

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897) came from humble roots. He was born in Hamburg to a father who attempted to make a living as a horn and bass player, and a mother who was a seamstress. His father's rough beer hall musician friends ensured that Brahms had a solid foundation in German folk and pop music of the day, but his father knew enough about music to make sure "Hannes" was properly trained in piano playing, theory, and composition. When he was a teenager, Hannes was put to work playing in after hours sailor hangouts, brothels, and other dark nightlife establishments to help support the family. One can only imagine the terrible experiences a very slight and pretty boy suffered at the hands of the "ladies" (not to mention the sailors) in these notoriously raucous environs. The opportunity to escape the seediness and enter into the profession of respectable music-making presented itself when Brahms' talent was recognized by local aristocracy. He began directing ladies' choruses, teaching piano to wealthy patrons' daughters, and playing at private salons, and when he was able, Brahms toured Germany with other young, talented musicians. In 1853, had the great fortune of meeting the famous violinist Joseph Joachim (the Joshua Bell of the mid-nineteenth century) in Weimar. Joachim recognized Brahms' talent and attempted to connect him with the movers and shakers in the music world. First, Brahms was introduced to Franz Liszt, who was duly unimpressed, though—in his typical fashion—quite cordial. Next, Brahms was sent with a letter of introduction from Joachim to Robert and Clara Schumann in Dusseldorf, and here he struck gold...or so he thought.

The Schumanns were absolutely taken with Johannes Brahms. His slender athletic form, his boyishly handsome face, his deep, penetrating blue eyes, and—most of all—his wonderful compositions played excellently by the young man on their piano. The Schumanns accepted him into their home as a family member. He babysat the children, organized Robert's papers, worked in the kitchen with Clara, and participated in their musical parties, mixing with the upper crust of German musical society. Robert was one of the most famous composers and conductors in Germany, and Clara was a virtuoso pianist without equal in her day. The association was wonderful for him in many ways, but soon after his friendship with the Schumanns was cemented, tragedy struck. Robert attempted suicide after a long period of mental deterioration, and Brahms stayed with Clara when he was sent to an insane asylum and after his untimely death.

In this time, Brahms was a life-saver for Clara, a pillar of strength in her life. Clara was, on the other hand, a mother-figure and representation of the ideal woman, an artist, philosopher, and all that is beautiful in the world. Brahms cared for Clara and her children as his own family, and eventually fell in love with her. He maintained his close friendship with Clara until she died 43 years later, but their love for one another was never consummated with an intimate touch or an open expression of love. For the rest of his life, Brahms was unable to love another woman wholly, and therefore developed a dark resentment for women. He was known to have fallen in love a number of times, and he was once engaged, but Brahms always deserted his girlfriends and turned to prostitutes to satiate his carnal desires.

Before Robert Schumann died, he wrote an article about Brahms in *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (*The New Magazine for Music*). The article, entitled "Neue Bahnen" ("New Paths"), hailed Johannes Brahms as the savior of music, "destined to give ideal expression to the times." The article was received by most with skepticism, and it put Brahms in the middle of a spotlight that he was very uncomfortable with. The following

years were made more difficult for Brahms by this article, as the pressure he felt to live up to Robert's characterization was enormous, and critics were waiting to pounce.

As his reputation grew, though, Brahms felt new pressures. In the 1860s, he had made his home Vienna, the musical capital of Europe, where he lived in the shadows of other great Viennese composers, namely Mozart, Schubert, and Beethoven. The urge to compose a symphony grew stronger, but Beethoven had proven himself the master of the genre 50 years earlier. Brahms knew he would be compared to Beethoven, and he respected and feared his idol enough to avoid seriously entertaining the idea of writing a symphony for years. "You don't know," Brahms observed, "what it means to the likes of us when we hear [Beethoven's] footsteps behind us."

His immeasurable fastidiousness and humility, and a fear of being compared to Beethoven, staved off the release of his first symphony for 14 years, but in 1876 he completed his *Symphony in C minor*. Immediately, his nightmares came true. The critic Eduard Hanslick wasted no time comparing Brahms to Beethoven, saying that Brahms had relied heavily on Beethoven's serious side, he lacked "heartwarming sunshine," and that the string melody in the fourth movement was reminiscent of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." The influential conductor Hans von Bulow nicknamed the symphony "Beethoven's Tenth," which also significantly irked Brahms.

The criticism was not all bad, though. Hanslick ultimately called the piece "an inexhaustible fountain of sincere pleasure and fruitful study," and it was an immediate hit with audiences. Today Brahms' *Symphony No. 1* stands as a monumentally important work on its own merit. It is an important part of the standard repertoire and a right of passage for young orchestral musicians. Leonard Bernstein said, "...Johannes Brahms stands firm in his old well-worn coat, insisting to the very end on perpetuating the classical tradition of Mozart and Beethoven...This amazing display of self-control, self-discipline, and self-containment probably saved his life, his sanity, and his God-given powers to fashion the music with which he enriched and ennobled the world."

Brahms died of cancer (liver or pancreatic) in 1897, and is buried in Vienna's Central Cemetery, only a few feet away from Johann Strauss Jr., Franz Schubert, and Ludwig von Beethoven.

—Silas Nathaniel Huff
New York City, 2007