

Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1883, Hamburg, Germany.

Died April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.

Concerto for Violin and Cello in A Minor, Op. 102 (Double)

Allegro

Andante

Vivace non troppo

Brahms composed his Double Concerto in the summer of 1887 and conducted its first performance in Cologne on October 18 of that year. Theodore Thomas led his orchestra in the American premiere on January 5, 1889, in New York City. The orchestra consists of pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons; four horns; two trumpets; timpani; and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-two minutes.

For Brahms, the year 1887 launched a period of tying up loose ends, finishing business, and clearing his desk. He began by asking Clara Schumann, with whom he had long shared his most intimate thoughts, to return all the letters he had written to her over the years. Clara, clearly stunned, at first hoped to extract "everything relating to his artistic or private life." "But he would not hear of it," she wrote in her diary on October 16. "And so today I handed them over to him with tears." Two days later, Brahms conducted the premiere of his final orchestral composition, this concerto for violin and cello—or the Double Concerto, as it would soon be known. Brahms privately decided to quit composing for good, and in 1890 he wrote to his publisher Fritz Simrock that he had thrown "a lot of torn-up manuscript paper" into the Traun River, and that he had abandoned his fifth symphony. (But Brahms was not yet done writing music: inspired by the playing of clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, he wrote a clarinet trio and quintet in 1891 and two clarinet sonatas in 1894; Clara's death in 1896 prompted his last work, the Four Serious Songs.)

The Double Concerto, written for the great violinist Joseph Joachim and Robert Hausmann, the cellist in the Joachim Quartet, was less a work of farewell than of reconciliation. In 1887 Brahms and Joachim were no longer speaking. They had been best friends almost from the day they met in May 1853 (Brahms was twenty, Joachim twenty-two). It was Joachim who had introduced the shy young composer to the Schumanns, leading Robert to write an influential news-paper column proclaiming Brahms a "young eagle," and arousing in Clara feelings of an intensity and emotional complexity that she would never completely shake. Brahms and Joachim were close for many years; they talked often, about everything that mattered to them, from affairs of the heart to business (Joachim offered indispensable advice on technical matters throughout the composition of Brahms's violin concerto). Then in 1880, Joachim, who had always been a helplessly jealous man, began to suspect that his wife, the contralto Amalie Spies, was having an affair with Fritz Simrock, Brahms's publisher. Brahms wrote a long letter insisting on Amalie's innocence—a clumsy attempt to patch up the Joachims' faltering marriage that

only precipitated their divorce and put an end to the friendship between the two men. For years Brahms wrote to Joachim and sent him scores, but, although he continued to play Brahms's music, Joachim no longer wanted his companionship.

During the summer of 1887, after Brahms settled in a rented villa overlooking Lake Thun in Switzerland, he seized upon a novel plan. In August Brahms wrote Joachim one last letter, saying that he had been unable to resist composing a new concerto for him and Hausmann, and that if Joachim wasn't interested, he should simply write "I decline" on a post-card. "If not," Brahms continued, "my questions begin. Would you like to see a sample? I am now copying the solo parts. Do you feel like getting together with Hausmann to check them for playability? Could you think about trying the piece with Hausmann and with me at the piano, and eventually with the three of us with orchestra in some town or other? I won't say out loud and specifically what I quietly hope and wish" This was the peace offering that Joachim ultimately could not refuse, and, like many a listener since; he melted as soon as he heard the music.

Joachim, together with Hausmann, met Brahms at Clara's house in Baden-Baden in late September; it was the first time the two men had spoken in seven years. They played through the work around Clara's piano, and then with the local orchestra. Although the music making went splendidly and the conversation showed no signs of strain (Brahms and Joachim immediately reverted to the intimate "du"), the old closeness was gone, and their friendship seemed now, for certain, to be over for good.

Together, the three men began to prepare for the premiere, which the composer conducted in Cologne the following month. The reception was surprisingly tepid, and even Brahms's old friend Theodore Billroth later told the critic Eduard Hanslick that he found the concerto's closely wrought style tedious and wearisome, "a really senile production," as he tastelessly put it. As with Beethoven, whose final, visionary works were dismissed because of his deafness, the novelties of Brahms's old age convinced even his best friends that he was simply washed up. At the American premiere in New York in 1889, conducted by Theodore Thomas (with Victor Herbert, in his pre-operetta days, as the cellist), the score was dismissed as "not the most catchy thing imaginable. 'It was years before the Double Concerto was accepted as the equal of Brahms's other concertos—it was the last of the four to appear on Chicago Symphony programs—and it is still the least-often played.

The idea of writing a concerto for more than one soloist was unfamiliar in the late nineteenth century, and even Brahms, who knew music history better than any composer of the day, probably could not think of any distinguished models other than the double violin concerto by Bach, Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante for violin and viola, and Beethoven's Triple Concerto for violin, cello, and piano. Brahms's pairing of violin and cello was particularly unexpected. "Surely this wonderful combination has never been tried before," Clara wrote at the time, and it is indeed without precedent. Brahms himself described the score simply as a "strange flight of fancy," although it is the logical culmination of his longtime interest in the baroque concerto grosso form, with its team of soloists. (Brahms, incidentally, was a great champion of Handel's music and in 1874 he conducted a performance of Solomon in Vienna.

Brahms had written his two piano concertos for himself to play, and he had composed his violin concerto in consultation with Joachim. Now, however, he was on his own, and he was clearly uncomfortable. "I ought to have handed on the idea to someone who knows the violin better than I do (Joachim has unfortunately given up composing)," he wrote to Clara at one point. "It is a very different matter writing for instruments whose nature and sound one only has a chance acquaintance with, or only hears in one's mind, from writing for an instrument that one knows as thoroughly as I know the piano." (Clara reminded him, apparently without providing consolation, that he had written all those symphonies.) Music for solo cello with orchestra, in particular, was unusual in Brahms's day (Robert Schumann's Cello Concerto of 1850 was not yet known). Brahms's famous comment on first seeing the score to Dvořák's Cello Concerto shortly before he died—"Why on earth didn't I know one could write a cello concerto like this? If I'd only known, I'd have written one long ago!"—confirms its novelty.

Throughout Brahms's concerto, the cello takes the lead—perhaps its role was to mediate between composer and violinist. Brahms begins with two cadenzas (each introduced by the orchestra), and while the first one, for cello, is long and expansive, the second, for violin, quickly turns into a duet with the cello. Despite its monumentality, the whole first movement is an extended dialogue—by turns intimate, heated, consoling, and ultimately conciliatory—for two instruments so alike in design yet so very different in character. The solo music throughout is extraordinarily difficult, yet there is very little obvious virtuoso spectacle. (Brahms saves for a few, telling moments the simple but stunning effect of having the violin and cello play in octaves.) The orchestral writing, for all its power, is uncommonly clear and economical. The entire movement is a masterful union of symphonic energy and inward lyricism.

In the slow movement, a horn call cues a generous, deep-voiced melody played by the soloists, again in octaves. Brahms's command of color is so subtle and his orchestration so inventive that each repetition of the tune brings a sense of variation. An elaborate and demanding (though unshowy) double cadenza leads to one last exploration of the theme. The finale, surprisingly for such a grand and powerful work, is both playful and humorous, intended as it was for the man with whom Brahms once regularly shared jokes and laughter. Just before the end, a tender and almost wistful mood sweeps through the music. But Brahms had written this concerto in order to bring Joachim into his life again, and in the final page, so resolute and joyous, he never looks back.

Phillip Huscher