sections, each with a new tempo and isolated by gigantic ritardandos. Unlike Beethoven, Brahms never added metronome marks. "This ensures a certain amount of licence." Chailly continues. "A certain amount of flexibility is also permissible inside the movements. But no extremes, merely hints. The drama of the music must be made audible without extremes."

Symphonies

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, op. 68

Composed between 1862 and 1876, premiered in Karlsruhe on 4 November 1876

1. Un poco sostenuto – Allegro
2. Andante sostenuto
3. Un poco Allegretto e grazioso
4. Adagio – Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

Johannes Brahms's struggles with the symphony began in the 1850s. Not because he drew directly on Beethoven's contributions to the genre, but because he knew full well that this titan among genres could only be given a future by striking out on new paths Until he found these paths he wrote many exploratory pieces, beginning with the monumental D minor movement that later found its way into the First Piano Concerto, and continuing through to the Haydn Variations, with which he gained a consummate mastery of variation technique. This was crucially important, for Brahms is variation incarnate. Always. Even in the First, which proclaims a new symphonic style with astonishing self-assurance, and which nowhere betrays its long and arduous gestation, except perhaps in the defiant bulk of its opening movement. The First bursts onto the scene perfectly self-contained and logical. Everything about it proceeds from something in the past and generates something in the future. The separation of melody and accompaniment hardly seems to apply. Parameters that performers fondly use as their private playground no longer serve that purpose. Take metre, for example. Brahms often sets the generation of his variants in motion by partitioning the cells of his material in ever-new ways between the bar lines. This cannot be understood unless the bar lines are exactly where they are supposed to be.

At the very opening of the First, the winds play a descending line while the strings play an ascending line. And since Brahms obtains highly contrasting material (basically the entire symphony) from both lines over the next three-quarters of an hour, he sets them apart by having the strings anticipate their bar lines. This allows the compositional fabric to breathe while charging it with energy. But seldom are things this plain to hear, because many conductors refuse to take the tempo mark seriously: *Un poco sostenuto*. By toying with the tempo and ignoring Brahms's phrase marks even at this stage, they sacrifice structure on the altar of self-fulfilment.

When played correctly we hear and understand, in real time, how the material generates itself – spreading out in layers in the first movement, blissfully intertwining in the three-part *Andante sostenuto* that deliberately departs from the Beethoven slow-movement model, and conjuring up a

rapturous nostalgia in modern guise in the *Un poco Allegretto e grazioso*, which likewise turns its back on Beethoven by not being a scherzo. Then comes the monumental finale, a powerful drama with its gaze focused on a single unique theme, perhaps the most beautiful of Brahms's many magnificent melodies. Cause and effect are all rolled into one.

The premiere of the First Symphony, given in Karlsruhe by Otto Dessoff, was a rousing success. Only then did Brahms venture to present the work to his Viennese audience. They, too, were thrilled.

The premiere of the First consolidated Brahms's reputation as Beethoven's heir almost at a single stroke. Yet at first the work was presented nine times in succession – in Karlsruhe, Mannheim, Munich, Vienna, Leipzig, Breslau (now Wrocław), Cambridge and twice in London – with a slow movement that differed markedly from the version we know today: it was thirty-two bars shorter, with five bars that are strikingly different from the version with which we are familiar. The material contained in five of these is not included in the final version. This may indicate why Brahms was not satisfied with the musical economy of the work, which was so important to him. When the work received its premiere, the movement was still conceived as a five-section rondo and therefore consisted, structurally speaking, of a string of relatively short sections, which the composer and several of his friends (especially Hermann Levi) considered inappropriate in view of the monumental outer movements. Levi, in a letter to Clara Schumann, found that the two middle movements were more suitable for a serenade than for this symphony.

So Brahms took another look at the slow movement after the series of premieres, and before the final publication by Simrock, and completely restructured it. He destroyed the score and orchestral material of the first version of 1876; all that remains, in the archive of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna, is a set of extra string parts probably prepared to accommodate the more lavish orchestral forces. These parts have made it possible to reconstruct the entire movement, revealing yet another important step on Brahms's road to the symphony. Above all, the revision shows just how much importance he already attached to large-scale architecture in his First Symphony. (A recording of the reconstructed movement can be found on CD 3. Riccardo Chailly and the Gewandhausorchester have recorded the movement with exactly the same string forces as were available when the work was premiered in Karlsruhe – ten first and eight second violins, and four violas, cellos and double basses.)

Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 73

Composed in summer 1877, premiered in Vienna on 30 December 1877

1. Allegro non troppo
2. Adagio non troppo
3. Allegretto grazioso (Quasi Andantino) – Presto ma non assai
4. Allegro con spirito

How different Brahms's Second Symphony is from the First! If the profound earnestness of the First betrays the exertions of its origin, the Second appears almost in pristine clarity. In this respect it has constantly drawn comparisons with Beethoven's "Pastoral" – comparisons applicable, if at all, to its cheerful and light-hearted underlying mood. For the D major Symphony, too, owes its structure to developing variation.

At first hearing, it seems as if Brahms wanted to draw on his wealth of melodic invention for the first-movement exposition. This is a bit puzzling for a composer who claimed not to be a great believer in inspiration. But digging deeper into the musical text we find that what seems to evolve so effortlessly is generated almost entirely from just a few notes.

The first three notes sounded by the cellos and double basses – D-C#-D, gently adumbrating the key of D major – bear within themselves the germ cell of the entire work. Because the opening is so unpretentious and seemingly bland, conductors of recent decades have devised ever-new ways to charge it with energy. It's been pumped and twisted, vibrated and inflated. Chailly casts all this ballast aside, knowing, with Weingartner as his witness, that he has Brahms on his side.

But rather than scuttling the Gewandhaus Orchestra's Brahms tradition altogether – a tradition extending back to Brahms himself – he questions it. The upbeat that sets the symphonic clockwork so simply and naturally in motion is followed by a light and airy opening movement that breathes calmly despite its brisk tempo. It casts off any semblance of heaviness with lightly undulating first violins and a soupçon of vibrato, but without sacrificing power. It also allows Brahms's delicate balance of registral hues to stand out far more sharply than could ever be achieved with ponderous pathos. By shaking off all the cobwebs the work has acquired over more than a century, he restores its original colours.

And these colours are not just decorative but monumental, despite their classical garb. We can hear this in the emotional depth of the magical slow movement, the only true Adagio in the four symphonies. The *Allegretto grazioso* combines variation form and scherzo in a polyphony of timbres. The finale glistens with melodies of uncommon evocative force, the consequence of a precisely calculated development of the three-note motif from the opening bar, now transformed into a concluding gesture of triumph.

The premiere was given in Vienna by Hans Richter. A few days later Brahms himself conducted a performance in the Leipzig Gewandhaus: once again the audience was thrilled. This performance confirmed Brahms's status as one of the patron saints of the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Symphony No. 3 in F major, op. 90

Composed in summer 1883, premiered in Vienna on 2 December 1883

1. Allegro con brio – Un poco sostenuto
2. Andante
3. Poco allegretto
4. Allegro

The Third is the shortest and most compact of Brahms's four symphonies. It too had a relatively easy birth, a sign of his firmly ingrained style and the confidence with which he now handled material in large-scale forms. Once again three notes form the foundation for four superb movements of which Antonín Dvořák once exclaimed, "What magnificent melodies it has! It is imbued with love, and it truly melts the heart!"

The Third begins on a grandiose scale. Its opening chordal upsurge seethes with an inward energy that Brahms develops with consummate craftsmanship in the half-hour that follows. Here the germ cells burgeon with lines and rhythms capable of sustaining the rest of the work. In interpreting the inner riches of this outwardly classical symphony, Chailly follows in Weingartner's footsteps, allowing the great composer's rhythmic counterpoint at last to come into its own.

Unlike the Second, the Third abounds in surging energy from the very first statement of its motto theme in the opening movement – energy constantly recharged by vacillating between major and minor and reinforced by varied shifts of rhythm in the movement's interior. The *Allegro* finale offsets this powerful opening with a triumphant gesture only to come to an end in calmness and tranquillity, as if the music were ebbing away. Again and again the finale avails itself of material from the two middle movements. They seem almost like afterthoughts in the symphony's overall design, the gentle,

melodious *Andante* blissfully caressing the soul, the rhythmically tottering *Poco allegretto* poised before the finale like a question mark.

Hans Richter conducted the premiere in Vienna. Though the self-styled progressives hissed in full force, they could not prevent this work, too, from immediately taking hold with the audience. Brahms also conducted the Third in the Leipzig Gewandhaus immediately after its premiere – with a triumphant success that promptly elevated it into the orchestra's core repertoire.

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, op. 98

Composed in 1884–85, premiered in Meiningen on 25 October 1885

1. Allegro non troppo
2. Andante moderata
3. Allegro giocoso
4. Allegro energico e passionate

Brahms didn't make it easy for his contemporaries with his Fourth. His opponents from the modernist camp added lyrics to the main theme of the first movement, to the effect that "He ran out of ideas aqain". His later biographer Max Kalbeck and even Clara Schumann advised the composer to withdraw the work, not knowing what to make of it. This is a bit puzzling today; in fact, we can hardly imagine what even his friends found wrong with it.

With the Fourth Symphony, Brahms's symphonic achievement reaches its fullest fruition. For decades he had struggled with what the post-Beethovenian symphony might look like. In this, his final contribution to the genre, everything falls into place: material and structure, emotion and technique. The finale, a miracle of rigour and beauty, hearkens back to Brahms's beginnings, to the Haydn Variations, the milestone before his breakthrough to the symphony. Here sonata form and passacaglia unite to create a cosmos that even Schoenberg and his disciples considered new, unparalleled, tuturistic.

To make this audible, once again the choice of tempo is crucial. Not absolute tempo, but rather proportionality and discipline. However small the differences may be in detail, their impact is all the greater. Take Brahms's lyrical second themes, lasciviously draped across the metre: they will be incomprehensible if allowed to meander, if not embedded in metrical rigour. Only then can they breathe; only then can the emotion and logic of their beauty unfold on the bedrock of developing variation.

Perhaps early listeners were puzzled by the fact that the symphony's opening *Allegro non troppo* immediately submits its germ cells to development. Again and again Brahms cloaks them in new sounds and rhythms; the three-part division of sonata-allegro form into exposition, development and recapitulation recedes into the background. And yet it dominates the architecture.

Compared to this art of development, rising to ever-new heights of dramatic force, the modally tinged harmonies of the *Andante moderato* seem archaic – an impression fortified by its surreptitiously dirge-like character. The *Allegro giocoso* is a scherzo of almost malicious humour. There are no lyrical effusions whatsoever, and seldom did Brahms's orchestra sound so acerbic – so concise and focused.

The same applies to the finale, despite its size. It is headed *Allegro energico e passionato* – fast, energetic and passionate. Only when both are taken at full value can the delicate intervening meditative moments balance the compositional texture. Here the effect, rather than standing in the foreground, emerges from the logic of Brahms's symphonic style. At the end comes a dramatic gloom that already foreshadows Mahler's finales.

Immediately after the premiere Hans von Bülow took his Meiningen Orchestra on tour with the Fourth. Brahms joined them and conducted many performances himself. Thereafter this late work, too, was fully established.

After completing his Fourth Symphony Brahms prefixed four bars to the first movement. Precisely when, and why, remain matters of speculation, as Louise Litterick convincingly argued in her 1987 article "Brahms the indecisive: notes on the first movement of the Fourth Symphony". The winds play a widely spaced A minor chord that collapses plagally to E minor, with string pizzicati marking the changes of harmony. From this the violins finally derive the motif of a descending third that will govern the rest of the movement. It is a strangely amorphous beginning, adding another preliminary stage to the movement's initial motivic material. Brahms himself, it would seem, was not convinced by this version, for the four bars had vanished by the time the symphony went to print. But his friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, wrote to him: "I almost regret that you deleted the introductory bars."

We may well second this opinion, for the introduction allows the structural labours to begin, as it were, one level lower in the humus of the music. In this light, it is important to give the alternative opening a hearing, even if it failed to find its way later into the canonical version. This version is presented here preceded by the last few bars of the first movement. This allows the listener to hear the cadence which ends the movement and which Brahms then mirrored in his revised opening.

Serenades

Serenade No. 1 in D major, op. 11

1. Allegro molto
2. Scherzo: Allegro non troppo
3. Adagio non troppo
4. Menuetto I – Menuetto II
5. Scherzo: Allegro
6. Rondo: Allegro

Serenade No. 2 in A major, op. 16

1. Allegro moderato
2. Scherzo: Vivace
3. Adagio non troppo
4. Quasi menuetto
5. Rondo: Allegro

Both of Brahms's serenades, opp. 11 and 16, were written during the period in which he was serving the Detmold court for three months each autumn (1857–60) as choral director, piano teacher and soloist.

Their composition date provides a hint as to why the two works so seldom turn up in concert programmes: they don't fit into the prevailing image of Brahms – not, in any case, as well as the contemporaneous First Piano Concerto, whose growlings suggest the struggle to produce a symphony more readily than the types of evening music – notturni, cassations and serenades – that echoed through the streets of Vienna a century earlier. Yet this line of thinking does the Serenades an injustice. For one thing, these are masterworks, carefully balanced in sonority, poetic, virtuosic, ambitious and full of appealing ideas. For another, they reflect Brahms's approach to the symphony at least as clearly as the First Concerto does. We are witnessing here that portion of the path which led in

1873 to the *Haydn Variations* – the last foothill Brahms climbed before scaling the peak that was his First Symphony, but a work that did succeed in entering the canon.

The first of the two Serenades also owes a debt to Haydn. In Detmold, where he wrote it between 1857 and 1859, Brahms made a thorough study of Haydn's symphonies, obtaining the scores from Joseph Joachim. The last, No. 104 in D major, served as a model for many aspects of Serenade No.1, which is in the same key: from the opening drone fifths to the first movement's principal theme, from the double dotting that links the Adagio with the concluding Rondo to details of the instrumentation. The extent of Brahms's enthusiasm for Haydn is evident in the theme of the first Scherzo, which foreshadows the penultimate "Haydn" variation and even the Second Piano Concerto. There is also the unmistakable influence of Beethoven's symphonies – the early ones and the "Pastoral" in particular have left their mark.

Johannes Brahms

Gewandhaus music director Riccardo Chailly notes that the playing time of the First Serenade exceeds that of most symphonies, and Brahms's adoption of models from his predecessors has nothing to do with eclecticism, but rather with a composer testing the viability of his tools for future use. "It sounds like Brahms immediately. You recognise the vocabulary and grammar of his symphonic language": horizontal and vertical rhythmic displacements, themes divided up between different instruments, surprising harmonic turns, triplets superimposed against duple rhythms, and the derivation of thematic material from motivic cells. As Chailly puts it: "The basic problem of the First Serenade is its Janus-faced character. It develops out of simplicity and yet is extremely complicated. It needs lightness of touch, the Mozartian tone, and yet is enormously differentiated symphonically."

The key for him, as so often, can be found in the tempo: "Brahms headed the opening movement Allegro molto, very fast. Not simply fast. If you fail to observe that, the 574 bars can really drag on. Not only do they take longer – they also never get going."

Accordingly, Chailly takes the "molto" very seriously, taking the orchestra to its limits, beating whole bars for long stretches, thereby getting the movement pulsating and sparkling, dancing and smiling. Says Chailly: "The last step towards the insight that it must be this way was hearing the EMI recording by Sir Adrian Boult, a superb Brahms interpreter as well as a pupil of Arthur Nikisch, which closes the circle of the Gewandhaus Orchestra's Brahms tradition."

At least as important as his determination of "outer" tempos is the reliability of Chailly's "inner" tempos. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the conclusion of the opening movement and during the

slow movement. At the end of the Allegro molto, the music fragments and deconstructs itself. Chailly states: “Brahms composed that out in minute detail, the movement increasing in energy right up to the last high D major chord. Adding a ritardando destroys that effect.”

This is even elearer midway through the Adagio non troppo: with a quiet push on semiquaver (16th-note) triplets, the violas and cellos set their sights on the home key of B flat major. A gentle swerve, a sparkling. Chailly insists, “one may hold back only minimally; we’re dealing with a gesture of simplicity, not of rhetoric!”

Op. 11 offers a briqhtness, waggishness and humour that would later become rare in Brahms. Yet it also bears the seeds of the features that distinguish the four symphonies, and that aspect simply can’t be heard when interpreters self-importantly poke around in the score searching for cross-references. It becomes apparent only if they rediscover it there on its own terms.

This is also entirely true of the Second Serenade, completed in November 1859 and premiered with considerable success in February 1860 in Hamburg. It presents quite a different face, also indebted to the spirit of Haydn and Mozart and the legacy of Beethoven but testing other colours for their future symphonic suitability. The exotic scoring is already an indication: doubled winds and strings minus violins. Chailly: “The idea is a duskier sound. Not in the sense of darkness, but rather one of pleasant shade.”

At first glance the score looks like wind-band music with string accompaniment, and indeed the handling of the winds can be understood within that tradition. But the strings are not content with the function of servants. The technically demanding viola part repeatedly takes the lead. Its songfulness in the opening movement is nostalgic, but it must initially “stay *piano*”, Chailly stresses. “The strings answer the winds with shaded colours, and out of this contrast begins the movement’s magical charm.”

Not until the strings establish a broken pizzicato foundation does the tone become serenade-like. This means that even when the texture becomes increasingly complex rhythmically, harmonically and structurally, the playing must remain multifaceted, multicoloured, light and delicate. Chailly again: “Semplicissimo! The double-bass jokes can generate their wit, the music swings, and the colours glow.” Brahms prescribes *alla breve* here, and the importance of taking the composer at his word is again self-evident. That applies as well to the light-hearted Scherzo and, still more, to the Adagio non troppo. “A serenade adagio”, Chailly reminds us, “not a symphony adagio: it has to flow.” Only then can the heavenly oboe-clarinet dialogue work its enchantment, making plausible the parallels drawn by Chailly with Mendelssohn: “Here I always have to think of the slow movement of the ’Italian’. It’s a different world of ideas but invented out of the same spirit.”

In the Quasi menuetto, too, it’s worth attending to what Brahms wrote above the movement. This piece in 6/4 time is no minuet. The composer is playing with the idea of minuet, leveraging its metre, letting it stagger and stumble, always thumbing its nose at listeners when they think they understand what’s happening. At the heart of this reflected minuet is one of Brahms’s earliest masterpieces: for Chailly, this Trio is a “triumph of simplicity, which in its reduction to the extreme – and with its lyrical poetry arising from its very limitations – looks ahead to Anton Webern.”

Finally the Rondo, again *alla breve*, extremely virtuosic, setting off sparks of inner energy, is another “Pastoral” reflection for Chailly, an uninhibited dance, whose glittering piccolo trills, teasing rhythms and irresistible drive recall Mozart.

Op. 16, to be sure, is also an early work by the symphonic late bloomer Brahms, one of many milestones along the path leading to the king of all genres. And because our music industry is more

interested in goals than approaches, this marvellous music leads a shadowy existence in the repertoire. It can't be reproduced with a large paintbrush, and so Chailly uses silverpoint to reveal that Brahms's path began, not with Beethoven, but Mozart and Haydn. With his reduced Gewandhaus forces, Chailly gives us buoyant and delicate but by no means harmless Brahms. Presented in lofty serenity but not casually, this is the music of a young composer who could already secure his niche on Olympus yet chooses to go somewhere completely different. In the First Symphony, first performed in 1876, we can hear where this path eventually leads.

Overtures

Academic Festival Overture (Akademische Festouvertüre), op. 80

Allegro – Maestoso – Animato – Maestoso

Tragic Overture (Tragische Ouvertüre), op. 81

Allegro ma non troppo – Molto piu moderato – Tempo primo ma tranquillo

"The one laughs, the other weeps": thus Brahms's comment on the *Academic Festival Overture*, op. 80 (composed in summer 1880, premiered in Breslau on 4 January 1881), and the *Tragic Overture*, op. 81 (likewise composed in 1880, premiered in Vienna on 26 December 1880).

The **Academic Festival Overture** was the celebrated composer's gesture of thanks to the University of Breslau for awarding him an honorary doctorate. As befitted the occasion, he worked several students' songs into the score, of which the only one familiar to most of us today is *Gaudeamus igitur*, joined by the famous German folk song *Ein Jäger aus Kurpfalz* (A hunter from the Palatinate). Brahms combines this melodic material in the form of a contrapuntal medley as artful as it is readily accessible. Yet the overture is constructed in strict sonata form – another academic touch, so to speak.

The gloomy **Tragic Overture** forms an earnest counterpart to its merry academic confrère. Here the influence of Beethoven's concert overtures can be descried, though Brahms adds his own distinctive inflection. As in the symphonies, the writing emerges on its own from developing variation. Brahms himself conducted the premières of both overtures. The cheerful *Academic Festival* immediately caught the fancy of the audience and was for a long time one of his most popular works altogether. The *Tragic* had a much harder go of it; even today it is relatively rarely heard in performance.

Concertos

Concerto for violin and orchestra in D major, op. 77

Composed mainly in 1877–78, premiered in Leipzig on New Year's Day 1879

1. Allegro non troppo (Cadenza: Joseph Joachim)
2. Adagio
3. Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace

When Johannes Brahms composed his First Piano Concerto, which was a catastrophic failure at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in 1859, he was still searching for a path to the post-Beethovenian symphony. This ensured that the concerto, with its grand symphonic design, was barely fathomable to his contemporaries. By the time he composed his Violin Concerto twenty years later, he had already completed his first two symphonies, perfected his technique of developing variation and become a

mature symphonist. This too ensured that his concerto, with its symphonic design, was difficult for the public to grasp.

For there is one thing these two concertos are not: neither is standard virtuoso fare. Both are insanely difficult for the soloist (and equally insanely difficult to accompany), and both hide their huge technical challenges behind a structural probity that is not concerned with effects and instead focuses on formal logic and rigour, on structure and development.

In the case of the Violin Concerto this has led to many choice *bons mots*. Pablo de Sarasate, for example, was outraged that the soloist had to tag after the oboist in the concerto's only genuine melody (he meant the opening of the middle movement). Many violinists, even those who consider their technique impeccable, have dismissed the piece as unplayable. Soon the quip began to circulate that Brahms had written a concerto *against* rather than *for* the violin. This is a quality the piece shares with Beethoven's concerto, whose symphonic scope and seriousness of expression surely guided Brahms in his Op. 77.

The symphonic scope of Brahms's concerto bears witness to the mature symphonist at every turn. Even the unusually long orchestral introduction (actually a preliminary exposition) shows how he distributes the movement's weight. For eighty-nine bars the conductor tells the orchestra what has to be done with the chordal material from which Brahms develops the opening movement. Only then does the soloist enter – not with a grand gesture, but by taking over the line almost casually above a pastel-hued seventh chord. What then follows is tough mental and mechanical work for the violinist. But once the soloist penetrates this cosmos of double stops, broken chords, strings of trills and acerbic passagework, the added sensual value is considerable. The virtuoso comes into his own at last in the final movement. Here Brahms, with a glittering and sure-footed *all'ongarese*, placates even the sceptics among violinists and grants the audience considerable visual appeal.

The appeal is all the greater when Leonidas Kavakos and Riccardo Chailly take the metronome marks found among Joseph Joachim's posthumous papers as their guide. It was Joachim who gave the work its premiere in the Leipzig Gewandhaus, under the composer's baton. Before then, he had given his pianist-friend Brahms crucial advice in the elaboration of the violin part Though Brahms followed Joachim whenever he found something too difficult or impossible to play, he almost always pressed ahead with his own solutions rather than adopting the proposals from his violinist friend.

The Gewandhaus premiere was a success, despite the reservations that many people held toward the work. And since Joachim immediately included his friend's concerto in his repertoire and played it all over the world, and since many of his countless pupils quickly learned to appreciate it in turn, it soon took hold. Today the Brahms Concerto is unquestionably among the most important and most frequently played works in its genre – which is also one reason why entire generations of performers have covered the score with idiosyncrasies and bad habits like mildew. The Teutonic heft with which many players have tried to reshape the work's alleged shortage of virtuosic impact has not always done it any favours.

Riccardo Chailly and Leonidas Kavakos have gone, so to speak, back to the roots and returned to the score, to a compositional fabric which, when viewed from the standpoint of structure rather than effect, is not as doughy and massive as the clichés would have it. And when they do, an almost classical lucidity shines forth from behind the grand gestures.

Dances

Hungarian Dances

orch. Brahms

No. 1 in G minor Allegro molto
No. 3 in F major Allegretto – Poco piu animato
No. 10 in F major Presto

arr. Joseph Joachim

No. 1 in G minor: Allegro molto
No. 2 in D minor: Allegro non assai
No. 6 in B flat major: Vivace
No. 11 in D minor: Poco andante

In its day the Hungarian Dances for Piano Four Hands was an overnight sensation. None of Brahms's works had higher sales figures during his lifetime. Yet he did not even deign to give it an opus number. His scruples arose from the fact that not all the material for the twenty-one pieces flowed from his own pen; many he had taken from coffee-house variants of Hungarian folk songs of the sort he had encountered in the 1850s, when he toured small-town venues as accompanist to the Hungarian violin virtuoso Eduard Reményi.

This had no adverse effect on the work's success, however, and Brahms's publisher Simrock constantly badgered him to produce an orchestral version. Brahms readily complied in the case of three, cloaking nos. 1, 3 and 10 from the first volume in instrumental attire and conducting their hugely successful première in Leipzig's Gewandhaus on 5 February 1874. But he remained obdurate and never orchestrated the others. The versions still heard today in the concert hall, especially as encore numbers, were provided by his colleagues, one of whom was Antonín Dvořák.

Joseph Joachim arranged several of the favourite pieces for violin and piano for his own use. In this version, too, the dances display their irresistible rhythmic, melodic and harmonic charm.

Liebeslieder-Walzer from Opp. 52 & 65

Selected and orchestrated by the composer

Op. 52 no. 1 (Rede, Mädchen, allzuliebes)
Op. 52 no. 2 (Am Gesteine rauscht die Flut)
Op. 52 no. 4 (Wie des Abends schöne Röte)
Op. 52 no. 5 (Die grüne Hopfenranke)
Op. 52 no. 6 (Ein kleiner, hübscher Vogel nahm den Flug)
Op. 52 no. 8 (Wenn so lind dein Auge mir)
Op. 52 no. 9 (Am Donaustrande, da steht ein Haus)
Op. 52 no. 11 (Nein, es ist nicht auszukommen)
Op. 65 no. 9 (Nagen am Herzen fühl ich ein Gift mir)

Another rousing success was the *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, published in two sets as Opp. 52 and 65 in 1868. They were originally written for voices and piano duet, but Brahms's publisher Simrock, acting on his own authority, added the words "with voices *ad libitum*". It almost led to a falling-out with the composer.

Yet the idea of dispensing with the voices fell on fruitful soil, and Brahms prepared his own version for piano alone. Finally, in 1869–70 he orchestrated nine of the songs, which were duly

premiered at the Berlin Musikhochschule on 19 March 1870, joined by a vocal quartet. Once again the score expressly indicated that the voices could be omitted. The result is a light, Viennese Brahms of diaphanous magic, full of feeling but never sentimental. It is difficult to see why these pieces, which only reached publication in 1938, are not heard more often.

Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn, op. 56a

Composed in Vienna in summer 1873, premiered there on 2 November of the same year

Tema: Chorale St. Antoni. Andante
Var. 1 : Poco piu animato
Var. 2: Piu vivace
Var. 3: Con mota
Var. 4: Andante con mota
Var. 5: Vivace
Var. 6: Vivace
Var. 7: Grazioso
Var. 8: Presto non troppo
Finale: Andante

The theme of Brahms's Haydn Variations – the "St Anthony Chorale" – is probably not by Haydn. Brahms found it in a suite for wind band that was attributed to Haydn at the time, but whose origins are today considered at best obscure.

No matter who thought up the theme, its five-bar periods immediately captured Brahms's attention, and he adopted the piece verbatim as the opening of his cycle. Here he tested the viability of his technique of developing variation one final time before ascending to the level of the symphony.

The Finale of the Variations already points to the finale of the Fourth by creating a hugely escalating passacaglia from the five-bar ostinato bass. The other variations are kept as concise as possible, each focusing on a single aspect of transformation. In other words, here Brahms develops in succession the very things that attained new riches in his symphonies. The still popular version for two pianos was written just after the successful premiere, conducted by Brahms himself.

Intermezzi

Intermezzo, op. 116 no. 4

orch. Paul Klengel

Adagio

Intermezzo, op. 117 no. 1

orch. Paul Klengel

Andante moderato

The introverted Intermezzi for solo piano are terse character pieces revealing the bittersweet autumn of late Brahms. Paul Klengel (1854–1935), the brother of the Gewandhaus Orchestra's legendary solo cellist Julius Klengel, orchestrated two of them skilfully and subtly for chamber orchestra.

Peter Korfmacher

Serenades

Serenade No. 1 in D major Op. 11

1. Allegro molto
2. Scherzo: Allegro non troppo – Trio: poco più moto
3. Adagio non troppo
4. Menuetto I – Menuetto II
5. Scherzo: Allegro
6. Rondo: Allegro

Gifted but without prospects or money, the young Brahms was glad enough to accept a modest musical post at the court of the Prince of Detmold during the winters of 1857, 1858 and 1859. His duties were uninspiring and the pay small, but he gained valuable practical experience in corporate music-making and profited from his immersion in the classical scores housed in the library. His D minor Piano Concerto dated from those years and so too did his two Serenades, Op. 11 and Op. 16, both achieving their definitive form in 1860. The former one, in D major, had in fact begun life as a nonet for wind and strings. On Joachim's recommendation, Brahms rescored it for Beethoven-size orchestra, with four horns but without trombones.

An early composition therefore and more expansive in its outer movements than Brahms would have favoured in later days, it has the qualities of conspicuous tunefulness, charm, freshness and vigour. By definition it could be expected to exceed the normal symphonic span of movements, and there are six, including two Scherzos and a Minuet. Haydn and early Beethoven loom large among its formative influences: what for instance could be more Haydnish than the start of the opening Allegro and its witty conclusion or indeed the second Scherzo. In the Minuet, however, older procedures are invoked, its Trio entitled *Menuetto II* after Baroque usage.

If Brahms's command of the orchestra at that period lacked the sophistication it subsequently attained, the Serenade's scoring sounds perfectly valid, his writing for horns and clarinets showing intimations of what was to come. By the same token, some of his idiomatic finger-prints are already in evidence, notably his fondness for triplets and the rhythmic effect of three against two, *hemiola*. It is in the extended, sonata-form Adagio that the essence of Brahms's reflective vein, then and thereafter, is to be heard.

Christopher Grier

Serenade No. 2 in A, Op. 16

1. Allegro moderato
2. Scherzo
3. Adagio non troppo
4. Quasi Menuetto
5. Rondo

Both of Brahms's serenades are products of his years as director of music at the court of Lippe-Detmold, where his presentation of the serenades and divertimentos of Mozart led him to try his own hand at such works. While the six-movement Serenade in D (Op. 11) began life as a nonet in 1857, the Serenade in A was conceived orchestrally from the start the following year. It is in five movements, and the scoring is unusual, omitting not only trumpets and drums but violins as well; this darkish string coloring accounts for a mellowness and intimacy more readily associated with chamber music. Brahms spoke of his Op. 16 as "a tender piece", and after conducting the premiere in Hamburg on

February 10, 1860, he remarked that he had rarely found so much pleasure in writing music. In that same year the two serenades became his first orchestral scores to see publication; the A major was revised and republished 15 years later.

Pastoral and serene for the most part, the opening movement ambles along without any big surprises but with some minor-tinged coloring that may have been introduced at the time of the revision. In the serenade's symmetrical design, a vivacious little scherzo and a more expansive *Quasi Menuetto* flank the work's centerpiece, an *Adagio non troppo*; this central movement's flowing outer sections encase a strikingly dramatic middle one that contains a fugue based on the opening material's bass line. An exuberant and outgoing rondo with a hearty outdoor flavor rounds out the work, the piccolo lending an element of almost giddy exhilaration to the robust good humor at the end.

Richard Freed

Dances

Hungarian Dances

No. 1 in G minor: Allegro molto (Orchestrated by: Johannes Brahms)
No.2 in D minor: Allegro non assai – Vivace (Orchestr.: Johan Andreas Hallén)
No.3 in F major: Allegretto (Orchestr.: Johannes Brahms)
No.4 in F sharp minor: Poco sostenuto – Vivace (Orchestr.: Paul Juon)
No. 5 in G minor: Allegro – Vivace (Orchestr.: Martin Schmeling)
No.6 in D major: Vivace (Orchestr.: Martin Schmeling)
No.7 in F major: Allegretto – Vivo (Orchestr.: Martin Schmeling)
No.8 in A minor: Presto (Orchestr.: Hans Gál)
No.9 in E minor: Allegro ma non troppo (Orchestr.: Hans Gál)
No. 10 in F major: Presto (Orchestr.: Johannes Brahms)
No. 11 in D minor: Poco Andante (Orchestr.: Albert Parlow)
No. 12 in D minor: Presto (Orchestr.: Albert Parlow)
No. 13 in D major: Andantino grazioso – Vivace (Orchestr.: Albert Parlow)
No. 14 in D minor: Un poco Andante (Orchestr.: Albert Parlow)
No. 15 in B flat major: Allegretto grazioso (Orchestr.: Albert Parlow)
No.16 in F major: Con moto (Orchestr.: Albert Parlow)
No. 17 in F sharp minor: Andantino – Vivace (Orchestr.: Antonín Dvořák)
No. 18 in D major: Molto vivace (Orchestr.: Antonín Dvořák)
No. 19 in B minor: Allegretto (Orchestr.: Antonín Dvořák)
No. 20 in E minor: Poco Allegretto – Vivace (Orchestr.: Antonín Dvořák)
No.21 in E minor: Vivace (Orchestr.: Antonín Dvořák)

There is a special relationship, running right through the work of Brahms, between his style of composition for orchestra and his style of composition for piano. While for some composers – Berlioz is an extreme example – the colours and timbres of the instruments of the orchestra constitute an integral factor in their musical invention, Brahms belongs to the opposing school, in that the piano, his own instrument, was always at the root of his musical conceptions. He 'thought', so to speak, pianistically. On the other hand, as early as 1853, when he was only twenty, his works for piano impressed Robert Schumann as "veiled symphonies": that is to say, they have a power which demands in some respects the apparatus of a symphony orchestra for realization. This inherent tension affected his entire output, so that his work in each medium benefits to some extent from the pull exerted by the other. It is the less surprising, therefore, that several of his works lead a double existence, of which it

is impossible to say that either version is "only" an arrangement of the other, and listeners are entirely free to decide which they prefer.

The Hungarian Dances are one such work. Brahms published them as piano duets in two sets (nos. 1–10 in 1869 and nos. 11–21 in 1880). But they owe their real fame – and they are among his most popular works – to the orchestral versions, in which the music reveals its brilliance more fully than in the piano versions. This is due not simply to the greater variety of colour which an instrumental ensemble gives, but also to specific effects which are inevitably more subdued on the piano: the typical string tremolos, for example, the rapid crescendos and diminuendos, or the rhythmic accents which are an important characteristic of the Hungarian idiom. The ancestor of these works of Brahms is not, of course, real Hungarian folk music: it was not until the early twentieth century that that became the subject of serious study, by Bartók, Kodály and others. Rather the line of descent is from the captivating sound-world of gypsy music, through the music of Haydn's and Schubert's day, where it had become a favourite means of colouration with the tag "alla ungarese". The idiom of that ancestry, though symphonically stylized, remains audible not only in the sound of Brahms's dances but also in the atmosphere. They vary in mood between high-spirited vitality and melancholia. For the most part Brahms used existing gypsy melodies, which he had collected since his youth, but a few are his own invention. The first set, nos. 1–10, has on the whole the livelier tunes, while melancholy is more prevalent in the second set. The music owes much of its unique character to the ago gic fluctuations, the switch from restraint to explosive energy, the alternation of mounting tension and relaxation. At the same time the score permits, indeed, it demands a great degree of creative freedom from interpreters; ever new melodies and motivic relationships succeed each other in continually changing lights, which makes every performance of the Hungarian Dances a *tour de force* of musicianship.

Volker Scherliess