

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 73

- I. Allegro non troppo
- II. Adagio non troppo
- III. Allegretto / Presto
- IV. Allegro con spirito

The first performance of Brahms' second symphony was given by the Vienna Philharmonic under conductor Hans Richter on 30th December 1877. It followed only one short year after his first symphony, and the inevitable comparisons ensued.

However, far more remarkable than a comparison between the two symphonies, is the relative ease with which he composed the second symphony - opening a flood gate that lasted until -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 completed.

To say that Brahms was a careful composer is a huge understatement. The pressure to present only his best before the public resulted in the first symphony being completed in his forty-third year after almost 21 years, by Brahms' own reckoning, of rumination between sketches and completion. He would send drafts and sketches to trusted friends - especially his beloved Clara, wife of composer Robert Schumann and wait for their criticisms or endorsements. He would also burn anything that he viewed as substandard so much extraordinary work including all the sketches are lost to musicologists who crave a deeper understanding of his compositional style.

Brahms had a busy performing schedule which occupied the winter season, much as it does today. As a result, he composed with freedom and energy in the summer months when he could get away. So, it was in Pörschach am Wörthersee, a town in the Austrian province of Carinthia, where he found peaceful and bucolic solace to compose his second symphony, in the summer of 1877. Its scoring and its

temperament are entirely pastoral -causing some to try and find relevant links between the Carinthian countryside and the musical phrase. Even though it progressed at a pace unusual for Brahms and he was happy with it, he sent revisions to Clara Schumann for her usual endorsements.

I am always mindful of seeing the work of Brahms from two angles.

On the one hand, there is the master composer and architect, whose work shows incredible genius. I am particularly struck by his ability to create melody out of structural harmony and vice versa. I would liken this to an architect who has managed to combine a red hot *artistic flair* with absolute solidity in *structural engineering*, so that the viewer does not know where the one leaves off and the other takes on. This is perhaps the grandest legacy that Brahms leaves to musicians.

On the other hand, there is the jovial Brahms, whom we sometimes see portrayed in those marvelous photographs who loved cigars, fine foods, fine wines and good German beer. The man whose loves were intense and feelings passionate, but was surrounded by the epoch's cloak of impervious traditionalism.

The second symphony, as masterful as it is in compositional style, seems to shout aloud the qualities of Brahms the jovial man. Instantly accessible, each movement brings forward all the elements one enjoys with Brahms. Listen for those low string sonorities that make simple harmony so much richer in Brahms' orchestrations. Listen for the French Horn, that marvelous mid range of sound favoured by Brahms, no doubt for the same reasons he favoured the viola and the contralto voicing. Listen for the inventive orchestration where solo woodwinds always penetrate effortlessly. Listen for the taut, rhythmic drive of Germanic music as Brahms connects history between Beethoven and Wagner. And finally, in this second symphony so different in its lack of brooding, effortless melody combined with effortless structure, listen for the jollity and verve that sparkles in D major.

Zane Dalal