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BRAHMS

Four Hand Piano Music Vol. 8

Symphony No. 4 • Tragic Overture

Silke-Thora Matthies • Christian Köhn



Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Four Hand Piano Music, Volume 8

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg in 1833, the son of a double-bass player and his much older wife, a seamstress. His childhood was spent in relative poverty, and his early studies in music, as a pianist rather than as a string-player, developed his talent to such an extent that there was talk of touring as a prodigy at the age of eleven. It was Eduard Marxsen who gave him a grounding in the technical basis of composition, while the boy was able to use his talents by teaching and by playing the piano in summer inns, rather than in the dockside taverns of popular legend, a romantic idea which he himself seems later to have encouraged.

In 1851 Brahms met the émigré Hungarian violinist Reményi, who introduced him to Hungarian dance music that had a later influence on his work. Two years later he set out in his company on his first concert tour, their journey taking them, on the recommendation of the Hungarian violinist Joachim, to Weimar, where Franz Liszt held court and might have been expected to show particular favour to a fellow-countryman. Reményi profited from the visit, but Brahms, with a lack of tact that was later accentuated, failed to impress the Master. Later in the year, however, he met the Schumanns, through Joachim's agency. The meeting was a fruitful one.

In 1850 Schumann had taken up the offer from the previous incumbent, Ferdinand Hiller, of the position of municipal director of music in Düsseldorf, the first official appointment of his career and the last. Now in the music of Brahms he detected a promise of greatness and published his views in the journal he had once edited, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, declaring Brahms the long-awaited successor to Beethoven. In the following year Schumann, who had long suffered from intermittent periods of intense depression, attempted suicide. His final years, until his death in 1856, were to be spent in an asylum, while Brahms rallied to the support of Schumann's wife, the gifted pianist Clara

Schumann, and her young family, remaining a firm friend until her death in 1896, shortly before his own in the following year.

Brahms had always hoped that sooner or later he would be able to return in triumph to a position of distinction in the musical life of Hamburg. This ambition was never fulfilled. Instead he settled in Vienna, intermittently from 1863 and definitively in 1869, establishing himself there and seeming to many to fulfil Schumann's early prophecy. In him his supporters, including, above all, the distinguished critic and writer Eduard Hanslick, saw a true successor to Beethoven and a champion of music untrammelled by extra-musical associations, of pure music, as opposed to the Music of the Future promoted by Wagner and Liszt, a path to which Joachim and Brahms both later publicly expressed their opposition.

The first of Brahms's symphonies was slow in gestation. Overawed by the example of Beethoven and the manifold expectations of his friends, and unresponsive to their anxious queries, he eventually completed his *Symphony No.1 in C minor, Op.68*, in the summer of 1876. He was still busy with the four-hand piano arrangement of the first symphony, when, in the summer of 1877, he started work on his *Symphony No.2 in D major, Op.73*. This was followed in 1883 by *Symphony No.3 in F major, Op.90*, categorized by some as the composer's pastoral symphony, performed in Vienna in December of the same year. The next summer brought the beginning of work on the fourth and last of Brahms's symphonies, the *Symphony in E minor, Op.98*. This was completed at the same summer resort of Müzzzuschlag the following summer, to be performed under the composer's direction at Meiningen in October. The symphony is amazingly convincing in its four-hand piano version, from the quiet serenity of the opening and the massive grandeur that follows, mingled with lyricism, its structure transparent in the

reduced version. In the second movement Richard Strauss imagined a funeral procession moving silently across moonlit heights, suggesting, perhaps, an evocative painting by Caspar David Friedrich. A cello theme assumes prominence, with a decorative first violin part, after which the march resumes. The scherzo opens forcefully. Although it lacks a formal trio section, there is a relaxation of tension at the heart of the movement, before the original material returns in full vigour. It seems that Brahms had long contemplated a final movement in chaconne or passacaglia form, derived from his study of Bach. The movement starts with the passacaglia theme, scored in the orchestral version for wind instruments, now reinforced in grandeur by three trombones. In the thirty variations that follow Brahms demonstrates his mastery of the form and his debt to tradition, the whole revealed in the greatest clarity in the piano reduction, at one time the only sure means of hearing the work.

The *Tragic Overture*, intended seemingly as a companion piece to the *Academic Festival Overture*,

was written during the summer of 1880 at the resort of Bad Ischl. The material used for the overture seems to have been in the composer's mind for some ten years, since sketches for the *Liebeslieder Waltzes* and *Alto Rhapsody* appear in the same notebook. It was possibly intended as part of music for a staging of Goethe's *Faust* at the Burgtheater in Vienna, for which Brahms had expressed interest in providing incidental music, a proposal that came to nothing. In tripartite sonata form, the overture opens with dramatically powerful chords, contrasted with the theme that immediately flows from them. There is a more lyrical second subject and a development of the material, before an abridged recapitulation. The form and nature of the music suggest rather a symphony than an occasional overture, while listeners may care to imagine elements of the story of Faust, although Brahms himself avoided that kind of programmatic writing, of which Liszt was a contemporary champion.

Keith Anderson

Piano Duo Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn

The pianists Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn, with individual solo careers, came together in 1986 to form a piano duo and played their first concert in public the last day of October 1988. As a duo the two players have won wide acclaim, with international prizes, and appearances in recital and as soloists. They broadcast regularly and have been responsible for a number of first performances of music by notable contemporary composers. They have held international master classes for the piano duo and duet playing. In addition to their recordings of Brahms for Naxos, they have also recorded works by Dvořák and Giselher Klebe.

Silke-Thora Matthies was born in Gütersloh, in North Rhine-Westphalia, and studied in Detmold with Renate Kretschmar-Fischer and at The Juilliard School of Music in New York with Joseph Kalichstein, winning first prize at the New York Gina Bachauer Competition and further awards in the Budapest Liszt/Bartók Competition, the Bordeaux Jeunes Solistes, and the Cleveland (Ohio) Robert Casadesus Competition. She has recorded music ranging from Domenico Scarlatti to the contemporary and appears as a soloist and recitalist in Germany and abroad. Since 1992 she has served as a professor of piano at the Hochschule für Musik Würzburg in Bavaria, leads master classes and is often jury member for international piano competitions.

Christian Köhn was born in Bochum, North Rhine-Westphalia, and studied in Dortmund with Joseph Matthias Blome and in Detmold with Renate Kretschmar-Fischer. He won prizes in the Hamburg Steinway Piano Competition, and the Dortmund International Schubert Competition, with awards from the Hamburg Oscar-und-Vera-Ritter-Stiftung and the Bonn German Music Competition. His career has taken him as soloist and recitalist to various countries of Europe and the Near East. At the Musikhochschule Detmold he is an assistant professor of piano, and is the editor of Brahms Four Hand Piano Music, published by Bärenreiter.

Brahms was an accomplished pianist, whose output for the piano spanned his entire life. In addition to his solo works he made four-hand piano arrangements of many of his orchestral and vocal scores, to give them greater accessibility. The *Fourth Symphony* is amazingly convincing in its four-hand piano version, from the quiet serenity of the opening and the massive grandeur that follows, its structure transparent in the reduced version. Coupled with this monumental work is the Faustian *Tragic Overture*.

Johannes
BRAHMS

(1833-1897)

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Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98	40:22
① Allegro non troppo	12:38
② Andante moderato	11:12
③ Allegro giocoso	6:04
④ Allegro energico e passionato	10:27
Tragic Overture, Op. 81	
⑤ Allegro con brio	13:54

Silke-Thora Matthies • Christian Köhn

Recorded at the Clara Wieck Auditorium, Sandhausen, Germany, from 2nd to 7th September, 1996
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 Cover painting: *A Farmyard with peasants at a gateway* by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793-1865)
 (Christie's Images, London / Bridgeman Art Library)



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54:16



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