



Brahms + Schumann

||| Songful, soulful music by Brahms opens this evening's concert. On the second half, we'll enjoy an evocative new piece by Edmund Finnis, then hear Robert Schumann's verdant Symphony No. 1.

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born 7 May 1833; Hamburg, Germany
Died 3 April 1897; Vienna, Austria

***Gesang der Parzen*, Opus 89 [Song of the Fates]**

Composed: 1882
First performance: 10 December 1882; Basle, Switzerland
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: 2 flutes (1st doubling on piccolo); 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; contrabassoon; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 14 minutes

Choral music comprises a significant part of Brahms's oeuvre – from the monumental *Ein deutsches Requiem* to two sets of *Liebeslieder Waltzer* to unaccompanied folksong arrangements to motets to part-songs, both *a cappella* and with piano accompaniment. In addition to the *Requiem*, he created several works for choir and orchestra; composed in the summer of 1882, *Gesang der Parzen* was the last of these.

Over a decade earlier, Brahms had employed a Hellenic subject for his *Schicksalslied*. He does so again here, setting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Gesang der Parzen* (Song of the Fates) from *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. In the play, Iphigenie relates a song, sung by the Fates, that tells of the capricious and cruel behavior of the gods. These are the words Brahms uses here. In its overall mood and orchestration, it is dark and foreboding.

A somber orchestral introduction leads to the chorus's dactylic rhythm (long-short-short) that will recur later, in the middle of the work and at the end, to serve as a unifying device. Brahms casts the text's seven verses into a rondo-like form (ABACA), with the refrain's D minor mode twice interrupted by episodes in the major. The choral voices are divided into six parts (SAATBB), with divided altos and basses adding duskier tone colors. States scholar Heinz Becker, "Brahms used an almost ascetic musical language with no florid sound-effects to capture the Mycean gloom of the ancient world." Indeed. And as the music fades away at the very end, an old man sits in his cave, remembering his children and grandchildren, shaking his head.

Recommended recording: Sir Colin Davis, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (RCA Red Seal) 🎧

Schicksalslied, Opus 54 [Song of Destiny]

Composed: 1868-71
First performance: 18 October 1871; Karlsruhe, Germany
Last MSO performance: October 2002; Andreas Delfs, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 2 horns;
 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 15 minutes

Encouraged by the immense success of his *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Opus 45, Brahms soon set to work on other choral compositions, including the cantata *Rinaldo*, Opus 50. About the same time, a friend showed him Friedrich Hölderlin's poem, *Hyperions Schicksalslied* (Hyperion's Song of Destiny). The composer was so taken with it that he sketched its first drafts on the spot. The bulk of the work came later, and Brahms completed it in Baden-Baden in May 1871.

Sumptuous and often muted, *Schicksalslied* comes close to the spirit of Brahms's *Requiem*. The text describes the serenity of the Greek deities, contrasted with the despair and suffering of humanity. Set in E-flat major, the orchestral prelude's broadly flowing melodies give way to a solo line for the altos that is repeated in four-part harmony and, indeed, the choral writing is largely homophonic. To contrast the lot of the gods with that of mankind, Brahms changes the meter from 4/4 to 3/4 and the tempo from *Langsam* (slow) to *Allegro*. Cross-rhythms depict water hurled from one rock to another, and the text finally ends on a note of plaintive surrender.

Brahms disliked this sad conclusion and considered repeating the text of the beginning. Hermann Levi – a Jewish conductor who, ironically, led the premiere of Wagner's *Parsifal* at Bayreuth – had been allowed to see the *Schicksalslied* before it was finished. Levi advised Brahms against this course of action. The composer instead reprises the luminous orchestral prelude, this time in C major, to close on a note of solace.

Recommended recording: Claudio Abbado; Ernst-Senf-Choir, Berlin Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon) 🎧

Alto Rhapsody, Opus 53

Composed: 1869
First performance: 3 March 1870; Jena, Germany
Last MSO performance: June 1985; Lukas Foss, conductor
 Maureen Forrester, contralto
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 2 horns; strings
Approximate duration: 13 minutes

Brahms was in his mid-30s when he composed the *Alto Rhapsody*. Its text comes from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem *Harzreise im Winter* (Winter Journey in the Harz [Mountains]). The work is somewhat autobiographical, for the inveterate bachelor Brahms, despite his deep admiration for women, was never able to form a lasting relationship, never able to take that final decisive step. In his biography of the composer, Karl Geiringer eloquently states:

He paid tribute to the charms of the fair sex by unconditional worship. And when physical beauty was coupled with intelligence and musical talent – he was especially fascinated by a beautiful voice – he was only too ready to fall in love. He did so not only once, but again and again in the course of his life. And not only the passionate handsome youth, but also the mature artist, and the master on the verge of old age, had reason to be confident that his love would be returned.

The cycle repeated itself in the summer of 1869, when Brahms became attached to Clara Schumann's third daughter, Julie. Because he was not outspoken in such matters, Julie had no idea of Johannes's feelings. In the meantime, Julie became engaged to another man. Brahms poured out his grief in the *Rhapsody* – and presented it to Julie as a wedding gift.

Scored for mezzo-soprano solo, four-part men's choir (TTBB), and orchestra, its introduction depicts a spiky mountain landscape. Into this scenario comes a lonely young man, whose words are divided into three stanzas: 1) soloist describes in words what the orchestra has depicted; 2) misanthrope tells the story of his lonely plight; 3) men's chorus joins to sing of the Father of Love, whose psaltery is depicted by the harp-like pizzicato arpeggios of the cellos. Brahms has moved from sorrow to acceptance, and the final cadence sounds like a benedictory "Amen."

Recommended recording: Dame Janet Baker; Sir Adrian Boult, male voices of the John Alldis Choir, London Philharmonic Orchestra (EMI) 🎧

EDMUND FINNIS

Born 1984; Oxford, England

The Air, Turning

Composed: 2016

First performance: 23 February 2017; Glasgow, Scotland

Last MSO performance: MSO Premiere

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo); 3 oboes; 3 clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet); 2 bassoons; contrabassoon; 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bell plates, crotales, gong, suspended cymbals, tam tam, vibraphone); strings

Approximate duration: 9 minutes

The young English composer Edmund Finnis studied at London's Guildhall School. His music ranges from intimate works for soloists and duets to immersive electronic pieces, music for film, ensemble and choral music, and works for large orchestra. From 2013 to 2016, he was composer-in-residence with the London Contemporary Orchestra, and has been a professor of composition at the Royal Academy of Music since 2015.

The Air, Turning is an orchestral tone poem. Finnis offered the following observations about the piece:

The individual elements of this piece are predominantly very simple. Patterns of sound are made up of interwoven instrumental lines that variously rise and fall, remain fixed, or form arcs. Blocks of sound color approach and recede across a background haze of softly shimmering metallic percussion and ephemeral string harmonics. As these clear lines and planes are superimposed and overlapped, they create variegated lattices of sound, accumulating and dispersing in waves, revolving and creating subtly shifting harmonies. Sounds are heard drifting into and over one another, gradually coalescing, circling, and gathering into swirling currents.

The words of the title are lifted from a poem called "Finding the Keys" by the Scottish poet Robin Robertson. While composing this piece, I was thinking about how we experience the medium of air: how vibrating air moves as sound across distance; how air is colored by light, seen and seen through, breathed in and out; the sensation of it moving around us.

Ken-David Masur conducted the work's American premiere on 30 April 2018, with the Civic Orchestra of Chicago.

Recommended recording: Ilan Volkov; BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (NMC Recordings) 🎧

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born 8 June 1810; Zwickau, Germany

Died 29 July 1856; Endenich (near Bonn), Germany

Symphony No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 38, "Spring"

Composed: 1841

First performance: 31 March 1841; Leipzig, Germany

Last MSO performance: May 2008; Jun Märkl, conductor

Instrumentation: 2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets;
3 trombones; timpani; percussion (triangle); strings

Approximate duration: 30 minutes

Robert Schumann and Clara Wieck (1819-1896) were married on 12 September 1840. This union resulted in tremendous musical productivity, for anticipating his marriage to Clara had unquestionably put Robert into a lyrical frame of mind. In 1840 – his so-called “year of song” – he gave voice to his pent-up emotions, penning over 125 lieder. The following year, still in a celebratory disposition, he set his sights on the orchestra, producing two symphonies and the *Overture, Scherzo, and Finale*.

Clara had urged Robert – whose compositions to date were mostly for his own instrument, the piano – to write for the orchestra. He sketched his Opus 38 in just four days, and less than a month later the full score was completed. He had taken his inspiration from a poem about spring by Adolf Böttger, and originally had given each of the movements a descriptive title, which he later withdrew: 1) Spring's Coming; 2) Evening; 3) Merry Playmates; 4) Spring at Its Height. Felix Mendelssohn led its first performance in Leipzig's Gewandhaus. Schumann numbered its enthusiastic reception among the most significant events of his musical life.

The composer wanted the introduction's opening brass fanfare to sound “as if from on high, like a call to awaken.” Its rising three-note figure becomes integral to the first movement, and will serve as a unifying motivic device to the symphony as a whole. An *accelerando* leads to the sonata-form *Allegro molto vivace*, whose relentless dotted rhythms are irresistibly exuberant. Toward the movement's end, the composer surprises us with a new theme, warm and lyrical.

The songs of the previous year must have been in the front of Schumann's mind when he penned the gentle 24-bar *cantabile* melody that opens the *Larghetto*. Once the violins have sung the tune, the cellos and then the solo oboe restate it, with imaginatively varied orchestration for each iteration. The trombones, hinting at the main theme of the *Molto vivace* to follow, bring the movement to a solemn conclusion. The D-minor *Scherzo* is set in a rondo-like form (ABACA), with two trios – the first in D major, the second in B-flat major – contrasting with the main refrain.

In the effervescent mood of the *Allegro animato*, Schumann seems to take a page out of the playbook of his friend Mendelssohn. There is much to admire in this sonata-form movement, but listen especially closely for a touch of magic just before the recapitulation: an affecting oboe solo, horn calls from an enchanted forest, and a birdlike cadenza for the flute. From there to the conclusion, it's all merriment.

Recommended recording: Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique (Deutsche Grammophon) 

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.