

Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Written: 1855–1876

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 46 minutes

Johannes Brahms began writing his first symphony in 1855, but by 1862 he had only finished the first movement. He was unusually critical of the effort, due at least in part to his veneration of Beethoven. “I shall never write a symphony,” he said to a friend. “You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us.” For whatever reason, he set the work aside for another twelve years. He finally completed the score in 1876.

Brahms composed his symphonies at a time when the prevailing musical direction was heading away from symphonies and toward compositions like tone poems that told musical stories. Many Romantics, including Wagner and his disciples, viewed Brahms’ adherence to classical forms as reactionary.

Like the music of Beethoven, Brahms’s *Symphony No. 1* unfolds organically, depending on dramatic contrasts to propel the music forward. The first movement opens with a tremendous, persistent pounding of timpani over which bits and pieces of an indiscernible melody gradually evolves into the main themes of the exposition. Apparently, the young Brahms had taken the advice of Robert Schumann: “The beginning is the main thing; if only one makes the beginning, then the end comes of itself.” Brahms follows the classical tradition of placing the slow movement second. This movement is in a three-part form. It begins with a long, melancholy violin melody. A brief middle section that features solo woodwinds follows.

The plaintive opening tune returns in a lovely duet between solo violin and French horn, ending as peacefully as it had begun. Instead of the usual scherzo, the third movement is also songlike, prominently featuring the clarinet and flute.

The magnificent finale begins with another long introduction but becomes gradually more agitated until the mournful call of the solo French horn interrupts it. Brahms begins the body of the movement with a lovely, broad melody in the darkest register of the strings. He then transforms, diverts and embellishes this theme. The symphony concludes with a final, very loud, brass utterance of the chorale first heard in the introduction.

Jan Swafford, in his biography of Brahms, claims that Brahms *First Symphony* “in one blow . . . resurrected the genre of the symphony from years of failure, [and] made it once again the king of musical forms.”

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