

Program Notes By Ed Wight

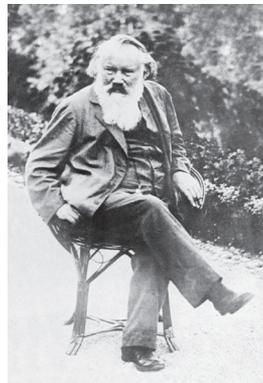
JOHANNES BRAHMS

Tragic Overture, OP. 81 (1880)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 clarinets, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings

Duration: about 13 minutes

Brahms wrote his only two concert overtures in 1880 at Bad Ischl, one of his scenic summer retreats away from Vienna. Whenever Brahms tackled a new genre, he often produced a pair of works. The first tended to be more complex and the fruit of long labor, while the second—which appeared quickly thereafter—is usually lighter and more accessible. Brahms followed that pattern in his first two piano quartets (1861), string quartets (1873), and symphonies (1876 & 1877, respectively).



But the reverse happened for these overtures. Brahms wrote the *Academic Festival Overture* for the honorary doctorate Breslau University awarded him. Though in a sophisticated form, it consisted of a somewhat lighthearted medley of student songs. This time, however, he follows it with perhaps the single most dramatic orchestral movement of his career. Brahms wrote *Tragic Overture* in dense counterpoint, motivic complexity, and an often unrelentingly dark minor mode.

Always self-deprecating, Brahms joked about both overtures: “One laughs, the other weeps.” He also wrestled with the title for this overture in D Minor. Writing to friends, he called this **Sonata-form** movement either ‘Dramatic Overture’ or ‘Tragic Overture’—never quite satisfied with either.

Brahms is not known for the “long, lyrical melodies that we have in Schubert or Tchaikovsky” (Richard Taruskin). Instead, he usually saturates his works with shorter motives—and rarely wastes one. Two seemingly neutral *staccato* chords open the work. But even this becomes a motive that Brahms elaborates further, at the opening of both the development section and the coda.

He immediately focuses on motives from both halves of the primary theme in the strings—the soft and ominous legato opening, as well as its accented conclusion. Brahms extends and varies them for a huge primary section lasting 65 bars. Then a soft, atmospheric transition section—climaxed by two horn calls—leads to the richly harmonized secondary theme in the violins in F Major, one of Brahms’s loveliest melodies. Three forceful themes—the last based on a motive from the secondary theme—close the exposition.

The development section opens softly, with an extended variant of the first half of the primary theme. Then in his most magical touch, Brahms slows the tempo by half to present a new transformation of the second half of the primary theme softly, in the strings.

Brahms surprisingly omits this primary theme from the recap, which opens in D major with a transition theme. After presenting the remaining themes of the exposition, we realize he was saving that primary theme for the coda. And he is relentless, once again indulging his penchant for new motivic variants. Hopes for a traditional and triumphant major-mode conclusion also vanish. Brahms maintains the tragic ethos by slamming the door shut in the dark minor mode.

Ed Wight

MALEK JANDALI

Concerto for Viola and Orchestra (2017)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), oboe, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, tamburo militare, toms (high, mid, low), gran cassa, triangolo, crash cymbal (high, low), tam-tam, harp, and strings

Duration: about 20 minutes

Malek Jandali received the inspiration to write a concerto for Robert Diaz when they shared the stage at the U.S. premiere of Jandali’s *Phoenix in Exile* in February 2017 at the Washington Pavilion. Jandali finished the concerto in November and dedicated it to Diaz.



According to the composer “This work integrates Syrian folk tunes and ancient melodies with Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique. The intention is to create a dissonant field of tension between *avant-garde* ‘European’ and the traditional ‘Syrian’ yet still remain authentic in this unique combination.” Jandali’s reinterpretation of dodecaphony makes for a free, totally engaging version that relates to today’s listener.

The effervescent Sonata-form first movement relies on short motives and rhythms from Syrian folk music but presents them, says Jandali “in a concerto format with Western structures and harmonies.” The movement’s irresistible perpetual motion is counterbalanced by moments of lovely lyricism both by the viola solo and the orchestra. The form is free enough to allow for a condensed climactic recapitulation that ends humorously in a quick disappearing act.

The slow movement unfolds as a Theme and Variations on an ancient Syrian folk melody. One of the many sources Jandali brought with him from Syria was a collection by Ali Darwish (1884-1952) that contained the melody “Sama’ I Ajam” by Ibrahim Darwish. Jandali was delighted to find all twelve notes of the scale in this extended melody, and invented a tone row based on their first appearance.

To create the third movement, Jandali used two Syrian folk tunes—specifically from *waslas*, referring to bridges in songs used often in Mushawahat and Sufi music. From these he constructed a ‘distorted’ mode (E-F-G#-A-Bb-C#-D#) for his melodic and harmonic vocabulary. The movement begins in a scampering, almost furtive hush of anticipation that dissolves and restarts as the viola pairs with both a lyrical bassoon melody and an agile clarinet solo. Striking passages of viola double stops and bold chordal interjections bring on an ethereal treble section. Toward the end a soulful slow passage initiates a buildup to a powerful climax—and a surprise ending.

Jane Vial Jaffe

BEETHOVEN

SYMPHONY no. 4 in B-flat MAJOR, OP. 60 (1806)

In the two centuries prior to World War I “more music of recognized greatness was composed in Vienna than in any other city in the world” (2001 New Grove Dictionary). An extraordinary series of composers—Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern—made Vienna their home. Consider just one composer (Beethoven) in a single year (1806). He completed the first major revision of his opera *Leonore* (which later became *Fidelio*), his violin concerto, the 4th piano concerto, the three Op. 59 ‘Razumovsky’ string quartets, the final version of the ‘Appassionata’ piano sonata, the 32 Variations in C Minor for piano—and his 4th symphony.



After the thunderous power and enormous scale of his 3rd symphony (“Eroica”), many consider the fourth’s shorter and joyful nature a conservative regression—opting for the style and dimensions of his first two symphonies. Composed between the 3rd and 5th symphonies, it stands “somewhat in their shadow...something of a lesser achievement” (critic Paul Schiavo). Yet Beethoven’s contemporaries viewed the work quite differently. One critic found it too powerful: “now and then excessively bizarre...incomprehensible and forbidding.” Another criticized too many challenging ideas: “its lack of noble simplicity...the too fruitful accumulation of ideas.” Beethoven packed these smaller dimensions with his more advanced middle-period style throughout, reflecting “aspects of his newly rugged and expansive manner” (Mark Ferraguto).

That ‘newly rugged’ style presents itself immediately. Beethoven writes a darker, slower moving and more ominous introduction than the plaintive major modes and faster note values of his first two symphony introductions. After its sudden and shocking fortissimo conclusion, he fashions a wonderfully light-hearted primary theme in this **Sonata-form** movement. Beethoven offers extensive solo writing: the solo bassoon, oboe, and flute sequences opening the pastoral secondary theme, a strict 8-bar clarinet and bassoon canon, and the remarkable 25-bar timpani solo that prepares for the recap. Unlike his less ad-

venturous early symphonies, reviews criticized the richer instrumental color: “he divides the melody too much among various instruments.”

The pulsing opening-bar motive of the following *Adagio* movement appears extensively in various guises throughout. But it appears most often as accompaniment for themes of “sustained lyricism...in one of Beethoven’s most beautiful slow movements” (Lewis Lockwood). He writes an extensive clarinet solo for the first episode in this **Sonata-Rondo** movement. The central episode features the most sustained dramatic explosion of the symphony—four bars of *forte* dynamics with *sforzando* accents on every beat in remote, minor-mode harmony. The extreme dynamics, accents, slow tempo and distant harmony all produce a dramatic effect unmatched in the first two symphonies.

He may label the next movement a ‘Menuet’, but the *Allegro vivace* tempo leaves no doubt that he’s writing a **Scherzo and Trio**. He also employs a new, middle-period structure for it not found in his early works. Its five-part form features two separate statements of the Trio section. Both Scherzo and Trio also feature disorienting rhythmic features that obscure either the downbeat of the bar (Scherzo) or the phrasing (Trio).

Beethoven turns to comedy for a delightful finale in **Sonata form**. The opening 16th-note motive in the strings underlies the humor throughout the movement. He fashions an extensive perpetual motion finale with this or similar 16th-note figures, a motivic saturation to a degree not found in his first two symphonies. Solo passages once again figure prominently in the structure: solo oboe, flute, and clarinet provide the softly lyrical secondary theme, and a breathtaking bassoon solo opens the recap. The symphony certainly has smaller dimensions, but as Robert Schumann wrote “Do not illustrate Beethoven’s greatness with the 9th Symphony alone. You can do as much... with the Greek-like slender one in B-flat Major.”

Symphony no. 4 premiered in March 1807 on a private, aristocratic concert in the palace of Joseph Lobkowitz. His own orchestra was augmented by other professionals and amateurs. There were no professional orchestras or concert halls in Vienna yet, and no public performance of the symphony until November 1807. Vienna’s great composers had once again raced ahead of the city’s performing institutions. A fully professional orchestra to do it justice didn’t appear until 1842—the Vienna Philharmonic.

Ed Wight