

Johannes Brahms Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68 (1876)
Movement I: Piu Sostenuto – Allegro – Meno Allegro

Brahms's Path to the First Symphony

- 1853: Robert Schumann publishes the article “Neue Bahnen” (New Clarity) in the *Neue Zeitschrift*. According to Knapp, it “...thrust Brahms upon the world as a new musical Messiah,” expounding on his genius, destiny for greatness, and describing his sonatas as “disguised symphonies for piano” (1-2). The article essentially set him before the world as the next great composer of Beethoven's caliber. This created tremendous anxiety in Brahms, especially with respect to his orchestral and symphonic writing in the shadow of Beethoven. As Schumann wrote in 1939, “When the German speaks of symphonies, he means Beethoven. The two names are for him one and indivisible—his joy, his pride.”
- 1855: Around this time, Brahms began writing a symphony in D minor. However, it was never completed. The first movement and perhaps parts of the second were reworked into his First Piano Concerto in D minor (1859), while the third, a scherzo was incorporated into the second movement of his German Requiem
- 1857-1859: wrote two serenades for orchestra. In a December 1859 letter to composer and conductor Joseph Joachim, Brahms revealed his desire to expand the first of these into a symphony. Over the next year, he expanded the instrumentation for his Serenade No. 1 in D Major and it was premiered in March 1860 as a “Symphony-Serenade.” However, afterward, he struck the “symphony” designation from the title and republished it as a “Serenade for Large Orchestra.” (Frisch, 34-35). Later, when confronted with the idea that the serenade was actually a misnamed symphony, Brahms exclaimed “Ach, Gott, if one still dared, after Beethoven, to write symphonies, they would have to look completely different!” (Knapp, 76 citing Kalbeck, I.339)
- 1862: On July 1, Clara Schumann writes the following in a letter to Joachim:
“Johannes sent me a little time ago—only fancy how surprised I was—the first movement of a symphony with this bold opening: [mm. 38-42 of the First Symphony in C Minor transcribed] ... That is rather strong, but I have become used to it ... the motives are treated with a mastery that is becoming more and more characteristic of him ... He has succeeded in making another splendid tradition from the second part [development] back to the first [recapitulation].
 (Cited in Steinberg, 68) From this, Tovey infers that the *piu sostenuto* introduction was added later, “so that its [the symphony's] first phrase once was the most abruptly dramatic opening ever attempted.”
- 1873: Brahms writes his Haydn Variations almost simultaneously for two pianos and orchestra. Frisch notes that they are more symphonic in character than his serenades “in devices like motives and invertible counterpoint...but also more generally in the polyphonic movement of the parts.” (64)
- 1876: Brahms completes his Symphony No. 1. in D Minor, at least 15 years after its initial conception. It is premiered by Otto Dessoff at Karlsruhe on 4 November 1876.

Works Cited: Frisch: *Brahms: The Four Symphonies*, 1996. Kalbeck, *Brahms*, Vol. 1, 1915. Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony*, 1997. Steinberg, *The Symphony*, 1995. Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*, Vol 1, 1935.

Listening Guide

Slow Introduction (mm. 1 – 37)

- The mood is solemn, troubled, and cloudy, with characteristically thick instrumentation and an arrangement of the orchestra into two “choirs” of winds and strings
- Three motives are presented that eventually join together to comprise Theme 1:
 - rising chromatic string motif of mm. 1-4 (1A)
 - progression of falling 6ths in the winds in mm 9-11 (1C)
 - open Cm (or EbM) arpeggio in the strings from mm. 21-24 (1B)

Exposition (mm 38-189)

- The initial exposition from mm 38-97 unifies and expands the three motives of the introduction.
 - 1A: rising chromatic winds (mm. 38-42)
 - 1B: rising Cm arpeggio in strings (mm. 42-51)
 - 1C: falling 6ths in octaves in strings (mm. 51-70)
- After a repetition of 1B, agitated pizzicato strings decrescendo to a transition section (mm. 98-121) based on some material from the arpeggios of 1B
- At m. 121, theme 1A2 is introduced, a mysterious rising chromatic oboe line that is accompanied by 1B in the cello. A new, four-note oboe motif is introduced in m 133 that is echoed in the woodwinds and horns as the rhythm slows down and becomes *perdendosi* (lost)
- At mm. 157, pizzicato strings enter again with an ominous, three-note motive that is overlaid between the strings. It resembles drops of rain before an inevitable storm. The storm arrives as Theme 2 from mm 161-177, appearing with an insistent four-note motive in the violins and cello and accompanied by an inversion of 1B.
- From mm 177-189, Theme 2 is played in counterpoint in the strings, and finally tears itself apart in descending minor 3rds

Development (mm. 189-343)

- Begins very abruptly with a triumphant canon of 1B in the strings in B major from mm. 189-198
- A mysterious pianissimo at m. 198 prefaces to the ominous broken pizzicato announcing the return of Theme 2, here in a forceful canon between violins and cello
- At 232, in contrast the stormy Theme 2, Theme 3 appears—a lyrical descending string line
The presentation of new thematic material in the development represents new experimentation with form, though Knapp suggests the theme might actually be an expansion of a pizzicato string accompaniment figure at m. 89
- Development of theme 2 and theme 3 continues, slowing rhythmically and building more tension until 321, where we reach a G pedal in the contrabass and contrabassoon that lasts until 331 when there is a fortissimo downbeat... in B minor?! This completely unexpected false recapitulation lasts until m. 342 measures, when a falling woodwind line returns to the...

Recapitulation (mm. 343-458)

- Essentially the same as the introduction, except slightly compressed, with fewer repetitions of themes, and set mainly in the tonic of Cm rather than tending toward the dominant of G

Coda (mm. 458 – 512)

- The descending major thirds that tore apart the exposition tear apart the recapitulation even more violently, echoing throughout all instruments from mm. 458-481
- A decrescendo transition through F mm. 481-498 prefaces the final *meno allegro* section, where the woodwinds call Theme 1A hopefully but fall back to C, lyrically lamenting while the four-note rhythmic motif of Theme 2 marches onward in the horns and timpani
- Ends with a quiet C Major chord in the winds, feeling like rays of sunlight after the tempestuous movement, but somehow also cold, distant, and ultimately unconvincing.