Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Symphony No. 3 in F, Opus 90

The first performance of the Brahms Third Symphony, in Vienna on December 2, 1883, was successful despite the presence in the audience of a vocal Wagner-Bruckner faction which held against Brahms both his fame as a composer and his friendship with the critic Eduard Hanslick, who pronounced the F major “a feast for the music lover and musician” and, of Brahms’s symphonies to that time, “artistically the most perfect. It is more compactly made, more transparent in detail, more plastic in the main themes.” According to Hanslick, Hans Richter, the conductor of the premiere, christened this symphony “Brahms’s Eroica” shortly before the first performance. And like Beethoven in his Third Symphony, Brahms marks the first movement “Allegro con brio.”

Brahms had already secured his reputation as an orchestral composer with the premiere of his Variations on a Theme by Haydn in Vienna in November 1873. Already behind him were his First Piano Concerto, the D major Serenade, Opus 11, and the A major Serenade, Opus 16, all dating from the late 1850s. Some material for the First Symphony also dates back to that time; but that work had to wait for its completion until 1876, by which time Brahms was able finally to overcome his strong reservations about following in Beethoven’s footsteps. The Second Symphony followed without hesitation a year later, and the Violin Concerto came a year after that, both being products of Brahms’s particularly productive summer work habits. Likewise the Third Symphony in 1883: having been occupied with thoughts for the symphony for some time, he interrupted a trip to the Rhine, renting accommodations in Wiesbaden so that he could complete the work, apparently writing it out without pause.

The Brahms Third is generally considered the most difficult of the composer’s four for a conductor to bring off successfully, and not just because all four of its movements end quietly—a fact that causes some conductors to shy away from it altogether, and which also may explain why it appears with considerably less frequency than the First, Second, and Fourth. Early in the last century, Tovey described the F major as “technically by far the most difficult [of Brahms’s symphonies], the difficulties being mainly matters of rhythm, phrasing, and tone.” One can expand upon this by mentioning the swift alternation of sharply contrasted materials during the course of the first movement, and the need to make both clear and persuasive the thematic connections that bind together the first, second, and last movements, a procedure Brahms does not attempt in his other symphonies. And, as the least often performed of the four, the Third continues to remain, in a sense, almost “new” insofar as audiences are concerned, and especially since its tight thematic and architectural structure, lean orchestration, and less effusively Romantic tone stand in sharp contrast to the other three.

The symphony begins Allegro con brio, with a rising motto for winds and brass whose broad 6/4 meter seems almost to hold back forward progress; it is only with the introduction of the main theme, taking the initial motto as its bass line, that the music begins really to move. The three-note motto, F-A-flat-F, is Brahms’s shorthand for “frei aber froh,” “free but glad,” musical symbolism he had already used in the A minor string quartet, Opus 51, No. 2, as rejoinder to Joseph Joachim’s F-A-E, “frei aber einsam,” “free but lonely,” many years before. But the F-A-flat-F motto here serves still another, purely musical purpose: the A-flat suggests F minor rather than F major, an ambiguity to be exploited elsewhere in the symphony. The sweeping main theme gives way to a new idea, tentative in its progress, clinging tenuously to nearly each note before moving to the next, but soon opening out and leading to a graceful theme given first to solo clarinet, then to solo oboe and violas in combination. This theme, in darker colorations, will be prominent in the development section of the movement. Now, however, an increase in activity leads to the close of the exposition, a forceful passage built from stabbing downward thrusts in the strings and a swirling wave of energy beginning in the winds and then encompassing the entire orchestra before grinding to a sudden halt for a repeat of the exposition. This is a particularly difficult moment rhythmically since the return to the nearly static opening of the movement comes virtually without warning, but there is something about the tight, classical architecture of this shortest of Brahms’s symphonies that makes the exposition-repeat an appropriate practice here, and not just a bow to convention. Hearing the beginning twice also helps us recognize the masterstroke that starts the recapitulation, where the motto idea, introduced by a roll on the kettledrum, broadens out both rhythmically and harmonically to propel the music forward in a way the opening of the symphony did not attempt. The motto and main theme will come back in yet another forceful guise to begin the coda, the theme transforming itself there to a chain of descending thirds—Brahms’s musical signature in so many of his works—before subsiding to pianissimo for one further, quiet return in the closing measures.

The second and third movements are marked by a contained lyricism, subdued and only rarely rising above piano. Hanslick describes the opening pages of the C major Andante as “a very simple song dialogue between the winds and the deeper strings”; the entry of the violins brings emphatic embellishment and the appearance of a new idea
sweetly expressive within a narrow compass, clearly characterized by the repeated pitch at its beginning and the triplet rhythm that stirs its otherwise halting progress. Brahms will use the repeated-note motive to mysterious effect in this movement, but the entire theme will return to extraordinarily significant purpose later in the symphony. The third movement is a gentle interlude in C minor, its pregnant melody heard first in the cellos and then in a succession of other instruments, among them combined flute, oboe, and horn; solo horn, solo oboe, and, finally, violins and cellos together. Before the statement by the solo horn, an interlude plays upon a yearning three-note motive again characterized by a simple repeated-pitch idea. As in the preceding movement, trumpets and drums are silent.

The finale begins with a mysterious dark rustling of strings and bassoons that seems hardly a theme at all, and it takes a moment for us to realize that, contrary to all expectation—but obviously so right once we’re aware of it—this last movement is in the minor mode. A pianissimo statement of the second-movement theme quoted earlier steals in so quietly that we barely have time to make the connection. Then, without warning, a fortissimo explosion alerts us already to how ripe for development is Brahms’s “non-theme,” as in the space of just a few pages it is fragmented and reinterpreted both rhythmically and melodically. This leads to the finale’s second theme, a proud and heroic one proclaimed in the richly romantic combined timbres of cellos and horns; this is the music that suggested to Joachim the story of Hero and Leander.* After playing with further muted transformations of the opening idea, the development builds to a climax on overlapping statements of the second-movement theme proclaimed by the orchestra at full volume and hurtling the music into the recapitulation. Only with a quiet transformation in the violas of the opening idea does the energy level finally subside. The symphony’s final pages return to the soft serenity of F major with the reemergence in a newly restrained guise of the second-movement theme, followed by allusion to and the return of the F-A-flat-F motto, and, at the end, one last, mist-enshrouded recollection of the symphony’s beginning.

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