Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Riccardo Muti Zell Music Director
Yo-Yo Ma Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

Thursday, May 4, 2017, at 8:00
Friday, May 5, 2017, at 1:30
Saturday, May 6, 2017, at 8:00
Tuesday, May 9, 2017, at 7:30

Riccardo Muti Conductor

Music by Johannes Brahms

Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68
Un poco sostenuto—Allegro
Andante sostenuto
Un poco allegretto e grazioso
Adagio—Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73
Allegro non troppo
Adagio non troppo
Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino)
Allegro con spirito

These performances are generously sponsored by the Zell Family Foundation.

CSO Tuesday series concerts are sponsored by United Airlines.

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Johannes Brahms
Born May 7, 1833; Hamburg, Germany
Died April 3, 1897; Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68

Beethoven died six years before Brahms was born, but his presence was felt by almost every composer who came after him. Even Brahms, a master of piano music and songs from an early age, put off writing symphonies and string quartets—two Beethoven forms par excellence—offering only the pathetic, but honest excuse: “You can’t have any idea what it’s like always to hear such a giant marching behind you.” Eventually, Brahms turned and faced the giant, but it took him nearly twenty years to do so, and only the magnificence of his own First Symphony gave him the courage to leave the ghost of Beethoven behind him for good.

Few great works of music have taken so long to get from sketch to finished product. Obviously, Brahms had his reasons for sitting on his first symphony, but eventually his friends and colleagues began to wonder whether he, like Schubert before him, might leave an unfinished symphony in the attic. (In fact, in 1870, Brahms said he would never complete the piece.) His publisher, Fritz Simrock, finally wrote: “Aren’t you doing anything more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in ’73 either?” But there was no symphony in 1873, just as there had been no symphony any year since 1854, when Brahms first set out to write one.

That earliest effort, in the key of D minor (the key of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, incidentally), neatly sidestepped the issue to become Brahms’s first piano concerto, even though the idea of “symphony” is written all over it. Brahms also avoided the challenge with the two serenades that gave him needed and valuable experience writing for the orchestra without directly taking on Beethoven. There was further testing of the waters in the substantial orchestral accompaniment to A German Requiem and other important choral works. And finally, a dress rehearsal of sorts—the grand Variations on a Theme by Haydn from 1873—though this too, for all its mastery of instrumentation and intellectual rigor, was not a symphony.

But Brahms did have a symphony in the works. As early as 1862, he sent a completed first movement to Clara Schumann. “Imagine my surprise!” she wrote to Joseph Joachim, who would

COMPOSED  ca. 1873
First CSO Performances
February 9 and 10, 1894, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting
July 9, 1936, Ravinia Festival. Hans Lange conducting
August 4, 2014, Ravinia Festival. Paavo Järvi conducting
October 8, 9, and 13, 2015, Orchestra Hall. Semyon Bychkov conducting
October 10, 2015, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. Semyon Bychkov conducting

CSO Recordings
1952. Rafael Kubelík conducting. Mercury
1975. James Levine conducting. RCA
1989. Günter Wand conducting. RCA
1993. Daniel Barenboim conducting. Erato

First Performance
November 4, 1876; Karlsruhe, Germany

Instrumentation
Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings

Approximate Performance Time
49 minutes
one day play the violin concerto Brahms wrote for him in a single summer. Clara’s surprise eventually turned to dismay when Brahms continued to drag things out, sending her the horn call from the finale as a birthday card some six years later, and finally sitting her down to listen as he played the whole symphony at the piano another eight years after that. Although Brahms certainly took his time, he proved to an impatient musical public that there was still music being written that was worth the wait. Unlike his contemporary Anton Bruckner, who made a career out of having second thoughts, Brahms was the best judge of his own work. When a piece didn’t please him, he put it aside or reworked it, or—in the case of his Fifth Symphony—he destroyed it. But he wouldn’t release it.

When Brahms sent his completed first movement to Clara Schumann in 1862, it didn’t begin with the fierce and arresting introduction we know, but took off like a rocket from the headlong Allegro. Clara confessed to Joachim that the beginning seemed bold and “rather harsh, but I have become used to it.” Brahms, however,

PLAYING BRAHMS IN CHICAGO
By Phillip Huscher

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra has a formidable history of playing Brahms’s four symphonies. The Orchestra performed the Third Symphony in April 1892, on the final concert of its very first season, and Theodore Thomas, the Orchestra’s founder and music director, introduced the others, one by one, in each of the next three seasons. Both Thomas and his successor, Frederick Stock, placed Brahms’s orchestral music at the heart of the Orchestra’s growing repertoire. In fact, for eighty-three consecutive seasons, there was at least one symphony by Brahms featured every year.

Thomas was a pioneer in introducing Brahms to this country. By 1891, when he founded the Chicago Orchestra, he had been performing the composer’s music in public for nearly forty years—from the time Brahms was a completely unknown name in America. In fact, when Thomas made his New York debut as a violinist in 1855—he was just twenty at the time—performing chamber music with the brilliant young pianist William Mason, he played in the world premiere of Brahms’s B major piano trio, the first of the composer’s works to be heard in the country, and the only one to be performed in the United States before it was given in Europe. Once Thomas decided to become a conductor in the early 1860s, fired by the idea of introducing the landmarks of orchestral music to the American public, he became Brahms’s most powerful champion in the United States.

In 1877, the year after the long-awaited premiere of Brahms’s First Symphony in Germany, Thomas and his chief rival, Walter Damrosch—the two most commanding conductors in New York at the time—fought over the chance to be first to play the work in this country. Thomas acquired the rights and announced the premiere for January 1878, but Damrosch outsmarted him and gave the U.S. premiere three weeks earlier. (According to the most popular account, a friend of Damrosch convinced Gustav Schirmer, Brahms’s U.S. publisher, to let him borrow the new score overnight for study purposes, and then delivered it to Damrosch’s house, where a team of copyists was waiting to work through the night to prepare the orchestra parts.) The New York press made much of the rivalry: after both men had led the symphony in New York that winter, one paper reported that in the third movement Damrosch conducted eighty-five beats to the minute and Thomas only sixty-four, implying, without musical logic, that Damrosch was the winner. Over the next several years, Thomas continued his campaign to introduce Brahms’s music to the American public; he gave the first U.S. performances of Brahms’s Piano Concerto no. 2 and Double Concerto in New York, and introduced the Variations on a Theme by Haydn in Boston on tour with his own orchestra.

By the time Thomas moved to Chicago in 1891 to start the Chicago Orchestra, he had already conducted all four of Brahms’s symphonies with the New York Philharmonic, and he clearly intended to play them regularly in Chicago. When he led the Third Symphony at the close of the first season, the press was encouraging. “Brahms’s [sic] Symphony is in every respect a masterly and a thoroughly delightful creation,” the writer for the Chicago Tribune reported, going on to call Brahms “a master who writes not merely because he would demonstrate his skill in the technique of composition, but because he has a musical message for the world.” But the Chicago public was not yet convinced. When Thomas was told that local audiences didn’t like Brahms, he is supposed to have shrugged and said, “Then I will conduct him until they do.” According to Thomas’s wife Rose, there was no composer of any nationality for whose music Thomas did so much in this country, for he played the Brahms symphonies directly against the popular will every year of his life, until the public grew to understand and appreciate them in spite of themselves.

During his first season in Chicago, Thomas was named music director
evidently didn’t, because when he played the entire symphony for Clara more than a dozen years later, it began with the powerful, measured drum beat and chromatic unfolding that now lead straight into the Allegro. Even though it was written after the fact—or, perhaps because of that—Brahms’s introduction serves as a preview of what follows: the opening violin line rising by half steps, for example, and the falling thirds in the winds will both be whipped into meaningful shape elsewhere.

The Allegro is conceived on the largest scale. The final turn into the recapitulation, in particular, is stretched to incredible lengths—and then, with the destination clearly in sight, resolution is further delayed by a daring descent into a remote key. For a moment, it appears that Brahms has thrown caution to the wind, but this sudden whim, too, is part of his plan, all calculated with the skill of a master craftsman.

From the beginning, Hermann Levi—a perceptive German conductor—thought the two inner movements more suited to a serenade or a suite. But brevity and conciseness aren’t at odds with the symphonic scale—although the grandeur of Brahms’s first movement might

for the World’s Columbian Exposition, set to open in May 1893. Thomas intended to make music a central part of the fair’s activities, and he invited Brahms, who had never set foot on these shores, to appear as the White City’s honored guest. Brahms demurred. On September 1, 1892, he wrote to Thomas, saying he was greatly tempted but afraid he would back out at the last moment. “Kindly excuse, then, the old-country man who cannot undertake the long voyage so lightly as you do, and turn over to another of our colleagues the honor and pleasure of representing German music at the exposition.” Dvořák ended up being the fair’s most famous visiting composer instead, and Thomas paid tribute to Brahms by leading a concert entirely of his works with the Chicago Orchestra in the first month of the exposition. (An all-Brahms concert was highly unusual fare in those days.)

Despite Thomas’s efforts, Chicago was slow to warm to Brahms’s music. Even the local critics were largely indifferent or unimpressed. “The composer is tiresome to the degree of being almost unbearable,” the Chicago Times wrote in 1895. The Chicago Herald said “his works, hardly without exception, are more for the musician and student than for the music-lover and nine-tenths of those who compose the average orchestral concert audience.” But when Brahms died, in April 1897, the Chicago Tribune mourned him as “one of the greatest, if not the greatest composer of music in the world.” The Chicago Orchestra played Brahms’s Third Symphony in his memory. On the program page, the piece was encased in a black box.

By then, the Chicago Orchestra had become America’s great Brahms orchestra, with a peerless champion in Thomas and with ties to the composer himself. Bruno Steinadel, Chicago’s principal cellist from the very first season, had played under Brahms in Berlin, where he held the same position with the Berlin Philharmonic for several years. Frederick Stock, who joined the Orchestra in 1895 as a violist—and would succeed Thomas as its music director—came to Chicago from the Cologne Orchestra, where Brahms was a regular visitor. (Stock would later make the Orchestra’s first recordings of Brahms’s music.) Thomas’s commitment remained undimmed: he took the Fourth Symphony on the Orchestra’s first tour to New York City, in March 1896, and the First Symphony was the centerpiece of the last program the Orchestra played in the Auditorium Theatre, in December 1904, before moving into its new home, Orchestra Hall.

Even then, Brahms was still something of a controversial figure in Chicago. Early in 1904, as Daniel Burnham’s design for Orchestra Hall reached its final form, the names of five composers were incorporated just above the tall arched windows on the second floor. You can see them today, as you approach the hall: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Wagner. But one day in 2004, when I was looking over Burnham’s architectural drawings in anticipation of the hall’s centenary, I was startled to see a different lineup. On the official east elevation, which is signed, approved, and dated May 18, 1904, it is Brahms’s name that appears, not Schubert’s. Over the summer, someone got cold feet. On the final detailed construction drawings of the band course inscriptions, dated in September, Schubert takes Brahms’s place.

Was it too big a risk in 1904 to place Brahms’s name on the front of a concert hall that, as Burnham wrote, “will last for some centuries, for which reason its projectors feel it a duty and a privilege to build something that Chicago can love and be proud of more and more from generation to generation.” It is easy to imagine the thinking: Brahms hadn’t even been dead a decade; his music was still new, his place in the public’s affection uncertain. Schubert’s name would add two letters to the stone carver’s task but possibly save face in the long run. Yet, that season, when the Orchestra moved into its new home, it was Brahms who reigned on stage: Thomas programmed three of his symphonies and the Violin Concerto, in addition to the Haydn Variations and the Academic Festival Overture. The composer’s presence in Chicago’s musical life has not diminished since. Year after year, generation after generation, Brahms continues to sit at the heart of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s musical life: not one of the Orchestra’s 126 seasons has passed without Brahms’s music on its programs.

—P.H.
lead one to expect something equally imposing to follow. Instead, Brahms's slow movement, in the surprising key of E major, is intimate and modest, with lovely woodwind solos and a magnificent one for violin at the end. The third movement is no scherzo, but an intermezzo, as warm and ingratiating as Brahms's piano pieces that actually bear the name.

With the finale, we come again to Beethoven, partly because any symphony that begins in C minor and then forges triumphantly into C major at the end must face comparison with Beethoven's Fifth, and partly because Brahms's big allegro melody suggests nothing more than the great song of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." When the likeness was pointed out, Brahms simply said, "Any ass can see that." More to the point, the English critic Donald Tovey noted that Brahms's theme is regularly compared with Beethoven's "only because it is the solitary one among hundreds of the same type that is great enough to suggest the resemblance." There are other echoes of Beethoven, too. Certainly the finale's extensive introduction, clouded with mystery and flaring up with occasional turbulence, takes a cue from Beethoven's Ninth. But then so do countless works written in the nineteenth century that don't profit from the comparison.

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Johannes Brahms

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

Within months after the long-awaited premiere of his First Symphony, Brahms produced another one. The two were as different as night and day—logically enough, since the first had taken two decades of struggle and soul-searching and the second was written over a summer holiday. If it truly was Beethoven’s symphonic achievement that stood in Brahms's way for all those years, nothing seems to have stopped the flow of this new symphony in D major. Brahms had put his fears and worries behind him.

This music was composed at the picture-postcard village of Pörtschach, on the Wörthersee, where Brahms had rented two tiny rooms for his summer holiday (and where he would write his violin concerto the next summer). The rooms apparently were ideal for composition, even though the hallway was so narrow that Brahms’s piano couldn’t be moved up the stairs. “It is
delightful here,” Brahms wrote to Fritz Simrock, his publisher, soon after arriving, and the new symphony bears witness to his apparent delight. Later that summer, when Brahms’s friend Theodor Billroth, an amateur musician, played through the score for the first time, he wrote to the composer at once: “It is all rippling streams, blue sky, sunshine, and cool green shadows. How beautiful it must be at Pörtschach.” Eventually listeners began to call this Brahms’s Pastoral Symphony, again raising the comparison with Beethoven. But if Brahms’s Second Symphony has a true companion, it is the violin concerto he would write the following summer in Pörtschach—cut from the same D major cloth and reflecting the mood and even some of the thematic material of the symphony.

When Brahms sent the first movement of his new symphony off to Clara Schumann, she predicted that this music would fare better with the public than the tough and stormy First, and she was right. The first performance, on December 30, 1877, in Vienna under Hans Richter, was a triumph, and the third movement had to be repeated. When Brahms conducted the second performance, in Leipzig just after the beginning of the new year, the audience was again enthusiastic. But Brahms’s real moment of glory came late in the summer of 1878, when his new symphony was a great success in his native Hamburg, where he had twice failed to win a coveted music post. Still, it would be another decade before the Honorary Freedom of Hamburg—the city’s highest honor—was given to him, and Brahms remained ambivalent about his birthplace for the rest of his life. In the meantime, the D major symphony found receptive listeners nearly everywhere it was played.

From the opening bars of the Allegro non troppo—with their bucolic horn calls and woodwind chords—we prepare for the radiant sunlight and pure skies that Billroth promised. And, with one soaring phrase from the first violins, Brahms’s great pastoral scene unfolds before us. Although another of Billroth’s letters to the composer suggests that “a happy, cheerful mood permeates the whole work,” Brahms knows that even a sunny day contains moments of darkness and doubt—moments when pastoral serenity threatens to turn tragic. It’s that underlying tension—even drama—that gives this music its remarkable character. A few details stand out: two particularly bracing passages for the three trombones in the development section, and much later, just before the coda, a wavering horn call that emerges, serene and magical. This is followed, as if it were the most logical thing in the world, by a jolly bit of dance-hall waltzing before the music flickers and dies.

Eduard Hanslick, one of Brahms’s champions, thought the Adagio “more conspicuous for the development of the themes than for the worth of the themes themselves.” Hanslick wasn’t the first critic to be wrong—this movement has very little to do with development as we know it—although it’s unlike him to be so far off the mark when dealing with music by Brahms. Hanslick did notice that the third movement has the relaxed character of a serenade. It is, for all its initial grace and charm, a serenade of some complexity, with two frolicsome presto passages (smartly disguising the main theme) and a wealth of shifting accents.

The finale is jubilant and electrifying; the clouds seem to disappear after the hushed opening bars, and the music blazes forward, almost unchecked, to the very end. For all Brahms’s concern about measuring up to Beethoven, he seldom mentioned his admiration for Haydn and his ineffable high spirits, but that’s who Brahms most resembles here. There is, of course, the great orchestral roar of triumph that always suggests Beethoven. But many moments are pure Brahms, like the ecstatic clarinet solo that rises above the bustle only minutes into the movement, or the warm and striding theme in the strings that immediately follows. The extraordinary brilliance of the final bars—as unbridled an outburst as any in Brahms—was not lost on his great admirer Antonín Dvořák when he wrote his Carnival Overture.

Phillip Huscher has been the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1987.