

ONDINE

Johannes Brahms
The Symphonies



Chamber Orchestra of Europe
Paavo Berglund

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

THE SYMPHONIES

CD 1

SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN C MINOR, OP. 68		44:32
1	I Un poco sostenuto – Allegro	15:09
2	II Andante sostenuto	8:35
3	III Un poco allegretto e grazioso	4:34
4	IV Adagio – Più andante – Allegro non troppo ma con brio	16:13

CD 2

SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN D MAJOR, OP. 73		43:30
1	I Allegro non troppo	20:09
2	II Adagio non troppo	9:08
3	III Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino) – Presto, ma non assai	5:09
4	IV Allegro con spirito	9:03

CD 3

SYMPHONY NO. 3 IN F MAJOR, OP. 90

36:00

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|---|-----|--------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I | Allegro con brio – Un poco sostenuto | 12:41 |
| 2 | II | Andante | 8:35 |
| 3 | III | Poco allegretto | 6:00 |
| 4 | IV | Allegro – Un poco sostenuto | 8:37 |

SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN E MINOR, OP. 98

37:43

- | | | | |
|---|-----|-------------------------------|-------|
| 5 | I | Allegro non troppo | 11:39 |
| 6 | II | Andante moderato | 10:12 |
| 7 | III | Allegro giocoso | 6:13 |
| 8 | IV | Allegro energico e passionato | 9:37 |

Chamber Orchestra of Europe

Paavo Berglund, conductor

Present day performances of Brahms symphonies with smaller string forces are rare, but there is evidence that the size of orchestra in Brahms's time was not fixed and, indeed, Brahms's own orchestra in Meiningen performed his fourth symphony with almost the same forces as are used on this recording.

"I shall never write a symphony! You have no idea how it feels to a man like me to hear such a giant marching behind."

Thus said **Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)** to conductor Hermann Levi in one of his characteristic moments of self-doubt in autumn 1871. He was approaching the pinnacle of his career and was already an acknowledged master by virtue of his First Piano Concerto, *Ein deutsches Requiem* and several fine chamber music works. But the symphony – the apotheosis of instrumental composition – remained unconquered.

The giant that Brahms referred to was of course Beethoven, whose shadow fell over nearly every symphonic composer in the 19th century in one way or another. However, no one was as profoundly taken with Beethoven's acclaimed achievements as Brahms, who was both inspired and discouraged by them. The growth of Brahms into a great symphonic composer was a long and painful process, leaving at least one aborted attempt by the wayside in the mid-1850s.

Brahms completed his *First Symphony* at the exceptionally mature age of 43, when he had already discovered his own style. After the long gestation period of the *First Symphony*, his other three symphonies were quicker in the coming, appearing within less than a decade. Stylistically, they form a coherent series, but on the expressive level, they are clearly different, each creating an independent and individual world of its own.

Brahms's symphonic composition was characterized by strict self-discipline and a powerful epic grasp; he never became bogged down in rhapsodic vagueness or distracting sidelines. His symphonies are cast in the traditional four-movement form, the main weight being focused in the flanking movements while the middle movements are deliberately lighter. The opening movement is always in sonata form, and the slow movement is always second. The third movement is, except in the *Fourth Symphony*, an intermezzo more restrained than the dynamic scherzo introduced by Beethoven. Brahms was at his most experimental in the finales, applying unconventional solutions in the final movements of the *First, Third and Fourth Symphonies*.

Motif conciseness formed an essential part of Brahms's musical thinking. This had already appeared in the work of Beethoven, and more so in the work of Schumann, but Brahms worked his tiny motif cells into his thematic network in a truly thorough and profound way. It is the synthesis of spontaneity and sub-surface constructivism that is so surprisingly natural in Brahms's music.

SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN C MINOR OP. 68

Brahms's *First Symphony* had one of the longest gestation periods in the history of symphonic music, but it is also one of the finest and most mature first symphonies ever. He began work on it by the early 1860s, but progressed sporadically at first. It was apparently not until summer 1874 that Brahms began to tackle it in earnest; yet it took until September 1876 before it was completed. Even after the premiere conducted by Otto Dessoff in Karlsruhe in December in the same year, Brahms made corrections to the work, particularly the slow movement.

Beethoven was invoked as a model from the very first; for example, Hans von Bülow called the work 'Beethoven's Tenth'. There is no denying the influence of Beethoven, but neither should it be exaggerated. The most obvious model is Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, following which Brahms's symphony progresses from a defiant C minor in the opening movement to a triumphant C major in the finale. Minor-key symphonies ending in a major key had been written before Beethoven, to be sure, but he was the first to bring true content and significance to this darkness-to-light progression. Brahms's *First Symphony* is linked to this aspiration and shows him to have been a master not only of symphonic form but of symphonic drama.

The first movement opens with a rugged introduction that seems carved in granite (Un poco sostenuto), closely related on the motif level to the rest of the movement. The quick main section (Allegro) erupts in a dynamic and dramatic torrent, and the second subject on the winds provides only brief respite. The music is fired by a tight, almost clenched rhythmic approach which features the 'Fate' rhythm familiar from Beethoven's *C minor symphony*. The extensive development section flows straight from its cataclysmic culmination into the recapitulation.

The slow movement (Andante sostenuto) is in the distant key of E major. It is dominated by beautifully balanced melodies and a tranquil mood, but there are darker tones in the music too. The most delicate moment comes towards the end when the opening oboe melody is recapitulated in a lyrically glimmering violin solo. The pastoral Un poco allegretto e grazioso opens with a leisurely flowing melody on the clarinet; the wind instruments have a central role in this movement. In the Trio, the music moves from duple time to 6/8 and gains a more energetic nature. When the opening clarinet theme returns, it is unobtrusively joined by a violin melody that presages the hymn theme of the finale. After two lighter middle movements, the symphonic drama returns in all its intensity in the introduction to the finale (Adagio). It paints a landscape of tension that opens up into an expansive

horn motif (Più andante). Providing the finale with an introduction was an unusual approach; its few precedents included Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and Schumann's *D minor Symphony*. The comparison with Beethoven is apt, since Brahms's horn motif corresponds to the liberating baritone recitative "O Freunde, nicht diese Töne" in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth. The main section proper (*Allegro non troppo ma con brio*) opens with a hymn theme whose similarity to Beethoven's *An die Freude* has been pointed out ad nauseam. Brahms himself became so fed up with the comparison that he once snapped: "Yes, and what is even stranger, every jackass can hear it."

The finale evolves into a dramatic yet triumphant battle. The movement is very coherent in terms of motifs and thematic work as is typical for Brahms; the material of the introduction is made efficient use of in the main section, and the horn motif is also involved. In the coda, the tempo picks up even more (*Più allegro*), as if underlining the victory achieved.

SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN D MAJOR OP. 73

Writing the *First Symphony* was an ordeal for Brahms, but its resolution freed his symphonic resources. The *Second Symphony* was easier and faster to write; it was completed only one year after the First. Brahms wrote most of it on the shore of Lake Wörther in Pörschach in summer 1887. His new self-confidence and the effortless composition process seem reflected in the symphony, the most relaxed and lucid of his symphonies, his 'Pastoral Symphony'. The premiere, conducted by Hans Richter at a concert of the Vienna Philharmonic on December 30, 1877, was a great triumph for the composer, and the success of the work continued in following concerts. The third movement was particularly attractive to audiences, and it was often played *da capo*.

The bright character of the *Second Symphony* seems a conscious contrast to the sombre defiance of the First. However, the relaxed mood did not allow Brahms to become lax in his self-discipline; true to character, this work too is concise in its motifs and solid in its structure. For example, the three-note figure on the cellos and basses in the very first bar (D – C sharp – D) seeds many other motifs throughout the work. On the other hand, perhaps too much has been made of the carefree atmosphere of the work, since it has its shadows too, particularly in the first two movements.

The opening of the first movement (*Allegro non troppo*) is one of the most tranquil in the whole of the symphonic repertoire, and the contrast to the tragic defiance of the *First Symphony* could hardly

be greater. Darker tones emerge in the development, which begins with a dense counterpoint; later, it takes on an elegiac tone. The slow movement (Adagio non troppo) begins with a sentimental expansive cello theme, which seems to contain hidden darker strands. Later, the music plunges into a restless minor key in a counterpoint that is almost Baroque in its solidity.

The third movement is a charming pastoral Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino). Its idyll is twice interrupted by a fleeting Presto ma non assai section that presents two variations on motifs in the main subject. When the main subject finally returns on the strings, the music becomes more emotional. The finale (Allegro con spirito) is the most jubilant in all Brahms's symphonies. Again, there are darker tones in the development, but finally the movement escalates into an ecstatic triumph with brass brilliance reminiscent of Baroque visions of heaven.

SYMPHONY NO. 3 IN F MAJOR OP. 90

Having completed two symphonies within a short space of time, Brahms paused for six years before returning to the symphony as a form. The return was easy, however; the *Third Symphony* was written quite rapidly in Wiesbaden in summer 1883. The work was extremely well received at its premiere in Vienna in December 1883; as with the premiere of the *Second Symphony*, the Vienna Philharmonic was conducted by Hans Richter.

The *Third* is the shortest but tonally the most original of Brahms's symphonies. In the opening bars, the key of F major is tinged with F minor, and the second subject of the first movement is in the distant A major. The expected key of C major in the second movement is followed by the unexpected key of C minor in the third. The finale is mostly in F minor, and F major is only attained towards the end, not as a triumph over a minor key but as a tranquil epilogue. Giving a symphony a quiet conclusion was something quite new in the approach to symphonic form. Its only precedent was Haydn's *Farewell Symphony* (1772), but Brahms invented his approach independently.

The network of motifs is again extremely coherent, and the notes F – A flat – F emerge from the massive pillars of sound in the woodwinds in the opening as a central motif. The music vacillates fascinatingly between major and minor. The actual theme, played by the strings, might be a reminiscence of the opening theme of Schumann's *'Rhenish' Symphony*. The development is more concise and restrained than in Brahms's earlier symphonies, and the major outbursts are reserved for the coda, which nevertheless subsides into a beautiful final curve.

The woodwind conjure up a pastoral scene in the beginning of the slow movement (Andante) and have a dialogue with short utterances in the strings, before moving to the more introverted second subject on clarinet and bassoon. In the recapitulation, the main subject is heard in yet another version, with richer ornamentation, but the second subject is missing. Instead, an expansive melodic arc on the violins emerges.

The third movement, Poco allegretto, is the best-known movement in the symphony, and it has often been performed separately. This is the furthest that Brahms ever went from the Beethovenian scherzo, replacing it with a simple melodic movement, almost like a second slow movement. The Romantic and elegiac main subject presented by the cellos is one of Brahms's finest melodic inventions. After the lucid middle section, it is also played by the horn.

The finale (Allegro) opens with a mysteriously twisting unison on strings and bassoon in F minor. This is joined by a hymnlike subject derived from the second subject of the second movement, and only then does the music attain forte. The transition from the culmination of the concise and dramatic development section to the recapitulation is effective and direct, the beginning half of the main subject being left out and the theme beginning directly with the forte. After the following culmination, the music turns to a nocturnal, mellifluous, subsiding coda where the music turns into a major key (Un poco sostenuto). Here we find, in addition to the motifs of the finale, the opening motto motif and an echo of the main subject of the first movement in the descending string tremolos.

SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN E MINOR OP. 98

The *Fourth Symphony* was written at the foot of the Alps in Müzzzuschlag in Steiermark during the summers of 1884 and 1885. "I am afraid that it tastes of the climate here – the cherries do not ripen here, and you would not want to eat them," Brahms wrote to Hans von Bülow.

Brahms was so concerned about the charm of the work that he undertook special arrangements with Hans von Bülow. He had the work played through at a rehearsal of the Meiningen Orchestra (which Bülow conducted) before letting the work be published. Brahms's fears proved unfounded, since the premiere, conducted by himself in Meiningen on October 25, 1885, was a huge success. The work has since been considered the culmination of his series of symphonies, the astounding quality and evenness of this series notwithstanding.

Compared with other great composers of the day, Brahms was exceptionally well versed in early music, not just Bach but older masters like Palestrina. One of the finest manifestations of this interest in his output is the *Fourth Symphony*. For example, the slow movement has an archaic Phrygian character, whereas the finale is a set of variations based on Baroque models in terms of both material and structure.

The main subject of the first movement (Allegro non troppo) is a well-known example of the synthesis of spontaneous melodic invention and the underlying strict constructivism: the opening of the theme can be reduced to a series of descending thirds.

In the development, the opening of the main subject first returns as it was but soon leads into a modulating section. However, the development is quite restrained, and the greatest effects are reserved for the coda. Here, Brahms wrote, a bit surprisingly, his first symphonic movement ever to conclude in a forte.

The slow movement (Andante moderato) opens with a dignified processional motif on the horns; the dual light of C major and E major gives the movement the archaic colour of the Phrygian mode. Variation of the main subject is the essential content of the movement, but there is also another important thematic element, the nobly curving line of the cellos.

The third movement here is a dynamic scherzo (Allegro giocoso), the only one of its kind in Brahms's symphonies. Even this does not conform to the traditional scherzo form; in fact, it is in duple time and in a very concise sonata form. For example, the performing indication 'giocoso' seems peculiarly light in the face of the robust energy of the piece, and it should not be understood in the more rustic sense that is typical of Brahms.

The symphony is crowned by the variations of the finale (Allegro energico e passionato). The variations are based on an eight-bar theme, which is heard at the opening on winds. Brahms derived it from the final chorus of Bach's Cantata No. 150, *Nach dir Gott verlangt mich*. This movement has been variously described as a passacaglia and a chaconne. The former is true in the sense that the melody of the theme is often included, albeit sometimes quite concealed; while sometimes a variation is based on the harmonization of the theme as in a chaconne.

Brahms was one of the great masters of variations, and the finale of the *Fourth Symphony* is one of the most impressive manifestations of this mastery. Brahms divided the 30 variations into three

groups. The tenth variation turns the music towards a pool of tranquillity in the middle, beginning properly with the elegiac flute solo (variation 12). The middle section ends when the sixteenth variation returns to the opening theme as if in a recapitulation. The finale concludes with a weighty *Più allegro coda*.

Kimmo Korhonen

Translation: Jaakko Mäntyjärvi

The **CHAMBER ORCHESTRA OF EUROPE**, hailed as one of the finest ensembles in the world, was founded in 1981, and draws its fifty members from fifteen countries. Since the initial inspired idea of its formation, the COE has flourished with the commitment and dedication of its players who all pursue parallel careers as soloists and chamber musicians of eminent ensembles. They come together for individual concerts, tours, festival engagements and recording projects, with a motivating energy stemming from the players' shared love of music-making at the highest level with like-minded musicians combining a wealth of cultural backgrounds.

Performing predominantly in Europe where important ties exist with the cities of Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, Graz, Paris and Salzburg, the COE also continues to visit Japan and the USA regularly.

The Chamber Orchestra of Europe's Artistic Adviser is Claudio Abbado with whom it has won Gramophone Record of the Year awards for Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims* opera and the Schubert symphony cycle. Over the years the Orchestra has also developed a close relationship with Nikolaus Harnoncourt, and together they too have won a Gramophone Record of the Year award, for the Beethoven symphony cycle. Paavo Berglund also played a vital role in the Orchestra's life, and in addition to their recording together of the complete Sibelius symphony cycle, which has won the coveted Diapason d'Or, this Brahms symphonic cycle continued their close collaboration. The COE was the first Orchestra to have its own, award-winning, label, and in all has released over 100 CDs with the world's leading conductors and soloists.

Receiving no public funding, it is thanks to the generosity of individual Friends, international companies and support from the European cities in which it has important residences that the Orchestra has been able to pursue its musical ideals and can continue to meet the challenges of its exciting concert and recording schedules ahead.

The Finnish conductor **PAAVO BERGLUND** (1929–2012) won his reputation on the podiums of numerous major orchestras, including the Berlin Philharmonic, the London Symphony, the Dresden Staatskapelle, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, the Moscow State Philharmonic, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Israel Philharmonic.

From 1962 to 1971 Mr Berglund held the post of Principal Conductor with the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra. In England, where he was Principal Conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra from 1972 to 1979, he went on to frequent engagements with such ensembles as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the London Symphony and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. He has led tours in Europe with the BBC Symphony, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra.

Berglund returned to Finland in 1975 to the post of Principal Conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. From 1987 to 1991 he was Principal Conductor of the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra. He assumed the post of Principal Conductor of the Royal Danish Orchestra in Copenhagen in September 1993.

Mr Berglund made his North American debut in 1978, leading the American Symphony Orchestra in New York City. Since then he conducted many important North American ensembles including the San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Toronto and Baltimore symphony orchestras, the National Symphony, the New York Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra.

Paavo Berglund recorded the complete Sibelius Symphonies with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, with the Helsinki Philharmonic, and for the third time with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, and complete Nielsen Symphonies with the Royal Danish Orchestra. Among the many honours his recordings have received is a Grammy award nomination for his world première recording of Sibelius's Kullervo Symphony and Diapason d'Or for the Nielsen Symphonies recording. His recording of the Sibelius's Symphonies with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe won Diapason d'Or and Choc de l'Année 1998 of Le Monde de la Musique. His highly esteemed discography also includes major symphonic works of Rachmaninov, Shostakovich, Smetana and Dvorák, among others.

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA OF EUROPE

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