

PROGRAM

BRAHMS

Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98

- I. Allegro non troppo*
- II. Andante moderato*
- III. Allegro giocoso*
- IV. Allegro energico e passionato*

See program notes on page 9.



2022-23 Sunday Matinees

BRAHMS SYMPHONY NO. 4

Sunday, Oct. 23 @ 3 p.m.

Carl St. Clair, conductor
Pacific Symphony

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*Performance at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts
Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall*

calculation here: The piano soloist grabs the primary role, even entering alone. But once the orchestra enters, it has the melody. Those chords, so full of life and confidence, actually *accompany* the orchestra's statement. They can be heard as a heroic response to the melodic lifeline. Once it has been introduced, the piano takes up the melody in a manner that is vigorous but more moderated and less tumultuous, setting up a pattern of alternating grandeur and lyricism that prevails throughout this concerto.

As 21st-century listeners, we are the beneficiaries of this concerto's unusual performance history and the landmark interpretation of the great American pianist Van Cliburn (1934 – 2013). When Cliburn won the first International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow in 1958 (as a tall, rangy, young-looking 23-year-old), the Cold War was at its height; Sputnik had been launched the previous year, and the space race and nuclear arms race were at full tilt. His victory came with this concerto, and it had an impact we can scarcely imagine now. He received a tickertape parade down Broadway and instantly became an American hero. But the response was even more dramatic in Moscow, where weeping listeners rushed the stage and mobbed him. Why?

In a sense, the answer goes back to the concerto's duality—the alternation of heroic and poetic sound that Tchaikovsky deftly gives us, mixing powerful chords and parallel octaves with rippling passages of rapid fingerwork that require flawless legato. Yes, superbly trained Soviet-era pianists combined accuracy and power. But where was the passionate individuality of their predecessors? Under the Soviet system, such highly personalized expressiveness was shunned. But in Cliburn's performance, the judges heard this kind of interpretive artistry combined with superb technique, and the conclusion was undeniable; listeners heard a cherished part of their national patrimony being restored to them by the unlikelyst of artists.

Johannes Brahms Symphony No. 4 in E Minor

Born: May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany
Died: April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria
Composed: Summers of 1884 and 1885
Premiered: Oct. 25, 1885, Meiningen, Germany

Most recent Pacific Symphony performance: Sept. 28, 2013. Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall in Costa Mesa, Carl St.Clair conducting
Instrumentation: 2 flutes including piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons including contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion, and strings

Estimated duration: Approx. 39 minutes

Contemporary reports and later accounts by music historians give us oddly contradictory impressions of Brahms. In viewing his photographic portraits chronologically, we see the handsome, sensitive young composer and pianist turn into a great bear of a man, ursine and shaggy. Plenty of quotations demonstrate how gruff he could be in talking about his own music and others'. And yet, underneath it all, he seems to have remained easily bruised—always the fretful composer who worked and reworked his first symphony for 14 years or more



while the music world waited impatiently for the opus that might prove to be "Beethoven's Tenth." "You have no idea what it's like to hear the footsteps of a giant like that behind you," he said. He finally felt ready to present his first symphony to the public when he was 43, yet its eventual success—which seemed to fulfill music-lovers' hopes for a worthy successor to Beethoven—made Brahms even more nervous about writing a second.

Indeed, the writing of symphonies seems to have pushed all of Brahms' buttons; for the sake of his nerves and to escape the pressure of expectations, he sought the solitude of country life for this kind of work when possible. In the case of the Fourth, he went to Muerzzuschlag, a quaint resort town in the Styrian region of Austria—a place of trout fishing, hiking and mountain climbing where the inner workings of sonata allegro form would be the last thing on most people's minds. The year was 1885, and Brahms was 52: old enough to be thinking about his musical legacy. In his fourth symphony, many listeners hear his farewell to the symphonic form.

In talking about the Fourth, he was up to his old obfuscatory tricks. He described the symphony as "a few entr'actes and polkas that I happened to have lying around" rather like a fashionista who's asked about her new dress and replies "what, this old thing?" (The reference to "entr'actes and polkas" is especially ironic coming from the brilliant technician whose mastery of flowing, integrated development is unexcelled among composers.) But his attitude can't have been so relaxed or good-humored when, in a trial run-through with his friend Ignaz Bruell, he played a two-piano reduction for a group of close friends. These included the critics Eduard Hanslick and Max Kalbeck, the conductor Hans Richter, and Theodor Billroth, a surgeon and accomplished amateur musician. Their reception was glacial and their comments, with the benefit of hindsight, seem baffling. The next day, Kalbeck, a loyal supporter, suggested that the final movement's form was inappropriate for a symphony; it is now considered one of the strongest elements in a symphony full of strengths. This movement encompasses the greatest emotional range of all Brahms' symphonic finales, and it was greeted with tumultuous applause at most early performances.

Based on a Bach chorale, the finale answers an opening movement that is noble yet austere by comparison. The second movement is marked *andante moderato*, a walking tempo. Launched with a beautiful horn theme, it is suffused with a feeling of fond remembrance. The gait is relaxed, yet Brahms' contemporaries correctly sensed a note of valediction in the music: His friend and former pupil Elisabeth von Herzogenberg compared it to a walk through an idealized landscape with a glowing sunset in the distance, and the young Richard Strauss was reminded of a moonlit funeral march. (Strauss himself would later excel at the musical evocation of moonlight.) As for the third movement, a joyful allegro giocoso, we defer to the famous phrase of the late Olin Downes: "Brahms as Old Bear's Paws." Here, Brahms not only hews to the traditional scherzo form for a symphonic third movement, but executes it with an exuberance rare in his music—including an uncharacteristically liberal use of glittering percussion.

Michael Clive is a cultural reporter living in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. He is program annotator for Pacific Symphony and Louisiana Philharmonic, and editor-in-chief for The Santa Fe Opera.