

# Johannes Brahms

## Symphony N° 2 in D major, Op 73

Brahms wrote his second symphony in the summer of 1877 during a visit to the popular tourist destination of Pörschach am Wörthersee, a town in the Austrian province of Carinthia. Its composition was brief in comparison with the fifteen years it took Brahms to complete his *First Symphony*, which was finished the year before the second. Brahms mischievously wrote to his publisher in November 1877, that the symphony "is so melancholy that you will not be able to bear it. I have never written anything so sad, and the score must come out in mourning." The mood is sometimes wistful and gentle, but the last movement is excited and energetic. However, there is a revealing letter from Brahms to the composer and conductor, Vinzenz Lachner, in which Brahms explains the melancholic side of his nature and comments on specific features of the symphony that reflect this. The première was given in December 1877 in Vienna while Brahms was living there, under the direction of Hans Richter.

The word *symphony* is derived from Greek meaning "agreement or concord of sound". In the *Second Symphony* Brahms preserved the structural principles of the classical symphony, that of four movements where two lively outer movements frame a slow second and a short third. Brahms is often considered both a traditionalist and an innovator (like Mendelssohn). His writing is firmly rooted in the structures and compositional techniques of the Baroque and Classical masters. He was a master of counterpoint, the complex and highly disciplined method of composition for which J S Bach is famous, and also of development, a compositional ethos pioneered by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. He collected first editions of their works. The early Romantic composers also had a major influence on Brahms, particularly Schumann, who encouraged Brahms as a young composer, and Schubert. He aimed to honour the 'purity' of venerable 'German' structures and advance them into a Romantic idiom. While many contemporaries found his music too academic, many admirers (though not necessarily Brahms himself) saw him as the champion of traditional forms and 'pure music', as opposed to the 'New German' school of programme music. At this time his works were considered old-fashioned by the 'New German School' whose principal figures included Liszt and Wagner. Brahms admired some of Wagner's music and admired Liszt as a great pianist, but the conflict between the two schools, known as the War of the Romantics, soon embroiled all of musical Europe. In the Brahms camp were his close friends: Clara Schumann, the influential music critic Eduard Hanslick, and the leading Viennese surgeon Theodor Billroth. In 1860, Brahms attempted to organise a public protest against some of the wilder excesses of the Wagnerians' music. This took the form of a manifesto, written by Brahms and his friend the violinist Joseph Joachim. The manifesto, which was published prematurely with only three supporting signatures, was a failure, and he never engaged in public polemics again.

In his lifetime, Brahms' popularity and influence were considerable. Dvorák, who received substantial assistance from Brahms, deeply admired his music and was influenced by it in several works. Brahms gave away large sums of money to friends and to aid various musical students, often with the term of strict secrecy. Brahms' contribution and craftsmanship have been admired by subsequent figures as diverse as the progressive Arnold Schoenberg and the conservative Edward Elgar.

Like Beethoven, Brahms was fond of nature and often went walking in the woods around Vienna. He often brought penny candy with him to hand out to children. To adults, Brahms was often brusque and sarcastic, and he sometimes alienated other people. His pupil Gustav Jenner wrote, "Brahms has acquired, not without reason, the reputation for being a grump, even though few could also be as lovable as he". He also had predictable habits that included a daily visit to the local tavern. Those who remained his friends were very loyal to him, and he reciprocated with equal loyalty and generosity.

*Programme notes provided by Joanna Lavender, November 2013*