

Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany on May 7, 1833. His father was Johann Jakob, a peasant from nearby Holstein who made his living playing a variety of instruments (primarily the contrabass). Jakob married his landlady, Johanna Nissen, and Johannes was their second of three children. When Johannes was seven, a local musician Otto Cossel gave him piano lessons. In 1846, Johannes began studying music theory with Eduard Marxsen who was the foremost music teacher in Hamburg. It was once thought that Johannes' early performing opportunities came mainly in the form of entertainment in local waterfront taverns and places of rather ill repute. Music historians today doubt this to be the case however, because of the child labor laws in effect at the time. Brahms also composed and arranged light music for local publishers and other performing artists. He gave his first solo piano recital at the age of 15, and when he was 16, performed a fantasia of his own.

Brahms did not allow his first three compositions to survive. Indeed, it was not until he composed his Scherzo for Piano Op. 4 in 1851 that he felt confident in sharing it publicly. Three piano sonatas and many songs followed in 1852-53 thus beginning his rise to fame in the music world. Brahms studied the music of Schumann and in September of 1853, visited the composer in Düsseldorf. Schumann thought very highly of the young composer's music and was instrumental in promoting Brahms' career. Schumann died an untimely death and whether out of gratitude for Schumann's help or from Brahms' generous nature and desire to help, he formed a life-long friendship with Schumann's wife Clara -14 years his senior.

In 1862, Brahms settled permanently in Vienna and focused on composing. He traveled frequently for concert tours and vacations and often spent his summers composing in the quiet countryside of Germany or Austria. Brahms' early works were written for small instrumental ensembles. He loved literature, as was apparent by the number of songs he composed: almost 200 solo songs, 25 duets, 27 quartets, over 100 folk songs, and many vocal canons.

Brahms did not complete his first symphony until he was over forty years old. An avid fan of Beethoven, Brahms was somewhat intimidated by the symphonic works of his legendary predecessor. He felt that in writing a symphony, he had to surpass that of Beethoven's Ninth; in his apartment, a bust of Beethoven looked down on where Brahms composed his masterpieces. In his zeal for the works of Brahms, Schumann had announced in a published article that Brahms was going to be the next great composer. Brahms was determined to live up to that prediction.

While he was working on his first symphony, he stated in a letter to conductor Herman Levi, "I will never compose a symphony! You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him [Beethoven] behind us." True to Schumann's prediction, Brahms was thought of by many as the "next" Beethoven. His first symphony which took Brahms almost 20 years to complete, was described by Hans von Bülow as "Beethoven's tenth symphony." Brahms composed three more symphonies more swiftly than the first (1877, 1883, and 1885).

Other major orchestral works by Brahms include two piano concertos, a violin concerto, a double concerto for violin and cello, and the German Requiem. Brahms composed many works based on the theme and variation form including: *Variations and Fugue on a theme by Händel*, *Paganini Variations*, and *Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn*. Brahms never wrote an opera nor did he write a tone poem.

In addition to his love of Beethoven, there were many factors that influenced the music of Brahms. He loved the works of Mozart and Haydn, and he collected autographs and first editions of their music. His favorite forms of composition were the sonata, symphony and concerto from

the Classical period. Brahms has been regarded as the most classical of the Romantic Composers. German folk music also had an influence on Brahms as he composed over 140 works for piano and voice. His lieder (German for songs), contain themes about the rural way of life in Germany.

Brahms was also influenced by the technological advancement of instruments, particularly the piano. With the advent of the cast iron frame, stronger strings, and the sustain pedal, came a more frequent use of the total range of the keyboard as evidenced in Brahms' works for piano in which the deep bass notes and pedal are used to create a powerful sound. He also enlarged the orchestras of his day by using trombones, contra bassoons, and the tuba. This addition on the "low end" of the orchestra came to be known as the "Brahms quality" of sound.

Brahms, like Beethoven, loved nature. He enjoyed long walks around Vienna and handing out penny candy to children. Adults found him brusque and sarcastic, his trademark beard receiving the brunt of many criticisms. Brahms was financially secure as a composer but chose to live modestly in a three room apartment in Vienna. He gave much of his money away to family and anonymously to young musicians.

Brahms was a perfectionist and often destroyed completed works that did not meet his standards of quality. In 1890, when he was 57, Brahms decided to stop composing. He systematically went through his apartment and destroyed incomplete manuscripts and compositions he did not like. He could not however, keep his decision to stop composing and in the years preceding his death, wrote a number of highly regarded works including two clarinet sonatas and the Four Serious Songs. In 1897, Brahms died from liver cancer; he was 64 years of age.