





JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

VIOLIN CONCERTO SYMPHONY No. 4

Shunske Sato *solo violin*

NIEUWE PHILHARMONIE UTRECHT

Johannes Leertouwer
conductor



JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

VIOLIN CONCERTO OP. 77 IN D MAJOR

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Allegro ma non troppo | 21:20 |
| 2. Adagio | 08:09 |
| 3. Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo | 07:56 |

SYMPHONY No. 4 OP. 98 IN E MINOR

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------|
| 4. Allegro non troppo | 12:32 |
| 5. Andante moderato | 10:53 |
| 6. Allegro giocoso | 06:07 |
| 7. Allegro energico e passionato | 09:54 |

TOTAL TIME: 76:56





“THE CHERRIES DO NOT GROW SWEET HERE” by Johannes Leertouwer

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) composed his *Violin Concerto in D-major, op. 77* during the summer of 1878, in the idyllic Austrian town of Pörttschach am Wörthersee, in the same peaceful lake-side setting that had inspired his *Second Symphony* the year before. During the creative process, Brahms asked violinist Joseph Joachim (1831-1907) for advice. Joachim was not only one of the most highly respected violinists of the nineteenth century, but also a close friend of Brahms. The surviving correspondence documents a collaborative process that was direct and pragmatic. Brahms sent Joachim portions of the solo part as he was writing it, explicitly requesting critical feedback. In one letter, he wrote: “I beg you to write me the sort of comments you would make to yourself—‘difficult,’ ‘awkward,’ ‘impossible,’ etc.” Joachim responded with detailed suggestions concerning bowing, fingering, and articulation. While considerable parts of their exchange must have taken

place in person, Joachim's input is evident in revisions to the manuscript and in the final shape of the solo writing. Although the evidence shows that their collaboration did not constitute an equal partnership—Joachim being no more and no less than a trusted adviser and fellow musician to Brahms, who remained in full control of the creative process at all times,—it is likely that Joachim's advice was not limited to violinistic matters. Brahms initially contemplated a more expansive four part design, which he later applied in his *Second Piano Concerto op. 83*, for the concerto. Joachim is not recorded as having met this idea with much enthusiasm, which may have contributed to Brahms ultimately adopting the more commonly used three-movement structure. Although the precise course of this discussion is only partially docu-

mented, Joachim's role as advisor is clear from the correspondence as a whole. The most tangible contribution from Joachim is the cadenza to the first movement, which Brahms chose to adopt rather than replace with one of his own. The concerto was first performed on 1 January 1879 in Leipzig, with Joachim as soloist and Brahms conducting. Contemporary reactions were mixed, in part because of the work's scale and density. Some admired its grandeur, while others found it too symphonic—critic Eduard Hanslick praised its intellectual depth, but conductor Hans von Bülow famously called it a "concerto for violin against the orchestra." Brahms's own perspective is partly revealed in some of his letters, though it remains difficult to discern how to interpret his peculiar mix of seriousness, wit and self-depreciation. Writing to



Joachim, he once remarked: “The violin is no longer a fiddle—it’s become a philosopher.” And about the concerto’s difficulty: “I have written a concerto for you... but whether it is a violin concerto is another matter.” Joachim later described his approach to the work stressing that the solo part must remain integrated within the whole: “The violin part should grow out of the orchestra, not stand against it.” This suggestion honours the concerto’s symphonic character, which distinguishes it from many virtuoso concertos. Rather than aiming to offer opportunities for instrumental display, the *Violin Concerto*—like the piano concertos—requires the soloist to function as part of a larger musical body. Brahms’s *Fourth Symphony op. 98 in E-minor*, composed in 1884–85, represents the culmination of his symphonic thinking. Written

again during summer retreats—this time in Mürzzuschlag, Austria—the work is often described as autumnal, and sometimes somewhat melancholic or even tragic. Just like the *Violin Concerto*, the *Fourth Symphony* too, benefited from intense collaboration. This score occupies a distinctive place in the working relationship between Brahms, the Meiningen Court Orchestra and its chief conductor, Hans von Bülow. Unlike many of Brahms’s earlier orchestral works, the *Fourth Symphony* was shaped not only at the writing desk but also in rehearsal. Brahms worked directly with the Meiningen players over an extended period, leading rehearsals and testing the work in practice before its publication. This process allowed for a degree of refinement that went beyond conventional preparation for a premiere. Contemporary ac-

counts suggest that Brahms used these sessions to adjust matters of orchestral balance, articulation, and tempo. The orchestra thus functioned as a practical sounding board, enabling him to clarify textures and strengthen the symphony’s internal coherence. While the surviving correspondence does not document this process in detail, the sequence of rehearsals and revisions indicates a sustained and hands-on collaboration.

Hans von Bülow’s role was central in facilitating this exchange. Under his direction, the relatively small Meiningen orchestra had achieved an exceptional level of precision and discipline, which Brahms greatly appreciated. He remarked that: “In Meiningen one can finally hear things as they should sound.” On another occasion he wrote: “It is a joy to work in a place where things are

being taken seriously.” In Bülow’s remarks we can find confirmation of his shared appreciation of the work ethos at Meiningen, which he had helped shape. Referring to the collaboration with Brahms at Meiningen he wrote: “Here we work, we do not rehearse to show off.” He appreciated Brahms as a composer of “music of thought” (*Gedankenmusik*) and famously framed him in a historic lineage: “Bach, Beethoven, Brahms.” He considered the *Fourth Symphony* to be: “One of the deepest and most artful Symphonies ever written.” Bülow and his excellent people at Meiningen (Brahms’s words) offered him a working environment in which compositional decisions could be tested and refined based on actual sounding results from the orchestra. The *Fourth Symphony* provides ample proof of Brahms’s familiarity with—and

love for—earlier musical traditions, particularly Baroque forms. The finale is a passacaglia, built on a repeating bass line derived from a cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), *Nach dir, Herr, verlangen mich* BWV 150. The blending of historical form with Romantic expression was typical of Brahms. He did not imitate the past, but he reimagined it through a modern emotional lens. He shared early versions of the *Fourth Symphony* with close friends, often playing through the score on the piano. Reactions were mixed. The critic Eduard Hanslick is reported to have said to Brahms's friend Max Kalbeck that, after hearing the first movement, he was left with the feeling that two highly intelligent people had given him a very fierce beating. Even usually sympathetic listeners found the work dense and severe at first hear-

ing. This appears not to have surprised Brahms, who anticipated that the symphony might not be loved and cherished immediately. In a letter, he wrote: "I fear it tastes of the climate here—the cherries do not grow sweet." Brahms however, did not doubt the quality of his work. He also reportedly told friends: "It will be less pleasing at first, but it will wear better." The first performance of the symphony took place on October 25 1885 in Meiningen with the Court Orchestra under Brahms's direction. Initial responses were indeed respectful but cautious, as Brahms had foreseen. Some struggled with the intensity of the work and the lack of overt 'heroic' triumph. Yet over time, the *Fourth Symphony* came to be recognized as one of Brahms's greatest achievements—a work of profound structural mastery and emotional depth.



ON THE PERFORMANCE

by Johannes Leertouwer

My research into 19th-century performing practices has made me wonder about the identity of the music of the past. As I was studying how Brahms's music had been performed in the past, particularly by musicians he knew, respected and trusted, a question started to resonate in me: do the expectations the composer had of people performing his music form a part of the composition? When the composer heard his music in his mind, it must have been shaped at least partially by all kinds of unwritten performing traditions and conventions that he was familiar with.

What does it mean for our understanding of the piece that we cannot access this intended version of the music, or any of the actual performances by the composer himself or his contemporaries? Is it okay to play what is not on the page, even if our understanding of what that might have been cannot be based solely on historical research, but inevitably will be based in part on speculation?

Brahms expected many things from musicians who performed his works, things that he did not write in the score because he did not want



to do so, or because he felt no need to do so. To me it remains a baffling fact that most of these un-notated conventions and expectations, which historical research has shown to have been part of music making in the nineteenth century, are today met with resistance, mistrust and are often simply forbidden.

Hopefully we can all agree that no amount of research can ever result in the recreation of a historical truth or reality, but what historical research can do is very powerful. In my opinion, knowledge about historical performing practices can be used by musicians in two ways. Firstly, it can help us question conventions and the rules and regulations that have been put in place to safeguard 'proper' performance by authorities in the musical world such as juries, committees and

individual teachers and professors. Secondly, it can inspire us to build a musical narrative that we can call our own, but which has a demonstrable connection with performing practices of the times of the composer. That is what I have been trying to achieve with my Brahms project. Together with a group of dedicated musicians I created a space for experimentation. The orchestra became a laboratory in which expressive tools such as modification of rhythm and tempo and portamento were re-invented and integrated into our performances. These recordings, part of my doctoral dissertation, document the results of our collective research. They are by no means definitive renderings of this magical repertoire. They capture—perhaps even more so than other recordings—a moment in time, a snapshot of what we could achieve

in one performance at the end of an exciting week of hard work outside the comfort zone that our traditional musical education had provided previously.

I am convinced that we are only at the start of a process of rediscovery of the expressive nature of romantic repertoire and I expect a wave of new approaches and exciting discoveries. The chasm between knowledge about 19-century performing practices and what we do with that knowledge on stage is lamented by many scholars. But this chasm can also be seen as an opportunity.

I sincerely hope that the recordings I made can serve to help bridge the gap between research and performance and can inspire musicians to explore new paths and discover new expressive possibilities in this and other all too familiar repertoire.

The Lost Art of 19th-century Performance

The 19th century was a time of remarkable expressive freedom in music-making. Performers routinely employed rubato, portamento, and flexible tempo modifications—practices that were rarely notated but were considered essential to musical expression. With the rise of structuralist and modernist performance ideals in the early 20th century, however, many of these traditions were abandoned in favor of a more standardized, metronomic approach and greater evenness of tempo and sound. A more literal reading of the score became the norm for high level performance. My research seeks to re-invent lost tools, arguing that their application can shed new light on Brahms's music and how it may have been performed in his time. Central to

this approach is the concept of unprescribed modifications—adjustments of rhythm and tempo, that can bring the music to life. Brahms himself famously resisted metronome markings, believing that mechanical precision could never capture the organic, breathing quality of music. My performances embrace this philosophy, using historical evidence to guide my interpretations while leaving room for the spontaneity that Brahms valued so highly.

Portamento, Vibrato, and the Sound of the 19th Century

One of the most characteristic features of my approach to Brahms is the use of portamento—the sliding between notes that was common in 19th-century string playing. Far from being a mere ornament, portamento was an expressive device,

used to shape phrases and convey emotion. 19th-century methods describe portamento as the most important expressive tool for string players, enabling them to imitate the subtle shadings and nuances of the human voice. These slides can transform the sound of a string orchestra. Some portamenti are unified in the sections of the orchestra, others are left to the individual members of these sections. The application of portamenti is combined with a carefully calibrated use of vibrato, as an ornament applied in particularly expressive moments, not as an integral part of sound production as is the case in modern string playing. The combination of abundant portamento and restrained use of vibrato creates a sound in the string orchestra that can range from crystal clear to veiled and indirect, from radiant and powerful to thin and fragile.





These qualities have their place in Brahms's music and can be used to build a musical narrative with techniques and sounds Brahms himself may have been familiar with. The choice of instruments is equally significant. The orchestra performing in this recording employs gut strings, 19th-century woodwinds, and brass, all of which produce a more varied palette of colors than their modern counterparts, which are built for technical reliability and evenness of sound in all registers. The result is a sound world that is at once familiar and revelatory—one that highlights the contrasts and inequalities of timbre and mood that Brahms's music contains.

Tempo as a Living Organism

Modifications of rhythm and tempo are the topic of my dissertation:

Re-inventing the Nineteenth-Century Tools of Unprescribed Modifications of Rhythm and Tempo in Performances of Brahms's Symphonies and Concertos. These modifications are at the core of my approach to these scores. Drawing on historical accounts and early recordings, I demonstrated in my PhD dissertation (Leiden University, 2023) that 19th-century performers treated tempo as a living, breathing entity, subject to constant fluctuation. A phrase might begin slowly, accelerate through its climax, and then relax—all within the span of a few bars. This flexibility, far from being arbitrary, was a means of shaping the musical narrative, creating tension and release in ways that modern, more rigid tempos do not. I find the description of the playing of the Meiningen court orchestra under the direction of Brahms's

favorite conductor Fritz Steinbach (1855-1916) by British music critic and scholar John Alexander Fuller Maitland (1856-1936) very telling: “The Meiningen Orchestra under Herr Steinbach was hors concours; their Brahms was absolutely non-metrical and absolutely unified.” Music critic Alexander Berrische (1883-1940) wrote that “Brahms had died a second time” as he lamented the fact that Steinbach’s approach to conducting Brahms, which was directly inspired by the composer and largely based on his instructions, had not yet taken root sufficiently to be carried into the future at the time of Steinbach’s death. Clearly it would be preposterous for me to claim that I could reinvent Steinbach’s “absolutely unmetrical” Brahms. Instead, I have tried to imagine what the result of a flexible approach to rhythm and tem-

po might be. In these recordings, I have strived for a sense of spontaneity and immediacy, as if the music is being created in the moment. Audiences accustomed to the polished and uniform sound of contemporary orchestras might find this approach surprising or even unsettling initially. My hope is that it will reveal the music’s emotional depth and dramatic power in a captivating manner and create a bridge between the past and present.

To know more about
The Brahms Project
www.johannesleertouwer.nl



The orchestra assembled for this project, under the direction of Johannes Leertouwer, was formed through a close collaboration between De Nieuwe Philharmonie Utrecht and the Conservatorium van Amsterdam.

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