

Program Notes

By April L. Racana

Tuesday, September 22 The 869th Orchard Hall Subscription Concert

Suntory Hall

9/10

Opera City

9/11

Orchard Hall

9/22

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No. 3 in F Major op. 90

Although the shortest of his symphonic works, Brahms' Third Symphony is perhaps the one that contains some of his most memorable musical moments, orchestrally. His renown for beautiful, rich lyrical lines shines throughout the entire work. One ponders how he could have ever hesitated writing in this genre, even in the wake of Beethoven's symphonic writing, with such a vast font of musical ideas welling up inside of him.

This work, however, seems to reflect much more influence by Schumann than any lingering effects of Beethoven, in several respects. It seems this symphony was inspired by a visit Brahms made to the Rhine in the late spring of 1883. Ironically enough, the same Rhine had also inspired Schumann's Third Symphony three decades earlier, and the opening theme has been determined by scholars to be inspired by that of Schumann's as well. Brahms' close relationship to Clara Schumann also can be seen in a gesture he made on her sixty-fourth birthday when he sent her a score of this, his newest symphony, as a gift. In a letter to Brahms, Clara expressed her feelings of gratitude:

"I have spent such happy hours with your wonderful creation...What a work! What a poem! What a harmonious mood pervades the whole! All the movements seem to be of one piece, one beat of the heart, each one a jewel! From start to finish one is wrapped about with the mysterious charm of the

woods and forest.... In the first I was charmed straight away by the gleams of dawning day, as if the rays of the sun were shining through the trees.... The second is pure idyll; I can see the worshippers kneeling about the little forest shrine, I hear the babbling brook and the buzz of the insects.... The third movement is a pearl, but it is a gray one dipped in a tear of woe, and at the end the modulation is quite wonderful. How gloriously the last movement follows with its passionate upward surge! But one's beating heart is soon calmed down again for the final transfiguration which begins with such beauty in the development motif that words fail me!"

The premiere of this symphony took place in Vienna, on December 2nd, 1883, and many in the audience that day received Brahms' latest symphony with as much warmth as his dear friend had. With the intimacy of the two inner movements contrasting so beautifully with the strength of the first and last movements, audiences today continue to feel drawn in to the warmth within. It has been noted that the three notes <F A♭ F> that form the opening motif were an abbreviation for Brahms' motto: *Frei aber froh!* (Free but happy!) One can just about sense this ecstatic freedom as the final movement climaxes before settling into a calmness and feeling of sheer contentment.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No. 4 in E minor op. 98

After taking fifteen years to publicly present his First Symphony, due to his hesitancy to follow in Beethoven's footsteps, Brahms finished his Second Symphony within four months of the First Symphony, somehow having broken through this mostly psychological barrier it seems. It then took him more than five years to complete his Third Symphony, however the Fourth Symphony came within the following year, after having spent the summers of 1884 and 1885 working on it. Contributing to this outpouring of symphonic writing in a relatively short amount of time was the generous offer of conductor, Hans von Bülow, who gave Brahms full use of the Meiningen court orchestra as a 'rehearsal orchestra.' This also was to be the start of the famous 'Brahms tradition' long established from that point on, with the same ensemble continuing to perform the composer's music even after his death. In October of 1885, after rehearsing the Fourth Symphony with this group, Brahms toured with them through Germany and the Netherlands.

One can hear in this work various elements which are said to be typical of Brahms' symphonic writing: the strong opening movement and even more magnificent finale, the two of which provide solid bookends for the middle movements; The third movement using an atypical form, for example in this last symphony, a modified sonata form, since it does not include the traditional development section; And his use of variation, as opposed to contrasting themes, can be heard throughout the work. In the final movement, the theme, taken from Bach's Cantata no. 150, can be heard thirty times, however with an added chromatic twist and with such subtlety that one may not even realize it

has been repeated to such an extent.

Other common features found in Brahms' symphonic writing can be heard in his use of instrumentation. In particular, his use of the Classical orchestra, complete with double woodwinds, as well as discretion in layering various timbres so as to create unique sounds, for example in the inner voicings, all created works that represented a tremendous influence from the Classical tradition, yet also pointedly moved forward to developing a style and following of his own. It is difficult to imagine Brahms ever considered the possibility of never writing a symphony given the depth of creativeness and wealth of ideas that can be seen to have culminated in this his last symphony.

It seems Robert Schumann's statement, written for the *Neue Zeitschrift Musik* more than three decades earlier that Brahms would "give ideal expression to the times" was right on the mark. He had felt from the first time he heard Brahms perform several of his piano works that he had the ability to continue Beethoven's legacy, stating that he heard 'veiled symphonies' in his early piano sonatas. Although Schumann would not live to hear Brahms' symphonic works, Clara would become a lifelong companion to the composer providing tremendous personal and professional support as a pianist and composer herself. One might wonder if it hadn't been for both Robert and Clara's encouragement, if Brahms would have found the courage to pursue his symphonic works to the extent that he did.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, triangle, strings

April L. Racana / please refer to p.22