

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90

*Allegro con brio*

*Andante*

*Poco allegretto*

*Allegro*

**Born:** May 7, 1833, in Hamburg

**Died:** April 3, 1897, in Vienna

**Work composed:** 1882–83

**World premiere:** December 2, 1883, in Vienna. The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra played under the direction of Hans Richter.

Brahms composed his Third Symphony in 1883, completing the score during a summer sojourn in the Rhineland spa town of Wiesbaden. These few details, virtually all that are known concerning the genesis of this composition, obviously shed no light on any larger meaning its music may embody. In this we must rest content. Brahms led an outwardly uneventful existence following his move to Vienna, in 1862, living alone and filling his days with study and composing. His inner life remained a secret even to his close friends, and it seems not to have intruded into his music. Brahms was not an autobiographical composer in the way that Tchaikovsky or Mahler were, and no correlations stand out between his mature works and the details of his life. The subjects, such as they are, of his great instrumental compositions are purely musical — they have to do with the transformation of melodic figures, and with the building up and resolution of great harmonic tensions — and it is for purely musical reasons that the Third Symphony is enthralling.

Along with the Second Piano Concerto, composed in 1882, and the Fourth Symphony, which followed in 1884, the present work represents the summit of Brahms' orchestral output. The majestic scope and depth of musical thought entailed in these compositions often inspires the adjective "Olympian," and in a general sense that sobriquet is apt. But though written on broad lines and encompassing great emotional range, the Third Symphony is not an especially large work by the standards of late 19th-century symphonic composition, and it seems anything but sprawling. On the contrary, Brahms achieves here a sense of classical equilibrium through his careful attention to formal proportions within and between the symphony's four movements. Moreover, he unifies his varied melodic ideas with ingenious cross-references and thematic threads that run throughout the work, and this adds to the impression of cohesion and integrity we sense when hearing the piece.

The most notable of those thematic threads is the ascending three-note motif that opens the symphony. The strong sweep of this figure sets the mood for the entire work, but its structural role is no less significant than the character it imparts. Recurring at once in a lower register of the orchestra, it serves as a bass line for the

cascading melody played by the violins. Thereafter it reappears at crucial junctures throughout the composition, its final appearance marking the conclusion of the entire piece.

In this symphony, as in others of his works, Brahms' themes prove rich in possibilities. Most of them contain not one but two or more melodic ideas suitable for variation and development. The second subject of the opening movement, for example, begins as a quiet, lilting melody with a rising contour, heard first in the clarinets and bassoon. Many composers would have been quite satisfied with such a tune, but Brahms appends a complementary phrase: three sharp notes followed by a descending line in the oboe. Both parts of the theme play important roles as the movement unfolds.

The ensuing *Andante* begins with a tranquil melody whose dotted (uneven) rhythms in the third measure outline a variation of the opening three-note motif. This is no mere coincidence, of course, and the immediate echo of this figure in the strings serves to make sure that we do not miss the association. The initial melody dominates the movement. A second theme, hushed and mysterious, is introduced by the low woodwinds, but its full significance will be realized only in the finale.

It has often been observed that Brahms abandoned the traditional scherzo as the third movement of his symphonies. Instead, he substituted an intermezzo form of his own invention. That of the Third Symphony, tinged as it is with a bittersweet autumnal quality, is perhaps the most beautiful such piece in all of the composer's output.

The finale provides both climax and summation. It begins with a running melody that gives way to a chorale-like theme based on the mysterious subject of the second movement. The music builds through a series of energetic climaxes to a broad coda, ending with an echo of the symphony's opening bars. Brahms thus brings the music, in supremely satisfying fashion, full circle to its point of origin.

### **What to Listen For**

The symphony's first moments bring three broad chords, the last coinciding with the start of a heroic theme. That three-chord motif recurs at important junctures in this movement and in the finale, notably at the very end of that movement. Brahms also weaves this figure into the second movement. There the first theme begins with an anthem-like melody whose every phrase ends with the upward-arching three-note motif that began the symphony. The third movement strikes a poignant note. After establishing the opening theme, Brahms reduces it first to three-note, then to two-note phrases, all the while maintaining its identity and character.