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Thursday Series

Petrenko's Brahms III: The Dream Team Returns

Thursday 15 November 2018 7.30pm

Sponsored by Weightmans

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897) Symphony No.3 in F, Op.90

Allegro con brio / Fast, with vigour

Andante / At a walking pace

Poco allegretto / A little fast

Allegro / Fast

Letter from Bohemia

10 October 1883

Dear Friend!

I've recently returned from Vienna, where I spent several days with Dr Brahms. At my request, he played the first and last movements of his new symphony for me. I say without exaggeration that this work surpasses his first two symphonies; if not in grandeur, then certainly in *beauty*. There is a mood in it, which one does not often find in Brahms! What magnificent melodies are there for the finding!

It is full of love, and it makes one's heart melt! Think of these words when you hear the symphony, and you'll agree...

Yours,

Ant. Dvořák

Dvořák wasn't the only musician to fall in love-at-first-hearing with Brahms' Third Symphony. It was one of the few works other than his own that Elgar was willing to conduct. Yet today it's easily the least-played of Brahms' four symphonies. Like the work itself, that's something of a puzzle – yet at the same time, perfectly comprehensible.

Absent friends

The clue's in the endings: all four movements of the Third end softly. Audiences love a good rousing finish, and Brahms knew that – his first two symphonies end in blazing triumph. But he brings the Third to a close in quiet serenity. And once you realise that Brahms wasn't writing to please the crowds, much about the symphony starts to make sense. As soon as it was completed, in the autumn of 1883, Brahms wrote to the violinist Joseph Joachim, offering him the chance to conduct it in Berlin. Joachim was Brahms' closest musical friend, but they'd fallen out, and hadn't spoken in months. The offer of the Third Symphony was an olive branch. In its music, Brahms is talking from the heart about the people and things that mattered most to him. It's filled with intimate references.

Cracking the code

The very first things you hear are three mighty, rising chords for the winds – before the strings launch off into a grand, striding melody. It's a magnificent opening, and very like the start of the *Rhenish* symphony by Brahms' long-dead hero and mentor Robert Schumann. So is it a coincidence that it came to him while staying in the Rhineland town of Wiesbaden? What certainly isn't a coincidence is that those three opening chords are the chords of F, A flat and F again. Which is just a technicality, until you know that, in their youth, Brahms and Joachim had private mottos – musical symbols of their artistic ideals. Joachim's was *Frei Aber Einsam* ('Free but Lonely'). Brahms' was *Frei Aber Fröh* ('Free but Happy') – or, in musical terms, F, A flat and F. Those notes reappear throughout the symphony. They're not always audible, though when Brahms wants you to hear them, you can't miss them!

Clearing the air

So the Third is a homage to Schumann, and a message to Joachim. But it's also pure Brahms, more relaxed and intimate than ever before with a full orchestra. It's hard to resist the dreamy clarinet waltz that comes after that epic beginning, and the dusky cello-and-violin colours of the *Poco allegretto*. That haunting lullaby, and the tender *Andante* second movement, are exactly what they seem to be: two of the most touching interludes Brahms ever wrote.

But this is still a classical symphony. A short way into the second movement, the skies darken briefly and clarinet, and then oboe, sing a sombre, hesitant melody. Remember that shadowy theme – because in the *Finale*, it unleashes a tempest. It's bracing, but also menacing (when Brahms introduces a courageous second theme, Joachim was reminded of the doomed classical hero Leander, swimming the Hellespont in the teeth of the storm). The storm peaks, and then, like the skies clearing at the end of a turbulent day, the colours of a radiant sunset spread through the orchestra. All anger is spent, and as the first movement's opening theme gleams in the distance, Brahms ends the Symphony on the chord with which it began – 'Free but Happy'.

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JOHANNES BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op.15

Maestoso / Majestic

Adagio / Slow

Rondo: allegro non troppo / Rondo: fast, but not too fast

Brahms' First Piano Concerto is a work of breathtaking ambition, in terms of both scale and emotional complexity. To follow the process by which he got to grips with it is to watch the young and already highly self-critical composer struggling to establish a technique that would cope with what he had taken on, and attempting to mark out his position on Germany's cultural map.

In 1854, a year after he had met and been befriended by Robert and Clara Schumann, and shortly after the attempted suicide that signalled the final stage of Robert's mental decline, Brahms began work on a sonata for two pianos. He then decided – no doubt with Schumann's description of his early piano sonatas as 'veiled symphonies' at the back of his mind – to re-work it as an orchestral symphony, turning to his friends the violinist Joseph Joachim and choral conductor Julius Otto Grimm for advice to bolster what he felt was his inadequate command of orchestral technique. Part-way through the finale, and with only the first movement orchestrated, he changed tack again. Setting the rest of the work aside he re-cast the first movement for piano and orchestra and composed a new slow movement and finale, eventually completing the concerto in late December 1856.

A private rehearsal in March 1858 in his home town of Hamburg left Brahms dissatisfied with it, and it was after a good deal of further work on the score that he felt able to risk a public premiere. This took place in Hanover in January 1859. While not a wild success, its reception was positive enough to encourage Brahms to arrange a second performance in Leipzig. Leipzig was, at the time, Germany's most prestigious musical centre; a success there would have made his career, and would have encouraged him to leave Hamburg and settle there. But neither audience nor critics were prepared for a concerto on such a massive scale, of such unremitting seriousness, with a solo part completely devoid of ear-tickling virtuoso brilliance, and it got a hostile reception. A leading Leipzig critic stated bluntly: "this work cannot give pleasure ... it has nothing to offer but hopeless desolation and aridity ... a desert of the shrillest dissonances and most unpleasant sounds."

Even today it is possible to recapture something of the shock which that Leipzig audience must have experienced. The opening, with its stark colouring and angry, leaping string theme, seething with trills, is blackly tragic, in spite of the warm, lyrical string theme that follows. In fact, the movement is full of gentle, lyrical passages, moments of calm amid the general darkness and turbulence. At one point the tone becomes almost playful, until we sense a growing tension and realise that Brahms is preparing for the climactic return of the opening music. Indeed, he seems to labour the point unnecessarily, so obvious does it all sound. But then we hear why – as the music arrives firmly in the home key of D minor the soloist crashes in with a chord of E major. It is more than just a startling contradiction of what we expect – this sense of dislocation lies at the heart of what this music is struggling with.

The second movement provides the expected emotional relief, though there is something reticent about its flowing tranquillity, its hushed restraint the only appropriate response to the tragedy of the first movement. There appear to be two impulses behind the music. Brahms called it a "gentle portrait" of Clara Schumann. In addition, he wrote the words 'Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini' (Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord) under the main theme in his initial sketch. He often referred to Robert Schumann as 'Mynheer Domini' – "an instrumental requiem for his troubled spirit" suggested Malcolm MacDonald, in his book on Brahms.

In resisting any kind of superficial brilliance in rounding off the work, the finale substitutes a kind of truculent energy. The central episode is a fully worked-out fugue that owes much to Brahms' study of JS Bach – the Leipzig audience certainly wouldn't have expected *that*. Even the two short cadenzas towards the end are not conventional display pieces but serve to advance the musical argument. After the first of these, horns and woodwind tell us that D minor is now D major and some kind of resolution is in sight. Brahms even gets the bassoons to slow the main theme down for an episode of amiably rustic piping, before the music gathers momentum again for the fiercely determined exhilaration of the final pages.

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