

Program Notes: January 21 & 22, 2022

Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833 - Hamburg, Germany

Died April 3, 1897 - Vienna, Austria

Double Concerto for Violin and Cello

By 1887 Brahms had reached a level of great maturity as a composer. Though he'd spent much of his early years concerned with living in the shadow of Beethoven, whom he idolized, his prolific writing had helped him break free from many of his fears and enabled him to compose numerous revered orchestral works. Despite this professional success, when he took up the project of creating a work for violin, cello, and orchestra, he was experiencing a rift in one of his most important friendships and professional relationships – that between himself and violinist Joseph Joachim.

The two had been close friends and working partners for decades when Joachim petitioned for a divorce from his wife, Amalie. During the proceedings, it was discovered Brahms had offered emotional support to Amalie in the form of a letter, which was used in her defense. In response to this perceived betrayal, Joachim ended his professional and personal relationship with Brahms. Thus, when cellist Robert Hausmann, a member of Joachim's string quartet, asked that Brahms write a concerto for him, the composer considered that a cello for Hausmann *and* Joachim might be an opportunity to work with his old friend and perhaps bury the hatchet. His intuition proved correct – working on the concerto mended the relationship between the two men.

As with the violin concerto before it, Brahms approached the concerto for violin and cello with considerable concern for his ability to write idiomatically for string instruments. Working with Joachim and Hausmann, or *arguing* over what ought to be altered, created an incredibly demanding concerto for both soloists and the orchestra. In approaching the work as a sort of concerto grosso, a baroque concerto that featured more than one soloist, with the dynamic and empowering sensibilities of the 19th century, Brahms created a work that brings the violin and cello together in an intimate, amiable style rather than one of aggressive contrast.

The cello, with a sonorous range closely resembling the human voice, and the violin, with its ability to reach stratospherically high pitches, first seem to compete against one another at the beginning of the *Allegro*. After a bold proclamation by the orchestra, the solo cello responds with a cadenza. Brahms showcases the instrument's unique timbre, beginning with its lowest string and moving into uplifting harmonics and taut motives in its upper range. The cello sings even when the strings are plucked by the soloist with bold guitar-like chords. The orchestra answers gently as the flutes escort the solo violinist into the work, responding to the cello's firm statement with stern chords. The two exchange chords while the orchestra awaits an opportunity to interject. Finally, the soloists join together in a series of arpeggios spanning the highest range of the violin and lowest range of the cello, complementing the assets of each instrument before ascending a scale in unison to reintroduce the orchestra.

In the gentle *Andante* movement Brahms allows the soloists to introduce the first theme together in the same octave, further developing a sense of unity between the two instruments. There is a general sense of weightlessness through much of the movement as the orchestra floats below the two soloists and buoys them between the broad melodic theme and complimentary, almost secretive, secondary musical theme.

The *Vivace non troppo* is introduced with playfulness by the solo cello, which is then picked up by the violinist before taking a more serious tone in the orchestra. Brahms splits this fanciful theme between the woodwind instruments, exploring the colorfulness of his ensemble before bringing in a sweeping second idea reminiscent of the gentle second movement of the concerto. In this final movement, the soloists continue to have many unison passages by way of melody or intent. Brahms, at times, displays his contrapuntal prowess, using the orchestra almost like a chorus, grouping sections with unified intentions. The joyful third movement concludes victoriously – and one hopes Brahms really was pleased with himself for his friendship-mending, brilliantly thoughtful final orchestral work.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born May 7, 1840 - Votkinsk (Udmurtia), Russia

Died November 6, 1893 – St. Petersburg, Russia

Symphony No. 5

About a century before the term “imposter syndrome” was coined, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother that he agreed with critics who had panned the premiere of his fifth symphony. “I cannot complain of lack of inventive power, but I have always suffered from want of skill in the management of form ... It was clear to me that the applause and ovations were not for this but for other works of mine...” he said, resigning that any positive reception had little to do with his most recent work. It was merely luck, he thought, due to his reputation.

This discomfort, though unfathomable for many modern audiences, arose from a genuine place. Supported by the Moscow and St. Petersburg Conservatories, which promoted a more Western-influenced style of composition, and having secured a patron in Russian railroad tycoon Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, Tchaikovsky had completed four numbered symphonies, numerous fantasias and programmatic (story-telling) works, dozens of songs and vocal works, operatic works such as *Eugene Onegin*, and the famed ballet, *Swan Lake*. Despite his success, his works were often juxtaposed against nationalistic “Russian sounding” compositions created by his contemporaries, known as the Mighty Five.

This collection of men including César Cui, Alexander Borodin, Mily Balakirev, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov sought to create a sound that was uniquely and recognizably “Russian” – ignoring Western convention and sometimes even eschewing academic training. Some of the group regularly lambasted Tchaikovsky, his mentors, and his institutions in print and in person. Meanwhile, Tchaikovsky sought to imbue his works with identifiable Russian attributes while appealing to the sensibilities and conventions of Western European music. In his fifth symphony, we hear a cosmopolitan composer, a prolific creator whose skills in ballet, opera, song, and chamber music are combined with profound emotive qualities.

This four-movement Symphony is unified by a short theme, or “motto,” first offered by the clarinets in the introduction, *Andante*, of the first movement. In this first movement, Tchaikovsky takes the simple theme and uses the unique characteristics of each instrument or section to express it in a unique way. The movement is dense, with large swings of energy and, a bit unusual, two major tempo shifts. After the initial *Andante*, there is a lively *Allegro con anima*, and the movement ends calmly in the *Molto piu tranquillo*. In the second movement, *Andante cantabile con alcuna licenza*, a keen listener may hear the harmony of the original motto in the low strings, creating a warm, round sound from which the beautiful horn solo emerges. At its peak, a trumpet blares the original motto over rolling timpani. This second

movement is brimming with sequencing, a fact which he appears to have regretted but which reminds us of his most emotive ballets. For the third movement, Tchaikovsky employs a waltz, written in a particularly Western European style, based on a tune the composer had once heard while traveling in Florence, Italy. In the last minute of this buoyant waltz, the woodwinds reiterate the motto of the first movement. The fourth movement of Symphony No. 5 mirrors the first with two major tempo shifts. The *Andante maestoso* beginning features the cello section performing a more optimistic version of the original motto. Tchaikovsky then transforms this theme into a frenzied, harried, rapid locomotive, the *Allegro vivace*. This frenzy of notes and sound and activity opens the path for the contrapuntal chorale of the *Meno Mosso*.

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