

5 CDs

Academic Festival Overture | Tragic Overture  
Variations on a Theme by Haydn | Serenade No.1

*Symphonies n° 1 - 4*

**BRAHMS**

GRZEGORZ NOWAK CONDUCTS

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra



## JOHANNES BRAHMS

(1833-1897)

### *Symphony No.1 in C minor, Op.68*

I. *Un poco sostenuto* - Allegro -

*Meno allegro*

II. *Andante sostenuto*

III. *Un poco allegretto e grazioso*

IV. *Adagio - Più andante - Allegro non*

*troppo, ma con brio - Più allegro*

Johannes Brahms' First Symphony was the most stunning symphonic debut in musical history. From its searing opening pages – a storm-tossed musical landscape, underpinned by relentless timpani strokes – to the brass-saturated apotheosis of the final coda, the listener is carried irresistibly along by the Symphony's awesome sense of inevitability. Yet this was hard won. Indeed, the moment that the Karlsruhe Orchestra conducted by Otto Dessoff first launched into that angst-ridden opening at the work's première on 4th November 1876, was one that the forty-three-year-old Brahms had been consciously putting off for over two decades.

The problem of composing a symphony that would bear comparison with Beethoven's unrivalled achievements had been uppermost in Brahms' mind since his first encounter with Robert Schumann in September 1853. The older composer enthusiastically hailed Brahms as the natural heir and successor to Beethoven, as well as describing his early piano sonatas as 'velled symphonies'; Clara Schumann declared that Brahms would 'find the first true field for his genius when he begins to write for orchestra; These generous declarations of faith were to haunt Brahms throughout his creative life. Even as the First Symphony was nearing completion, he confided in the conductor Hermann Levi: 'I will never write a symphony. You have no idea what it is like to hear a giant [i.e. Beethoven] constantly marching behind you.'

Brahms' first attempt at symphonic writing was the planned conversion of an existing two-piano sonata in 1854. This never got much beyond the drawing board, however, the ideas being ultimately re-shaped into the Sturm und Drang contours of the First Piano Concerto. Likewise the First Serenade

After directing a performance in Munich in 1878, Hermann Levi recalled: 'I have never been through anything more painful. Total silence greeted the first movement and persistent hissing broke out after the second and third. After the concert there was a move afoot to compel the Academy to publish all its programmes at the beginning of the season so that in the event of a Brahms symphony being presented, one could decline to subscribe!' Posterity has understandably been somewhat kinder in its judgment, and this magnificent work is now generally recognised as seminal in the history of symphonic form. The first movement's volatile landscape is immediately signalled by an introduction of the greatest intensity that contains all the essential thematic elements to be employed thereafter. As the movement progresses these ideas are transformed into a breathtaking array of contrasting shapes and colours and, although their common source may not always be immediately apparent, the music is continually propelled along by the tremendous sense of their belonging together.

(1857-8), whose overt tunefulness and easygoing nature quickly dashed any symphonic pretensions Brahms had initially harboured. The crushingly high standards the young composer imposed on himself effectively drove any further mention of symphonic composition underground. Yet work did continue, and during 1862 Brahms began sifting through some ideas that would eventually emerge some fourteen years later.

The most important creative work was done after Brahms had finally taken up permanent residence in Vienna in 1869 and for several years he continued to work meticulously through his ideas. So complete was Brahms' success that his new symphony was popularly branded 'Beethoven's Tenth'. The connection is made explicit by the fourth movement's main choralic theme, which Brahms appears to have consciously modelled on the famous 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. When questioned about it at the time, Brahms typically snapped back impatiently: 'Any donkey can see that! Sadly, not everyone took to Brahms' sometimes ruggedly intellectual style.

*Symphony No.2 in D major, Op.73*  
I. Allegro non troppo  
II. Adagio non troppo  
III. Allegretto grazioso (quasi andantino)  
IV. Allegro con spirito

The rich complexity and subtlety of Brahms' Symphony No.2 are such that mere words can only give the vaguest hint as to the magnificent, overpowering music it contains. The first movement is a colossal sonata-form structure whose first three notes, sounded by low cellos and double basses, generate much of the material used in the movement. Allied to this immensely fertile idea is a theme made up of two complementary phrases, the first scored for French horns and bassoons and the second, following immediately, for woodwind. The tonally ambiguous second subject (bearing a passing resemblance to Brahms' famous lullaby) first appears in luminous string orchestration, and is subsequently taken up by the woodwind. To say that the rest of the movement follows the traditional pattern of development and recapitulation is to say very little about the miraculous bar-to-bar operations in the score.

The second and third movements inhabit an entirely different world; indeed their relative brevity and melodic grace led Levi to suggest that they were 'more suitable for a serenade or a suite than a symphony on this scale'. Yet, on reflection, it is difficult to imagine what alternative Brahms had, given the all-encompassing majesty of the outer movements. One interesting feature of the third movement is the opening clarinet melody which, halfway through, proceeds with the first phrase again, only with all of the original musical intervals turned upside down.

The finale opens with one of the most extended of all symphonic introductions, its decidedly brooding atmosphere ultimately soothed by the calming influence of a solo French horn. The main *Allegro* section starts quietly in the strings with the famous chorale melody loosely based on the 'Ode to Joy' theme, which triumphantly re-emerges just before the final uplifting peroration.

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