

THIRD EDITION

# The Enjoyment of MUSIC

ESSENTIAL LISTENING

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# Absolutely Classic: Brahms and the Nineteenth- Century Symphony

## 39

## CHAPTER

### ► First, listen ...

to the first two minutes of the third movement of Brahms's Symphony No. 3, focusing on the main melody. How does Brahms use different instruments to vary the expression in this opening section?

Music may not be a truly universal language, but it is certainly more flexible in meaning than any communication based on words. Sound can seem to dig deeper into our emotions than the logic of words—and this aspect of music made it especially appealing to the Romantics, as we have seen. Yet many thought that program music, linking sound to a narrative or an image, was a step backward from the potential of music to express things beyond words. These were (and are) the proponents of **absolute music**: without a program, relying entirely on structures of sound for its expressive power. This repertory continues to dominate in orchestral concerts, since audiences enjoy the opportunity for individual interpretation that is opened up when music is not explicitly linked to anything else. And indeed, in most Western traditions, even when a voice is ostensibly the primary focus of a song, there is often an instrumental “break” in which the expressive potential of music is allowed to float freely and expand the listener’s experience.

“It is not hard to compose, but it is wonderfully hard to let the superfluous notes fall under the table.”

—Johannes Brahms

### In His Own Words

“Without craftsmanship, inspiration is a mere reed shaken in the wind.”

—Johannes Brahms

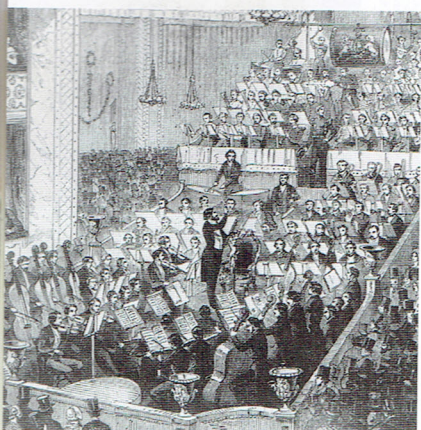
## ABSOLUTE MUSIC IN THE ROMANTIC ERA

In addition to new programmatic genres such as the symphonic poem and program symphony, Romantic composers continued writing in the multimovement genres established in the Classical era, which included the symphony, the concerto, and chamber music (string quartets and quintets, piano trios and quartets). As

### KEY POINTS

- Composers continued writing instrumental music without a program (**absolute music**) throughout the nineteenth century, including symphonies, concertos, and chamber music.
- Romantic symphonies were characterized by lyrical themes, colorful harmonies, expanded proportions, and larger orchestras featuring new instruments.
- German composer Johannes Brahms continued the Classical traditions of the Viennese masters in his four symphonies. His Third Symphony is Classical in structure but Romantic in tone.





The nineteenth-century orchestra offered the composer new instruments and a larger ensemble. Engraving of an orchestral concert at the Covent Garden Theatre, London, 1846.

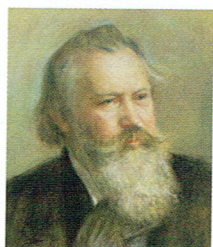
we have seen, the most important organizing element in absolute music is form, since there is no prescribed story or extramusical literary program provided by the composer. Though the basic components of the three- or four-movement cycle covered in Chapters 25–30 were retained, nineteenth-century composers did not always follow the “traditional rules.”

## Form and Expression in the Romantic Symphony

In the course of its development beyond the Classical-period tradition of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, the symphony gained weight and importance. Nineteenth-century composers found the symphony a suitable framework for their lyrical (“singing”) themes, harmonic experiments, and individual expressions. By the Romantic era, music had moved from palace to public concert hall, the orchestra had vastly increased in size, and the symphonic structure was growing steadily longer and more expansive.

The first movement, the most dramatic of the Romantic symphony, generally retains the basic elements of sonata-allegro form. It might have a drawn-out, slow introduction, and it often features a long and expressive development section. The second movement, often in a loose three-part form, may retain its slow and lyrical nature but can also range in mood from whimsical and playful to tragic and passionate. Third in the cycle is a strongly rhythmic dance or scherzo, with overtones of humor, surprise, caprice, or folk dance. The fourth and final movement

## Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)



Born in Hamburg, Germany, Brahms early on developed what would be a lifelong affection for folk music, collecting songs and folk sayings throughout his life. Brahms had the good fortune to study with Robert Schumann at Düsseldorf, who recognized in his pupil a future leader of the circle dedicated to absolute music. Robert and his wife Clara took the young musician into their home, and their friendship opened up new horizons for him.

The death of Brahms’s mother in 1865 inspired him to write his *German Requiem*, with biblical texts that he selected himself, in her memory. He ultimately settled in Vienna, where, at age forty, he began writing his great symphonic works. During these years, he became enormously successful, the acknowledged heir of the Viennese masters. The declining health of his dear friend Clara Schumann gave rise to his *Four Serious Songs*. Her death deeply affected the composer, already ill with cancer. He

died ten months later and was buried in Vienna, near Beethoven and Schubert.

Brahms’s four symphonies are unsurpassed in the late Romantic period for their breadth of conception and design. In his two piano concertos and violin concerto, the solo instrument is integrated into a full-scale symphonic structure. Brahms gorgeously captured the intimacy of chamber-music style, and is an important figure in piano music as well. As a song writer, he stands in the direct succession from Schubert and Schumann, with about two hundred solo songs.

**MAJOR WORKS:** Orchestral music, including four symphonies, variations, overtures • Four concertos (two for piano, one for violin, one double concerto for piano and violin) • Chamber music, including piano trios and quartets • Duo sonatas • Piano music, including sonatas, character pieces, dances, variations • Choral music, including the *German Requiem* (1868) and part songs • Lieder, including *Wiegenlied* (Lullaby).



has a dimension and character designed to balance the first. Often it also follows sonata-allegro form and may close the symphony on a note of triumph or pathos.

## Brahms's Symphony No. 3 in F Major

Johannes Brahms was a traditionalist; his aim was to show that new and important things could still be said in the tradition of the Classical masters. The Third Symphony, written in 1883 when he was fifty years old, is the shortest of his four symphonies and the most Romantic in tone. In form, however, the work looks back to the Classical structures of the eighteenth century. The first movement, a conventional sonata-allegro, opens with a dramatic figure: a three-note motive (F–A–F) that permeates the entire symphony. The slow movement, a haunting Andante in sonata-allegro form, evokes the peacefulness of nature with its simple, hymnlike theme in the woodwinds.

Rather than following with a scherzo, Brahms wrote a melancholy waltz in C minor, set in ternary form (LG 28). The opening theme, a poignant cello melody, is heard throughout this impassioned orchestral “song without words,” accompanied by restless string figures. First the violins, then the woodwinds take up the melody, whose arched rise and fall suggests a huge orchestral sigh. The middle section, now in a major key, presents two themes set against an expressive, chromatic accompaniment. The return of the opening theme is newly orchestrated, then closes with an emotional statement by the violins and cellos playing in octaves. A short coda brings back the mood of the middle section, closing with two soft pizzicato chords. The finale, a dramatic sonata-allegro, features concise themes and abrupt changes of mood. Throughout, the listener is challenged by shifting moods, timbres, and melodies that affirm the technical command and the creative invention of a great Romantic master.

Later generations of orchestral composers have often tried to find a middle way between fully absolute and explicitly program music. Certainly, however, the appeal of Classical forms continues to the present day, thanks in no small measure to their revitalization through the music of Brahms and his followers.

### ▶◀ Reflect

How does the change in instrumentation for the main theme affect you as a listener? Which instrument(s) do you find most expressive, and why?

Brahms's study and personal library in Vienna, in a nineteenth-century painting.



### YOUR TURN TO EXPLORE

Choose a pop song that includes one or more extended instrumental passages, and focus on the sections when the voice is silent. What do the instruments express beyond the meaning of the words? What specific elements (melody, harmony, timbre) does the composer employ to emphasize those wordless meanings? How do those meanings influence the overall effect of the song?