

SYMPHONIC MONUMENTS

JOHANNES BRAHMS
SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN E MINOR, OP. 98

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE CONDUCTOR'S LECTURE
(FOR FOREIGN GUESTS)**

"His entire artistic output is one great variation on the works of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Schumann."

(Hugo Wolf)

"He never concerned himself much with 'originality' and never shied away from formulas — in full agreement, after all, with the old masters, who knew there could be no style without formulas."

(Alfred Einstein)

"A posthumous child of the great masters."

(Alfred Einstein)

Ladies and gentlemen, dear listeners,

Allow me to begin this season final concert of the *Symphonic Monuments* series in a somewhat unorthodox way — with a handful of enigmatic quotes — as I warmly welcome you, together with the Szczecin Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra.

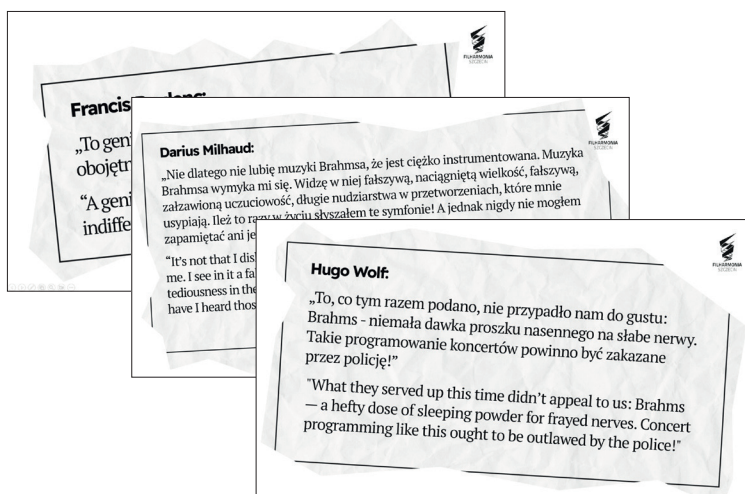
When speaking of the greatest composers of classical music, in a single breath one often names the three great B's: Bach, Beethoven, and... Brahms, the hero of tonight's concert. These three figures share not only their nationality and the first letter of their surnames.



The eminent German musicologist Alfred Einstein put it this way:

"The romantic character of Brahms' work is grounded in his ties to the lost paradise of classical music — and he hides this from no one with ears trained to listen. These bonds gave his works charm and grace without depriving them of individuality."

Though today Brahms ranks among the ten most frequently performed composers, and though his musical language is firmly rooted in tradition — so hardly controversial — not every opinion on his work has been, or still is, so kind.



Harsh criticism, isn't it? I dared to present you these opinions not to discourage you, but to remind us all — that music is something we can discuss. We're allowed to have different opinions. I must confess, I dream of a time when conversations about music stir audiences as much as internet scandals do. This evening's introduction to Johannes Brahms' Symphony No. 4 in E minor is meant to help you understand this work — and after hearing it, to either appreciate it, fall in love with it, or critique it. The choice is yours — and, most importantly, there's no wrong choice.



Johannes Brahms was born in 1833 in Hamburg. He began learning piano as a child, and as a pianist-composer, he was first recognized and declared a genius in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* newspaper by none other than Robert Schumann, who would later become his mentor and friend.

In 1857, Brahms moved for several months to Detmold, where he worked as a choral conductor and piano teacher. By then, he already had a number of piano and chamber works to his name — so he decided to challenge himself with orchestral music. He began composing a symphony, but as he wrote, he returned to his artistic foundation: the piano.

This led to the creation of his Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor. In March 1858, during a private rehearsal for a small audience, Brahms heard, for the first time, his own notes performed by an orchestra. It motivated him to continue working — and he had much to learn. As a pianist, he still needed to master the possibilities of orchestral instruments: what roles to assign them, how to blend their sounds.

The result of these explorations included two orchestral serenades, *A German Requiem*, and the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, which, incidentally, were performed here at our Philharmonic just over a month ago.

In the early 1860s, Brahms began seriously considering a move to Vienna — then the capital of the musical world. Largely because of a woman — though, while Brahms remained a bachelor to the end of his days, his love life is a topic for another lecture.

What matters more for us is the friendship he struck around this time with Fritz Simrock, who would become Brahms' principal publisher and financial adviser. We also know that by then, Brahms had been working for some time on his monumental Symphony No. 1 in C minor. But as a perfectionist with immense respect for the great masters of the past (especially Beethoven), Brahms responded to the interest — and even pressure — from Simrock and other friends with a smile, explaining that he still did not feel ready to follow in his great predecessors' footsteps.

That readiness only came in 1876. It's said that his first symphony took nearly twenty years to complete.



The work was warmly received by both critics and audiences, and it was then that Brahms the symphonist was truly born. Ideas for new symphonies flowed much more quickly after that.

Just eight years later, Johannes was spending his summer holidays in the Austrian Alps, already working on his Symphony No. 4. He completed it there, at the foot of the Semmering Pass, the following summer in 1885 — exactly 140 years ago.

It's worth noting that in his youth, Brahms burned many of his own compositions in the fireplace, deeming them unworthy. And the Symphony No. 4 — his final symphony — nearly suffered the same fate. A fire broke out in the Alpine house where the composer was staying, and the score was saved by a woman vacationing with her family next door.

At 52, Brahms was a confident, seasoned artist. Yet he was keenly aware that the Symphony in E minor was sterner in character than anything he had written before, and he feared how it would be received. He wrote to his friend, the conductor Hans von Bülow:

"I do wonder whether it will manage to win over the public. I fear it bears too much of the local air — here, cherries never turn sweet..."

Indeed, after a private presentation of the symphony on two pianos, Edward Hanslick — a critic generally favourable towards Brahms — remarked that he felt as though two burly rogues had given him a beating. Another critic, Max Kalbeck, praised the first two movements but advised discarding the third, publishing the fourth as an independent work, and composing a new scherzo and finale for the symphony.

Brahms grew increasingly uneasy but chose to trust himself and made no alterations to the score until the orchestral rehearsals. At that point, he did introduce a few adjustments — though they were minor and concerned only the opening of the first movement. Johannes's imagination and musical instinct proved sound; the symphony made a tremendous impression on the performing musicians, which calmed the composer's nerves. The premiere of the Symphony No. 4 took place on October 25th, 1885, in Meiningen. The composer of the famous *Hungarian Dances* enjoyed a resounding success, with the audience responding with a prolonged applause and demanding an encore of the very same third movement Kalbeck had dismissed.



A week later, the work was performed again in Meiningen, after which Hans von Bülow — head of the local orchestra — set out on tour with the ensemble and Brahms himself, presenting the Symphony No. 4 in Frankfurt, Dortmund, Essen, Düsseldorf, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Amsterdam, The Hague, Arnhem, Krefeld, and Bonn. In January 1886, the piece had its premiere in Vienna, followed by performances in Berlin and Leipzig in February. To put this enthusiastic reception in contemporary terms, one might compare the public's reaction to Brahms's music at the time to the modern phenomenon of pop stars.

Let us now take a look inside this monumental score. The entire symphony begins in a highly unusual way — as though we are opening a door and glimpsing music that had been playing there all along: eternal, ancient, waiting for us to arrive.

Mov. 1, bars 1–8

Brahms avoids sonic fireworks — he constructs his music from tiny building blocks, small motifs that, through continuous transformation, give rise to entirely new musical worlds. This mastery of developing earlier material through countless techniques is one of the hallmarks of Brahms's style.

The structure of the symphony is the classic four-movement form: with an introspective and at times stormily dramatic first movement, followed by a second movement in the style of a lyrical prayer. Here, Brahms, imitating the sound of an organ, doubles the same melody played by several instruments in different octaves:

Mov. 2, bars 1–4

This introduction leads us into a broad, flowing melody played by the clarinet, accompanied by pizzicato strings.

Mov. 2, bars 4 (second half) to 8

The third movement marks a moment of unbridled joy — a lively scherzo.

Mov. 3, from the opening to letter A

However, it is the final movement that stands out most in terms of form, and here we see Brahms's reverence for the music of the past. Typically, symphonic finales were written as either a sonata form (featuring two contrasting themes) or a rondo (with a recurring refrain alternating with varied episodes). In his Symphony No. 4, instead of these customary models, Brahms chose to compose a passacaglia.

What lies behind this enigmatic term? The passacaglia is a seventeenth-century street song in triple metre, whose defining feature is a continuously repeating theme in the lowest, bass voice. This form was especially favoured by composers of organ music — while the pedal line (played with the feet) sustained the constant theme, both hands were free to improvise over it.

The most famous organ passacaglia is Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passacaglia in C minor*, BWV 582. While we do not (yet!) have the king of instruments in our concert hall – as the organ is sometimes called – we will present an orchestral arrangement of a fragment of this piece. Here is how its eight-bar bass theme sounds.

Bach — *Passacaglia*, bars 1–8

After this theme, a series of additional eight-bar passages appears, each called a “variation.” I challenge you — try to count how many such variations you hear in the excerpt.

Bach — *Passacaglia*, complete excerpt

Did anyone manage to count the variations? Yes, there were nine. In fact, Bach wrote over twenty, but for the purposes of today's concert, we've trimmed the piece by more than half. Of course, nothing is stopping you from listening to the full version at home this evening — preferably a good organ recording, and loudly (since organs sound best when played loud!). I'm sure your neighbours will be amazed.

All right, let's leave Bach and return to Brahms and the finale of our symphony, where the theme is also eight bars long. Unlike Bach's simple bass line, however, Brahms's theme consists of eight full chords — beginning with E minor and ending on E major.

Mov. 4, bars 1–8

What follows is a sequence of thirty variations, through which Brahms reveals his absolute mastery as a composer. In this kaleidoscope of variations, moods, characters, orchestrations, and tempi shift constantly. Some variations feature the easily recognisable theme in the bass.

Mov. 4, eight bars before B to B

Others change character abruptly within the space of a single eight-bar variation.

Mov. 4, eight bars before D to D

There's even a variation where the theme is hidden within a delicate flute melody, making it difficult to discern. This is one of the most beautiful, intimate passages Brahms ever composed.

Mov. 4, bars 97–104

Some variations are light, airy, and dance-like.

Mov. 4, eight bars before H to H

While others are filled with high drama, performed by the full orchestra.

Mov. 4, bars 193–200 (notably the violins and oboes at the end)

After these thirty variations comes a brief coda, though it doesn't lead to a triumphant, celebratory finale. Instead, the entire symphony concludes as it began — in the nostalgic key of E minor.

Brahms developed his own orchestral style, but compared with other composers of his day, his instrumentation remained traditional. He had no desire to experiment, preferring instead to express his musical ideas through the established, conventional language that entirely suited his purposes. He often said he was born too late — but perhaps the point in life is not to find oneself in the right time, but to find the right time within oneself. This musical modesty remains utterly captivating, even today.

