

**Living in the shadow:**

A closer look at Brahms and his first symphony

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“It seems to me that the proof of the futility of the symphony has been established since Beethoven.” These harsh words expressed by Claude Debussy derive from an essay written at the turn of the twentieth century. There seems to be a certain amount of bluntness in this statement, which does not come as a surprise given that Debussy was but one of many composers who completely avoided the genre. However, many composers of the nineteenth century, claimed that the “futility of the symphony” was simply based on very nature of Beethoven’s achievements. The grand scale mastery of all nine symphonies seemed to be the highest level attainable for instrumental music. Beethoven’s supremacy as a symphonist was not merely an opinion that could be swayed one way or another, but rather a hard fact that every nineteenth century composer had to face.

The premier of Beethoven’s ninth symphony that took place in Vienna on May 7, 1824 (ironically Brahms’ birthday) was met with great enthusiasm and the completion of the work itself created a new reality. Many critics claimed that Beethoven’s greatest contribution was the lifting of the symphony to the realm of the metaphysical. No longer was the genre bound to being produced under the demand of wealthy princes, such as Haydn’s scenario in regards to the Esterhazy family, nor was it appropriate to simply compose a work from the fondness of a memory, as was commonly the case with Mozart. Indeed, a new era had come.

Symphonists of the late eighteenth century had in some cases already begun using the genre as a vehicle to engage with deeper philosophical content. However, the shocking opening chords and disobedience of tradition in Beethoven’s “Eroica” unexpectedly propelled this notion to new extremes. Limits continued to be pushed and new levels within

instrumental music were reached as Beethoven continued his journey as a symphonist. After his death in 1827, composers of the time were looking towards the new decade with nervous hesitation. Beethoven's legacy undoubtedly became a mountain that stood lurking in the distance for any composer who felt the urge to write a symphony, however this was only one of many factors that stood in the way. The symphony did not necessarily have to cease with the death of Beethoven, however the real question that lingered in the back of nineteenth century minds was: could the genre continue to flourish like it did?

Critics of the time urged young composers to write in more lyrical styles (an approach taken by Mendelssohn), but for many, this seemed useless since the attainability of the metaphysical was an unrealistic expectation and a heavy burden that seemed impossible to carry. Looking back, we can gather that the twenty years following Beethoven's death was a "period of consolidation following a period of intense originality." Even iconic composers of the nineteenth century such as Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Liszt felt conflicted. Mendelssohn abandoned three complete symphonies, Schumann did not dare to write his first until 1841, and Liszt felt as though Beethoven had said it all, so what more was to be said? Interestingly, other composers such as Berlioz and Wagner who also respected Beethoven, approached the so called "mountain" very differently. Berlioz appreciated the master, but by no means felt the need to be restricted by the rules of form or by the daunting burdens of the metaphysical. His *Symphonie fantastique*, which premiered in 1830, is a perfect example of this. It is fascinating to remember that even though this piece is commonly played today, its premier took place only three years after Beethoven's ninth symphony. Of course the public response to this work was that of complete confusion, but

then again, it is important to remember that many scholars consider Berlioz out in his “own world,” and not necessarily part of the nineteenth century dialogue. Wagner on the other hand, agreed with Liszt’s proclamation that the Beethoven symphonies put a clear end to the genre, and therefore believed that since one great tradition had come to an end, another must rise.

“The only German composer of Wagner’s lifetime who was big enough to stand with him on more or less an equal footing was Johannes Brahms. But they are antipodal. Wagner was the revolutionary, spearheading the future. Brahms was the classicist who dealt with abstract forms and never wrote a note of program music in his life, much less an opera. Wagner was to exert enormous influence on the future. With Brahms the symphony as handed down by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Schumann came to an end.”(Schonberg 289)

Johannes Brahms was born on May 7, 1833 in Hamburg. As the middle child of three, Brahms was a quiet individual who developed a deep love for learning. Although not directly born into poverty, his family moved around frequently and often lived in cramped spaces due to unreliable incomes. As a young boy, Brahms received his earliest musical training from his father, Johann Jakob, who made his living as an amateur musician. At the age of seven, Brahms began studying piano with Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel. Cossel often commented that Brahms had promising potential if only he would stop his “never-ending composing.” Just a few years later, Brahms was accepted to study music theory and piano free of charge with one of Hamburg’s leading instructors, Eduard Marxsen. This relationship proved to be extremely formative as Marxsen was the first to introduce the music Bach and Beethoven to young Johannes.

By the time Brahms had entered his twenties and began appearing on the broader musical scene in the early 1850s, the prestige of the symphony was beginning to fade. In October 1853, Brahms took a trip to Düsseldorf, Germany, where he was first introduced to Robert Schumann and his wife Clara. Schumann was greatly impressed by the young composer, and in response wrote an essay titled “Neue Bahnen.”

A surface level sense of spiritual longing was a common notion of the nineteenth century. By the 1850s, music critics were openly questioning the future of the symphony in messianic terms, would there be a second Beethoven? Schumann had an important voice in the matter and felt it was in some sense his responsibility to discover and proclaim the “new messiah.” After dismissing quite a few candidates such as Lachner and Mendelssohn, Schumann’s initial meeting with Brahms sealed the deal. “Neue Bahnen,” the essay previously mentioned was Schumann’s public proclamation that he had found the “new messiah.” He writes:

“After such an antecedent there would and must appear quite suddenly on who was called to articulate the highest expression of the age in an ideal manner, one who would bring to us mastery not in a process of step-by-step development, but would instead spring fully-armored, like Minerva, from the head of Cornus. And he has come, a new blood at whose cradle the graces and heroes stood guard. His name is Johannes Brahms; he came from Hamburg, where, working in dark stillness, he was nevertheless educated by an excellent and enthusiastic teacher [Eduard Marxen] in the most difficult elements of the art, and he was recently recommended to me by a venerated and well-known master [Joseph Joachim].”

Schumann's proclamation was an overwhelming burden that began hovering over Brahms as soon as it was published. The public's response to the essay was that of confusion given that Brahms was only a mere twenty year old, and had not yet written anything worthy of praise. Although the public did not take Schumann's declaration seriously, the young Johannes did, and deep down he knew from that point forward his life would never be the same.

It took Brahms twenty one years (1855-1876) to complete his Symphony No. 1 in C Minor. Living in the shadow caused even a genius to second guess all of his work, and as a result Brahms destroyed many of his early compositions, including some the earliest drafts of the first symphony dating from 1854. The opening introduction of the first movement is an indescribable representation of what it must have felt like to be Brahms. The weight of each slow passing chord so vividly depicts his internal struggle, and the timpani's unrelenting eighth notes are Brahms' way of reminding us that Beethoven is still pounding at his door.

As the movement begins, we get the clear understanding that it dares not be interrupted. A large level analysis can classify this movement as sonata form, but the conventional divisions of this form are not affirmed by traditional harmonic, melodic, or rhythmic stability. The unrelenting harmonic weight of the *un poco sostenuto* introduction arrives at a transition in m. 9, offering us lighter material after taking an eight measure journey through the past twenty years of Brahms' life. At m. 38, we arrive at the movement's *Allegro* which will soon offer a contrapuntal richness that surprised many nineteenth century critics. As Brahms pushes traditional Romantic techniques to their extremes, we can begin to analyze the three characteristics that truly give this first movement

its power: chromaticism, complex rhythmic language, and most important: motivic style.

These compositional techniques are being used in a new way, and are vigorous factors of the first movement.

After a life time of living in the shadow, Brahms is clearly obsessed with motivic-thematic coherence in the first movement. The three basic motives can be broken to the following:

(x): consists of extremely restricted stepwise motion with equal rhythmic values, but often beginning in syncopation with the first note tied over the bar line.

(y): derived from x with a stronger rhythmic figure consisting of a longer note and three sixteenth notes leading to a downbeat.

(z): comprised of a wide range triadic arpeggio

According to Walter Frisch, a musicologist at Columbia University, “these three motivic types are manipulated, combined, varied, and transformed with an intensity that carries this movement well beyond even the most motivically taunt creations of Beethoven.”

Unlike traditional sonata form, the development section of the first movement offers a new sense of stability and thematic fulfillment to the jagged motives of the exposition.

Unlike so many composers who came before him, Brahms’ tendency was to develop motives so thoroughly in the exposition that new tasks like thematic fulfillment must be found in the development section. An example of this thematic fulfillment can be seen by comparing mm. 89-93 in the exposition to mm. 232-236 in the development.

Another striking moment in the development occurs at mm. 289-93, when a surprising moment of rest takes place. Motion has virtually ceased as the strings quietly echo a remnant of motive (x). A non-coincidental echo of this moment takes place in Beethoven's "Eroica," where the unforgettable syncopations of the development simmer down to quiet chords in mm. 280-284. This moment serves as a sort of calm in the eye of the storm, but has never been as clear as in Brahms' first symphony. This compositional technique therefore left an impression by redefining the traditional notion of the development section.

The coda begins at m. 474, and again according to Frisch, "it is here where motive (x) reaches its thematic fulfilment for the first time since the development." It is important to note that mm. 478-95 form one of the most cohesive thematic statements of the entire movement. We are surprised as listeners to hear this theme only once before the *Meno Allegro* returns us to a restatement of the introduction at m. 495, in which the timpani reassumes its ominous pedal point and the chromatic presentation of motive (x) reappears. The conclusion of the movement is surprising but also contains a clear sense of closure. The final appearance of (x) is extended in the strings in mm. 501-505, and the completing note C is delayed until m. 508 as the motive (z) stands to have the final say of the movement.

Movement two in E major is a modified ternary form (A-B-A). The A section unfolds into one of Brahms' most sophisticated thematic groups, which produces five different thematic ideas. Brahms' greatest desire was to link this *Andante sostenuto* to the larger narrative of the symphony. An example of this is how between phrases (a) and (b) Brahms repeats three consecutive eighth note B's in the horns to quote the longing pedal

point from the introduction of the first movement. In this movement Brahms takes his five thematic ideas and stretches them in unbelievably beautiful ways. In the third movement, Brahms continues his obsession with symmetry by outlining a broader ternary form that is very intentional with its harmonic structure. “Despite the multilayered balance and symmetry in the movement, all is not ‘normal,’ and therein lie the connections between the Allegretto and the symphony as a whole.”

The finale to Brahms’ first symphony gracefully destroys all nineteenth century expectations of form. The movement does incorporate qualities of both sonata and rondo form but ultimately represents neither of them. After the iconic horn solo starting at the *Piu Andante*, the moment we have been waiting for finally arrives at m. 61 when Brahms shares with us his final theme that has been twenty years in the making. This unforgettable melody first introduced by the violins is often referred to as the “Beethoven theme” because of its resemblance to the “Ode to Joy,” melody from Beethoven’s ninth symphony. Brahms’ theme is transcendent in quality, and appears as if it is about to put through a series of variations, also similar to the ninth.

Soon after the initial statement, variation I takes place from m. 78-93, where the theme remains completely intact, but the orchestration is slightly altered. Directly following variation I, it seems as though Brahms is about to set us up for variation II, but quickly abandons this idea and rather follows with an intense motivic manipulation. Right after a restatement of the Alhorn theme from movement one, the appearance of a second theme, arrives in m. 118 and totally dismisses the notion that this movement will be a set of theme and variations. This quickly informs us that Brahms has different plans for his long awaited

finale. An ingenious shift to E minor in m. 142 and the return of motivic ideas in m. 148 & 156, also reminds us that the sense of conflict from the first movement is still unresolved.

At m. 186, the transcendent theme reappears, but the ambiguous context of this return seems too early to be the recapitulation, however, that is exactly what it turns out to be. Over the next few minutes of music, we hear Brahms masterfully expand upon his motivic ideas, with a counterstatement of the first theme (m. 186), and a reappearance of the Alhorn theme (m. 285) and second theme (m. 326). However by the arrival of the coda in m. 367, we begin to understand that Brahms has no intention of ever reconciling his theme with the many contrasting ideas that he has presented us with. Rather a sense of fulfillment in these final moments is achieved purely on the basis of motivic development. The symphony comes to a close with five powerfully concluding chords in C Major.

The majority of nineteenth century critics had very good things to say about Brahms and his first symphony. Many thought the symphony was exceptional solely based on its content and historical position, while others loudly proclaimed the piece to be “Beethoven’s Tenth!” Regardless of varying opinions, it is important to realize that the world knew that Brahms’ reference to Beethoven’s ninth was too obvious to be considered a weakness. Instead, it represented a conscious intention to lay to rest the fears of the unknown. Even though it took twenty years, the first symphony was a necessity of the nineteenth century to serve as a way of confronting Beethoven directly in order to move beyond him

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