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Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, op. 98—Johannes Brahms

“This is a chosen one.” Robert Schumann so characterized Johannes Brahms in his famous article that introduced the young Brahms to the public. Little did he know! Brahms went on to become the last great successor of the artistic mantle of musical Classicism that led from Joseph Haydn, through Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. That’s taking the rather narrow view, of course, for there were others that followed who revered the classical attributes of restraint, balance, clarity of form, elegance, and general equipoise that characterized the collective features that came to be known as classical style. And they stand in clear contrast to the sweeping trends and excesses of musical Romanticism that came to dominate European music until the cataclysm of World War I.

Simply put, the composers of the nineteenth century after Beethoven tended to divide themselves into two groups. The progressives were true “Romantics,” and were greatly influenced by the extra-musical ideas that were the subjects of contemporary literature, poetry, and painting, among others. They devised new genres, such as the tone poems of Smetana and Liszt, the music dramas of Wagner, and the characteristic piano pieces of Chopin. Much of this music, to use a phrase still common among seekers of meaning in music, was about “something”—meaning something familiar to human experience. Liszt and Wagner, et al, while respecting the music of the past, saw no future in continuing that tradition.

Others, Brahms most significantly, still adhered strongly to the style of Beethoven that focused on the purely musical. He and other conservatively minded musicians held that the traditional forms of sonata, concerto, and symphony had not nearly exhausted their viability, and that music should continue to speak in an integrated language that referred to itself, alone, and certainly not to extra-musical ideas. So, he and his ilk continued to write “pure,” or “abstract” music, like sonatas and symphonies (a so-called symphony is just a sonata for orchestra). Today, most of those who compose, perform, and listen to art music see no contradiction at all in valuing both broad aesthetic viewpoints—so we enjoy the best of both worlds. The example of Beethoven’s music loomed overwhelming for Brahms, and he waited for decades to essay his first symphony, completing it in 1876, when he was forty-three years old. It has long since taken its place at the center of the orchestra’s repertoire.

Well, it didn’t take Brahms nearly so long to write his second symphony as it did the first, and the mood of that work is a strong contrast to that of the mighty seriousness of the first. This sunny work followed shortly in 1877, but then a hiatus occurred while Brahms devoted himself to other masterpieces, including the Academic Festival Overture and the monumental second piano concerto. He returned to the symphonic genre and finished the third symphony in 1883. It is the shortest of the four symphonies, and in many respects the most straightforward in musical and psychological content.

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Finally, in 1885, there appeared the epic and beloved fourth symphony.

This is a work in which astounding technical proficiency, intellectual seriousness of purpose, and general musical craftsmanship are woven together in a seamless exploration of tragedy. But certainly not the dark, abject, personal tragedy found, say in works of someone like Tchaikovsky. His was, rather, that of a deep, reflective rumination over the fate of all mankind as might be undertaken by a great philosopher or poet. Brahms was a wise, highly educated man, who took pleasure in the quotidian ordinary beauties of human existence, but who nevertheless understood the need to reflect upon the greater picture of our lives. And his music eloquently mirrors those considerations.

The second movement opens with a powerful statement by the unison horns, the general sound of which suggests some ancient procession or ritual, and in fact, the harmony that Brahms employs offers some vague suggestion of an ancient Church mode—yet again evidence of his deep awareness of the usefulness of the past. Clarinets, accompanied by pizzicato strings, take up the theme, as the solemn procession plods on. Gorgeous string scoring leads to the second idea, which the composer typically presents to us in an ingenious variety of guises, but always without empty “padding.” The main theme ends it as it began, leaving us wondering exactly what world we have visited.

Today, it is astounding to reflect that many of Brahms’ contemporaries—respected men, all—roundly condemned him for a lack of imagination, and just about any other virtue of great musical composition. Today, we understand him, and revere his music as having no superiors in those qualities. The world is a better place for his efforts; his critics were wrong. His Viennese public knew better—in one of his very last public appearances before his death, the audience gave him a roaring ovation after every movement of his Symphony No. 4.

Violin Concerto in E Minor, op. 64—Felix Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn wrote several concertos both for piano and for violin. The last concerto, for violin, is one of the most important solo works of the nineteenth century. Finished in the fall of 1844, after many years of work, the concerto is the product of a man at the height of his artistic powers. At the time he was literally the toast of Europe, composing fervidly, visiting everywhere as guest conductor and composer, serving as music administrator to a new conservatory in Leipzig, and all the while trying to cope with the bedeviling trials of an official appointment at the Prussian court at Berlin and Potsdam. He was literally working himself to death, and his life, indeed, lasted only a few more years.

The concerto was premièred in 1845 in Leipzig by Mendelssohn’s friend, the great violinist, Ferdinand David, but the performance of it by the very

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young virtuoso of violin, Joachim, one month before Mendelssohn's death in 1847 must have been a particularly poignant one. At the time he was driven to incapacitation by the death of his beloved sister; that and his onerous professional schedule led to a series of strokes that killed him.

The concerto's enduring popularity is ensured by its intrinsic beauty and musicality, but there are some interesting points about it that led to its place as a model for later composers of violin concertos, including Tchaikovsky and Sibelius. Foremost is the entry of the solo violin right at the beginning; traditionally, the orchestra begins with a section that announces the themes, and then is joined somewhat later by the entrance of the soloist. In addition, Mendelssohn moved the place of the solo cadenza to a point earlier in the first movement, just before the recapitulation, rather than nearer the end, before the coda. Finally, the composer wrote out exactly what he wanted the soloist to play in the cadenza, rather than leaving it to the compositional skills (and taste!) of the soloist, in the traditional manner. Although cast in the familiar three movements of a concerto, it was written in such a way as to move seamlessly from one to the other without a break. Audiences in those days were used to applauding between movements and this feature probably came as a bit of a surprise to them. The bridge between the first two movements is a low sustained B in the bassoon that moves up to the C of the key of the winsome melody of the second movement. The third movement is segued into by a transition passage for solo violin and strings, out of which bursts the main theme of the rondo in the major key, announced by a kind of trumpet fanfare.

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis—Ralph Vaughan Williams

Ralph Vaughan Williams (incidentally, pronounced: "Rayf, not Ralf") is perhaps Britain's most important and influential composer of the first half of the twentieth century. Prolific in most musical genres, he was an active composer from his student days right up until his death in 1958, at the age of eighty-six. He composed dozens of works that are part of the core repertory of British music of the last century, including the important series of nine symphonies. He lived a long life—long enough to have written in a number of rather different styles, all of them authentic and reflective of his changing interests and the times. He was born into an educated, upper middle class family, attended Cambridge University, and studied with eminent musicians and scholars, including a stint with Maurice Ravel. Among his early close friends and fellow students were such luminaries as Bertram Russell, Leopold Stokowski, and, of course, Gustav Holst.

In addition to his early activities as a rising composer, he and Holst were among the leaders in the efflorescence of serious study and collection of English folksong that arose in the late nineteenth century. He and Holst frequently spent time in the countryside tracking the rapidly vanishing body

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of song, writing them down, and preserving them. He later served as president of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. And, inevitably, his appreciation of this great literature became a major influence on one facet of his musical style—evidenced by every American band student’s encounter with his English Folksong Suite.

Another important interest and activity of his early on was his editorship of the English Hymnal (1906), his interest in the great English composer, Henry Purcell, and of all of the music, in general, of the Renaissance in England. It is the latter that is the inspiration for one of his early and most beloved compositions, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

Thomas Tallis, along with William Byrd, was the most important of English composers of the Tudor era. He served under English monarchs from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I, dying in 1585. If you were quick you would have seen his character on the television show, “The Tudors,” so he certainly was not obscure. And he was resourceful, for though he openly maintained his faith as a Roman Catholic, he served under various religious regimes. One of his important publications (with his colleague, Byrd, he enjoyed a monopoly granted by Elizabeth I printing any kind of music) was his 1567 collection of polyphonic settings of Psalm tunes.

In 1910 Vaughan Williams chose the third one of these as the basis for his own composition. He was familiar with it, for he had included it in the 1906 English Hymnal. The tune’s original title is simply “Third Mode Melody,” which refers to it being in the Phrygian church mode. Not major, and not minor, it is a marvelously mysterious mode that can be heard by playing the scale from “e” to “e” on the white notes of the piano. Written for strings, alone, the composer divides the orchestra into three groups of varying sizes, thus providing some interesting textural changes. The main tune is heard several times, but like any good composer, Vaughan Williams takes various elements of the melody and creates the “fantasy,” which of course was a typical musical procedure during the sixteenth century. A winsome diversion takes place not too long after the beginning in the form of a viola solo, this theme appearing in the full orchestra towards the end. A dry description this is, doing little justice to a sonorous, timeless evocation of the genius of an earlier musical style that is rarely heard in the modern concert hall. Vaughan Williams simultaneously created a tribute to one of the high points in the English arts, along with a perfect reflection of his own twentieth-century musical aesthetic.

Symphony No. 8 in F Major, op. 93—Ludwig van Beethoven

It is commonplace, of course, for scholars to think of Beethoven’s musical life in three great periods—the last one being the time of compositions that “challenge” comprehension and appreciation. The fecund middle period, roughly the first decade of the nineteenth century, is the time

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of dozens of the magnificent works that came to define the composer and establish his eternal reputation, and his eighth symphony stands pretty much near the end of that time.

Written mostly during 1811 and finished by early 1812, it—like its mate, the seventh symphony—is without doubt a complete reflection of the happy times and optimistic personal attitude of the composer at that time in his life—both professionally and personally. We are all familiar with the struggles and depressive moments in his emotionally up and down life, but times were good about then. The beloved “Pastoral” symphony was finished in 1808, and he had then busied himself with important works, among them, the “Emperor” piano concerto and the music for Egmont. Sketches for both the seventh and the eighth symphonies were all part of his activity during this time.

He had already suffered health problems by early 1811, and traveled to the spa in the Bohemian town of Teplice, where work on the symphonies went on during that summer. Both symphonies were finished the next year, and together they more or less demark the end of an era. From that time on, until the end of his life in 1827, Beethoven the man, and his musical works underwent significant changes. His health underwent further deterioration, with debilitating family squabbles and failures in personal relationships all contributing to the change. While there were great works still to be written, the flow of inspiration attenuated, his social isolation increased, and the style of his composition took on a new, abstract quality. So, the Symphony No. 8 in many ways roughly marks the end of the major creative period of the composer’s life—what lay ahead were works that often tested his audiences in significant ways; they still do.

A common trait of Beethoven’s creativity was to write works, though conceived almost simultaneously, that often end up quite differently. The contrasts between his seventh and eighth symphonies are a case in point. The seventh has significant “gravitas” and length, whereas the eighth is much shorter and full of humor, élan, and a certain light-hearted sparkle. Beethoven, himself, referred to it as “my little one.”

It’s a rollicking, thumping affair, full of humor, and with some of the loudest passages that Beethoven ever called for. Even the so-called “slow” movement is not in the slightest, slow. The symphony starts right out with an emphatic, happy theme replete with dramatic pauses, with passages that almost sound like powerful ending material rather than an opening. The form is the familiar sonata form, but in typical fashion Beethoven almost dashes through it, seemingly to just get it over with, in order that he can indulge himself in a long intense coda with pounding sections and unprecedented sustained volume. And then the movement ends with a Beethoven surprise: intense hammer strokes followed by unexpected soft little accents.

As noted above, the second movement is not the usual slow movement but

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a fairly rapid exercise in what many generations have thought of as some kind of parody on a metronome or a clock. It's not proven, and you can draw your own conclusions, but it goes from the first to the last bar with almost unremitting sixteenth note "tick-tocks" in the woodwinds—it doesn't vary a whit in tempo, even during the "stutter stops." More Beethoven humor, it would seem—what else could it be?

There are not many serious moments so far, and the third movement—usually a brisk, and often dramatic "scherzo" in Beethoven—is a throwback to the old minuet of Haydn and Mozart, but with a major difference. This is not a gentle, stately dance of old. In Beethoven's hands, this one is nothing less than a bit weird in rhythm, and full of unusual accents that would make it a challenge to dance to for even Fred and Ginger. It's as if the composer deliberately set out to confuse us as to what this is, and he succeeds famously at continuing the unusual nature of this symphony with yet another bit of eccentricity. Most will find the horn and clarinet solos in the middle section ingratiating and a rather smooth diversion from the outer sections.

The last movement is a run for the money. Taking off at blistering speed, there is a shower of machine gun-like notes that occasionally pause, followed by an enigmatic loud note that seems from some other key. We hear a main section that returns on a regular basis, with contrasting ones and a bit of a development, as the movement explores a variety of unusual and entertaining keys that surprise and delight. But, it's a relatively short affair—rather like the first movement—for Beethoven more or less zips through the form almost perfunctorily to indulge himself in a coda of literally unprecedented length. Along the way, the unexpectedly loud "wrong" notes continue to be heard—but now in a context that rather explains them. The rustic humor continues in the funny, thumping octave jumps in the bassoons and timpani. This whole amusing symphony ends with what seems to be another poke at convention: tonic chords are repeated, repeated, and repeated to nail the conclusion. It's almost a self-parody of the "long hair" Beethovenian emphatic ending. This is a delightful work, and constantly surprises those who are more familiar with all of the other "big" symphonies, and it is well deserving of the composer's documented pride in it.

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