

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

(1833-1897)

*Symphony No. 1 in c minor, opus 68*

The son of a double bassist in the Hamburg Philharmonic Society, **Johannes Brahms** demonstrated great promise from the beginning. He began his musical career as a pianist, contributing to the family coffers as a teenager by playing in restaurants, taverns, and even brothels. By his early twenties, he enjoyed associations with prominent musicians. In every genre in which he composed, Brahms produced works that have become staples of the repertoire. The friend and mentor who was the most instrumental in advancing his career was **Robert Schumann** (1810-1856), who all but adopted him and became his most ardent partisan. Following Schumann's death, Brahms became the closest confidant and lifelong friend of the composer's widow, pianist and composer **Clara Wieck Schumann**. After a life of spectacular musical triumphs and failed loves (the composer was involved in several romantic entanglements but never wed), Brahms died of liver cancer on April 3, 1897.

In 1853, when he was only 20, Schumann had proclaimed Brahms "*the young eagle*" and prophesied: "*If he will sink his magic staff ... where the capacity of masses in chorus and orchestra can lend him its powers, still more wonderful glimpses into the mysteries of the spirit world will be before us.*" Encouraged by Schumann to undertake a symphony, Brahms made some attempts in 1854 but he was unsatisfied with the symphonic potential of the sketches and diverted them into the First Piano Concerto and the *German Requiem*. Over the next 20 years, his publisher nagged and his friends beseeched him for a symphony. In 1872, he finally exploded at conductor Hermann Levi: "*I shall never write a symphony! You can't have any idea what it's like always to hear such a giant marching behind you!*" The giant, of course, was Beethoven. His nine symphonies were, for Brahms, the apotheosis of the symphonic form; beside them, Brahms found his own symphonic efforts utterly inadequate.

It was not until 1870 that he hinted about any progress at all beyond the first movement. The 1873 success of the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* seemed to convince Brahms that he could complete his initial symphony, and in the summer of 1874 he began two years of laborious revising, correcting, and perfecting before he signed and dated the score of the *Symphony No. 1 in c minor* in September 1876. When he completed it in 1876, Brahms was already 43 and one of Europe's most revered composers. He had created masterpieces in every musical genre save opera and, more surprisingly, the symphony. Nervous about the response of the Viennese critics, Brahms had the symphony premiered in Karlsruhe on November 4, 1876. Brahms' premonition was correct as, at the Vienna premiere, the symphony met with a good but not overwhelming reception. One critic suggested posting signs in concert halls warning: "*Exit in case of Brahms.*" There is little doubt that Beethoven was, indeed, Brahms' model. Biographer Jan Swafford wrote, in *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*, "*As in Beethoven's Third, Fifth, and Ninth Symphonies, Brahms' First is a symbolic journey from darkness to light, from fatalistic uncertainty to apotheosis, from tragedy to joyous liberation.*"

OF NOTE: When friends pointed out that the last movement's chorale tune reminded them of the finale of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 ("*Ode to Joy*"), Brahms gruffly retorted: "*Any ass can see that!*"