

*Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80*  
by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

*Duration: Approximately 10 minutes*

*First Performance: January 4, 1881 in Wroclaw, Poland*

*Last ESO Performance: October, 1998; Robert Hanson, conductor*

Although Brahms was not a college man, he did have the occasion as a twenty-year old to taste college life on an extended visit to Göttingen with his friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim. Years later, the experience served him in good stead when, in 1879, the University of Breslau granted him an honorary doctorate. After acknowledging the offer with a simple postcard (!), he began work on the obligatory composition in honor of the occasion.

In place of the expected solemn work, he produced what he called “a cheerful potpourri of student songs *a lá Suppé*.” (Franz von Suppé was one of the best known writers of light music of the period, being particularly known for his operettas and comic operas.) The result was a delightful spoof of the solemnities of academia, and despite Brahms’ usually well deserved reputation for gravity, a masterpiece of subtle humor.

Much of the humor of the work depends on the contrast between the imposing Brahmsian style and that of the four college songs which Brahms had no doubt heard sung over innumerable steins of beer at Göttingen, and were very much part of German popular culture of the time. Although some of the effect is inevitably lost today because the songs are not as well known, the listener can roughly recreate the impression by imagining a full, noble, Brahms orchestra (the largest that he ever used, by the way) solemnly intoning “99 bottles of beer” or some other such piece of ribald undergraduate nonsense.

The mock serious introduction begins in the weighty key of C minor but concludes as the brass proudly proclaim in C major the first of the college songs, *Wir hatten gebauet ein stattliches Haus* (“We had Built a Stately House”), itself in this rendition sounding like a stately, hymn-like tune. The piece then breaks into an *Allegro* in what is a standard sonata form, the famous procedure used in the first movements of symphonies as well as in countless overtures. The next college tune, known as the *Hochfeierlicher Landesvater* (“Most Solemn Song to the Founder of the Country”), occurs as a flowing melody in the violins and is followed by what the great English musicologist Sir Donald Francis Tovey called the Great Bassoon Joke. This is a rendition by two bassoons of the notorious *Fuchsenritt* (“Fox Song”), a freshman hazing song.

Movements in sonata form also have concluding sections called codas, and here Brahms treats us to a full orchestral treatment of that best known of all college songs, *Gaudeamus igitur* (“Let us now Enjoy Ourselves”), which had characterized the carefree student life since the late Middle Ages.

The first performance of the overture was conducted by Brahms himself at Breslau in 1881 at a ceremony filled with full academic pomp and circumstance. According to one report, however, the dignity of the occasion was interrupted as students burst

spontaneously into song when they heard the familiar songs, no doubt adding some of their own irreverent words, as students will. Thus did Brahms receive his Doctor of Philosophy, *honoris causa*, and the music world a masterpiece which seems today as fresh as ever.

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Concerto No. 2 in F minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 21  
by Frédéric Chopin (1810 -1849)

*Duration: Approximately 32 minutes*

*First Performance: March 17, 1830 in Warsaw*

*These are the first ESO performances of the work.*

By the time he was nineteen years old, Chopin had already become well known in his native Poland as a brilliant musician. He was by then a published composer and a familiar figure as a pianist in the aristocratic salons of Warsaw, although he had not yet made a formal debut before a large audience. After a brief trip to Vienna where he played two successful concerts, he returned to Poland, where there was much pressure for him to stage a large public performance. Thus it happened that on 17 March 1830, just a few weeks after his twentieth birthday, he performed his Concerto in F minor in Warsaw before an audience of nearly a thousand. The concert was a smash hit - local boy had indeed made good and he was well on his way to becoming what he has remained ever since, a Polish national hero. Ironically, hometown applause notwithstanding, not long afterward he would leave his native land for good, eventually settling in Paris.

That work, now confusingly known as Concerto No. 2, was his first attempt at concerto form and was soon followed by a second. (According to the practice of the time, the two concertos were numbered in order of publication rather than of composition.) The concept of the piano concerto has, of course, long been an important part of concert life but when Chopin made his first attempt, the genre was not much more than half a century old. It had first been raised to the highest level by the great concertos of Mozart, a composer whom Chopin worshipped. Chopin probably didn't know the concertos as a student but he did know other works and as different as Mozart the formal Classicist and Chopin the moody Romantic might seem to be, it is not far-fetched to suggest that the exquisite elegance of Chopin's style owed something to his love of Mozart. After Mozart, Beethoven followed with his own formidable five concertos, but Beethoven's more muscular style was not much to Chopin's taste. As the style moved into the early Romantic era, Mozart's concepts were modernized, so to speak, by composers such as Johann Hummel, one of Mozart's favorite pupils, Friedrich Kalkbrenner, Ignaz Moscheles, and John Field, all practitioners of the so-called "brilliant style," which featured brilliantly virtuosic passage work designed to impress large audiences. This is the style that Chopin heard most frequently and which he would inevitably adopt, although, despite his youth, his two concertos have proven to be more distinctive and lasting than any written by those worthy gentlemen.

No discussion of Chopin's style would be complete, however, without mention of one of his great loves, the so-called *bel canto* opera of the period. The long lined, graceful Italianate melodies of composers such as Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini, were very much in Chopin's ear, and many of his wonderful melodies are actually opera arias given to the piano.

The F minor Concerto begins, as did the concertos of Mozart, with an orchestral introduction. Much has been written about Chopin's orchestration, many critics having pronounced it as being, at best, perfunctory. There certainly is no doubt that Chopin was never particularly interested in writing for orchestra: virtually all of his orchestral writing came at this early part of his career when it seemed necessary to establish himself as a serious composer. For the rest of his life he would concentrate on writing for solo piano. Unexceptional though the opening introduction may be, it does what such introductions do, which is to present the themes which will be heard later in the solo instrument and then developed. The first theme is somewhat martial in character in F minor, while the second is more lyrical and in a major key. The entrance of the piano immediately captures the ear and throughout the rest of the movement the solo instrument dominates the conversation as it expands on and ornaments the thematic material while the orchestra frequently discreetly remains in the background. Mozart usually would provide a solo cadenza at the end of this movement, but, as one commentator has put it, there has already been enough opportunity for virtuoso display as to make it unnecessary here.

The dreamy slow movement which drew ecstatic praise from both Liszt and Schumann when they heard it in Paris, has been called Chopin's "first nocturne." (Chopin's many Nocturnes for solo piano have always been among his most popular works.) The popular stereotype of the Romantic artist who pours his private emotional life into his work is frequently overdone but here it actually was the case. The sensitive, shy young artist was deeply in love with a young lady named Konstancia Gladkowska, whom he worshipped from afar. He himself wrote in a letter to a friend that he had her in mind when he wrote this very operatic movement with its long, flowing *bel canto* melodies and exquisite coloratura *fioriture* (ornaments). One particularly dramatic moment occurs in the middle section as we hear shuddering tremolos in the strings over which the solo instrument tells its story like a heroine in an operatic recitative. Incidentally, unrequited love may have tortured the young artist for a time, but he seems to have switched his affections to a certain Duchess Delfina Potocka, to whom the entire concerto was formally dedicated.

In the brilliant finale Chopin employs the rhythms of the Polish folk dance known as the mazurek. (He would eventually write nearly 60 mazurkas for solo piano.) The difficult solo part gives plenty of opportunity for virtuoso display, especially in the spectacular coda, which is announced by a solo horn not in the melancholy key of F minor which has dominated the concerto but in the cheerful key of F major which provides an ebullient ending. Such crowd-pleasing endings were designed to bring audiences to their feet, and this one succeeded not only in Warsaw but in Paris, then the artistic capital of the Western world and the place where Chopin would spend most of the rest of his life.

A postscript: even before Chopin had performed in Paris, Robert Schumann, then one of the most important music journalists of the day, had heard a work written by

Chopin at the age of 17, even earlier than the F minor Concerto. Schumann wrote prophetically: “Hats off, gentlemen – a genius!”

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Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Op. 120  
by Robert Schumann ( 1810 -1856)

*Duration: Approximately 29 minutes*

*First Performance: December 6, 1841 in Leipzig*

*Last ESO Performance: February, 1996; Stephen Squires, conductor*

Schumann’s Fourth Symphony is another work whose numbering conveys some chronological misinformation. It was published in 1853 as the last of Schumann’s four symphonies and is so known today. The work originated, however, more than a decade earlier at a particularly momentous time in the composer’s life. In 1840 Schumann married Clara Wieck, a woman who was in her own right one of the most remarkable personages of her day. His marriage was of incalculable significance to Schumann: Clara would bear him eight children, nurse him through his debilitating depressions caused by a severe affective disorder (probably bi-polar disorder), and serve as his muse, critic, and counselor, all the while pursuing her own career as one of the great pianists of the day. After his suicide attempt and tragic early death in an asylum, Clara would survive her husband by some 40 years serving as the chief champion of his remarkable body of music.

Schumann had the habit of concentrating on one area of music at a time. Having focused almost exclusively on piano music at the beginning of his career, he would make the year of his marriage his *Liederjahr* (“year of the song”). In a fit of manic creativity inspired by his muse, he would write well over 100 songs in that year, many of them love songs. The year 1841, on the other hand, would prove to be a “symphonic year,” resulting, among other works, in the production of his symphony No. 1 which had a very successful premiere in March of 1841. Not long afterward, continuing in what he called a “brainstorm,” he began work on a symphony in D minor, which was to be a birthday present for his wife and premiered in December of 1841 as his Symphony No. 2. For various reasons the response was unenthusiastic and Schumann decided to put it aside, unpublished. It would not be until 1851, after he had already written two more symphonies, numbered 2 and 3, that he would turn again to the D minor symphony, revising it extensively, re-orchestrating it, and, after a successful performance in March of 1853, having it published as Symphony No. 4.

The disappointing reception of the early version of the symphony may partially have been because of a weak performance but also, quite possibly, because the work presented a radically new concept of symphonic writing. Rather than writing a traditional

symphony in the usual four discrete movements, Schumann had originally intended to connect all movements in one continuous work. Furthermore, his idea was to unify the entire work by using recurring themes throughout. This procedure, known as cyclical writing, would become common in the later Romantic period but was still relatively rare at this point and may well have been puzzling to many listeners.

As it happened, in the original version Schumann had connected only the last two movements. Among the many changes in the extensive revision was a return to his original idea of playing all movements without pause. In addition, he made some of the connecting passages more effective, simplified some complex textures, and changed some of the development procedures. Although there has been much criticism of the composer's re-orchestration of the symphony, the revised version is generally considered to be perhaps Schumann's greatest achievement in symphonic writing and one of the most original symphonies in the Romantic repertoire.

The symphony begins with a slow introduction that immediately presents a melancholy theme in D minor, a theme which serves as a kind of motto that unifies the entire work. It will recur throughout the symphony sometimes literally and sometimes in various transformations. As the introduction gradually speeds up, it leads into the main *Allegro* portion, whose principal vigorous theme is derived from the opening. Although the opening portion of the movement seems at first to fit a traditional sonata form, it eventually becomes clear that the composer is going his own way by creating a new kind of symphonic structure. Rather than giving us the expected recapitulation of the first theme in D minor, Schumann presents an entirely new, radiantly lyrical theme in major key. The movement gradually increases in tempo and drives to a brilliant end in D major. Incidentally, at the beginning of the development section we hear several dramatic chords dominated by trombones playing on E-flat, a note foreign to the prevailing key. These chords strike with the force of terrifying thunder claps and will recur later in the symphony.

After the ebullient first movement ends in a major key, the second movement, entitled *Romanze*, opens with a reflective minor key melody sung mournfully by oboe and a solo cello. This then alternates with the introductory theme that opened the symphony. That introductory theme then does further duty in the contrasting middle section as it is transformed into a cheerful major key, accompanied by a graceful ornamentation in the solo violin.

The stormy *Scherzo* again is based on the introductory theme, this version being turned upside down into what musicians call an inversion of the theme. As in most scherzos, there is a contrasting middle section, this one being a variant of the major key middle section of the *Romanze*, with the ornamental arabesques now played by the entire first violin section. At the end of the movement this section returns briefly but seems to disintegrate gradually, falling into fragments. An air of mystery takes over the orchestra as it returns to a dark minor key and we hear fragments of themes already heard. The tension gradually builds to a terrifying level until the orchestra breaks into the joyous finale.

The main theme of the finale is based on the main theme of the first movement but it is now in a cheerful D major. As the music drives forward there is yet another chance to hear the fateful "thunderclap" chords at key structural points. The tempo increases as we head to the coda, which, as some commentators have observed, is announced by the same

dramatic chord that announces the arrival of the Commendatore coming back from the dead at the end of Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*. It is a terrifying moment in the opera and certainly a dramatic one here as the orchestra launches into the frantic, double time coda. It might be said that this wonderful symphony has its own share of bi-polarity, moving from its dark opening in D minor through many passages of great pathos to the manic joy of D major with which it ends.

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