
TELARC
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Brahms
serenades NO. 1 & NO. 2
sir charles mackerras
scottish chamber orchestra

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)
Serenades No. 1 and No. 2
Sir Charles Mackerras
Scottish Chamber Orchestra

Composer of symphonies, concertos, chamber music, piano works, choral works, and more than two hundred songs, Johannes Brahms is generally regarded as the preeminent master of symphonic style in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Brahms was born in Hamburg on May 7, 1833. His first teacher was his father, a horn and double-bass player. At age seven, Brahms began studying the piano with F. W. Cossel. Three years later, he was sent to Cossel's own master, Eduard Marxsen, with whom he also studied theory and composition. Between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, Brahms earned money to help support his family by playing the piano in restaurants and taverns, meanwhile giving recitals and making his first attempts at composition.

Brahms was about twenty when he met both Joseph Joachim, the eminent violinist, and Robert Schumann. Thanks to Schumann's enthusiastic endorsement, in the periodical *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik,* Brahms came swiftly to public notice. Indeed, when Schumann described him as a young genius "called forth to give us the highest expression of ideals in our time," the praise thrust Brahms into controversy—controversy that grew volcanic.

On the one side stood a modernist school represented by Liszt and Wagner, and on the other side stood conservatives eloquently represented by Schumann. The latter saw Brahms as heir to the sublime Classicism of Mozart and Beethoven, a Classicism under attack; the modernists thought Brahms hopelessly old-fashioned, his music dry as dust. We now see that Brahms, though revering the past, wrote music that is incomparably expressive; that Classicism and Romanticism are but two sides of the same coin, since action-reaction in the arts grows from the systole-diastole inherent in human nature; and that "romanticism" describes musics of many styles. The listener's difficulty with Brahms, then as now, comes from the complexity and subtlety of his ideas rather than from the characteristics of his technique. But the contemporary polemics were fierce and Brahms stood at the center of the fire storm. Not till much later did Hans von Bülow, one of Wagner's most earnest supporters, acknowledge Brahms's esthetic acceptability by changing the slogan "Bach-Beethoven-Berlioz," which Peter Cornelius had coined in 1854, to "Bach-Beethoven-Brahms," the form it maintains to this day.

Schumann, in addition to his public endorsement, asked his publishers to issue Brahms's music. To this friendly confidence Brahms responded characteristically, by applying to his scores relentless self-criticism, only at length allowing them to be printed.

He was as independent as he was self-critical. Though the circumstances surrounding Schumann's premature death gained Brahms an intimacy with Clara Schumann which was by turns intellectual and romantic—which was in fact, as he would later say, "the most beautiful experience of his life, its greatest wealth, its noblest content"—Brahms never brought himself to marry.

In his early thirties, Brahms was named conductor of a choral society in the little town of Detmold, pianist-in-residence to the local prince, and piano teacher to the music-loving princess. The three years of his tenure saw him complete a string sextet, the first version of his first piano concerto, and both of his serenades. By 1861, he was back in

Hamburg. Two years later, having failed to win the post of conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic, he settled in Vienna as director of the *Singakademie.* The decade also witnessed the completion of his *German Requiem,* a work that had occupied him since Schumann's death. With this monument of choral music Brahms moved into the front rank of composers. In addition, he was by 1872 principal conductor of the Society of the Friends of Music, and for three seasons he would direct the Vienna Philharmonic.

He remained ever afterward in Vienna. There the tranquility of his life was disturbed only by altercations resulting from his quick temper, by the rivalry between his supporters and Wagner's, and by the occasional love affair. At intervals he gave concert tours during which he conducted or performed as pianist. He spent his summers traveling in Italy, Switzerland, and Austria.

It was thus in Vienna in the last decades of his life that Brahms composed such deeply-felt masterworks as his four symphonies, his violin concerto, and his second piano concerto—not to mention his *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* and his superlative chamber music and songs. But the serious side of his nature was balanced by good humor that was robust. When the University of Breslau gave him an honorary degree, for example, Brahms expressed his thanks by writing the *Academic Festival Overture*—whose energetic use of student songs shocked academic purists. In the same year he composed his *Tragic Overture,* and of the two works he observed: "One laughs, the other weeps."

In the mid 1890s, thoughts of Clara's failing health heightened his own sense of weariness—and perhaps added to the somber quality of his *Four Serious Songs,* a work based on Biblical texts that deal with the vanity of earthly things and with death as a release from pain. Not long after Clara died, Brahms himself fell ill and was diagnosed with cancer. The last of his works, a set of chorale-preludes for organ, ends with a meditation on the old Lutheran hymn "O World, I Now Must Leave Thee." Death came, in Vienna, on April 3, 1897.

It was a youthful and forward-looking Brahms, however, who wrote the two Serenades, which were his first purely orchestral works to be published. He began the First Serenade in 1857, conceiving it as an octet and only later adapting it for chamber ensemble and, later still, for large orchestra. In it is manifest, as has often been remarked, his affection for Haydn and Mozart. In 1858, before the First Serenade was finished, he began the Second Serenade, which he completed in 1859 and would revise in 1875.

Over the centuries, the serenade form, which had begun as a nocturnal song of courtship, evolved into a suite of dances and marches. Very often at princely courts or in well-to-do bourgeois homes, such divertimenti served as background music for weddings and other festivals. That these might be held outdoors accounts for the preponderance of woodwinds and horns. Long before Brahms took an interest in the form, Mozart, Schubert, and Beethoven had written serenades for various instruments, as Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, Stravinsky, and the young Richard Strauss were to do afterwards. But by Beethoven's and Schubert's day, given the revolutionary changes in society, such music had come to be designed for serious, attentive listening. Hence Brahms could freely compose Serenades that are notably gentle in manner, soft-spoken in quantity of sound, in mood idyllic and tender.

— Michael Murray

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Mackerras / Scottish Chamber Orchestra

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Technical Information

Recorded at Glasgow City Hall, November 10–13, 1998.
Microphones: Neumann M49c tube
On-Stage Microphone Preamplifiers: E.A.R. tube
Console: DDA Interface
Interconnecting Cables: van den Hul Carbon Fiber
Digital Recording Processors: dCS 904 & 954 running at 176.4kHz PCM
PCM downsampling via dCS 974 Sample Rate Converter
Monitored Through: E.A.R. tube power amplifiers; Bowers & Wilkins 801 Matrix loudspeakers
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24- to 16-bit Encoding: Apogee UV-1000 Super CD Encoder

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Recording Producer: James Mallinson
Recording Engineer: Tony Faulkner

Executive Producer: Robert Woods
Editor: Rosalind Ilett

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Serenades No. 1 and No. 2

Sir Charles Mackerras
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Serenade No. 1 in D Major, Op. 11

1. I. Allegro molto [12:52]
2. II. Scherzo: Allegro non troppo [7:56]
3. III. Adagio non troppo [14:24]
4. IV. Menuetto 1; Menuetto 2 [4:08]
5. V. Scherzo: Allegro [2:44]
6. VI. Rondo: Allegro [6:04]

Serenade No. 2 in A Major, Op. 16

7. I. Allegro moderato [8:47]
8. II. Scherzo: Vivace [2:35]
9. III. Adagio non troppo [8:27]
10. IV. Quasi Menuetto [4:57]
11. V. Rondo: Allegro [6:25]

Total Playing Time [79:56]