

Sunday Afternoon Classics
Petrenko's Brahms IV
Sunday 18 November 2018 2.30pm
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JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)
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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JOHANNES BRAHMS

Symphony No.4 in E minor, Op.98

Allegro non troppo / Fast, but not too fast

Andante moderato / At a moderate walking pace

Allegro giocoso / Fast, with joy

Allegro energico e passionato / Fast, with energy and passion

“Shall I send you a piece of me, and can you let me know what you think of it? But in these parts cherries don’t grow to be sweet and edible – so don’t be embarrassed if it isn’t to your taste. I’m not at all eager to write a bad No.4”. That’s Brahms in August 1885, writing to his friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg about his new Fourth Symphony, and it’s typical of the man – candid but

reserved, hiding his pride and anxiety behind a little joke. He knew that even his friends would find the Fourth Symphony challenging at first. His reputation as the last of the classical masters – and that huge beard – could make him and his serious, formally-perfect music seem daunting; and this new symphony, unlike the three before it, didn't even have a happy ending to sugar the pill. But Brahms's contemporaries also wrote serious, formal music – and we don't hear many symphonies by Bruch or Rietz these days. Brahms is much more than that.

So the Fourth Symphony is formally perfect. That doesn't mean it's scaled-up Mozart – it's brilliantly original, a work in which very personal musical ideas and emotions are fitted to exactly the right form for them, and for the whole piece. The first two movements are in 'traditional' symphonic forms, done with complete mastery. The third would usually be light relief – but Brahms uses it to drive the symphony powerfully forward. And then, for the finale he flouts a century of tradition and, for the first time since Bach, builds a crowning movement from a baroque passacaglia – in which a huge musical structure is built over the same eight notes, repeated again and again.

But Brahms was never interested in music as pure form. And, with his profound feeling for musical history, he filled his symphony with clues to the emotions that inspired it. It was his first major work after the death of his friend Gustav Nottebohm, an expert on medieval music. So the Andante is written in the medieval 'Phrygian mode' – a combination of harmonies that was supposed to suggest shade and sorrow. The third movement is its complete opposite – the 'Ionian mode', suggesting sunlight and joy. Then there's Brahms's choice of instruments. He brightens the third movement with the most frivolous instrument possible, the triangle. But he switches mood immediately with the opening of the finale, as the trombones make their first appearance in the whole work. The baroque masters used trombones at the most solemn moments of sacred music. Likewise, as Brahms wrote the

slow, plaintive flute solo at the heart of his finale he must have recalled that they used the flute as an instrument of mourning.

The Fourth Symphony tells a story, then? Certainly the choreographer Léonide Massine found enough of a narrative to create his 1933 ballet *Choreartium* from the piece. Brahms was never that specific; the story of this symphony is what the listener feels as they hear it. It has all the lilting melodies, stirring climaxes, quiet sunsets and joyous shouts of anything by Tchaikovsky or Mahler. But it also has a drive, a sincerity and, at the end, a tragic grandeur that make it one of Romantic music's most powerful experiences. Brahms was right; at its first performance – at Meiningen, on 25 October 1885 – many listeners found the symphony's stormy finish too severe. It is strong stuff. But the critic Eduard Hanslick summed it up – and captured the uplifting quality of any truly great Tragedy – in his review of the Viennese premiere, in January 1886: “It is like a dark well; the longer we look into it, the more brightly the stars shine back”.

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