

## Symphony No. 3 in F Major, op. 90—Johannes Brahms

Generally speaking, 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. This music, to use a phrase still common among seekers of meaning in music, was about “something” —meaning something familiar to human existence

Others, Brahms most significantly, still adhered strongly to the musical philosophy that great music was simply about “itself,” and required no extra-musical references for complete and satisfying meaning. 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). The example of Beethoven’s music (in this tradition) loomed almost as overwhelming for Brahms, and he waited for decades after reaching musical maturity to essay his first symphony, completing it in 1876, when he was forty-three years old. It garnered sufficient success to be deemed the “Tenth,” referencing Beethoven’s nine in that genre, although it bears more comparison with Beethoven’s fifth symphony. Brahms’ sunny second symphony followed shortly in 1877, but 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’s the shortest of the four symphonies, and in many respects the most straightforward in musical and psychological content. Unlike the first symphony (more than twenty years in gestation), this one apparently came somewhat easily to him, for he wrote it in a matter of months, while he was on summer vacation.

It opens with three mighty chords, the melodic outline of which appears at important structural points throughout the movement. This “motto” even appears in the fourth movement—a quite “progressive” technique for our Classical Mr. Brahms. The motto is simply comprised of the notes, F-A<sup>b</sup>-F, they being the first notes in the symphony and they follow immediately, repeated in the bass line. While this is going on in the basses, the violins play the swinging, descending line that really can’t make up its mind whether or not this symphony is in F major or F minor. This is a key (no pun intended) element in Brahms’ building of the whole movement—you’ll hear this little musical schizophrenia throughout the movement. A graceful, warm secondary theme is first heard only a bit later in the solo clarinet, and most of the essential bits are in. This little pastoral theme, but in sinister guise, played by the cellos and bassoons lets you know that the composer is going to play around creatively with the ideas before rounding it all off with the recap. It’s not a long movement and is one of the best examples of the concise craftsmanship for which Brahms is famous. Along the way take pleasure in the graceful waltz-like rhythm of the movement, which the composer constantly—and characteristically—plays around with, so that you’re never quite sure where the beat is.

The *Andante* begins with a meditative little passage, played by the traditional band of clarinets, bassoons, and horns so familiar from the eighteenth century, and, of course, most of the movement is based upon these materials. There is a more energetic middle section, but the mood resumes for yet another soft, placid ending. The third movement of most symphonies is usually a vigorous, fast, even dance-like affair. But, Brahms chooses to maintain the mood set by the first two movements, with a melody played by the cello section so familiar to many. The crepuscular atmosphere is considerably enhanced by Brahms’ choice of keys with lots of flats, which gives a distinctive sound to the string section. The melody is passed around, played with a bit, and the middle section appears with yet another winsome idea. It doesn’t last long, and the woodwinds bring us back to the familiar opening theme, now played by that most romantic of instruments, the horn, followed by the oboe taking a turn. The string section wraps up this most lyrical of movements.

The last movement begins, as does the same movement in his previous symphony, with an energetic, bustling, but soft unison passage for the string section. The key is F minor— isn’t this a symphony in F major?—don’t forget the ambiguity in the first movement. Brahms works this apparent paradox for most of this movement, in a stormy mood. Jagged, almost angry ideas appear—still in the minor mode. And then—the clouds pass, the sun shines, and an optimistic theme in a happy major key sings forth. But, there’s a lot of ground to cover, yet. So, Brahms proceeds to work through all of these ideas in a vigorous, apparently still hostile mood. The recapitulation is likewise. Finally, in the coda—begun by muted violas—when we’re almost done, the major mode finally returns, the tempo broadens out, and the whole affair ends with the warm, romantic, autumnal glow that we have come to associate with the mature, reflective Brahms. And did you notice? All four movements of this great symphony end gently and softly—that is an eloquent reflection of the depth of the man.