

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73

Johannes Brahms

“I shall never write a symphony!” Johannes Brahms famously declared in 1872. “You can’t have any idea what it’s like to hear such a giant marching behind you.” The giant was Beethoven, of course, and although his music provided essential inspiration for Brahms, it also set such a high standard that the younger composer found it easy to discount his own creations as negligible in comparison.

Four more years would pass before Brahms finally signed off on his First Symphony. But once he had conquered his compositional demons he moved ahead forcefully. Three symphonies followed that first effort in relatively short order: the Second in 1877 (only a year after he had completed the First), the Third in 1882–83, and the Fourth in 1884–85. Each is a masterpiece and each displays a markedly different character. The First is burly and powerful, flexing its muscles in Promethean exertion; the Second is sunny and bucolic; the compact Third, though introspective on the whole, mixes in a hefty dose of heroism. With his Fourth Symphony, Brahms would achieve a work of almost mystical transcendence born from the opposition of melancholy and joy, severity and rhapsody, solemnity and exhilaration.

Brahms did much of his best work during his summer vacations, which he usually spent at some bucolic getaway or other in the Austrian countryside. The summer of 1877, during which he completed his Second Symphony, he spent in the resort town of Pörschach, on the north shore of the Wörthersee (known in English as Lake Worth) in the southern Austrian province of Kärnten (Carinthia). Brahms was greatly taken with this locale, which was new to him that summer, and he remarked in a letter to the critic Eduard Hanslick (his friend and cheerleader) that there were “so

many melodies flying about that you must be careful not to tread on any.” He would return to the same spot the following summer to write his Violin Concerto and yet again the year after that, when he was occupied with his G-major Violin Sonata (Op. 78). Others found the place similarly inspiring; not many years later, Mahler would build a summer getaway on the lake’s southern shore, and Alban Berg would compose his Violin Concerto while residing along Lake Worth in the summer of 1935.

Brahms’s Second Symphony was viewed from the outset as a “landscape” symphony, a sort of equivalent to Beethoven’s *Pastoral*. “It is all blue sky, babbling of streams, sunshine, and cool green shade,” wrote Brahms’s musical physician-friend Theodor Billroth. “By Lake Worth it must be so beautiful.” Later commentators have added many a fine point to the discussion, but the general idea remains, and on the whole the Second Symphony is accepted as a sort of nature idyll. Having said that, it is also important to

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: the summer of 1877

World premiere: December 30, 1877, with Hans Richter conducting the Vienna Philharmonic at the Musikverein in Vienna

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 23, 1878, Adolph Neuendorff, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 30, 2016, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 46 minutes

remark that this is, after all, a large-scale work by Brahms, and that fact in itself mandates that it will not be simplistic in its emotional stance, that even the most idyllic landscape will offer plenty of acreage for clouds and shadows, for the alternation of serenity and melancholy.

Another Brahmsian trait is that of not being in a hurry. This aspect is fully on display in the Second Symphony, which is the longest of his four. The movement markings themselves betoken the overall spirit of relaxation and moderation. The first movement is fast (*Allegro*) but “not too much so” (*non troppo*), just as the second movement is “not too slow” (*Adagio*

non troppo). Brahms labels his third movement ambivalently, wanting it to fall somewhere in the region of *Allegretto con grazioso* (Pleasantly sort-of-quickly) and *Quasi Andantino* (sort-of-slowly), before galloping off in a *Presto* (Very quick) — but in this case *Presto ma non assai* (Very quick, but not very much so). Only in the finale does the composer allow the orchestra to proceed relatively unbridled at *Allegro con spirito* (Fast, with high spirits).

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

In the Composer's Words

Brahms was not usually very helpful when it came to describing his music. In the case of his Symphony No. 2, he was typical in being evasive and ironic. Just after finishing it, he wrote to his friend Elisabet von Herzogenberg that, to get an idea of the new piece,

you have only to sit down at the piano, placing your little feet on the two pedals in turn and striking the chord of F minor several times in succession, first in the treble, then in the bass (*ff* and *pp*).

In fact, one would be hard pressed to locate an F-minor chord anywhere in this piece. After the dress rehearsal for the premiere Brahms wrote again to von Herzogenberg, observing that

the orchestra here plays my new “Sinfonie” with crepe bands on their sleeves because of its dirge-like effect, and it is to be printed with a black border, too.

Brahms at the piano in a caricature by Willy von Beckerath

