JOHANNES BRAHMS
(1833-1897)

Symphony No.3 in F Major, opus 90

- Allegro con brio
- Andante
- Poco Allegretto
- Allegro

The son of a double bassist in the Hamburg Philharmonic Society, Johannes Brahms demonstrated great promise from the beginning. He began his musical career as a pianist, contributing to the family coffers as a teenager by playing in restaurants, taverns, and even brothels. By his early twenties, he enjoyed associations with prominent musicians. In every genre in which he composed, Brahms produced works that have become staples of the repertoire. The friend and mentor who was the most instrumental in advancing his career was Robert Schumann (1810-1856), who all but adopted him and became his most ardent partisan. Following Schumann’s death, Brahms became the closest confidant and lifelong friend of the composer’s widow, pianist and composer Clara Wieck Schumann. After a life of spectacular musical triumphs and failed loves (the composer was involved in several romantic entanglements but never wed), Brahms died of liver cancer on April 3, 1897.

In 1853, when he was only 20, Schumann had proclaimed Brahms “the young eagle” and prophesied: “If he will sink his magic staff … where the capacity of masses in chorus and orchestra can lend him its powers, still more wonderful glimpses into the mysteries of the spirit world will be before us.” Encouraged by Schumann to undertake a symphony, Brahms made some attempts in 1854 but he was unsatisfied with the symphonic potential of the sketches and diverted them into the First Piano Concerto and the German Requiem. Over the next 20 years, his publisher nagged and his friends beseeched him for a symphony. In 1872, he finally exploded at conductor Hermann Levi: “I shall never write a symphony! You can’t have any idea what it’s like always to hear such a giant marching behind you!” The giant, of course, was Beethoven. His nine symphonies were, for Brahms, the apotheosis of the symphonic form; beside them, Brahms found his own symphonic efforts utterly inadequate. It was the success of the Variations on a Theme by Haydn (1873) that seemed to convince Brahms that he could complete a symphony. When he completed his Symphony No. 1, in 1876, Brahms was already 43.

Work on his Third Symphony began in 1882 and completed it at Wiesbaden during the summer of 1883. The Symphony’s dramatic conflict is posed at the very beginning of the work, in the three-note motif that pervades the first movement and reappears in the fourth. The letters of the motif (F, A-flat, F) are said to stand for the composer’s personal credo, Frei aber froh (“Free but glad”) which has been interpreted in any number of ways by generations of musicians, musicologists, critics, and audiences.

The first movement is exceptionally concise, direct, and compact. Although the passion of its first few measures calms into gentler themes almost immediately, Brahms departs from the expected harmonic pattern by retaining an ambiguity of major versus minor throughout. The second movement is characterized by long, graceful phrases and a melody marked by repeating triplets which gives the movement a timeless, dream-like character. Perhaps the most-famous among the four movements, the third is a work of pure beauty. Although it is a Scherzo and Trio, there is no humor per se in the movement. If anything, the mood is a mournful one with a beautiful, poignant melody. Closing the symphony is a movement with enormous vitality which, once again, focuses on the major-minor contrast. Brahms returns to the main theme of the first movement near the end of the Finale, bringing a cyclic unity to the whole work; however, this time the searching and fiery character of the first movement is now peaceful, serene, and content.

Hans Richter conducted its first orchestral performance in Vienna on December 2, 1883, and the concert was one of the greatest triumphs Brahms was ever to experience. Ironically, Brahms found success difficult to deal with and worried that he would not live up to what he perceived as the new expectations that stemmed from the Symphony’s popularity.

OF NOTE:
Brahms presented the Symphony No. 3 to Clara Schumann as a gift on her sixty-fourth birthday. Clara's letter of thanks reads, in part, “I have spent such happy hours with your wonderful creation. What a work! What a poem! . . . From start to finish one is wrapped about with mysterious charm.”