BRAHMS
The Symphonies

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Andris Nelsons Music Director

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JOHANNES BRAHMS

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Opus 68
Symphony No. 2 in D, Opus 73
Symphony No. 3 in F, Opus 90
Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Opus 98

Live recordings

November 8/10, 2016 (Symphony No. 1)
November 11/12, 2016 (Symphony No. 2)
November 15/17/18/19, 2016 (Symphony No. 3)
November 18/19, 2016 (Symphony No. 4)

Symphony Hall, Boston

DISC ONE 45:39

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Opus 68

01 Un poco sostenuto—Allegro (13:23)
02 Andante sostenuto (9:31)
03 Un poco allegretto e grazioso (4:56)
04 Adagio—Più Andante—Allegro non troppo ma con brio—Più Allegro (17:45)

DISC TWO 80:47

Symphony No. 2 in D, Opus 73

01 Allegro non troppo (16:18)
02 Adagio non troppo (9:58)
03 Allegretto grazioso (quasi andantino) (5:15)
04 Allegro con spirito (9:48)

Symphony No. 3 in F, Opus 90

05 Allegro con brio (13:47)
06 Andante (9:25)
07 Poco Allegretto (6:58)
08 Allegro—Un poco sostenuto (9:13)

DISC THREE 42:17

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Opus 98

01 Allegro non troppo (13:08)
02 Andante moderato (12:20)
03 Allegro giocoso (6:39)
04 Allegro energico e passionato (10:07)

JOHANNES BRAHMS
The Symphonies

Symphony No. 1

The most famous words ever written by Johannes Brahms had to do with his dread of "the tramp of a giant" behind him. The giant stalking Brahms was, of course, Beethoven. By the ends of their lives Haydn and Mozart had made the symphony the king of instrumental genres, but they left things to be done, and Beethoven did them: he expanded, intensified, readjusted. For one example, while Haydn's and Mozart's finales tended to be relatively light, in his later symphonies Beethoven made the finale the goal and culmination of the work, as in the Ninth with its epic choral finale. The decades after Beethoven's death saw enduring work by composers including Robert Schumann, but from mid-century a fallow period set in that lasted until Brahms's First in 1876. The genre seemed to be cursed.

Brahms's mentor Robert Schumann had decreed that he must write symphonies in the line of Beethoven. But what kind of symphonies could pick up where Beethoven left off, yet add something new and significant? Though Brahms grappled successfully with that dilemma, his answers did not come quickly. He possessed the ambition and courage for the challenge, but he was cautious.

The result was a gestation period for his Symphony No. 1 of more than fifteen years. Shortly after Schumann broke down and was committed to an asylum, Brahms began a two-piano sonata that turned into a symphony, which in turn broke down. A decade later Clara Schumann wrote a friend that Johannes had sent her a "bold opening" for a symphony. The snippet she writes down in her letter is the beginning of the first Allegro of the eventual First Symphony. Brahms told friends the piece would be done in a year. Then, a dozen years. We can't know what happened, but we can understand some of the hurdles he faced.

The giant was still tramping. Meanwhile Brahms was always a competent orchestrator, but the scoring of his early orchestral music is more effective than distinctive. He refused to write a symphony until his orchestral voice was as individual as everything else about his music. He found his orchestral voice in the *Variations*

on a Theme by Haydn, from 1873. But there were still pressing questions regarding a symphony. What kind of middle movements? How to make the whole work into a single dramatic shape with the finale as culmination, as in Beethoven's Ninth?

By the mid-1870s Brahms had found some solutions. For one, there would be no Beethovenian scherzo. Instead he decided on a movement animated but not allegro, what we call the Brahmsian intermezzo. But he still had to write a finale that somehow paid off the drama and intensity of the first movement he had written so long before.

In 1868 Brahms sent Clara Schumann a postcard on which he wrote an alpenhorn call he had heard in the mountains. That horn call would become the transforming moment of the First Symphony's finale. In the summer of 1876 he headed for the Isle of Rügen to finish his craggy symphony amidst its craggy landscape. Now he understood the dramatic shape of his C minor symphony, which is the same as Beethoven's C minor Fifth: from darkness to light, fate to jubilation. To his old first-movement Allegro draft Brahms added an introduction that sets a foreboding tone. Then comes a defiant Allegro, the dialogue carried along in driving muscular rhythms that subside only to rise again. The coda slows to a recall of the introduction.

Wistful lyricism is the keynote of the Andante sostenuto. In the middle section an agitated moment reminds us of the symphony's opening, but it recedes and the first theme returns in horn and high violin. The intermezzo's atmosphere is set by a breezy clarinet solo; a touch of gaiety enters the symphony for the first time. In the middle, flowing lines become gradually fervid and assertive, but the movement ends quietly.

With descending bass notes and a piercing minor chord, the finale returns to the foreboding tone of the first movement. Tumultuous music rises to a shout, then in a transcendent moment the melody of the alpenhorn appears like sunlight breaking through clouds. After a solemn declaration in trombones, the movement proper begins with one of the most beautiful themes in the symphonic literature. In the coda jubilation breaks out—the kind of jubilation with which Beethoven finished his Fifth, but in an entirely Brahmsian voice.

Symphony No. 2

Tradition holds that after the years spent on the First, the halcyon Symphony No. 2 was born in one summer like a cry of relief. Brahms wrote it in 1877, in the delightful resort of Pörtschach. The story, however, is not so cheerily simple. If the opening of the First is fateful, the Second's is a pastoral peace. But it is fraught peace, shadowed, compromised.

It begins like the first sigh of a waltz. As the music seems about to bloom, we suddenly hear a roll of timpani and ominous chords in trombones, like clouds darkening a sunny landscape. Those trombones are the symphony's emotional key, what one scholar called its "lost idyll": a memory of arcadia when idylls are no longer possible. The second movement begins with one of Brahms's most poignant cello melodies, luscious in sound, but the shadow hangs over it. The third movement provides a necessary contrast: folksy, a waltz-like three-beat alternating with skittering music. The gaiety does the trick, the shadows are banished. The romping finale is a garland of delicious melodies leading to a happy ending in a blaze of trombones: once the harbingers of sorrow, now the heralds of joy. Yet the shadow lingers. At the height of his powers, Brahms wrote a serenely beautiful masterpiece whose secret message is that you can't go home again.

Symphony No. 3

The Symphony No. 3, from 1883, is Brahms's most tight-knit, with questions posed in the opening that are resolved only in the exquisite final measures. It begins with pealing chords in winds and brass, then a great string proclamation in F major; in the next measure the basses rise to A-flat, wrenching the harmony into minor. There is the central drama: a struggle between major and minor, joy and anguish. The surging first theme gives way to a rippling melody in the clarinet, but the ground is still shifty—harmony and rhythm resolve infrequently and indecisively.

A gentle melody in winds begins the second movement. After a lovely flowering, the second section is a chorale with strange and somber harmonies. In a wash of strings the first theme returns, but not a repeat of the chorale—its moment is later. Then the unforgettable third movement, with its keening cello melody set in a fluttering texture of strings. The sense of yearning is unmistakable, but ultimately this music sounds like nothing else. After a middle section, the opening theme rises to a pealing assertion before sinking to sighs.

The finale begins with a murmuring string line, then a quietly striding theme appears—the mysterious chorale of the second movement, which finds its climax here. It fades, leading to a powerful, almost desperately surging theme. The development section is dominated by the chorale theme, now angry and insistent. At the end Brahms achieves something remarkable: this thorny and tumultuous symphony ends with a gentle coda that returns, in a magical shimmer of strings, to the opening theme of the symphony, stripped of grief and uncertainty, resolved into a gentle farewell.

Symphony No. 4

Written in 1884-85, the Symphony No. 4 is the culmination of Brahms's life as artist and craftsman. In 1883 he wrote his publisher: "I still think catastrophe is coming." He was talking about Austria's rising tide of reaction and anti-Semitism. His Fourth Symphony is an elegy for the passing of the civilization he knew, and a dark prophecy of the future. It begins with a lilting dance-like theme that acquires flowing counterpoints; there is a fanfare; a passionate second theme in cellos; a fog seems to stop the music in its tracks. Call the tone *anticipation*. The second movement declares itself with a striding wind proclamation that resolves to a slow, solemn dance. It is scenic, like a procession for a fallen hero, the scoring gorgeously autumnal. The third movement's pounding, shouting, two-beat dance is startling in the shadowed atmosphere.

As the slow movement was shattered by the lusty scherzo, that mood is shattered by the searing brass chords that begin the finale. The tragic intensity that ended the second movement has returned. The movement is equally traditional and radical: a unique finale on the old dance form of the chaconne, variations over a steadily repeating bass line. Surely the cultural catastrophe Brahms saw around him lies in the background. Someone once described the finale as "an inexorable fate implacably driving some great creation, whether of an individual or a whole race, toward its downfall." The only break is a middle section of haunting beauty, an exquisite flute solo and a stately variation for trombones. The symphony ends with rampaging minor harmonies; there is no hopeful turn to major.

In Brahms's symphonies we find a compelling expressive pattern: the First a path from darkness to light, the Second whose light is threatened by shadow, the Third searching through tumult to peace, and finally a work in which tragedy grows and flowers to the end. Four symphonies that enfold a great creator's lifetime of learning, feeling, and searching for things that cannot be found—the fate of artists like everyone, but it's the job of artists to express it for all of us.

Jan Swafford

Jan Swafford is a prizewinning composer and writer whose books include biographies of Johannes Brahms and Charles Ives, "The Vintage Guide to Classical Music," and, most recently, "Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph." An alumnus of the Tanglewood Music Center, where he studied composition, he is currently working on a biography of Mozart.

ANDRIS NELSONS

The 2016-17 season is Andris Nelsons' third as the BSO's Ray and Maria Stata Music Director. In the summer of 2015, following his first season as music director, his contract with the Boston Symphony Orchestra was extended through the 2021-22 season. In February 2018 he becomes Gewandhauskapellmeister of the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, in which capacity he will also bring both orchestras together for a unique multi-dimensional alliance. He and the Boston Symphony Orchestra have made two European tours, following the 2015 Tanglewood season and in May 2016. The fifteenth music director in the orchestra's history, he made his BSO debut at Carnegie Hall in March 2011 and his Tanglewood debut in July 2012. His first CD with the orchestra—live recordings of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* Overture and Sibelius's Symphony No. 2—was released in November 2014 on BSO Classics. In an ongoing, multi-year collaboration with Deutsche Grammophon, he and the BSO will release live recordings of Shostakovich's complete symphonies, the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and other works by the composer. The first two releases in this series (featuring symphonies 5, 8, 9, and 10) won the Grammy Award for Best Orchestral Performance in 2016 and 2017. In August 2016, the initial release (Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10) also won *Gramophone* Magazine's Orchestral Award.

In the next few seasons, Andris Nelsons continues his collaborations with the Berlin Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, and Philharmonia Orchestra. A regular guest at the Royal Opera House, Vienna State Opera, and Metropolitan Opera, he was critically acclaimed as music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra from 2008 to 2015. In 2010 at the Bayreuth Festival, he premiered a production directed by Hans Neuenfels of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, which he led there again in 2014. Born in Riga, Latvia, in 1978 into a family of musicians, Andris Nelsons began his career as a trumpeter in the Latvian National Opera Orchestra before studying conducting. He was principal conductor of the Nordwestdeutsche Philharmonie in Herford, Germany, from 2006 to 2009 and music director of the Latvian National Opera from 2003 to 2007. He is the subject of a 2013 DVD from Orfeo, a documentary film entitled "Andris Nelsons: Genius on Fire."

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Roster includes only those musicians who participated in the BSO's Brahms symphony performances of November 8–19, 2016.

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Associate Concertmaster

Alexander Velinzon
Associate Concertmaster

Elita Kang
Assistant Concertmaster

Bo Youp Hwang

Lucia Lin

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Nancy Bracken

Bonnie Bewick

James Cooke

Catherine French

Jason Horowitz

Ala Jojatu

Bracha Malkin

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Julianne Lee
Assistant Principal

Sheila Fiekowsky

Nicole Monahan

Ronan Lefkowitz

Vyacheslav Uritsky

Jennie Shames

Valeria Vilker Kuchment

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Mihail Jojatu
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* extra player

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John Morin

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Production Assistants
Silas Brown
Brian Losch

Mastering Engineer
Tim Martyn, Phoenix Audio

Recordings made using
Bowers & Wilkins speakers.

For the Boston Symphony Orchestra
Andris Nelsons, *Music Director*

Mark Volpe
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Photography
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Booklet Editor
Marc Mandel