

## Program 9

### **Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104** **Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)**

*Composed in 1894-1895.*  
*Premiered March 19, 1896 in London, conducted by the composer with Leo Stern as soloist.*

During the three years that Dvořák was teaching and composing in New York City, he was subject to the same emotions as most other travelers away from home for a long time: invigoration and homesickness. America served to stir his creative energies, and during his stay from 1892 to 1895 he composed some of his greatest scores: the “New World” Symphony, the Op. 96 Quartet (“American”) and the Cello Concerto. He was keenly aware of the new musical experiences to be discovered in the land far from his beloved Bohemia when he wrote, “The musician must prick up his ears for music. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or organ grinder. I myself am often so fascinated by these people that I can scarcely tear myself away.” But he missed his home and, while he was composing the Cello Concerto, looked eagerly forward to returning. He opened his heart in a letter to a friend in Prague: “Now I am finishing the finale of the Violoncello Concerto. If I could work as free from cares as at Vysoká [site of his country home], it would have been finished long ago. Oh, if only I were in Vysoká again!”

Elements of both Dvořák’s American experiences and his longing for home found their way into the Cello Concerto, the last of his works composed in this country. The inspiration to begin what became one of the greatest concertos in the literature was a concert by the New York Philharmonic in March 1894 at which Victor Herbert (*the* Victor Herbert of operetta fame) played his own Second Cello Concerto. This work convinced Dvořák that the cello was a viable solo instrument, something about which he had been unsure despite the assurances of Hanus Wihan, cello professor at the Prague Conservatory, who had been urging his fellow faculty member to write a piece for the instrument. (Apparently Brahms, Dvořák’s friend and mentor, also had a similar mistrust of the cello as a solo instrument. When he first saw Dvořák’s score he wondered, “Why on earth didn’t I know that one can write a violoncello concerto like this? If I had only known, I would have written one long ago!”) The thoroughly middle European character of the music, however, belies its American catalyst. It might just as well have been written in a Czech café as in an East 17th Street apartment.

Dvořák’s Cello Concerto occupies the pinnacle in the solo literature for the instrument because of its wealth of melodic ideas, its solid construction and its glowing orchestration. The opening movement is in sonata form, with both themes presented by the orchestra before the entry of the soloist. The first theme, heard immediately in the clarinets, not only contains the principal melody, but also serves to establish the importance given to the

wind instruments throughout the work, their tone colors serving as an excellent foil to the richness of the cello. “One of the most beautiful melodies ever composed for the horn” is how Sir Donald Tovey described the second theme. The cello’s entrance points up the virtuosic yet songful character of the solo part. The effect of the music for the soloist is enhanced by the use of the instrument’s burnished upper register, a technique Dvořák learned from Victor Herbert’s Concerto.

Otakar Sourek, the composer’s biographer, described the second movement as a “hymn of deepest spirituality and amazing beauty.” It is in three-part (A–B–A) form. A touching bit of autobiography is attached to the composition of this movement. While working on its middle section, Dvořák received the news that his beloved sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová, who had aroused in him a secret passion early in his life, was seriously ill. He showed his concern by using one of Josefina’s favorite pieces as the theme for the central portion of this *Adagio* — his own song, *Let me wander alone with my dreams*, Op. 82, No. 1. When he returned to Prague in April 1895, he learned of her death, and revised the finale to include another reference to the same song, thus producing the autumnal slow section just before the end of the work.

The finale is a rondo of dance-like nature. Following the second reprise of the theme, in B major, the *Andante* section recalls both the first theme of the opening movement and Josefina’s melody from the second. A brief and rousing restatement of the rondo theme led by the brass closes this majestic Concerto.

### **Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98** **Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)**

*Composed in 1884-1885.*  
*Premiered on October 25, 1885 in Meiningen, conducted by the composer.*

In the popular image of Brahms, he appears as a patriarch: full grey beard, rosy cheeks, sparkling eyes. He grew the beard in his late forties as, some say, a compensation for his late physical maturity — he was in his twenties before his voice changed and he needed to shave — and it seemed to be an external admission that Brahms had allowed himself to become an old man. The ideas did not seem to flow so freely as he approached the age of fifty, and he even put his publisher on notice to expect nothing more. Thankfully, the ideas did come, as they would for more than another decade, and he soon completed the superb Third Symphony. The philosophical introspection continued, however, and was reflected in many of his works. The Second Piano Concerto of 1881 is almost autumnal in its mellow ripeness; this Fourth Symphony is music of deep thoughtfulness that leads “into realms where joy and sorrow are hushed, and humanity bows before that which is eternal,” wrote the eminent German musical scholar August Kretzschmar.

One of Brahms’ immediate interests during the composition of the Fourth Symphony was Greek drama. He was greatly moved by the tragedies of Sophocles in

the German translations of Professor Wendt, and many commentators have seen the combination of the epic and the melancholy in this Symphony as a reflection of the works of that ancient playwright. Certainly the choice of E minor as the key of the work is an indication of its tragic nature. This is a rare tonality in the symphonic world, and with so few precedents such a work as Haydn's in that key (No. 44), a doleful piece subtitled "Mourning Symphony," was an important influence. That great melancholic among the famous composers, Tchaikovsky, chose E minor as the key for his Fifth Symphony.

Repeatedly accused of being forbiddingly metaphysical or overly serious, the Fourth Symphony was not easily accepted by audiences. The crux of the problem was the stony grandeur of the finale, which undeniably confirms the tragedy of the work. The normal expressive function for a symphonic finale is to be an uplifting affirmation of the continuity of human experience. The classic models are Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, and Sir Donald Tovey pointed out that in all that master's works, only three have minor tonality endings. Even that great prophet of *Weltschmerz*, Gustav Mahler, ended only his Sixth Symphony on a pessimistic note. So, in this last of his symphonies, it would seem that Brahms grappled with innermost feelings and found a hard-fought acceptance of his own mortality. The outward sign of his perceived great age, his magnificent beard, found its counterpart in tone in this grand Symphony, perhaps the greatest work in the form since those of Schubert and even Beethoven.

It is fitting that the Fourth Symphony was on the program for the final appearance Brahms made before his beloved Vienna. Hans Richter scheduled the piece for the Vienna Philharmonic's concert of March 7, 1897, and invited Brahms to attend. Brahms was already mortally ill with the liver cancer that would end his life in less than a month, but he struggled from his bed to a box in the *Musikvereinsaal* for the concert. Each movement of his Symphony brought a shattering response from the audience. Florence May, Brahms' loving biographer, described the touching scene: "Tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there, shrunken in form, with lined countenance, strained expression, white hair hanging lank, and through the audience there was a feeling as of a stifled sob, for each knew that he was saying farewell. Another outburst of applause and yet another; one more acknowledgment from the master; and Brahms and his Vienna had parted forever."

Brahms' Fourth Symphony is large in size and emotional impact while enormously subtle in detail. The first movement begins almost in mid-thought, as though the mood of sad melancholy pervading this opening theme had existed forever and Brahms had simply borrowed a portion of it to present musically. The movement is founded upon the tiny two-note motive (short-long) heard immediately at the beginning. Tracing this little germ cell demonstrates not only Brahms' enormous compositional skills but also the broad emotional range that he could draw from pure musical expression. To introduce the necessary contrasts into this sonata form,

other themes are presented, including a broadly lyrical one for horns and cellos and a fragmented fanfare. The movement grows with a wondrous, dark majesty to its closing pages which, to Tovey, "bear comparison with the greatest climaxes in classical music, not excluding Beethoven."

"A funeral procession moving across moonlit heights" is how the young Richard Strauss described the second movement. Though the tonality is nominally E major, the movement opens with a stark melody, pregnant with grief, in the ancient Phrygian mode. The mood brightens, but the introspective sorrow of the beginning is never far away. Though in sonatina form (sonata without development section), the movement has none of the airy sweetness of so many of Mozart's *andantes* cast in that form, but possesses rather an overriding sense of comforting tears washing away great loss. To the noted German musicologist Phillip Spitta, this was the greatest slow movement in all of the symphonic literature.

The third movement is the closest Brahms came to a true scherzo in any of his symphonies. Though such a dance-like movement may appear antithetical to the tragic nature of the Symphony, this scherzo is actually a necessary contrast within the work's total structure since it serves to heighten the pathos of the surrounding movements, especially the granitic splendor of the finale. Brahms, as always, took great care with the deployment of his orchestral resources, and he emphasized the singular brightness of this movement by calling for the silvery tingle of the triangle — its only appearance anywhere in his symphonies.

The finale is a *passacaglia* — a series of variations on a short, recurring melody. The *passacaglia* was a compositional technique highly favored by Baroque composers that fell into disuse with the changed requirements of the music of the Classical era. It had never been used in a symphony before this one, and it reflects both Brahms' interest in the music of earlier eras and his faith in the inexorable expressive powers of the old formal types. The theme, to which Brahms added a single chromatic note, was taken from Bach's Cantata No. 150, *Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich*, though John Horton has made a convincing argument that the form was influenced by François Couperin and Georg Muffat. Pedantry was not Brahms' point here, but it is essential to understanding his style to realize that he was familiar with this old music (from his own study and as an editor for several fledgling musicological series) and could draw whatever resources from it he needed to vivify his works. There are some thirty continuous variations in the finale, though it is less important to follow them individually than to feel the massive strength given to the movement by this technique. The opening chorale-like statement, in which trombones are heard for the first time in the Symphony, recurs twice as a further supporting pillar in the unification of the movement. Yet Brahms never lost sight of the central aesthetic of the Symphony, and his friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg wrote to him, with no little wonder, "Who can resist an emotion strong enough to penetrate all that skillful elaboration?"

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