



Philharmonia Baroque Productions
Brahms: Serenades
Notes by Michael Steinberg

Serenade No. 1 in D major, Opus 11
Serenade No. 2 in A major, Opus 16

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He composed the Serenade No. 1 in 1857 and 1858 for an ensemble of flute, two clarinets, bassoon, horn, and string quartet, a version that no longer exists. In September 1858, Brahms played the piece on the piano for Joseph Joachim, who advised him to score it for full orchestra, which Brahms did in the course of the following year. Joachim conducted the original version in Hamburg on March 28, 1859, and he was also on the podium for the first performance of the final version, which took place in Hanover on March 3, 1860. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Brahms composed the Serenade No. 2 in 1858-59; Clara Schumann saw the first movement in December 1858 and received the complete score on November 9, 1859. After a reading rehearsal with Joseph Joachim's orchestra in Hanover in January 1860, Brahms conducted the first performance on February 10 that year at a concert of the Hamburg Philharmonic Society. He made some revisions that summer, and some further revisions followed in 1875. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, violas, cellos, and basses. In a letter to the conductor Bernhard Scholz, Brahms suggested that "eight or more violas, six cellos, and four basses or something on that order seems right to me."

If Brahms had called his enchanting Serenade in D major a symphony—and he almost did—we would be hearing it all the time. After Brahms's friend the violinist and conductor Joseph Joachim received the full-orchestra version, he began referring to the work as a "Symphony-Serenade," and for a while Brahms adopted this term as well, though in the end he settled for "Serenade in D major for Large Orchestra." It is not a symphony and doesn't feel like one, at least not like what we think of as a Brahms symphony.

Brahms wrote this Serenade, this almost Symphony-Serenade, under the spell of Mozart's serenades and divertimentos, the septets of Beethoven and Hummel, the Schubert Octet, and the Octet and Nonet of Louis Spohr. After a trial visit in the spring of 1857, he was working at Detmold, even today a town of only some 30,000 inhabitants, located about forty-five miles southwest of Hanover. In Brahms's day it was the capital of Lippe, a tiny principality with a rich cultural life. Prince Leopold III maintained a small but excellent orchestra whose conductor and concertmaster shared a progressive outlook that made room for the newest works of Berlioz and Wagner. When Clara Schumann moved from Düsseldorf to inconveniently distant Berlin,

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she recommended that the twenty-four-year-old Brahms succeed her as piano teacher to Prince Leopold's sister and other ladies of the court. Brahms was also expected to conduct a chorus made up of court ladies and some carefully screened women from town, and to organize chamber music concerts in which he would participate as pianist.

Everybody liked him, his piano students, his doting chorus, and the members of the orchestra, and the prince was pleased with his work. For Brahms himself, Detmold provided an agreeable setting in which to compose, to expand his knowledge of the repertory, and to gain experience as a conductor. It also offered a chance for some emotional cooling off, something he needed after Robert Schumann's tragic death in 1856 and in the aftermath of a love affair with Agathe von Siebold, a gifted young singer he had met in Göttingen. Schumann's death, aside from the distress value it had on its own, put his situation with his beloved Clara into an alarming new light; as for Fraülein von Siebold, though he seems really to have loved her, he got cold feet. "Fear of commitment" is the phrase these days.

The once so powerful voice of Robert Schumann is in an indirect way part of the background of this serenade. As much on intuition as on evidence, Schumann had closed his career as a music critic by hailing the barely twenty-year-old Brahms as the one who would realize his dream that "there inevitably must appear a musician called to give expression to his times in ideal fashion; who would reveal his mastery not in a gradual evolution, but like Athene would spring fully armed from the head of Zeus. Such a one has appeared, a young man over whose cradle Graces and Heroes have stood watch."

Such an accolade might have scared an artist less shy and thin-skinned than Brahms. Of course Brahms was not only shy and thin-skinned, he was immensely ambitious as well. His ambition and his talent, and his first encounter with the Beethoven Ninth, led him to attempt a symphony, a project that brought him to the edge of despair and that he completed in 1857, not as a symphony but as the Piano Concerto No. 1. Nineteen more years would pass before he finally gave himself permission to let the world hear his First Symphony. Brahms's Detmold compositions—two serenades, a few lovely pieces for his women's chorus, and some lieder—were projects in which to stretch and exercise his craft, and a temporary withdrawal from the burden Schumann had laid upon him, ventures to enjoy rather than to sweat over.

Brahms's Serenade No. 1 in its original form, as nonet, pleased at its premiere. Nonetheless, Brahms chose to destroy the score and parts after he had made the orchestral version. Brahms's orchestration is close to what we find in late Haydn and early-to-middle Beethoven. The only oddity is the full quartet of horns, something you find occasionally in early Haydn and Mozart, but then not again until the Beethoven Ninth. It is certainly a beautiful sound that Brahms has imagined here. As for overall design, Brahms must have had some of Mozart's serenades in mind. Those are often like symphonies expanded by an extra minuet, with perhaps something additional like a set of variations as well. Brahms's plan—allegro/scherzo/adagio/minuet/scherzo/finale—is like that, his extras being the two scherzos.

Brahms begins with country matters—drones in the bass, and a perfect horn theme on top. It is homage to a favorite work by a favorite composer, the finale of Haydn's last symphony. Even after the drone stops, the basses are leisurely about moving from one note to another; this produces a sense of relaxation that makes the gait feel non-symphonic. Like Mozart before him

Philharmonia Baroque Productions
Brahms: Serenades - Notes by Michael Steinberg

and Dvořák afterwards, Brahms is lavish with the profusion of themes he offers us. The development, with its surprising extensions and associations, looks forward to the mastery of Brahms's later years.

The most bewitching feature of this first movement is the coda. Twenty-seven measures of D, about which basses and timpani are unmistakably insistent, seem to settle the matter that the movement is over. The flute, however, blithely ignores this, and the cellos happily follow. The music becomes more and more lost in dreams and wanders ever farther afield. Perhaps feeling a little guilty, the flute tries some gentle reminders of D major, to which clarinets and low strings make willing but bemused response. When the movement ends, *pianissimo*, nothing is left of the vigorous physicality that has informed it from the beginning: The last floating chord—just flute, two clarinets, and violas—is a bit of gossamer.

That ending is a kind of reverse preparation for the beginning of the slightly sinister second movement, which starts *piano* but low, and whose theme is a version of an idea to which Brahms would return twenty-two years later in the second movement of the Piano Concerto No. 2. The main body of the movement is dark. The middle section is bright, outdoorsy, and provides warming contrast.

The slow movement is spacious and in every way glorious. With the bassoons and low strings densely bunched in the middle and low registers, the sound is unmistakably Brahmsian—Brahmsian euphony, Brahmsian melancholy. This movement is the heart of the Serenade. Like the first movement, it is unexpectedly prodigal in the amount of material it offers. For just a few seconds, a brief development finds a place of such radiance, such brightness of harmony, that we scarcely know what to make of it. What is such transcendence doing in a serenade? Brahms's great teacher, Mozart, would have understood. Brahms gives the coda to the flute. It is true poetry, a few bars to make us hold our breath.

Next, a pair of minuets. Brahms begins with a trio for two clarinets and bassoon, with flute and *pizzicato* cello joining in for the second strain. The middle section, which he calls Menuetto II, goes into the darker world of G minor, though the mood is no more than wistful, a little sad. And the tune—for first violins, accompanied by violas, cellos, and clarinets—is one of the most tenderly expressive of Brahms's whole life.

Then another scherzo—this one athletic, in robust D major, and full of Brahms's love of Beethoven, especially the Second and *Pastoral* symphonies. The finale continues that energetic spirit. It is a rondo whose main theme, bouncing cheerfully in the saddle, beautifully sets off the rich variety of the other episodes. The close is sonorous and happy.

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The difference between Brahms's two serenades in actual sound is striking. The A major Serenade omits violins; not only does this give it a darker sound, but it creates a balance which makes this work, in contrast to the other, essentially a wind serenade with accompanying and supporting strings.

**Philharmonia Baroque Productions**  
**Brahms: Serenades - Notes by Michael Steinberg**

There has been much discussion of what gave Brahms the idea for this violin-less orchestra. Was it his delight with the sound of the opening of the Adagio of the D major Serenade? Was it Méhul's opera *Uthal* (admired both by him and Joachim), Hummel's beautiful Septet, Opus 74, the duet of Elisabeth and the Landgrave in Act 2 of *Tannhäuser* or the quartet in *Fidelio* that surely was Wagner's inspiration? All these are possible sources, and it doesn't really matter. Brahms was not given to talking about his music, and when he did he was likely to be teasingly deceitful.

The reception of the Serenade at its Hamburg premiere was friendly, though not enough so to get Brahms appointed the Philharmonic's next conductor, a position he then ardently desired. Its successful performance in Vienna under Johann von Herbeck in 1862 was an important step toward making Brahms known in the city that would become his home in 1869. But not everyone was pleased. When Joachim conducted the Serenade in Hanover in March 1860, he received an unsigned letter instructing him that "Brahms's Serenade is a monstrosity, a caricature, a freak, which should never have been published, much less performed *here* . . . whilst the piano concerto [No. 1] served up to us last winter still sticks in our throats! It is inexcusable that such filth should have been offered to a public thirsting for good music. . . . Do not impose upon your audience a taste for that which can only be the greatest torture to people with *sound ears*."

The first movement begins with mellow clarinets and bassoons, though the sweetness of this opening soon gives way to a melancholy strain in minor, with Brahms's beloved triplets cutting across the duple meter. A soaring, expressive melody for the oboe and a lazily swaying theme for clarinets in thirds are the other chief thematic components. The movement is in sonata form, but this is one of the examples where Brahms does not ask for the exposition to be repeated. (This is a question Brahms always considered carefully.) After the urgent and impassioned development, the entry into the recapitulation is exceptionally lovely. With utmost gentleness, the oboe leading the way, Brahms returns to A major; after half a minute of musing, he brings the first theme back, and then we realize that we have been home all along. The recapitulation itself is regular, but to make up for that, Brahms gives us an expansive and magically poetic coda.

The fast-paced scherzo is distinctly Czech in its bouncy cross-rhythms. The central trio is more tuneful, but the strings make sure we do not forget the rhythmic dissonances. An exuberant coda is filled with virtuosic scale passages.

The slow movement—Adagio but *non troppo*, not too slow—is a marvel. Here Brahms sets out to write a passacaglia, a set of variations over a reiterated bass. (It may well have been the first time that anyone had done that since Beethoven's C minor Variations for Piano of 1806.) Eight iterations carry it from its starting point of A minor to C major. There an impassioned rhetorical outburst leads to the introduction of new material and new adventures. When the violas bring the passacaglia bass back, Brahms presents it fugally, making a great stir before leading the movement to its quiet close.

I don't understand what Brahms meant by heading his fourth movement "Quasi menuetto." Even taking the most generous view of "quasi," I cannot hear anything minuet-like in this sweet D major movement with its distinct duple meter. Ghosts of the main part of the movement are a

**Philharmonia Baroque Productions**  
**Brahms: Serenades - Notes by Michael Steinberg**

gentle background presence to the trio. The trio's main business is a shy and touching melody for the oboe.

Brahms has saved the piccolo for the finale. It is a happy cheerleader in an exuberant movement full of charm and subtle rhythmic surprises.—**Michael Steinberg**

*Michael Steinberg, the San Francisco Symphony's program annotator from 1979 to 1999 and a contributing writer to its program book until his death in 2009, was one of the nation's pre-eminent writers on music. His books include three "listener's guides" (The Symphony, The Concerto, and Choral Masterworks) and For the Love of Music, all published by Oxford University Press. The notes on the Brahms serenades appeared originally in the program book of the San Francisco Symphony and are used by permission. Copyright © San Francisco Symphony.*