

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany.

Died April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

Brahms composed his Second Symphony in the summer of 1877; Hans Richter conducted the first performance in Vienna on December 30, 1877. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons; four horns; two trumpets; three trombones and tuba; timpani; and strings. Performance time is approximately forty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Brahms's Second Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on November 23 and 24, 1894, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on January 31, February 1, and 2, 2002, with Daniele Gatti conducting. The Orchestra most recently performed this symphony at Orchestra Hall on a special pension fund concert on May 24, 2005, with James Levine conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 10, 1936, with Hans Lange conducting, and most recently on July 1, 2005, with James Conlon conducting.

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 Pörschach, on the Worthersee, where Brahms had rented two tiny rooms for his summer holiday. 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 Theodore 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 Pörschach." 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 Pörschach—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 musical 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. (Theodore Thomas, who would later found the Chicago Symphony, introduced the work to the United States on October 3, 1878, at a concert in New York City.)

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*.

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