

# **BRAHMS**

# Symphony No. 3 Haydn Variations

## London Philharmonic Orchestra Marin Alsop



### Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Symphony No. 3 · Variations on a Theme by Haydn, 'St Antoni Chorale'

Brahms's Third Symphony is surely one of his most poetic, evocative works, with vivid characterization and individuation of themes and their transformations: the bold chordal chromatic opening gesture heralding and underpinning the sweeping arcs of the first theme, the untroubled pastoral second subject, decisive transmutations in development - the second subject now tragic, the first lyric and monumental; the naïve march of the slow movement, with its nevertheless complex phrase-lengths and cadence echoes, the archaic quasi-chorale with enigmatic harmonies at the movement's centre, the concluding rich, yearning violin melody evolved from the earlier cadences; the rhythmic play in the tunes of the third movement, where 'upbeats' become winsomely relocated and, in the trio, beguilingly accented; the vigorous minor-key finale, with its veiled, anxiously mobile first theme, the solemn brass version of the slow movement's chorale the athletic, seemingly carefree major second subject, the emphatically defiant end to the exposition, development which fragments the first theme, then glorifies and energizes the chorale; finally the transfiguring apotheosis as the first theme slows, turns to major, combines with yet another variant of the chorale, now peaceful and celebratory, and with a meditative, valedictory return of the very beginning of the symphony.

The conductor of the first performance, Hans Richter dubbed the Third Symphomy Brahms's Eroica'; this was really a party pleasantry, though one that caught on and engendered serious discussion in the contemporary press. Perhaps more telling were the reactions of Brahms's friends. Clara Schumann wrote to him how, in the symphony, 'one is surrounded from beginning to end by the secret magic of the life of the forest' and Joseph Joachim, little given to such poetic interpretations, heard the story of Hero and Leander in the last movement. Brahms composed the work in Wiesbaden in summer 1883 and his biographer, Max Kalbeck, poet as well as historian, suggested a

connexion with the great monument celebrating the German nation being built close by, the statue of Germania at Rüdesheim. He also speculated as to a possible origin of the middle movements in Brahms's erstwhile plan to write incidental music for Goethe's Faust. It is, however, Kalbeck's third proposal that has caught the minds of today's public - that in this symphony Brahms used the musical spelling of a personal motto, the notes F-A-F standing for 'frei aber froh' (free but happy) and giving the work a special biographical slant. While there is abundant evidence that the young Joachim used the motto F-A-E, 'frei aber einsam' (free but lonely), there is none at all to support Kalbeck's inventive suggestion of one for Brahms. Nevertheless, Brahms was free and, in the main, happy, and he did have pronounced ability in making arpeggios into tunes - such are the truths of fiction.

Brahms himself said just one thing about such origins: that the first theme was 'literally transcribed from the Berchtesgaden vodel'. The theme's pitches do indeed replicate those of a Juchezer sung in Berchtesgaden, but the significant lessons here are about transformation as expressive renewal, and about Brahms's love and use of folk-music, for he makes these notes into a sophisticated high-art theme of symphonic scale and potential. Critics from Brahms's time onwards have pointed to altogether different sources for this theme - in link passages in the slow movement of Schumann's First Symphony, and the opening movement of his Third; these resonances are indisputable, though there is no record of Brahms or Clara Schumann ever alluding to them, but again it is general implication concerning the more Schumannesque facets of Brahms's romanticism which has the greater interest. Recently other critics have pointed to resonances from Tannhäuser, Siegfried and Götterdämmerung, seeing the symphony as a tribute to Wagner, who had died that February.

All this testifies to the suggestive richness of the *Third*, yet to understand the foundations of Brahms's

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expressivity we should go back to Richter's party pleasantry, not for its specific reference to Beethoven's own Third, but for the more general invocation of Brahms's great predecessor, from the study of whose music he had learnt the core of his creative equipment. For Brahms's Third Symphony is the work of a constructivist poet – the far-reaching 'speaking' themes and their telling transformations articulate the established architecture of the classical symphony and make it new, showing how profoundly Brahms understood his loved heritage. In the historical and structural contexts of its sonata and ternary forms, the symphony's contrastive, transformative and reflexive narratives take on correspondingly greater power, fluency and expressive immediacy.

The *Third Symphony* was first performed on 2nd December 1883 in Vienna and became an outstanding success – Brahms's characteristically complex response was to wonder whether he should cancel subsequent performances.

As is well-known, Brahms's path to his First Symphony was protracted and arduous, but on the way a work with less weight of historical precedence emerged relatively easily into the world. He composed his Variations on a Theme by Haydn in summer 1873 at Tutzing on the Starnberger See, first in the two-piano version (giving it the special status of a separate opus number), which he orchestrated that September: the first orchestral performance was on 2nd November, Brahms himself conducting. He had long been a Haydn enthusiast, had studied particularly the symphonies and piano trios, had copied canons and other pieces, and he followed the work of the Haydn scholar Carl Ferdinand Pohl. Both Pohl and Brahms believed the melody they transcribed around 1870 was Haydn's own, now doubted by some scholars, who consider it a popular tune of the time, or by a pupil, say Ignaz Pleyel. Brahms made the Chorale St Antoni the basis for the first freestanding set of variations for orchestra, thus founding a genre which became productively popular, for instance with Dvořák, Elgar and Reger, among others. Sketches show Brahms working at contrapuntal intricacy, particularly for the eighth variation, and counterpoint remains a special feature of this variation-set as a whole; he evolved a fugue subject from the theme, at one stage surely contemplating a fugal finale (as in his Handel Variations). He changed his mind also on the soundworld of the very opening, reverting from his initial decision to include strings to Haydn's original wind scoring, and while the work was being published he considered and rejected the idea of allowing a tuba to substitute for the contrabassoon.

The work takes a basic structural feature from Haydnesque precedent: instead of ordering the early variations by increasing figurative animation then switching to minor and character variations. Brahms here chooses the less characteristically classical route of an early pairing of major and minor variations, as Haydn had done, for instance, in his F minor set for piano, and the slow movement of the 'Drumroll' Symphony. There are eight variations. In the first (major) duplet and triplet lines diverge and converge in inverted counterpoint around held notes retained from the end of the theme; the second (minor) adds a dottednote clarinet line; the gentler third (major) has continuous flowing motion with decorative additions; the fourth (minor) comprises an austere scalic melody and severe counterpoint, with inversion at the 12th; the fifth to seventh variations are all major, offering two different scherzi (another Havdn speciality, of course) and a captivatingly beautiful siciliano on flute. The eighth variation (again minor) comprises fleeting canons in reticent and evanescent contrast to the solemn opening of the finale. There the theme's opening phrase becomes a passacaglia bass, its seventeen appearances offering fresh opportunities for counterpoint and expressive elaboration; finally, with corruscating, festive accompaniment, the theme itself returns triumphantly on full orchestra.

Robert Pascall

#### **London Philharmonic Orchestra**

The London Philharmonic Orchestra, founded in 1932, has long established a high reputation for its versatility and artistic excellence. These are evident from its performances in the concert hall and opera house, its many award-winning recordings, its trail-blazing international tours, and its pioneering education work. The London Philharmonic Orchestra presents its main series of concerts at the Royal Festival Hall and in summer becomes the resident symphony orchestra at Glyndebourne Festival Opera. Kurt Masur has been the Orchestra's Principal Conductor since September 2000, following in the footsteps of Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir Adrian Boult, Sir John Pritchard, Bernard Haitink, Sir Georg Solti and Klaus Tennstedt. Vladimir Jurowski, currently the Orchestra's Principal Guest Conductor, will become its new Principal Conductor in September 2007.

#### Marin Alsop

www.marinalsop.com

Principal Conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra since 2002, Marin Alsop takes up her position as Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony in 2007/8. She won the Royal Philharmonic Society Conductor of the Year award in 2002 and Radio 3 Listeners' Award in 2006, and was named *The Gramophone* magazine's Artist of the Year in 2003. She regularly conducts the Chicago Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, New York Philharmonic and Los Angeles Philharmonic, and recent guest engagements include the Boston Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra and Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. Marin Alsop studied at Yale and at the Juilliard School and won the Koussevitzky Conducting Prize at Tanglewood, where she studied with Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa. Her recordings for Naxos include the Brahms Symphonies and Overtures with the London Philharmonic, the complete orchestral works of Samuel Barber with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony* with the Colorado Symphony. Acclaimed recordings for Naxos with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra include works by Bernstein, John Adams (8.559031), Philip Glass (8.559202), Bartók (8.557481).

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The Third Symphony, one of Brahms's most poetic and evocative works, was hailed by the critic Eduard Hanslick as 'artistically the most perfect...equal to the best of Brahms's works...a feast for the music-lover and musician'. Arguably the composer's greatest symphony, it was first performed in December 1883 in Vienna and became an outstanding success. This is the third release in the major new Naxos cycle of the Brahms Symphonies featuring the internationally acclaimed London Philharmonic Orchestra and conductor Marin Alsop. Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2 are available on Naxos 8.557428 and 8.557429.

## **Johannes BRAHMS** (1833-1897)

Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90

Allegro con brio - Un poco sostenuto - Tempo I

2 Andante

4 Allegro

3 Poco Allegretto

Variations on a Theme by Haydn,	
'St Antoni Chorale', Op. 56a	19:23
5 St Antoni Chorale: Andante	2:15
6 Variation 1: Poco più animato	1:25
<b>7</b> Variation 2: Più vivace	0:57
8 Variation 3: Con moto	1:59
9 Variation 4: Andante con moto	2:27
10 Variation 5: Vivace	0:56
11 Variation 6: Vivace	1:18
12 Variation 7: Grazioso	3:11
13 Variation 8: Presto non troppo	1:01
14 Finale: Andante	3:54
London Philharmonic Orchestra (Leader: Pieter Schoeman)  Marin Alsop	

Recorded at Blackheath Concert Hall, London, UK, on 21st and 22nd March, 2005 (tracks 1-4) and at The Colosseum, Town Hall, Watford, UK, from 22nd and 23rd April, 2006 (tracks 5-14) Producer and Engineer: Tim Handley • Booklet Notes: Robert Pascall

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