

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68 (1876)

It's a common thing to emulate one's heroes. For Johannes Brahms, one of these heroes was Ludwig van Beethoven, who had raised the bar considerably for the kind of emotional, symbolic, and architectural complexity that music could represent, especially in a symphony. Prior to Beethoven, composers turned out symphonies like pop songs. Joseph Haydn, for instance, wrote over one hundred, and Mozart managed 41, even though he died quite young. In part, composers could be so prodigious in the genre because symphonies were meant simply to delight and entertain. Consequently, many were predictable and formulaic. Beethoven, however, transformed this attitude. He only wrote nine symphonies, yet each stretched the genre in a new direction, accomplishing something original and innovative. Among music lovers, Beethoven raised the symphony to the stature of a novel, with a similar capacity for emotional depth and psychological complexity. This upped the ante for all composers who followed Beethoven. In fact, it terrified Brahms. He suffered from what we might describe today as imposter syndrome, which was only compounded by his early successes and recognition by the composer Robert Schumann. In an article entitled "New Paths," Schumann, also an influential music critic, introduced the young composer to his readership in the most over-the-top fashion:

I thought, that it would and that it must be, that someone would suddenly come along whose very calling would be that which needed to be expressed according to the spirit of the times and in the most suitable manner possible, one whose mastery would not gradually unfold but, like Minerva, would spring fully armed from the head of Jupiter. And now he has arrived, a young blood, at whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch. His name is Johannes Brahms...

And, honestly, how could anyone live up to that kind of hype? Brahms was just 20 years old, and yet he was already being crowned heir to Beethoven. So, Brahms took his time, carefully considering ideas for a first symphony. Some of these musical sketches ended up surfacing in other works, including portions of his *German Requiem* and his first piano concerto. But more than 20 years passed, and he was still without a finished symphony. At age 40, his frustrations poured out in letter to a friend: "I shall never write a symphony! You can't have any idea what it's like always to hear a giant marching behind you." The giant, of course, was Beethoven (it probably did Brahms no favors that he kept a marble bust of Beethoven on his piano where he composed).

Eventually, Brahms' creative energies came into focus. In September of 1868, Clara Schumann, a close friend, received a postcard from Brahms, who was vacationing in the mountains: "High on the mountain, deep in the valley, I greet you a thousand times." On the card, he had also doodled the "alphorn" melody that figures so importantly in the final movement of his First Symphony. It was still another eight years before Brahms completed his work, but what finally emerged was a truly extraordinary composition, one that thoroughly honored his mentor but also established Brahms' own distinctive and original voice. Knowing that his work would be compared to Beethoven's, Brahms included

allusions to his hero's work throughout, particularly his 5th and 9th symphonies. In fact, a famous conductor, Hans von Bülow, once described it as "Beethoven's Tenth." Perhaps by facing Beethoven's legacy and influence so squarely, Brahms could finally move forward.

I. Un poco sostenuto — Allegro

While Brahms wasn't a fan of attaching programmatic descriptions of his music, it's perhaps not a stretch to hear the first bars of his symphony as the musical embodiment of the angst and emotional struggle he felt in producing the work. The opening theme in the strings sounds as if it's being wrenched upward against the weight of descending horns as the timpani hammers out a single, incessant tone. The movement is in sonata form, and in the exposition fans of Beethoven may notice Brahms' conspicuous reference to Beethoven's rhythmic "fate" motive (short-short-short-LONG) from the Fifth Symphony. Brahms also juxtaposes a motive from Beethoven's Third Symphony, the *Eroica* (Heroic) *Symphony*, against his own themes.

II. Andante sostenuto

A hymn-like, lyrical theme begins the movement. If you listen carefully, you might hear a subtle allusion once again to Beethoven's "fate" motive. The form of the movement is ABA, the beginning of the middle section marked by a contrasting skipping, lilting rhythm played by the strings. Brahms ends the movement with a coda featuring a lovely dialogue between solo horn and violin.

III. Un poco allegretto e grazioso

While our expectations for the third movement of a symphony might include a punchy scherzo, Brahms instead surprises us with yet another lyrical movement, this one a bit quicker and more pastoral in sound. It begins with beautiful melody played by the clarinet. Like the second movement, this one is also in ABA form. One can hear the arrival of the "B" section in its shift in time signature, from 2/4 (duple subdivision) to 6/8 (triple subdivision).

IV. Adagio — Più andante — Allegro non troppo, ma con brio — Più allegro

After a rather moody introduction, a solo horn begins to dissipate the gloom with a noble call evoking mountain alphorns. Throughout the movement Brahms reintroduces and reimagines material heard previously, juxtaposing elements of light and dark against one another. Ultimately, the light wins out in the emergence of a heroic, hymn-like chorus that serves as one final musical allusion to Beethoven. This is Brahms' take on Beethoven's famous "Ode to Joy" melody from the 4th movement of his ninth and final symphony. Musically and symbolically, Brahms seems finally ready to take on the legacy that had haunted him for so long.