Symphony No. 1 in C Major, opus 21

Far too many people dismiss Beethoven’s First Symphony as a lightweight imitation of Haydn and Mozart, unworthy to be compared with the mighty symphonies that followed. It is true that we find here almost nothing of the heroic grappling with issues of human aspiration and triumph over adversity that dominates his Third, Fifth, and Ninth symphonies; instead, this symphony is witty and joyous from beginning to end. Yet already his unmistakable voice and daring approach are on display, especially in the bold third-movement scherzo. Far more than a summation of what the composer had learned from 18th-century symphonic tradition, the First delivered a warning shot of the revolution he would launch just three years later with his Third Symphony, the dramatic “Eroica.”

The First was probably written in 1799–1800, though sketches for it go back to 1795–96. Beethoven was slow to tackle the symphonic genre; he waited until he was nearly 30 and had already written two piano concertos, many sonatas, and six string quartets. Under his baton, his maiden symphony was premiered in Vienna on April 2, 1800 at a benefit concert to raise money for himself; at this concert, he also performed his First Piano Concerto and works by Mozart and Haydn. Haydn had been Beethoven’s teacher off and on since the young composer arrived in Vienna in 1792, and, not surprisingly, the First Symphony pays considerable tribute to the older composer’s effervescent style.

First Movement: With his very first chords — a pungent dissonance resolving to a harmony not belonging to the home key of C — Beethoven serves notice that his is a new voice. In fact, throughout the brief slow introduction, we’re not sure what the key really is; only the abrupt opening of the main section confirms that it is C major. An aggressive but plain-Jane first theme is, like Beethoven’s best symphonic themes, rich in developmental potential. Contrasting with it is a limpid, graceful second theme, launched by a duet of oboe and flute. Following the custom of the day, this exposition section is repeated before moving on to a taut, dramatic development. Here, Beethoven shows he is already skilled at breaking apart the elements of his first theme and coaxing marvelous new possibilities out of the fragments.

The Andante cantabile second movement, in the key of F Major, actually sounds much more like an 18th-century courtly minuet than does its successor movement, which seems mislabeled as a minuet. The second violins open with a mincing, Haydnesque theme that grows into a little fugue as the other instruments enter. Gracious and gentle as this movement is, it does contain an uneasy dotted-rhythm accompaniment, first heard in the timpani, that adds considerable excitement to the development section when it is passed to the strings.

Beethoven called his third movement a minuet, but it is really the first of the faster and tougher scherzo movements he developed to replace the older court dance. It is full of bold harmonic modulations and dueling cross-rhythms between instruments. The middle trio section features the woodwinds (they play an important role throughout this work) and, although initially gentler, crescendos at the end to match the vigor of the scherzo. This is the work’s most forward-looking movement.
The last movement reverts to the exuberant, whirlwind style of a Haydn finale. It opens with a loud, portentous chord suggesting serious matters ahead. But its trick opening lets the cat out of the bag. Here Beethoven proved that, despite his squabbles with Haydn, he had learned much from the old master.

A German Requiem, opus 45

In early February 1865, Johannes Brahms received a telegram from his brother, Fritz, in Hamburg: “If you want to see our mother again, come at once.” The composer traveled as fast as he could from Vienna, but arrived too late: Christiane Brahms had already died of a stroke at age 76. Though he maintained a stoical face before his family, Brahms was devastated by the loss of the mother who had stood lovingly by him through all his trials and triumphs. After he returned to Vienna, a friend Josef Gändsbacher dropped in at his apartment and found him playing Bach’s Goldberg Variations with tears streaming down his face. Brahms briefly told Gändsbacher of his loss, but never stopped playing. Music was his ideal solace from grief.

That grief would generate the composer’s longest and most profound work: A German Requiem (Ein Deutsches Requiem), mostly composed over a one-year period from 1865 to 1866. But actually the music for this choral-orchestral masterpiece had been gestating for at least a decade, and it was originally intended as a memorial to Robert Schumann, Brahms’ discoverer and mentor.

Thus A German Requiem is actually a memorial to two important people in Brahms’ life: his biological mother and his artistic father. And it was an intensely personal and original work. Unlike most musical requiems, it is not based on the liturgical Catholic rite for the dead: a service emphasizing prayers for the souls of the departed. Rather, it is an idiosyncratic Protestant setting, with its text drawn by Brahms himself from the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha of Martin Luther’s German Bible. The emphasis is not on the dead but on finding consolation for the living, as stated in the Requiem’s very first line from St. Matthew’s gospel: “Blessed are they that mourn.”

A word about Brahms’ own religious stance: the composer was raised in the Protestant tradition and remained a faithful reader of the Bible throughout his life. But in adulthood, he became a religious skeptic bordering on agnosticism and was never a churchgoer. The text he assembled for his Requiem expresses more or less his own convictions: a universal, nondenominational message, but not a specifically Christian one. Premiered in Leipzig on February 18, 1869, A German Requiem is a strikingly original work with few parallels before or since.

Listening to the Music: Constructing solid musical architecture was always an important concern for Brahms, and so the Requiem is shaped as a mighty arch. The quieter, more restrained first and last movements mirror each other, as do the more dramatic and forceful second and sixth movements, and the more personal third and fifth movements dominated by solo voices. The well-loved fourth movement, “How Lovely Are Thy Dwelling Places,” stands alone as an intimate and untroubled central interlude.

Even though it is in the major mode — F Major, the Requiem’s home key — movement one, “Blessed are they who mourn,” is weighed down with grief. Brahms chose a very dark-toned ensemble: violas, cellos, double basses, and the more somber wind colors and omitted the brighter sounds of clarinets, trumpets, and even violins. The first melody we hear, in the cellos, is a variation of J.S. Bach’s chorale tune “Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten” (Whoever lets solely dear God reign); this rising-and-falling
theme will reappear many times in this movement. Equally important is a three-note rising motive in the soprano part topping the chorus’s first entrance; this is the seed motive from which the entire work grows. Despite the heavy sorrow, there is a mood of calm underlying this music, and the lighter middle section, “They that sow with tears shall reap in joy,” explains why.

The second movement, “For all flesh is as grass,” is a strange yet powerful mixture of a funeral march and slow sarabande dance. The violins finally appear, but, since they are played with mutes, they sound veiled and husky. The chorus’s grim unison melody follows the shape of the Bach chorale. Eventually, the music accelerates a bit and actually begins to dance for the interlude “So be patient, beloved brethren”: a promise of deliverance. After a reprise of the funeral dirge comes a magical moment as the music brightens into the major and the chorus proclaims that, unlike mortal man, “the Word of the Lord endures forever.”

Movement three, “Lord, teach me to know my end,” personalizes the previous movement’s message as the baritone soloist pleads for help in accepting his mortality. “How shall I find consolation?” he cries and the chorus repeats the question with growing frenzy. Moving from D minor to D Major, the answer comes in a radiant choral cadenza: “My hope is in the Lord.” Then begins one of the Requiem’s most extraordinary passages: a double fugue for chorus and orchestra with each pursuing its own separate fugue subject. All this contrapuntal activity is anchored in a mighty sustained pedal on the pitch D, representing the secure grip of the hand of God.

The Requiem’s peaceful, lyrical oasis, “How lovely are Thy dwelling places,” is a vision of untroubled faith. The key is a warm E-flat major, the meter a gently swaying 3/4, and the orchestra a chamber ensemble of great beauty and delicacy.

Movement five, “You Now Have Sorrow,” is a radiant expression of motherly love enduring beyond the grave. It was the last movement Brahms composed, added only in 1868 at the suggestion of the composer’s old teacher Eduard Marxsen. But perhaps this was the soonest after his mother’s death he could bear to write music expressing his own loss so openly. How touching are the lines “I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice” and “As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you.” Muted strings and woodwinds, with occasional soft interjections from the chorus, accompany the soprano soloist’s beautiful, arching lines: an idealized representation of the voice of Christiane Brahms.

In the sixth movement, “For we have here no continuing city,” the chorus wanders like homeless refugees through a forest of harmonically unstable lines; this bewildered search is intensified by the entrance of the baritone soloist intoning the famous words from First Corinthians. Here we have the Requiem’s only reference to the Day of Judgment, but the chorus and orchestra greet this prospect with confidence and jubilation: “Death is swallowed up in victory!”

Movement seven, “Blessed are the Dead”: Having found hope for the living, the Requiem now turns its attention for the first time to the dead. This music — which begins with the sopranos’ singing a reversal of the Bach chorale tune — relates back to movement one, but is now bigger and more confident. And how much the mood has changed is brought home clearly when the altos lead a reprise of the Requiem’s opening music. Instead of murky low strings, they are now accompanied by shining high woodwinds and violins. At the work’s close, the harp — an instrument Brahms rarely used — wafts sweetly upward.

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