

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany.

Died April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.

Serenade No. 2 in A Major, Op. 16

Brahms composed his A major serenade in 1858–59 and conducted the first performance on February 10, 1860, in Hamburg. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, violas, cellos, and basses. Performance time is approximately thirty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Brahms's Second Serenade were given at the Auditorium Theatre on January 15 and 16, 1897, with Theodore Thomas conducting.

Today Brahms's two genial serenades are often thought of as mere studies for his celebrated symphonies—as a way of warming up for the serious business of following in Beethoven's footsteps and tackling the greatest of classical forms. ("After Haydn," Brahms once said, "writing a symphony was no longer a joke but a matter of life and death.") The serenades clearly *are* the work of a young man who was gaining experience writing for an orchestra and learning about large-scale form. And they are the obvious link between the earliest stage of Brahms's career, when the slim and beardless composer wrote little but piano music, and the full maturity of the commanding, grandfatherly figure whose symphonies and concertos were the talk of Vienna. But Brahms's serenades are also his response to the great tradition of Mozart serenades and divertimentos, and like Beethoven's septet and Schubert's octet, they are small-boned masterpieces in their own right.

Robert Schumann was the first musician to predict the extent of Brahms's transformation, hearing "veiled symphonies" in the young man's piano works, and he wouldn't have been the least bit surprised to see Brahms stepping out and trying his hand at writing for larger ensembles. "Should he direct his magic wand where the powers of the masses in chorus and orchestra may lend him their forces," Schumann wrote in 1853, just five years before Brahms began this serenade, "we can look forward to even more wondrous glimpses of the secret world of spirits." After Brahms took a job in Detmold in 1857, where he had the opportunity to work firsthand with an orchestra, he started writing orchestral music.

But Brahms was cautious: his first serenade originally was sketched as a nonet for winds and strings, and then arranged for chamber orchestra. The second serenade performed this week is the first piece Brahms wrote with the sound of an orchestra in mind. (Although Brahms was working on his First Piano Concerto at the time, it started out as a big sonata for two pianos.) It not only marked a turning point in his career—and in his growing self-confidence, as well—but it's a work of real originality. This is arguably the earliest composition to reveal the promise that Schumann had seen. Unfortunately, Schumann died in 1856 without hearing any of Brahms's greatest works. But his widow Clara was the first person Brahms sent his new serenade to, and she was delighted to see that he was living up to Robert's hopes. She loved the *adagio* in particular and played through her favorite passages at the piano again and again.

Brahms ensured that no one would mistake this work for a symphony by writing five movements, with an "extra" scherzo added before the slow movement—copying the loose, multimovement layout of countless serenades—and by scoring it for strings without violins. As a result, most of the main melodic ideas are given to the winds, which only stresses its ties to Mozart's great serenades for wind instruments.

The first movement is particularly gracious and relaxed. But it isn't without its own bold touches, including a development section that carries the music to far-away D-flat (another passage that Clara admired) and then sits stubbornly on A for twenty-six measures before the opening material is reprised. There are two dance movements—an unusually unbuttoned, folklike scherzo and a restrained "quasi menuetto"—

surrounding the adagio Clara so loved. This intimate and poetic slow movement, literally at the heart of the piece, is one of Brahms's finest creations, a set of variations over a repeated bass that points the way toward the Variations on a Theme by Haydn—and on to the grand passacaglia of the Fourth Symphony. The finale is a good-natured rondo, full of rhythmic vitality and brilliant effects, for which Brahms has been saving the piccolo all along.

Fourteen years passed before Brahms completed another orchestral work, the Variations on a Theme by Haydn. But in the meantime, he was working on his first symphony, one of the most eagerly awaited compositions in the history of music, and, partly because of that, one that took a remarkably long time to get from sketch to the concert hall. After 1876, when Brahms finally let the world hear what he had been up to, this youthful serenade was quickly overshadowed. With each new symphony, Brahms's public increasingly viewed the serenade as inconsequential, an exercise in orchestration, and, at best, as a lovely but slight entertainment. It took the music world some time to recognize that it's the work's very lack of complexity and seriousness, and the composer's obvious delight in writing for an orchestra, that makes this A major serenade one of the natural wonders of Brahms's catalog.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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