

## The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

### **BRAHMS' "FOURTH SYMPHONY"**

The magisterial "Fourth Symphony" by Brahms is the anchor on the program of orchestral music offered by the Berkshire Symphony, led by conductor Ronald Feldman Friday, May 5th, 8 pm in Chapin Hall on the Williams College campus. Also featured will be the 2006 winners of the Williams' student soloist competition. Admission is free.

The "Fourth" dates from 1885, and was the composer's penultimate orchestral work (the last was the "Double Concerto" for violin and cello, composed two years later.)

Brahms wanted to try out his new symphony far from Vienna – to test the waters for its reception. He chose Meiningen – a city in Thuringia, central Germany, which had an excellent orchestra. Brahms offered Hans von Bulow, the eminent pianist and conductor, the premiere.

Public reaction for this last of Brahms' four symphonies at its first performances was not unanimously favorable. Listeners had to work hard to find the easy and appealing charm of the composer's middle symphonies, and the austerity of the final movement, based upon the archaic Baroque form of the passacaglia, confused many. The question remains: Is this piece cerebral, and is it worth our efforts to probe its depths? Indulge me for a few paragraphs as I attempt to revive some of the issues prevalent 120 years ago, when this work was new.

The composer knew that the "Fourth Symphony" would not yield its secrets easily to the casual listener. In a letter to von Bulow, written as he had just completed the symphony, Brahms wrote "I am really afraid that its taste will be affected by the climate here: the cherries never ripen here, and you wouldn't eat them!" A caveat: we should remember that Brahms made a fetish of mock self-deprecation; he did it with his trusted friends, such as Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim, the eminent violinist for whom Brahms composed his "Violin Concerto."

So, admittedly, the “Fourth” was considered “difficult.” What about the second question - why should we take the trouble to listen with great involvement? The answer lies in the question of Brahms’ relation to music history, as he perceived his place within it.

Brahms’ mastery of the inherited musical forms derived from Bach, Beethoven and the then-little-known but venerable music of the Renaissance was comprehensive; he was the first great composer to be fully aware of “early” music, that is, music composed before J.S. Bach. Brahms’ personal library contained some of the first musicological research done on music composed before 1600, and he owned rare, antiquarian manuscripts and treatises on music theory and scores of several celebrated old masters.

In the “Fourth Symphony,” more than any other of his works, Brahms presents us with the conundrum of a composer torn between his love of tradition in conflict with his desire to conciliate this dedication to the past with his own musical style – a style which came into flower at the height of the Romantic era in music. Brahms sadly confessed to a few friends that he felt he was “born too late.” The “music of the future,” espoused by Richard Wagner, Franz Liszt, Gustav Mahler, Hugo Wolf and Richard Strauss was not for him.

It is a fascinating proclivity of mature artists near the end of their creative lives to produce works of Olympian gravitas and intellectual depth. Think of “The Art of Fugue” of Bach, the late string quartets of Beethoven and, in our own day, the solo “Violin Sonata” of Bartok, among many such examples. In instances such as these, we are listening to music of nobility and expansive, deliberative passion - the granitic contemplations of the evolved composer enjoining us to “go to the mountaintop,” to partake of the most sophisticated conceptions of the mind of musical genius.

So definitely, yes – we should make the effort to meet the composer on his own terms. As I suggested earlier, this “Fourth Symphony” is now canonical, and because it is, it is familiar and can be perceived and enjoyed on many levels. Just the other day, my good friend Stephen Walt, who is the principal bassoonist in the Berkshire Symphony, offered his opinion: “Whenever I play the slow movement of Brahms’ “Fourth,” it then and there becomes one of the high points in my musical life.”