

CARL MARIA VON WEBER
(1786–1826)

Overture, *Oberon* (1826)
(9mins)

By the summer of 1823 Weber was suffering with tuberculosis, and for the next 18 months he composed almost nothing. Then in August 1824 Charles Kemble, of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, invited Weber to compose an opera for London; Weber's fame there had been established through performances of his opera *Der Freischütz* (*The Freeshooter*). Weber was relieved at the prospect of being able to provide for his family, and accepted. He was offered *Faust* or *Oberon*, opting for the latter, to a libretto by Planché. Weber was nervous of writing for an unfamiliar audience, declaring that: "The cut of an English opera is certainly very different from a German one".

The score was incomplete when Weber travelled to London in February 1826. He hastily finished it, and *Oberon* was premiered to a rapturous reception on 21 April. Tragically, Weber died in his sleep soon afterwards, the night before he was due to return home.

Planché's libretto was uninspiring, but Weber's music is exceptional. The overture begins with a noble slow introduction featuring horn solo, delicate strings and woodwind decorations, giving way to a swift movement full of memorable themes and, remarkably, *joie de vivre*, softened by a lyrical reprise of the opening ideas.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770–1827)

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E flat, Op. 73, *Emperor* (1809–10)
(36 mins)

Allegro
Adagio un poco moto
Rondo: Allegro

In 1805 Beethoven wrote: "God knows why my piano music still makes the poorest impression on me." Within a few years this apparent struggle had been decisively overcome, culminating in his final complete concerto, the Piano Concerto No. 5. Work had begun amidst the Siege of Vienna in 1809 (or perhaps a little earlier), despite the surrounding turmoil. Beethoven wrote of the "destructive, disorderly life around me: nothing but drums, cannon, and human misery in every form". During the siege itself Beethoven is said to have hidden in his brother's cellar, covering his head with pillows.

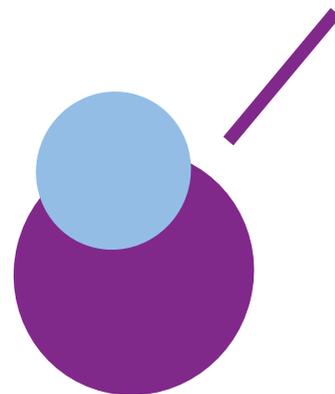
The concerto's sketches offer further insights into Beethoven's state of mind. Since 1808 he had been staying with the separated Countess Marie Erdödy. When he discovered that she was bestowing large sums of money on his servant, he assumed a seedy transaction, scribbling on draft pages of the concerto: "What more can you want? You have received the servant from me instead of the master... What a substitution!!!! What a glorious exchange!!!!" He promptly >>

moved out. The slow movement bears another bitter remark: "Austria rewards Napoleon"; Beethoven, who had once idolised Napoleon, was by now disgusted at the repercussions of his power-hungry actions.

The concerto was premiered in Leipzig in 1810, to thunderous applause. The subtitle, *Emperor*, was not Beethoven's own but was added later. When the work was published in February 1811 it was dedicated to his student Archduke Rudolph, son of Emperor Leopold II.

The music unfolds in a majestic, symphonic sweep, starting with an innovative gesture: an extended cadenza for the soloist, supported by powerful chords played by the full orchestra and summarising in miniature the whole first movement. In the tender slow movement, one of Beethoven's most beautiful creations, the piano is given graceful material that foreshadows Chopin. An orchestral held note bridges the gap between the 'Adagio' and a brilliant, jubilant 'Rondo'.

Interval (20 mins)



JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 (c. 1854–76) (45mins)

*Un poco sostenuto – Allegro
Andante sostenuto
Un poco allegretto e grazioso
Adagio – Più andante – Allegro non troppo,
ma con brio*

In 1862, aged 29, Brahms sent some music to Clara Schumann; she wrote to the violinist Joseph Joachim: "Johannes sent me the other day – imagine the surprise! – the first movement of a symphony." Clara noted down the opening, which she described as "rather strong, but I have soon become used to it. The movement is full of wonderful beauties, and the themes are treated with a mastery that is becoming more and more characteristic of him."

Clara's excitement was contagious, Joachim replying optimistically: "Perhaps I shall be able to invite you to Hanover for Brahms's symphony at the end of October." In reality, it would be another 12 years before Brahms completed the work.



Creatively, he wrestled with potential replacements for a *scherzo* (lively) movement, and with a suitable approach to the finale. More practically, he needed to earn enough money to give him the time to devote to a large-scale work, a project that risked losing him money if unsuccessful.

In the summer of 1868, Brahms was ready to return to the symphony. He healed a temporary rift with Clara Schumann by sending her a postcard saying, "Thus blew the shepherd's horn today" captioning a simple melody to the words, "High on the mountain, deep in the valley, I greet you a thousandfold". This alpine horn tune became a key moment in the introduction to the symphony's finale. Brahms made further tentative attempts at the work between 1874 and 1876. He visited the conductor Hans von Bülow, playing the symphony for him on the piano. Bülow promptly shifted his allegiance from Wagner to Brahms, and he conducted the work's premiere in 1876, calling it, in a nod to Beethoven, "The Tenth". Bülow wrote to a friend: "I believe it is not without the intelligence of chance that Bach, Beethoven and Brahms are in alliteration."

Despite the affinity with Beethoven, Brahms's First Symphony is not backward-looking, possessing numerous innovative features. The work opens with an extraordinary statement: an anguished

'Adagio' punctuated by relentless timpani, mellowing before the main movement brings a further injection of tension, contrasted with passages of lyricism. The deft handling of such rich material on what could be an unwieldy scale demonstrates Brahms's hard-won skill as a symphonist.

The mysterious and beautiful slow movement features Brahms's characteristically mercurial use of rhythm, and he solved the *scherzo* quandary with an elegant movement featuring memorable descending lines and rhythmic exchanges. The finale is a supreme marriage of Baroque and Beethovenian elements, the essentially Classical orchestra deployed to sound wonderfully rich, particularly its glorious writing for horns (Clara's alpenhorn theme) and woodwinds. The resemblance between the chorale theme and Beethoven's Ninth was so obvious that Brahms exclaimed, "Any jackass can see that!" Moments of conflict are heightened with more rhythmic dislocations, and the coda's ecstatic recollection of the introduction's trombone chorale is a transcendental moment emphasising with unfettered joy the greatness of Brahms's achievement.

Feature & Programme notes by Joanna Wyld
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