

## Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

### SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN E MINOR, OP. 98 (1885)

- I. ALLEGRO NON TROPPO
- II. ANDANTE MODERATO
- III. ALLEGRO GIOCOLO
- IV. ALLEGRO ENERGIACO E PASSIONATO

Strange things happened to the symphony during the course of the 19th century. Berlioz and Liszt gave its movements literary titles and freely married it to the tone poem. Wagner in his maturity never wrote a symphony and believed that he had absorbed its essential qualities into the texture of his music dramas. The results were original and beautiful. But in opposition to this trend arose Brahms, who felt that something important in the great tradition of music had been lost. He bent his life's work towards the restoration of what he saw as the main line, stemming from the giants of the past, and epitomised by Beethoven. A part of this task was the recreation of the symphony as a monumental, self-contained form in the classical tradition.

By the very nature of this task, as Brahms saw it, it could not be approached lightly. An early effort turned into the massive and dramatic First Piano Concerto. Not until he was 43, in 1876, did he produce his First Symphony, the splendour of which caused it to be described, jokingly yet admiringly, as 'Beethoven's Tenth'. The following year came the more genial and lyrical Second Symphony. Six years then elapsed before the Third Symphony appeared, with its engaging combination of earthy, folk-style melodies and autumnal sadness. Then in 1885 came the monumental Fourth Symphony. Probably of all the four works, it best sums up what Brahms was aiming at, in turning the old great formal tradition to the deepest romantic expressive uses.

The affecting 'sighing' theme, played by violins and echoed by woodwinds, that opens the **first movement**, *Allegro non troppo*, was drawn by Brahms from one of Beethoven's most introspective works, the slow movement of the Op. 106 piano sonata. A dramatic conflict is set up by the second theme group, with its brilliant fanfares from horns and woodwinds, followed by a grand, soaring theme from the cellos. Two moods are thus put into opposition, and Brahms alternately develops the second theme group and the first, then moves with gathering force and power to the great climax which takes place in the very closing pages, or coda, an affirmative transformation of the reflective opening theme.



Brahms

Notable in the movement, as indeed throughout the Symphony, are the subtle cross-rhythms which straddle bar-lines, and which give the music a richness of texture and turbulent inner life. In his orchestral colour Brahms seeks to create not sharp contrasts, but a subtly changing balance of strings, woodwinds and brass, like the innumerable degrees of light and shadow through which Rembrandt realises the underlying monumental structure of his great paintings.

The **slow movement**, *Andante moderato*, begins with horns, soon joined by the other woodwinds over pizzicato strings, in a theme that has the slow lilt of dance music carrying a heavy weight of sadness. The violins come to the forefront with a long, singing melodic line of beautiful serenity. A stormy climax builds up, with triplet figures peeled out by the full orchestra, and then the triplet motif is transformed into a hauntingly lovely melody for the cellos. One of the great moments in this movement comes near the close, when this same consoling melody is taken up and expanded upon by the full string section.

The boisterous **third movement**, *Allegro giocoso*, had justly been called the only 'true scherzo' in the Brahms Symphonies. In its amiable and vigorous nature it is akin to a robust folk song. The **last movement**, *Allegro energico e passionato*, is one of the greatest examples of Brahms's 'groundbreaking conservatism'. He adapted the old baroque form of the chaconne, or passacaglia, with its variations over a ground bass. The basic theme of eight notes is announced by brass, woodwind and drums in eight mighty chords. It is present as the foundation of all the subsequent 30 variations and coda. But unlike the use of the form a century or two before Brahms, here the theme is so absorbed in the harmonic texture, and in melodies which are subtle variants of its basic shape, to the point that often the listener feels, rather than hears, its presence. This is especially so in the reflective middle section of the movement, with its plaintive flute solo, followed by awesome trombone chords. And, as in the first movement, the conclusion is a powerful and confident transformation of the opening theme.

Programme notes: David Patmore