

## **Johannes Brahms (1833-97), Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 (1876)**

(1)

“The First Symphony of Brahms seemed to us as hard and as uninspired as upon its former hearing. It is mathematical music evolved with difficulty from an unimaginative brain... How it ever came to be honored with the title of *The Tenth Symphony* [i.e., as if Beethoven had written a Symphony No. 10] is a mystery to us... This noisy, ungraceful, confusing and unattractive example of dry pedantry before the masterpieces of Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Gade, or even of the reckless and over-fluent Raff! Absurd! ... All that we have heard and seen from Brahms’s pen abounds in headwork without a glimmer of soul... It is possible that as we grow more familiar with this symphony it may become clearer to us, but we might pore over a difficult problem in mathematics until the same result was reached without arriving at the conclusion that it is a poetic inspiration.”

Boston *Gazette*, January 24, 1878

(2)

“The principal work of the evening was Brahms’s Symphony in C minor. We think a better choice might have been made for an opening concert... It is poor in ideas, and the few that there are want originality. They do not warm us, they do not speak to our hearts’ emotions. Everything is measured, cold and of aristocratic reserve... Three slow movements following each other become extremely tedious, and the most striking motif of the whole work, the leading theme of the last movement, is so much like the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony that, as another writer has admirably remarked, it should be put in quotation marks.”

New York *Post*, November 8, 1880

(3)

“The First Symphony of Brahms seems to strive after the unattainable; it is full of irritant and restless discords; it has strange, climbing, grasping phrases which seem to be trying to drag down something which still glides upward from their reach; its pastoral motifs often break away in suggestion of storm and confusion; and strings are frequently urged to the very top of their compass, and at times, as in the first and last movements, a sort of Walpurgis Night sweeps down and whirls everything away in a rhythmic chaos.”

Boston *Daily Advertiser*, December 29, 1883

(4)

“There is in Brahms’s C minor symphony an iteration and reiteration of mere fragmentary ideas... which makes it simply tiresome, and the opening movement is suggestive of the Lord Chancellor’s song *Iolanthe*... The orchestra did wonderfully good work in all this tiresome waste of endless harmony.”

Boston *Herald*, December 31, 1883

(5)

“Lovers of Brahms were much disturbed by the large numbers of people leaving the hall between the movements of the C minor Symphony... It must be admitted that to the larger part of our public, Brahms is still an incomprehensible terror.”

Boston *Evening Transcript*, November 16, 1885

(6)

“In the Brahms C minor Symphony every note draws blood. It has been plausibly questioned whether Brahms’s music will ever become popular... That it is not popular now and in Boston is pretty evident, for our audiences listen to it in a silence that speaks more of dismay than of veneration.”

Boston *Evening Transcript*, December 9, 1888