

***Prelude to Oedipus Tyrannus***

**John Knowles Paine (1839–1906)**

Written: 1880–81

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Eight minutes

Seasoned American symphony-goers would probably find it easy to rattle off the names of a good many nineteenth-century composers. It's a good bet, however, that no Americans would be on that list. There just aren't that many romantic-era American composers. But there are a few!

John Knowles Paine was the oldest of the lot. He grew up in Portland, Maine. His grandfather built one of the first pipe organs in New England, and his father started and conducted the town band and ran the local music store. Young John first started studying music from a German immigrant who had settled in Portland. Then, like virtually all serious American musicians, he travelled to Europe. Paine went to Berlin to study organ and composition. Back home in the states by 1861, he settled in Boston where he was a church organist. A series of free public music lectures led to his appointment as a music instructor at Harvard, and in 1875 the college appointed him as America's first professor of music.

Paine was conservative in his musical tastes, adhering "to the historical forms, as developed by Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven" as opposed to the "extremely involved and complicated technics of music, like Wagner, Liszt, and their adherents." The historian Wiley Hitchcock presents a fair description of his music:

Most of it cannot be faulted in workmanship, none of it in seriousness of purpose: Paine took very seriously music's mission to "hallow pleasure," and if his music seems somewhat over-aspiring to profundity, hardly daring to relax or smile, this should be

ascribed not to incompetence but to his aesthetic attitude. . .

In 1880, the students at Harvard endeavored to present Sophocles's tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. Paine provided the incidental music for the play. The three-hour drama—all in Greek!—was a hit. A review by John Sullivan Dwight stated, “Adding lift and inspiration to the whole, making the three hours seem short, [was] the beautiful, strong, fitting, manly music composed by Professor Paine.” Paine's music became so popular that a Boston Symphony patron could plead with the conductor George Henschel:

Oh, Henschel, cease thy higher flight!  
And give the public something light;  
Let no more Wagner themes thy bill enhance  
And give the native workers just one chance.  
Don't give the Dvorák symphony again;  
If you would give us joy, oh give us Paine!

©2016 John P. Varineau

***Concerto in E minor for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 85***

**Edward Elgar (1857–1934)**

Written: 1919

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 30 minutes

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Elgar was clearly the leading English composer and the first to gain international prominence after Henry Purcell (1659–1695). But then the devastation of World War I began and, like many other artists, Elgar lost his creative drive. “I cannot do any real work with the awful shadow over us,” he wrote. Shortly after the war ended, he started composing again and wrote three significant chamber works. While still in hospital recovering from a tonsillectomy, Elgar woke up and asked for a pencil and paper. He sketched out a melody that would become the opening theme of his *Cello Concerto*. Work progressed quickly from then on, and the concerto was ready for its premiere in October of 1919.

However, the orchestra wasn’t quite ready. Naturally, the lack of rehearsal affected the performance. “The orchestra made a public exhibition of its miserable self,” the critic Ernest Newman wrote. He did, however, go on to compliment the concerto:

The work itself is lovely stuff, very simple – that pregnant simplicity that has come upon Elgar’s music in the last couple of years, but with a profound wisdom and beauty underlying its simplicity. . . . A fine spirit’s lifelong wistful brooding upon the loveliness of earth.

Another critic said the concerto “represented, for Elgar, the angst, despair, and disillusionment he felt after the end of the War, and an introspective look at death and mortality.”

You can certainly hear that sentiment in the opening statement by cello and throughout the elegiac first movement, but you won't find it at all in the light-hearted scherzo of the second movement. There is a yearning quality to the lyrical third movement, one that the cello leads throughout. The fourth movement begins with a dramatic recitative played by the cello, that leads into a more robust, almost cheery, march. Suddenly the tempo slows down, the musical clouds darken and the movement progresses to a final climax. There are two brief references to what has come before: one from the third movement and the other from the opening of the concerto itself. A final orchestral outburst finishes the concerto.

*©2016 John P. Varineau*

## ***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.”

©2016 John P. Varineau