

## Symphony No. 1 in c minor Johannes Brahms

That **Brahms** was an extraordinary composer is not new to us. That he was a fine pianist, a skilled accompanist, a prodigious performer, a profound musician – all these things, and more, are not new to us. The wealth of information about his works and the works themselves leave serious musicians gasping for new superlatives. Why? I don't begin to suggest that you will find a finite answer in the following notes, but merely some thoughts that point to it.

The role of the composer is, in my view, most analogous to that of an architect. Success depends on numerous unrelated parameters that are mastered and then brought together in the final presentation. We know that artistry, or art for the sake of art, needs a cohesive platform from which to be successful. The fantastical gargyle exists as an attachment to the drainage from the cathedral roof just as the intricate series of beautiful arches within, may actually support a central tower. And so it is with the great composer, who must deftly provide structural integrity along with artistic flare, understanding the intricacies of both disciplines. In the case of Brahms one is acutely aware of these different aspects of composition, but to his constant credit cannot easily distinguish them apart – as the structural elements are at once melodic and harmonic.

We know Brahms struggled with the concept of symphonic writing. His two orchestral serenades are full orchestrations, even if in vignette form, and his first piano concerto with its huge orchestral introduction, was most probably his first palpable stab at a symphony. Dr. Tovey refers to that introduction as the “mightiest utterance since Beethoven's ninth”, and concludes that “there is at least as much experience of orchestral writing behind Brahms's first symphony as there was behind Beethoven's third.” As greatly celebrated as this first symphony is, we must also remark on the caution that Brahms exercised. He kept the first three movements to himself for about ten years before working on the finale. Much like Beethoven, there were countless revisions, in this case under the guidance of Clara Schumann. We know that Brahms was insecure about his compositions, many lost to us because of his habit of burning scores that he reviewed as sub-standard. We also look back on a remarkable period of fourteen years out of his sixty-three, from 1873-1887 in which the *Haydn* Variations, all four symphonies, the violin concerto, the second piano concerto, the double concerto and the *Academic Festival* and *Tragic* overtures were written. This first symphony, closely followed by the second, is during the early part of this prolific outpouring when he was already 43. There is no question that the music you hear in the First Symphony of Brahms is as mature, and as lasting, as any in the repertoire.