



# BRAHMS

## Symphony No. 2, op. 73

**Johannes Brahms**, born on May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Brahms to Johann Jakob Brahms and Johanna Henrika Christiane Nissen, was a German composer and pianist, and one of the leading musicians of the Romantic period. Brahms spent much of his professional life in Vienna, Austria, where he was a leader of the musical scene. In his lifetime, Brahms's popularity and influence were considerable; following a comment by the nineteenth-century conductor Hans von Bülow, he is sometimes grouped with Johann Sebastian Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven as one of the Three Bs. Brahms composed for piano, chamber ensembles, symphony orchestra, and for voice and chorus. His music is firmly rooted in the structures and compositional techniques of the Baroque and Classical masters. He was a master of counterpoint, the complex and highly disciplined method of composition for which Johann Sebastian Bach is famous, and also of development, a compositional ethos pioneered by Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven. Brahms aimed to honor the "purity" of these venerable "German" structures and advance them into a Romantic idiom, in the process creating bold new approaches to harmony, melody and, especially, rhythm. While many contemporaries found his music too academic, his contribution and craftsmanship have been admired by subsequent figures as diverse as the progressive Arnold Schoenberg and the conservative Edward Elgar. The diligent, highly constructed nature of Brahms's works was a starting point and an inspiration for a generation of composers. Despite his reputation as a serious composer of large, complex musical structures, some of Brahms's most widely known and most commercially successful compositions during his life were small-scale works of popular intent aimed at the thriving contemporary market for domestic music-making; indeed, during the 20th century, the influential American critic B. H. Haggin, rejecting more mainstream views, argued in his various guides to recorded music that Brahms was at his best in such works and much less successful in larger forms. Among the most cherished of these lighter works by Brahms are his sets of popular dances—the Hungarian Dances, the *Waltzes*, Op. 39, for piano duet, and the *Liebeslieder Waltzes* for vocal quartet and piano—and some of his many songs, notably the *Wiegenlied*, Op. 49, No. 4 (published in 1868). This last was written (to a folk text) to celebrate the birth of a son to Brahms's friend Bertha Faber and is universally known as *Brahms's Lullaby*.

**Symphony No. 2** was composed in the summer of 1877, less than a year after the premiere of his Symphony No. 1 (Op. 68 in C minor)—an astonishing fact given that the former had taken him fifteen years to complete. Finally confident in his abilities as a symphonist, and less troubled by the looming shadow of Beethoven, Brahms created a much more spontaneous work that was well received by both critics and audiences. When compared with the works of his contemporaries, this piece is conservative in both orchestration and formal structure. But it is by no means reactionary. Rather, Brahms revised and expanded upon the eighteenth century model, largely replacing thematic contrast with transformation and variation, and adding his distinctive richness of harmony and rhythm. The piece opens with the three-note germinating cell and a simple horn melody; we are then introduced to two subjects in turn, the first announced by the violins, and the second by the cellos and violas in a luxurious duet. After developing both themes, Brahms creates an interesting recapitulation by briefly combining the initial horn melody and the first subject, and then dwelling extensively on the second subject. A short coda is attached to the end. Two bassoons color the second movement's opening cello theme with a dark counterpoint, creating an immediate contrast to the first movement. It is here that we begin to see the more introspective side of Brahms, although this is by no means a brooding movement; there a surprising variety of expression within the slow prevailing tempo. With the third movement, Brahms for the first time departs from a string-dominated texture, and allows a solo oboe to introduce the opening theme, while pizzicato cellos and a woodwind choir provide accompaniment. Full of rhythmic interest, this movement has frequent meter changes, expectant fermatas, and Brahms' distinctive cross-rhythms. The moody and unpredictable finale oscillates between manic energy and somberness; Brahms is constantly changing direction, sometimes so abruptly as to pull the rug out from beneath your feet. The motion never stops, and when the final D major fanfare arrives, one has the sense of having been on a wild ride.