

Academic Festival Overture, op. 80—Johannes Brahms

By the late 1870s, Brahms' position as a preëminent composer was well recognized. He was almost universally admired for his first two symphonies, his two serenades, and the "Haydn" variations. So, in 1879 the University of Breslau in Prussia (now Wrocław, Poland), in the best tradition of universities everywhere, brought honor to the distinguished composer—and distinction to itself, of course—by awarding him an honorary doctorate. Typically, Brahms modestly sent a letter of thanks to the university, and called it a day. But, he was urged to respond in a more substantial fashion, and so composed his *Academic Festival Overture*, one of his only two works in that genre. The title in English is a bit misleading, for there was no actual "academic festival." It's only a poor translation from the German—the reality being an "overture in festive style." Brahms, while a genial and warm man, rarely let down his dignity—and let's face it—is not known for his fondness for humor in music. His popular image of a portly man with a generous beard, an omnipresent cigar, and a serious mien is not without some truth. But in this instance, Brahms responded with one of his happier and more accessible compositions. Rather than a concert overture worked out with original themes, perhaps in the manner of, say, a first movement of one of his imposing symphonies, he chose to surprise everyone with a lighthearted mélange of traditional student drinking songs.

While most of the tunes are unknown to contemporary American audiences, the swirling, magisterial last section is based upon the universally familiar *Gaudeamus igitur* (a cliché in the soundtrack of every Hollywood movie set on a college campus in the 30s and 40s.) Some folks today may also recognize bits of the famous Rákóczi March (familiar these days from Berlioz' *Damnation of Faust*). But to their delight, the German university audience at the time would have recognized all the songs that Brahms quoted or alluded to. But, Brahms, being Brahms, would never have countenanced a simple medley of tunes hooked together willy-nilly. Rather, the form is as tight, clear, and developmental as you could ask of this skilled structuralist of musical logic. It takes a master to serve up something ostensibly light, but which takes its place among the most revered of concert masterpieces. It may be somewhat of a medley, but it all sounds irrepressibly Brahms.

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