

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg; died April 3, 1897 in Vienna.

Symphony No. 3 in F major, Opus 90 (1882-1883)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, December 2, 1883

Vienna Philharmonic

Hans Richter, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 33 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings

Brahms had reached the not inconsiderable age of 43 before he unveiled his First Symphony. The Second Symphony followed within eighteen months, and the musical world was prepared for a steady stream of similar masterworks from his pen. However, it was to be another six years before he undertook his Third Symphony, though he did produce the *Academic Festival* and *Tragic Overtures*, the Violin Concerto and the Second Piano Concerto during that time. When he got around to the new symphony, he was nearly fifty, and had just recovered from a spell of feeling that he was “too old” for creative work, even informing his publisher, Simrock, that he would be sending him nothing more. It seems likely — though such matters always remained in the shadows where Brahms was concerned — that his creative juices were stirred anew by a sudden infatuation with “a pretty Rhineland girl.” This was Hermine Spiess, a talented contralto who was 26 when Brahms first met her in January 1883 at the home of friends. (Brahms was fifty.) A cordial, admiring friendship sprang up between the two, but this affair, like every other one in Brahms’ life in which a respectable woman was involved, never grew any deeper. He used to declare, perhaps only half in jest, that he lived his life by two principles, “and one of them is never to attempt either an opera or a marriage.” Perhaps what he really needed was a muse rather than a wife. At any rate, Brahms spent the summer of 1883 not at his usual haunts in the Austrian hills and lakes, but at the German spa of Wiesbaden, which just happened to be the home of Hermine. Work went well on the new symphony, and it was completed before he returned to Vienna in October.

Brahms’ Third Symphony, the shortest of his four works in the form, is the most clear in formal outline, the most subtle in harmonic content and the most assured in contrapuntal invention. No time is wasted in establishing the conflict that charges the first movement with dynamic energy. The two bold opening chords juxtapose bright F major and a somber chromatic harmony in the opposing moods of light and shadow that course throughout the work. The main theme comes from the strings “like a bolt from Jove,” according to Olin Downes, with the opening chords repeated by the woodwinds as its accompaniment. Beautifully directed chromatic harmonies — note the bass line, which always carries the motion to its close- and long-range goals — lead to the pastoral second theme, sung softly by the clarinet. The development section is brief, but includes elaborations of most of the motives from the exposition. The tonic key of F is re-established, not harmonically but melodically (note how the bass leads the way), and the golden chords of the opening proclaim the recapitulation. A long coda based on the main theme reinforces the tonality and discharges much of the music’s energy, allowing the movement to close quietly, as do, most unusually, all the movements of this Symphony.

The second and third are the most intimate and personal movements in Brahms’ orchestral music. A folk-like theme appears in the rich colors of the low woodwinds and low strings to open the second movement. The central section is a Slavic-sounding plaint intoned by clarinet and bassoon that eventually gives way to the flowing rhythms of the opening and the return of the folk theme supported by a new, rippling string accompaniment. The romantic third movement replaces the usual scherzo. It is ternary in form, like the preceding movement, and utilizes the warmest tone colors of the orchestra.

The finale begins with a sinuous theme of brooding character. A brief, chant-like processional derived from the Slavic theme of the second movement provides contrast. Further thematic material is introduced (one theme is arch-shaped; the other, more rhythmically vigorous) and well examined. Brahms dispensed here with a true development section, but combined its function with that of the recapitulation as a way of tightening the structure. As the end of the movement nears, the tonality returns to F major, and there is a strong sense of struggle passed. The tension subsides, and the work ends with the ghost of the opening movement’s main theme infused with a sunset glow.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda