JOHANNES BRAHMS
Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98
BORN: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg
DIED: April 3, 1897, in Vienna
WORK COMPOSED: 1884–85
WORLD PREMIERE: October 25, 1885, in Meiningen. Hans von Bülow conducted the renowned Meiningen Orchestra.

Johannes Brahms’ four symphonies have been cornerstones of the orchestral repertory for well over a century, and with good reason. More than any composer, Brahms succeeded in combining the qualities of taut subliminal drama and imposing sonic architecture that Beethoven had made the hallmarks of his symphonic music. His Fourth Symphony, a singular masterpiece, melds poetic invention with the most thoughtful treatment of musical ideas and formal design.

Brahms composed this work during the summers of 1884 and 1885, which he spent at the small town of Mürzzuschlag in the Austrian countryside. This would be the composer’s final essay as a symphonist and his penultimate work for orchestra. Although a dozen years remained to Brahms, only the Double Concerto, Op. 102, followed this symphony in the line of his orchestral compositions.

The Fourth also proved the most difficult of Brahms’ symphonies for his contemporaries to apprehend. The inner circle of the composer’s Viennese friends, who heard a preview performance on two pianos in September, 1885, generally found it troubling. Eduard Hanslick, an influential music critic, found it like “two very clever people arguing,” and Max Kalbeck, who would become Brahms’ biographer, went to the composer the following day to plead for revision of the work. Even Theodore Billroth, an intelligent physician whose musical perceptiveness Brahms greatly respected, found it at first “too massive, too tremendous, too full,” though he discovered that with closer acquaintance the music became “more and more magnificent.”

While Brahms undoubtedly felt disappointed at the failure of his closest friends to embrace the new symphony, he probably expected as much. He was well aware that the character of the work was more rigorous than genial, its effect bracing rather than beguiling. Nevertheless, he refused to alter the score apart from minor details of instrumentation, which he revised following an initial orchestral reading in October, 1885. Brahms may have been surprised, but surely was gratified, that the symphony was received enthusiastically on this and subsequent occasions.

The Fourth is the only one of Brahms’ symphonies to launch directly into the principal theme of its first movement without so much as a note of introduction. This abrupt beginning disturbed a number of early listeners, including the great violinist Joseph Joachim, who urged Brahms to add a few measures of preparation. The movement’s two main subjects are well defined and strongly contrasted, and Brahms develops both ideas with his customary skill.

Many commentators have remarked the modal contour of the melody that forms the basis of the second movement, and Brahms uses its tonal ambiguity to fashion uncommonly beautiful harmonies and melodic variations. By contrast, the scherzo is perhaps the most boisterous music the composer ever produced.

But Brahms has saved his trump card for the finale. This is constructed as a passacaglia, a set of ongoing variations over a repeating eight-note theme presented at the outset by the winds. Passacaglia form is an old one and was favored by composers of the Baroque period. It also is daunting in its strictness. Yet its
severity is to a large extent the source of its strength. Brahms responds to the constraints of the passacaglia procedure with music of tremendous power and expressiveness, the rigid framework of eight-measure phrases serving as a foil for his creativity. The whole movement is carefully shaped, subsiding from an imperious opening sequence to a tranquil central group of variations before building inexorably to a final climax. In its inspired discourse and formal perfection, Brahms’s last utterance as a symphonist must be counted among his greatest achievements.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: The first theme of the symphony’s initial movement is a marvel of economy, its constituent two-note figures merging and expanding to form a long, expressive melody. Leonard Bernstein once described the contrasting second subject as a kind of strange tango, and if this does not do justice to its character, it does serve to identify it. Brahms approaches the reprise of the opening material through a hushed passage conveying a wonderful sense of pregnancy, and the initial theme returns quietly, at first, and in elongated rhythms in the woodwinds.

A robust horn call heralds the main theme of the second movement, which suggests an Austrian pilgrims’ hymn. Brahms’ continual variations of this subject are ingenious and at times moving in their eloquence, nowhere more so than in the soaring violin melody that follows the initial presentation of the theme by clarinets and bassoons. The ensuing scherzo fits Brahms’ description, in a letter to a friend, as “fairly noisy, with three timpani, triangle and piccolo.”

The finale’s generative idea is the austere theme presented at the outset by the winds. This theme, or at least its attendant harmonic sequence, repeats continually over the course of the movement. With each recurrence, Brahms varies its rhythms or instrumentation, adds counter-melodies and otherwise transforms the initially spare idea. The music builds to an initial climax, then subsides to a mournful flute solo. This brings on a more placid central section; but a return of the passacaglia theme in the stern form that opened the movement plunges us back into a more dramatic vein, and the music rises powerfully to its conclusion.

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