

**Brahms' Symphony No. 4**  
**Program Notes**  
**April 13 - 15, 2012**

In 1816, Franz Schubert quit his irksome job as a teacher in his father's school in suburban Vienna, a post he had taken largely to avoid conscription into military service. He was nineteen. In his diary for June 1816, he recorded that he had just received his first payment for one of his compositions, a cantata for the name-day of one Professor Watteroth, and he thought that the time was right to try his luck beyond the classroom walls in the great world of music. The ebullient Symphony No. 5, written soon after he entered upon his new life, represented little stylistic advance over its predecessors, though it was clearly their superior in workmanship and expression. He cast about for models for a large new piece that would bring him to the attention of Vienna's music lovers, and settled on music by the unlikely tandem of Beethoven, whom he respected almost to adulation, and Rossini, then the most popular composer in the imperial city and probably in all of Europe. The work Schubert wrote was a "grand" symphony — the first time he had used precisely that appellation, though the piece, the Symphony No. 6 in C major, was smaller in scoring (by two horns) than the Fourth Symphony and shorter in length (by 200 measures) than the Second.

Concerning the influence of Beethoven, Schubert's Sixth Symphony is most heavily indebted to that composer's Symphony No. 1. (Beethoven had completed all of his symphonies except the Ninth by 1818, the year of Schubert's Symphony.) Not only does Schubert's Symphony share the key of C major with Beethoven's First Symphony No. 1, but the works also have other important characteristics in common: each has a scherzo instead of a minuet; each begins with a stately slow introduction of unsettled harmonic character; each has an extensive development section and a large coda in its first movement; and each exhibits a chamber-like interplay of instrumental lines. More noticeable at first hearing than these large formal attributes, however, is the influence on the work's melodic and rhythmic components of the music of Gioacchino Rossini. It was in 1817, at just the time that Schubert's Sixth Symphony was gestating, that "Rossini Fever" broke out in Vienna. An almost uncontrollable passion for his music spread through the city following the production of *L'inganno felice* in November 1816. *Tancredi*, *L'italiana in Algeri*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and other of his operas were hastily paraded across any available Viennese stage during the following months; when Rossini himself came to town for the 1822-1823 season, "the frantic enthusiasm passed all reasonable limits," according to Schubert's biographer Maurice Brown. Schubert heard *Tancredi* and *The Barber*, and liked them, though he did poke a certain quantity of fun at their stylistic mannerisms. (Beethoven, characteristically, shot off some heated diatribes against the Viennese public for liking such Rossinian entertainments, though he did admit a bit of grudging admiration for Rossini's talent as a theater composer.) While under the influence of Rossini, Schubert created his three Overtures "In the Italian style" and launched his Sixth Symphony. It is in the thematic naiveté of the Symphony's second and fourth movements that Rossini's shadow looms largest.

Though Schubert may have hoped that his Sixth Symphony would propel him into the upper echelon of Vienna's orchestral composers, he apparently had no definite public performance in mind when he wrote the piece. Always content to follow the path of least resistance, he seemed satisfied to have the work played privately by the amateur music society for which he had created his earlier symphonies. This little

orchestra, grown from a string quartet which originally met at the house of Schubert's father, rehearsed and gave informal concerts in the Schottenhof apartment of its leader, Otto Hatwig, a violinist at the Burgtheater. Franz was a regular violist with the group at the time they read through his new Sixth Symphony. (Like Mozart, he preferred to play viola rather than violin in ensemble music.) Nothing is known of this tryout except the report of Schubert's friend Leopold Sonnleithner that it took place sometime soon after the work was finished in February 1818. The Symphony was not heard publicly until it was performed by the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna on December 14, 1828, three weeks and two days after its composer died. Actually, even that performance was something of a back-handed compliment to Schubert, since the piece was substituted for the later C major Symphony (No. 9, "The Great"), which was deemed by the Gesellschaft to be too lengthy and difficult for the available rehearsal time. The Sixth Symphony was played once more in Vienna the following year, and then apparently not heard again in that city until 1860, when a general interest in Schubert's music began (finally!) to arise. On their expedition to Vienna in 1867, the Englishmen George Grove and Arthur Sullivan unearthed a treasure-trove of Schubert's original manuscripts (including those of the Symphonies Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 and the *Rosamunde* music) which became the nucleus of the complete edition of his works that led to the international recognition of the full scope of his genius.

The Symphony No. 6 (sometimes called "The Little" to distinguish it from the "Great" Symphony No. 9, also in C major) is in the traditional four movements. It begins with a slow introduction equally indebted to Haydn's late symphonies, Beethoven's Symphony No. 1 and the opening strains of a typical Rossini overture. The perky main theme, in quicker tempo, is initiated by the flute and then distributed to the rest of the orchestra. The flute and clarinet present the movement's second theme, a skipping tune given above a bustling string accompaniment. (All of Schubert's symphonies, from his earliest examples of the genre, are notable for the prominence they give to the wind instruments.) A motive with a falling scale sequence closes the exposition, and is carried into the development for discussion and elaboration. The recapitulation proceeds apace, with a vivacious dash to the end closing the movement.

The *Andante* is based on a theme of folk-like simplicity, though its manner (the brief pauses followed by short notes, for example) hints of a certain Rossinian dandyism. The movement opens with a full presentation of the principal melody and a rather stormy episode buffeted by a flurry of triplet rhythms. These two sections are then repeated with some tiny variations, and the movement finishes with a quiet recall of the opening melody by the woodwinds. The third movement is a fully developed Scherzo, the first to appear in Schubert's symphonies, though he had already used the form in a number of his chamber works. The Trio, swaying in rhythm and gentle in mood, provides a sylvan contrast to the energetic motion of the surrounding Scherzo. The finale, episodic in structure, seems closer to the expansive style of the ballet than to the concentrated expression of the symphony, though in its sections of virile rhythmic incessancy it looks forward to the incomparable Symphony No. 9, written a decade later.

In an essay published during his stay in America, Antonín Dvořák wrote of Schubert's early symphonies, "The more I study them the more I marvel. Though the influence of other masters is apparent in them, Schubert's musical individuality is unmistakable in the character of the melody, in the harmonic progressions, and in the orchestration.... I conducted his early Fifth and Sixth Symphonies a dozen times with my pupils in New York; they shared my pleasure in them, and recognized at once their great

beauty.”

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*Sic transit gloria mundi.* During his lifetime, Johann Nepomuk Hummel was judged to be among the greatest musicians of the age. As a composer, he was placed second only to Beethoven. Many thought his piano playing without peer, especially in his improvisations. He was one of the most respected (and expensive) keyboard teachers in Europe, who published a tutor that sold thousands of copies within days of its appearance. His talents for conducting and management enabled him to assume the position as successor to Haydn at Esterháza, as well as important posts in Vienna, Stuttgart and Weimar. He was among the first musicians to campaign for a uniform copyright law. He traveled widely, befriended such notables as Goethe, and seemed to be a thoroughly likeable person whose success did not go to his head. Today, he is largely forgotten.

Hummel, born in November 1778 in Pressburg (now Bratislava), was a prodigy. When his father, a string player and conductor, moved the family to Vienna when Johann was eight to take a job at the little theater run by Emanuel Schikaneder (the librettist five years later of *The Magic Flute*), the boy came to the notice of Mozart, who took him into his household as a pupil for the next two years. After this brief apprenticeship, Mozart encouraged Johann to go out into the world and make himself known, and a five-year series of concert appearances was undertaken throughout northern Europe and England. Hummel enjoyed good success, and he was an accomplished musician when he returned to Vienna in 1793. During the next decade he performed little, concentrating instead on study (with Salieri, Albrechtsberger and Haydn), composition and teaching. He met Beethoven, and the two began a long, though stormy, friendship. In 1804, Hummel replaced Joseph Haydn as head of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy’s musical establishment (on Haydn’s recommendation), composing, conducting, training the choirboys in singing and violin and keyboard, assembling a Haydn archive, and overseeing the music for the court theaters until 1811. He then toured as a concert virtuoso until receiving an appointment as Kapellmeister at Stuttgart in 1816. That position did not allow him sufficient time to pursue his career as a pianist, however, so two years later he negotiated a more suitable contract at Weimar, where he remained for the rest of his life. The 1820s were a productive time for Hummel as composer and performer, but he suffered a decline in popularity during his last years, when the public was dazzled by the virtuoso wizardry of Paganini and Liszt, and beguiled by the new sensitivity of the music of the early Romantic composers. Hummel’s death, in 1837, was regarded as the passing of the Classical era.

Hummel occupies an important place in the history of music. He carried the Mozartian tradition into the 19th century and flavored it lightly with some newer harmonic and stylistic confections, resulting in a style that the noted scholar and pianist Charles Rosen called “post-Classicism.” Elegance, reserve and a certain formal predictability characterize much of Hummel’s large output, which includes works in all the major genres of the time except the symphony. He was especially known for the elaborate decorations with which he filled his own keyboard performances, a quality that resulted in a rather mannered version of what seems in Mozart fresh and inventive. Some of his keyboard techniques and compositional devices were appropriated by such Romantic composers as Mendelssohn, Schumann and even Liszt, but Hummel himself remained more closely allied to the 18th than the 19th century. His musicianship and talent are unquestioned, but, as Joel Sachs wrote in the *New Grove’s Dictionary*, “His music reached the highest

level accessible to one who lacks ultimate genius.”

Hummel composed his Trumpet Concerto in 1803 for Anton Weidinger, the virtuoso who had inspired Haydn’s only work in the genre seven years before. The Concerto, first played by Weidinger for members of the Esterházy court on New Year’s Day, 1804, may have been instrumental in securing him the position as Haydn’s successor with that noble clan. The solo part, to which the manuscript suggests Weidinger made significant contributions, was tailored to the capabilities of the keyed trumpet, a new instrument which Weidinger helped to develop. Into Beethoven’s time, the trumpet was still a “natural” instrument, i.e., simply a wound metal tube capable of producing only the signal-call notes of a bugle. To fill the gaps between the available tones, various mechanical experiments were tried beginning in the late 18th century, including Weidinger’s keyed trumpet, which achieved pitch alterations by means of levers covering holes along the sides of the instrument. It was for this instrument that Haydn and Hummel composed their trumpet concertos. Though the instrument inspired two of the finest brass concertos in the repertory, its tone quality was flawed by its key mechanism, and it found little favor. It was superseded by the invention of the modern piston valve in 1815 by the Berlin horn player Heinrich Stölzel, which allowed brass instruments to produce the complete chromatic compass of notes with full, ringing tones. It is the system still in use today.

The opening *Allegro* of Hummel’s Trumpet Concerto is cast in the traditional sonata-concerto form. Its orchestral introduction contains both of the movement’s important themes: an octave-leap motive inspired by the fanfare proclivities of the solo instrument, and a pert complementary phrase in dotted rhythms initiated by the strings after a brief pause. The trumpet appropriates and elaborates these melodies as the movement progresses through a second exposition, a compact development section and a recapitulation. (Hummel, rather extraordinarily, allowed for no cadenzas in this Concerto.) The *Andante* is in the nature of an expressive operatic aria, beginning in a somber minor mode before turning to brighter feelings in its second portion. The movement is remarkable for its chromatic writing, employing notes which would have been impossible to produce on a natural trumpet but which were newly available on Weidinger’s keyed instrument. The finale is a bounding rondo in which Hummel further exploited the low register scales and chromatic inflections of the keyed trumpet. The movement is merry closing music, the sort of thing the Germans call a *Kehraus*, a “sweeping-out” — the last, lively dance of the evening.

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In the popular image of Brahms, he appears as a patriarch: full grey beard, rosy cheeks, sparkling eyes. He grew the beard in his late forties as, some say, a compensation for his late physical maturity — he was in his twenties before his voice changed and he needed to shave — and it seemed to be an external admission that Brahms had allowed himself to become an old man. The ideas did not seem to flow so freely as he approached the age of fifty, and he even put his publisher on notice to expect nothing more. Thankfully, the ideas did come, as they would for more than another decade, and he soon completed the superb Third Symphony. The philosophical introspection continued, however, and was reflected in many of his works. The Second Piano Concerto of 1881 is almost autumnal in its mellow ripeness; this Fourth Symphony is music of deep thoughtfulness that leads “into realms where joy and sorrow are hushed, and humanity bows before that which is eternal,” wrote the eminent German musical scholar August Kretzschmar.

One of Brahms' immediate interests during the composition of the Fourth Symphony was Greek drama. He had been greatly moved by the tragedies of Sophocles in the German translations of his friend Gustav Wendt (1827-1912), director of education in Baden-Baden (Wendt dedicated the volume to Brahms upon its publication in 1884), and many commentators have seen the combination of the epic and the melancholy in this Symphony as a reflection of the works of that ancient playwright. Certainly the choice of E minor as the key of the work is an indication of its tragic nature. This is a rare tonality in the symphonic world, and with so few precedents such a work as Haydn's in that key (No. 44), a doleful piece subtitled "Mourning Symphony," was an important influence. That great melancholic among the famous composers, Tchaikovsky, chose E minor as the key for his Fifth Symphony.

Repeatedly accused of being forbiddingly metaphysical or overly serious, the Fourth Symphony was not easily accepted by audiences. The crux of the problem was the stony grandeur of the finale, which undeniably confirms the tragedy of the work. The normal expressive function for a symphonic finale is to be an uplifting affirmation of the continuity of human experience. The classic models are Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, and the esteemed English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey pointed out that in all that master's works, only three have minor tonality endings. Even that great prophet of *Weltschmerz*, Gustav Mahler, ended only his Sixth Symphony on a pessimistic note. So, in this last of his symphonies, it would seem that Brahms grappled with his innermost feelings and found a hard-fought acceptance of his own mortality. The outward sign of his perceived great age, his magnificent beard, found its counterpart in tone in this grand Symphony, perhaps the greatest work in the form since those of Schubert and even Beethoven.

It is fitting that the Fourth Symphony was on the program for the final appearance Brahms made before his beloved Vienna. Hans Richter scheduled the piece for the Vienna Philharmonic's concert of March 7, 1897, and he invited Brahms to attend. Brahms was already mortally ill with the liver cancer that would end his life in less than a month, but he struggled from his bed to a box in the *Musikvereinsaal* for the concert. Each movement of his Symphony brought a shattering response from the audience. Florence May, Brahms' loving biographer, described the touching scene: "Tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there, shrunken in form, with lined countenance, strained expression, white hair hanging lank, and through the audience there was a feeling as of a stifled sob, for each knew that he was saying farewell. Another outburst of applause and yet another; one more acknowledgment from the master; and Brahms and his Vienna had parted forever."

Brahms' Fourth Symphony is large in size and emotional impact while enormously subtle in detail. The first movement begins almost in mid-thought, as though the mood of sad melancholy pervading this opening theme had existed forever and Brahms had simply borrowed a portion of it to present musically. The movement is founded upon the tiny two-note motive (short-long) heard immediately at the beginning. Tracing this little germ cell demonstrates not only Brahms' enormous compositional skills but also the broad emotional range that he could draw from pure musical expression. To introduce the necessary contrasts into this sonata form, other themes are presented, including a broadly lyrical one for horns and cellos and a fragmented fanfare. The movement grows with a wondrous, dark majesty to its closing pages which, to Tovey, "bear comparison with the greatest climaxes in classical music, not excluding Beethoven."

“A funeral procession moving across moonlit heights” is how the young Richard Strauss described the second movement. Though the tonality is nominally E major, the movement opens with a stark melody, pregnant with grief, in the ancient Phrygian mode. The mood brightens, but the introspective sorrow of the beginning is never far away. Though in sonatina form (sonata without development), the movement has none of the airy sweetness of so many of Mozart’s *andantes* cast in that form, but possesses rather an overriding sense of comforting tears washing away great loss. To the noted German musicologist Phillip Spitta, this was the greatest slow movement in all of the symphonic literature.

The third movement is the closest Brahms came to a true scherzo in any of his symphonies. Though such a dance-like movement may appear antithetical to the tragic nature of the Symphony, this scherzo is actually a necessary contrast within the work’s total structure, since it serves to heighten the pathos of the surrounding movements, especially the granitic splendor of the finale. Brahms, as always, took great care with the deployment of his orchestral resources, and he emphasized the singular brightness of this movement by calling for the silvery tingle of the triangle — its only appearance anywhere in his symphonies.

The finale is a passacaglia — a series of variations on a short, recurring melody. The passacaglia was a compositional technique highly favored by Baroque composers that fell into disuse with the changed requirements of the music of the Classical era. It had never been used in a symphony before this one, and it reflects both Brahms’ interest in the music of earlier eras and his faith in the inexorable expressive powers of the old formal types. The theme, to which Brahms added a single chromatic note, was taken from Bach’s Cantata No. 150, *Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich* (“I Long for Thee, Lord”), though John Horton has made a convincing argument that the form was influenced by François Couperin and Georg Muffat. Pedantry was not Brahms’ point here, but it is essential to understanding his style to realize that he was familiar with this old music (from his own study and as an editor for several fledgling musicological series) and could draw whatever resources from it he needed to vivify his works. There are some thirty continuous variations in the finale, though it is less important to follow them individually than to feel the massive strength given to the movement by this technique. The opening chorale-like statement, in which trombones are heard for the first time in the Symphony, recurs twice as a further supporting pillar in the unification of the movement. Yet Brahms never lost sight of the central aesthetic of the Symphony, and his friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg wrote to him, with no little wonder, “Who can resist an emotion strong enough to penetrate all that skillful elaboration?”

In his biography of the composer, Peter Latham wrote of this stirring work, “Before the end we have risen altogether out of sight of the shady valleys of the *Andante* and the cheerful merriment of the scherzo, and the wind roars unmercifully over the stony slabs of the mountain-side [of the finale]. It is an awesome heart-searching experience, a mighty assertion of the spirit of man.”

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