

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1

Mar 29 - 31

JOHANNE BRAHMS (1833-1897)

TRAGIC OVERTURE

Duration: ca. 12 minutes

When Symphony Hall opened in Boston in 1900, the prominent and opinionated critic Philip Hale suggested signs be posted over the doorways reading, "Exit in case of Brahms." A fire wasn't needed to empty the auditorium, he quipped; merely a few bars of Brahms would do the trick.

A distaste for Brahms was fashionable among the lingering pro-Wagnerians of the time, who elevated themselves above what they regarded as dated and dusty. Brahms, they felt, was too busy looking over his shoulder at Beethoven to focus on the "music of the future." Tchaikovsky threw his own tomatoes, calling Brahms full of "self-inflated mediocrity," and Benjamin Britten stepped outside the composers club long enough to say, "It's not bad Brahms I mind; it's good Brahms I can't stand."

All this makes good fodder today, as Brahms is as much at home at Symphony Hall as the Straz Center, Mahaffey Theater and Ruth Eckerd Hall. His stature as a symphonist is undisputed. His two dozen chamber works are pinnacles of the literature, and his concertos, serenades, sonatas and *German Requiem* form a singular and commanding voice. Almost all of his music is abstract and can be enjoyed as music for music's sake. Typical Brahms has a rich, earthy quality, as if he planted notes as seeds, tilled the ground and harvested music in full, aromatic bloom.

Brahms often composed works in pairs, such as his *Academic Festival Overture*, Op. 80, followed by the *Tragic Overture*, Op. 81, which he had originally called the *Dramatic Overture* and may well have been inspired by Goethe's *Faust*. The two couldn't be more different: the former loose and jovial and based on drinking songs, the latter dark and serious. Brahms summed it up best: "One laughs, the other weeps."

Scored for large orchestra, the overture sounds like the opening movement of a symphony, and in fact follows the same sonata-allegro design as his symphonic pieces. It begins with two massive D minor chords that serve as anchors for the work's fugal elements, climbing scales and abrupt starts and stops. In his usual masterly way, Brahms builds both mystery and urgency, slicing tempos in half for contrast, then quickening the pace in a shattering climax that ends with five pronounced chords and a timpani roll.

“In this work we see a strong hero battling with an iron and relentless fate,” the music critic and biographer Herrmann Dieters wrote after the work’s premiere in 1880. “We do not care to inquire whether the composer had a special tragedy in his mind, or if so, which one; those who remain unconvinced by the powerful theme, would not be assisted by a particular suggestion.”

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG (1874-1951)

VERKLARTE NACHT (TRANSFIGURED NIGHT), Op. 4

Duration: ca. 30 minutes

Arnold Schoenberg was a musical chemist, his notes the elements, the orchestra his laboratory. He experimented with sounds, coming up with strange concoctions, some unstable and explosive. And when he was done, his theories knocked the music world on its ear.

Although Schoenberg began composing in the shadow of Brahms and Wagner, he soon created a groundbreaking language: 12-tone music. With this new system, Schoenberg tossed harmony out the window, but not order. His music is highly organized and precise in its use of the chromatic scale (an octave divided into 12 equal parts) and free of the constraints of major and minor tonality and the relationship of consonance and dissonance.

“Schoenberg is a devil who seduced composers away from the universally comprehensible musical grammar that had evolved since medieval times,” notes Allan Kozinn in his book *the Essential Library of Classical Music*, adding that he replaced the sweep and lushness of 19th-century music with “cragginess.” But in doing so, he liberated music from what might have become a harmonic dead end.

For all this revolutionary work, Schoenberg is not always a popular choice in today’s concert halls. The very name strikes terror in the hearts of those who love their Mozart, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, as Schoenberg upset the cart, introducing nasty dissonances that many conservative listeners loathe. Just as the Cubist movement in art had its detractors, Schoenberg’s concepts took some getting used to.

For those new to Schoenberg, the best place to start is with *Verklarte Nacht*, (*Transfigured Night*), originally conceived as a string sextet. Written in 1899 and revised in 1917 and 1943, *Transfigured Night* is a beautiful, seductive creation that rides the wave of late Romanticism, and barely hints at the progressive works that followed. A veritable watershed that stands alongside the works of Debussy, it serves what the composer called “a reconciliation of the styles of Brahms and Wagner.”

“There’s a high romanticism about this music, but it’s very dense harmonically,” said Music Director Michael Francis. “To me, Schoenberg is very much out of a Brahms world, with a deep tragic quality, which complements the *Tragic Overture* on this program.”

Transfigured Night is based on a poem by Richard Dehmel, which depicts a troubled couple (she's pregnant from another man) walking through "a cold, barren grove" drenched in moonlight. The man's compassion and understanding of their dilemma, and the realization that the woman's child will be his as well, "transfigures" their relationship. But don't take this story literally; whatever the symbolism in the transition of darkness to light, the piece needs no literary association to enjoy.

Speaking of the dark, this weekend's performances will feature the poem and be done with the stage lights off, "and that will really give everyone a sense of the narrative writing, and in darkness I think you'll feel it," Francis said.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)
PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN D MINOR

Duration: ca. 44 minutes

Nothing else like it had ever been written. Audacious, impulsive, titanic, full of the exuberance of a young man burdened by the expectations cast upon him. He had just been tagged a genius by the composer and advocate Robert Schumann, who predicted great things from the 20-year-old from Hamburg – and he didn't disappoint. Ironically, it was Schumann's attempted suicide that stoked the fire for the *D Minor Concerto*, Johannes Brahms' monumental attempt to carve his way into an elite canon.

Brahms originally conceived the work as a sonata for two pianos, and then as a symphony, but neither worked. He spent the next four years molding both ideas into what would become a keyboard concerto. The result is music of turbulence, unanchored harmony, and soaring expression. Then there's the shadow of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, which preoccupied Brahms for much of his early career.

"In this music, Brahms is battling through his own issues," Music Director Michael Francis said. "There's so much Beethoven in it, so much strength and vigor."

The opening movement is one of the longest of any piano concerto, clocking in at nearly 25 minutes, its stormy orchestral introduction ushering in the soloist and a series of somber chords. The tragic tone continues through all five sections – intro, exposition, development, recap and coda – and seems intended to evoke emotional distress. If this majestic argument nearly collapses under its own weight, Brahms keeps the music moving with a countenance never again heard in his work. Unlike most concertos of the late 19th century, this section contains no cadenza for the soloist to wax virtuosic. It doesn't need one.

A plaintive *adagio* follows, which many believe is a tribute to Schumann's beloved wife, Clara, whom Brahms adored. The work concludes with a vigorous *rondo* based on a gypsy theme and the concerto's only keyboard cadenza. If you hear hints of the finale of Beethoven's *C Minor*

Piano Concerto, you are correct. Some might call this plagiarism; Brahms would consider it creative borrowing.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.