

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 by Johannes Brahms

In the TV comedy series, *Seinfeld*, the neurotically challenged character, George Costanza, gave us a delicious example of hollow self-aggrandizement: trying to impress a woman in a bar, he informs her that he is a writer on a TV show, even though earlier we had seen that he has almost zero creative energy and talent. “Some people write symphonies. This is my gift”, he brags.

Imagine, then, the consternation of Johannes Brahms as he entered middle-age. As a piano virtuoso he had for years blazed a trail with his piano and chamber music. Fellow composer and close friend Robert Schumann had proclaimed Brahms in his publication, the *New Journal of Music*, to be “the chosen one” and the rightful heir to the mantle of Beethoven. But unlike Schubert and Mendelssohn, who had precociously turned out their first symphonies while still in their teens, Brahms at 40 had yet to write his first symphony. Despite his success in other musical genres, he could not yet claim that writing symphonies was his gift! What was holding him back?

Being expected to follow in the footsteps of the great Ludwig van Beethoven, a musical colossus whose symphonic output culminated in the miraculous Ninth, one of the wonders of Western civilization, could not have helped. No pressure! Brahms had indeed struggled with sketches for a symphony since his twenties. His first piano concerto had early on taken the form of a symphony but its first two performances were disastrous flops, a factor that surely undermined the composer’s confidence in writing for an orchestral form. Being an extreme perfectionist Brahms was not prepared to unveil anything less than a masterpiece with his first symphony.

When Brahms finally delivered at age 43, though, it was clear that it had been worth the wait. The foremost music critic of the day, Eduard Hanslick noted: “Seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer’s first symphony with such tense anticipation. . . Even the layman will immediately recognize it as one of the most individual and magnificent works of the symphonic literature.” The conductor Hans von Bülow was equally taken, declaring the symphony to be Beethoven’s “Tenth”, not least, because of some of the obvious musical references Brahms had made in his symphony to Beethoven’s works including the famous *da da da dum* fate motif (listen out for this in Brahms’ first movement) from Beethoven’s Fifth, and the similarity between the Ode to Joy theme in Beethoven’s Ninth and the big tune in the last movement of Brahms’ symphony. Even Brahms’ choice of key signature of C minor for the symphony could be seen as an homage to Beethoven, who used the same key in some of his most incisive and tempestuous works including the Fifth Symphony, the *Pathétique* Sonata, and Third Piano Concerto.

Yet while Brahms tipped his hat to the musical giant he so revered, the very opening bars of his symphony have their own distinctive power and strength. It begins with a soaring line in the strings underpinned by timpani pounding on repeated Cs. The introduction was actually something Brahms added after he had completed the rest of the symphony and serves as an arresting prelude into the faster paced *Allegro*, while foreshadowing some of the key ideas to come, among them intertwined ascending and descending chromatic lines. The first movement is full of intense drama and contention punctuated by huge climaxes that eventually give way to a muted reconciliation in C major.

The second movement, marked *Andante*, continues our journey in the more serene ambience of E major, a third above C, an interesting modulation that Beethoven also deployed in the slow movement of his C minor piano concerto. The oboe soon introduces a beautiful melody, which after the movement's more turbulent central section, returns, but now with the support of a lovely duet for solo violin and horn. The third movement, which takes the form of an intermezzo or scherzo begins with a calm lilting melody that is followed by a descending chromatic line, a reminder of one of the symphony's unifying ideas.

The grand finale, like the first movement, begins with a portentous opening presaging big things to come. After the initial drama we can almost imagine the sun rising on an Alpine vista as we hear, above hushed tremolos in the strings, what Brahms called his "Alphorn" melody, a beckoning horn call, and one he presented in a greeting to his close friend Clara Schumann with whom he formed a lifelong but platonic relationship. This is followed by a chorale theme in the trombones and then suddenly we are presented with one of those golden moments that are the makings of a great symphony: Brahms' killer melody, the one that listeners immediately identified as being not unlike Beethoven's Ode to Joy theme. Of course, as Brahms noted, there is a similarity ("Any idiot could see that" he scoffed) but at the same time it is sufficiently different and memorable that it would be churlish to say that he plagiarized Beethoven. The various ideas packed into these three sections are then interwoven to form the fabric of the rest of movement before we arrive at the gloriously triumphant coda, a rousing farewell that features again the chorale heard earlier and, like the conclusion of Beethoven's Ninth, an absolute blaze of major chords.

As appreciation of the symphony grew rapidly over time, Brahms was finally able to unburden himself from the enormous psychological weight of being permanently in Beethoven's shadow. Further symphonies were to come more quickly, and finally Brahms, now regarded as one of the greatest exponents of the genre, could say that writing symphonies was truly his gift.

*Program notes by Julian Brown © 2014
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