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

Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68

Brahms began his first symphony in the 1850s and completed it in 1876; it was first performed on November 4 of that year in Karlsruhe, Germany. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Brahms's First Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on February 9 and 10, 1894, with Theodore Thomas conducting.

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 if 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 of 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 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, 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 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 which 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, 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. There's also much that is pure Brahms, like the unforgettable horn call that parts the clouds and admits the bright sunlight of the C major allegro theme, or the brilliant and hair-raising coda, which nearly beats Beethoven at his own game. The ending, in fact, is as exalted and triumphant as any in music, and it's clear that the triumph is Brahms's alone.

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