

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

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

### *Tragic Overture*, Opus 81 (1880)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, December 20, 1880

Vienna Philharmonic

Hans Richter, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 13 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings

Many of Brahms' works were produced in pairs: Piano Sonatas, Opus 1 and Opus 2; Piano Quartets, Opus 25 and Opus 26; String Quartets, Opus 51; Clarinet Sonatas, Opus 120; even the first two Symphonies, the sets of *Liebeslieder Waltzes* and the Serenades. These twin pieces seem to have been the result of a surfeit of material — as Brahms was working out his ideas for a composition in a particular genre, he produced enough material to spin off a second work of similar type. Though the two orchestral overtures of 1880, *Academic Festival* and *Tragic*, were also written in tandem, they have about them more the quality of complementary balance than of continuity. *Academic Festival* is bright in mood and lighthearted in its musical treatment of some favorite German student drinking songs. The *Tragic Overture*, on the other hand, is somber and darkly heroic. Of them, Brahms wrote to his biographer Max Kalbeck, "One overture laughs, the other weeps." And further, to his friend and publisher, Fritz Simrock, "Having composed this jolly *Academic Festival Overture*, I could not refuse my melancholy nature the satisfaction of composing an overture for a tragedy." Brahms never gave any additional clues to the nature of the *Tragic Overture*.

The *Tragic Overture* is comparable in form and expression to the first movement of a symphony. Its sonata structure commences with a stern summons of two chords immediately preceding the austere arching main theme in D minor. Brahms' characteristically dark orchestral sonority, emphasizing low strings and low woodwinds, does much to supply the solemn mood of the work. The first theme gives way to a hushed transitional section employing the sepulchral sounds of trombones and tuba over a quivering string accompaniment. A contrasting theme is presented in the relatively tranquil tonality of F major by violins, but the stormy disposition of the opening is not kept long at bay. The compact development restores the tempestuous mood. The recapitulation is a considerably altered version of the exposition's musical events, which here receive further exploration of their expressive potentials. The sense of heroic struggle which forms the dominant emotional world of the *Tragic Overture* remains undiminished to the end.