



## Johannes Brahms

(1833-1897)

### Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80

Heavy, serious, melancholy – it's easy to run away with an image of Brahms that does less than justice to both him and his music. He worked on his *Academic Festival Overture* at about the same time as his *Tragic Overture*, and the two works, as he himself acknowledged, represent the opposite sides of his musical personality. The *Academic Festival Overture* is by the Brahms who loved gypsy music, admired Johann Strauss II, and produced such light-hearted works as the *Liebeslieder* (Love-song) Waltzes for four solo voices and piano duet.

It was written as a thank-you present to Breslau University after it had awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1879. The implication of the German title, *Akademische Festouvertüre*, is that this is not so much a contribution to a university knees-up as a jolly overture that just happens to have been written to mark a university occasion. The festivity, in other words, was all Brahms's idea, instead of the "fine symphony" the University was hoping for.

Although never a university student himself, Brahms continued to look back fondly to a period in 1853 when he joined in the social life of students in the town of Göttingen. In the overture he returns to the world of riotous songs and arcane fresher's initiation rituals with evident relish, drawing on four student songs of the period. He described it as "a merry potpourri of student songs à la Suppé", a reference to the overture to Suppé's<sup>1</sup> operetta *Flotte Bursch* in which, like Brahms, he quotes the best-known of all German student songs, 'Gaudeamus Igitur' (So let's enjoy ourselves while we're still young).

Brahms's subdued, minor-key opening shouldn't fool anyone, and probably isn't meant to. He may not be ready to let us in on the joke just yet, but neither is he totally able to suppress a grin. As this section ends, minor turns to major, and the trumpets launch into the first of the four songs. A reminder of the overture's opening is followed by a sweeping string melody, based on a phrase from the second song. Then a nonsense-song appears on two chuckling bassoons. Brahms saves 'Gaudeamus Igitur' for his exhilarating coda, using the largest orchestra he ever employed to add a thoroughly festive sparkle to this rumbustious ending.

<sup>1</sup>Franz von Suppé (1819-1895): He first made his name as an opera conductor in Vienna in 1841. He wrote almost exclusively for the theatre, producing over two hundred stage works, including *Poet and Peasant*, *Light cavalry*, *Pique dame*, *The beautiful Galatea*, and *Boccaccio*, whose overtures remain popular, even though the operettas themselves have become neglected.