

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Tragic Overture, Op. 81

BORN: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg

DIED: April 3, 1897, in Vienna

WORK COMPOSED: 1880

WORLD PREMIERE: December 26, 1880, in Vienna. Hans Richter conducted the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

The *Tragic Overture* opens with a pair of shattering chords. From this initial figure flows a broad theme rising in the strings.

The initial subject expands powerfully and leads to two others: a march-like figure which grows out of the opening theme, and a tender melody whose inherent warmth transcends the restraint with which Brahms treats it.

Brahms' two concert overtures evoke Janus, the two-headed Roman god of comedy and tragedy. The composer wrote both works during the summer of 1880. The first, his *Academic Festival Overture*, is the one truly light-hearted piece in his output. As if to compensate for its uncharacteristic levity, Brahms immediately set to work on a far more serious composition that he titled simply *Tragic Overture*.

We don't know whether Brahms composed this music with a specific idea or dramatic scenario in mind. Max Kalbeck, his first biographer, asserts that the composer expressed interest in providing music for a theatrical presentation of Goethe's *Faust* in Vienna, though in the end the play proved too difficult to stage and the production was abandoned. But sketches discovered after Brahms' death indicate that he conceived much of the music some 10 or 12 years before he composed the overture, and that initially he may have intended its music for a symphony. In view of this, it is more reasonable to hear the work as an expression of tragedy in general rather than as a response to any particular literary stimulus.

Scored for 2 flutes and piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; strings.

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