

Robert Schumann (1810–1856)

Konzertstück for Four Horns and Orchestra in F major, Op. 86 (1849)

Robert Schumann's *Konzertstück for Four Horns and Orchestra* stands as a unique entity in his body of orchestral works. Composed in Dresden in 1849 it reflects both his fascination with instrumental colour and his responsiveness to contemporary advances in musical technology. The invention of the valved horn, which permitted fully chromatic playing, offered Schumann an expanded expressive and harmonic palette. The *Konzertstück* thus became not only a vehicle for virtuosic display but also an exploration of the instrument's newly revealed lyrical and harmonic potential.

The work was conceived during a period in which Schumann's compositional style achieved a new synthesis of clarity, concision, and emotional directness. In contrast to the large-scale dramatic tendencies of his earlier symphonic works, the *Konzertstück* demonstrates a more streamlined sense of proportion and orchestral transparency. It stands alongside the *Cello Concerto in A minor* and *Album for the Young* as evidence of Schumann's artistic renewal in the late 1840s.

Despite featuring four horns, the *Konzertstück* is not conceived as a showcase for four individual players; rather the four horns act collectively as a concertante group, at times blending as a single sonorous body and at others engaging in intricate dialogue, set against the rich orchestral fabric that is characteristic of Schumann's mature orchestration.

The opening movement unfolds with an immediate sense of ceremonial grandeur. The orchestral introduction presents a bold and rhythmically assertive theme, soon taken up and elaborated by the quartet of horns in brilliant unison. Schumann juxtaposes passages of extrovert heroism with moments of more supple lyricism, achieving a balance between martial vitality and poetic expressiveness. The development section displays masterly contrapuntal craftsmanship, as motives are exchanged and transformed among the solo instruments and orchestra. Throughout, the composer's rhythmic flexibility and harmonic richness lend the movement a sense of spontaneous momentum and structural cohesion.

The central *Romanze* provides a profound contrast in character and affect. Here, Schumann writes in a more introspective and elegiac vein, constructing a sonorous dialogue among the horns whose blended timbre evokes the warmth of a vocal ensemble. The principal melody, noble in contour and restrained in expression, unfolds over a delicately sustained orchestral accompaniment. Subtle modulations heighten the movement's emotional tension, culminating in a brief but impassioned climax before subsiding into a state of serene repose. This movement exemplifies Schumann's capacity to combine intimacy with grandeur, and harmonic complexity with lyrical simplicity.

The finale restores the extrovert spirit of the opening, yet with even greater rhythmic exuberance. Structured as a rondo of considerable brilliance, it is driven by propulsive rhythmic figures and intricate interplay between soloists and orchestra. The horn writing here is of exceptional difficulty, encompassing rapid passagework, extended range, and sustained high tessitura—all of which exploit the technical advantages of the valved instrument. Schumann's contrapuntal ingenuity is once again apparent, as he weaves independent lines into a cohesive symphonic texture. The work concludes in a resplendent affirmation of F major, the horns' triumphant sonority bringing the composition to a radiant close.

The *Konzertstück* received its premiere in Leipzig in 1850 under the direction of Ferdinand David and was immediately recognised for its originality and brilliance. It has since remained a cornerstone of the horn repertoire, admired both for its technical audacity and its integration of virtuosic writing within a symphonic framework. The work's influence may be traced in later Romantic treatments of

the horn by composers such as Richard Strauss, who extended the expressive and structural ambitions that Schumann so vividly embodied in this singular composition. One only has to hear the climactic point of Strauss' second Horn Concerto, where the solo horn is joined by the orchestral horns as a single entity, to hear the influence of Schumann's instrumental audacity and exuberance.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony no. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 (1855-1876)

There can be little doubt that the **Ninth Symphony** of Beethoven represented something of a milestone in the evolution of the genre. It was not merely a case of its vast length but its near definitive treatment of the symphony as personal statement, a cultural artefact rather than a composition produced to suit the whims and needs of one or another wealthy patron. After this work, the business of creating a symphony was that of personal devotion, an attempt to leave an enduring and individual legacy, unfettered by the shackles of commercial constraints.

That Brahms struggled to produce a single named work in the genre (and thus fill the void left by the death of Beethoven) until relatively late in his career should, therefore, come as little surprise. It is not the case that he was unable to compose on a sufficiently broad canvas (two orchestral *Serenades* and his D-minor **Piano Concerto** suggest the contrary), simply that the seemingly unsolvable riddle of Beethoven's Ninth, the struggle to reconcile personal expression with the strictures of classical symphonic form remained for some time as immovable as the work's iconic status itself.

When, in 1876, the premiere of Brahms' **First Symphony** took place he was almost immediately hailed as the true successor to Beethoven; the irony of it being labelled 'Beethoven's Tenth' by contemporary commentators such as Hanslick and von Bülow did not escape the composer who, by several accounts, was irritated by the suggestion. Yes, he had been influenced by Beethoven. How could he not have been?

That influence can be felt in Brahms' manipulation of small motifs to generate musical argument, the utilisation of tension-release as a structural organiser (the 'from darkness to light' trajectory of the work as a whole finding precedent in Beethoven's **Fifth Symphony**, also in C-minor) and in the intensity of its expression. Brahms was not attempting a radical departure from what had become the defining principles of the symphony as Beethoven had bequeathed them.

The greater interest in Brahms' work stems more from the differences than the similarities to Beethoven's work. The first movements of both the **Fifth** and **Ninth** symphonies of the older composer, for example, are based upon the most simple motivic germs amounting to little more than a single interval (a falling third in the former, a fourth/fifth in the latter). It is Beethoven's manipulation of these ideas that gives rise to musical expression; Brahms' ideas, broader and less easily manipulated, are themselves imbued with expression.

The very opening of Brahms' **First** brings to mind not Beethoven but J.S.Bach; over a pulsating timpani pedal emerges a sinuous rising and falling chromatic theme quite unlike anything in Beethoven. In fact the contrapuntal density displayed throughout the main *allegro* of this movement and in the majority of the finale likewise looks back to baroque procedures rather than to the formal clarity of the classical period. A key feature of Brahms' style is that of his rhythmic inventiveness; he frequently places his accents not on the main beat but on a weaker one, sometimes for several bars at a time, a strategy that not only results in great rhythmic tension but also imbues the music with a flexibility that negates the need for much interpretive interference.

In the central two movements Brahms deviates from the Beethovenian model by presenting what are, in effect, two *intermezzi* of individual character. This was perhaps Brahms' only formal innovation in his symphonies yet it is certainly not difficult to ascertain its influence in the works of composers such as Mahler. The *andante sostenuto* begins as a hymn voiced by strings; indeed strings dominate throughout despite a prominent oboe melody typical of the composer before an extended passage of solo violin duetted alternately by horn and clarinet draws the movement to a close. The succeeding *un poco Allegretto e grazioso* once again highlights Brahms' skill as a composer for wind instruments, evidenced by the solo clarinet melody that opens the movement. A contrasting middle section acts as a dialogue between wind and strings before the opening material returns with a new accompanimental figure.

Much has been made of the similarity between Brahms' use of a chorale-like theme in the final movement and Beethoven's use of his 'Ode to Joy' theme in his final symphony. Whereas Beethoven sought to develop his theme through a set of variations, however, Brahms modifies and expands upon *his* theme in a more obviously symphonic way (the anguished cry that opens the movement foreshadows its eventual C-major statement). Besides, this is only one of three important ideas that are introduced in the first seventy bars and it is the way in which Brahms binds his various themes into a coherent whole that impresses. Throughout the rhythmic drive and harmonic tension result in a movement of great excitement; when the final C-major apotheosis is reached its sense of victory is heightened by the constant struggles that have gone before.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Symphony no. 8 in B minor, D759 (1822)

The posthumous reputation of Schubert, whilst entirely fair in its awarding of such epithets as 'genius', would perhaps have been easier to assess were it not for the unearthing of his two late symphonies some years after his death. During his lifetime he completed hundreds of songs (elevating the genre of *lied* from salon-piece to high-art) and piano miniatures (likewise). There were chamber works and even the occasional opera. In contrast, Schubert only completed seven symphonies, although the existence of a continuous sketch for one and a two-movement torso of another results in the accepted total of nine.

And yet, the very popularity of the 'Unfinished' (no.8) and 'Great' (no.9) has led to an easy if somewhat lazy categorisation of Schubert as a 'symphonic' composer. While there can be no doubt that they are both masterpieces of the genre, Schubert's more consistent achievement lies elsewhere. His first six, composed between 1812 and 1821, are skillful examples of the Viennese classical symphony, clearly in thrall to the eighteenth century ideal so definitively expressed by Mozart and Haydn. The influence of Beethoven can hardly be heard and when it can be identified (as in the 'fourth') it is more as a gesture of intent than content and is, in any case, usually followed by an act of musical contrition (as in the **Fifth**, which is the most perfect of his early 'classical' symphonies). After completing his sixth and having grown dissatisfied with the limited scope of the genre as it stood, Schubert took a break of nearly three years from symphonic composition. The more lyrical and expansive seventh symphony of 1821 (which was completed from beginning to end only as a draft and, despite having been completed by at least three others has remained outside of the canon) demonstrated that Schubert had found a way to expressing himself within the form.

Schubert's reputation as a symphonist rests, therefore, upon his last two published works in the

genre but it is worth remembering that by the time of his death in 1828 only those first six symphonies have been performed. That both had to wait until many years after the composer's death for their first performances lends a bitter sweet note to their continued popularity.

Quite why the 'Unfinished' was never finished may never be explained satisfactorily. The fanciful notion that the composer realised that the two-movement form worked sufficiently and did not require anything further (a notion that led to a whole school of performance which treated the *andante* as a proto-Mahlerian *adagio* of farewell) is contradicted by the fact that Schubert did leave sketches for at least a *scherzo*. Likewise the romantic idea that Schubert was so troubled by his recently having been diagnosed with syphilis that he was unable to continue does not quite ring true. It is, however, conceivable that the heightened level of musical expression that is evident throughout the work (the first movement in particular) was unsustainable by Schubert in 1822.

Indeed, the almost febrile intensity of the *allegro moderato* is the very quality that seems to have made it so popular with audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (it was a favourite of Hollywood music directors in the early days of 'talkie movies' whenever a suitably gothic mood was required). The opening, sounded by unison cellos and basses has a mysterious quality which leads into the movement proper. Here the murmuring violin figurations accompany the first of two distinctly Schubertian melodies, assigned to the oboe and clarinet. As the music moves forward to its first climax the composer introduces more syncopation and powerful *tutti* chords. The music then dissolves with disarming efficiency to reveal the second theme, presented by the cellos over syncopated accompaniment. This melody has become perhaps Schubert's most famous and its structural position and orchestration was a clear influence on Brahms in his **second** symphony (Brahms had a hand in editing the work for publication). However, the gentle nature of this theme does not long distract from the prevailing darkness of the movement as a whole which reaches new heights of turmoil in the development section.

The ensuing *andante con moto* provides much respite from what has preceded it. The mood is predominantly relaxed but even here there are moments of minor-key turbulence and drama. The movement complements its predecessor so perfectly (and, in terms of duration, precisely) that it is easy to understand why the work has been so accepted in its incomplete form.

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