

Brahms symphony no.3 programme note

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“ Many music lovers will prefer the titanic force of the first symphony; others the untroubled charm of the second, but the third strikes me at being artistically the most nearly perfect. ” – Edward Hanslick, music critic. Brahms’ third symphony was long awaited by his fans, after a six year break from his second symphony. It is neither forceful, nor charming. It is a strange, non-traditional work. Its opening is reminiscent of Schumann’s “ Rhenish”, making us wonder, why? Is it an homage to his friend? Or is it yet another alleged reference to Clara Schumann?

The premier was one to remember. On December 2nd, 1883, under the conducting of Hans Richter, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra debuted the symphony to fans and hecklers alike. Even with the death of long time enemy Richard Wagner the feud lingered on. Wagner fans chose that night to attempt an interference. However, it was unsuccessful and the show was a hit. After the premier, Brahms polished the score several times before releasing a final copy in may of 1884. There are many strange attributes to this relatively short piece.

The first obvious one is the third movement; it is a poco allegretto, which is unusual for the time period. The other is the repeated use of an F- Ab – F motive, which gives a diminished sound that is completely unexpected. The motive (F – Ab – F) is said to be derived from a saying of Brahms’ close friend Joseph Joachim, “ Free, but lonely” or “ Frei aber einsam”. Taking the first three letters of each word you get F- A- E. This short motive Brahms, Schumann and Dietrich used to compose a violin sonata in honor of their friend.

Brahms later declared himself “ Free, but happy” or “ Frei aber froh”. This gives us the motive F – A – F. Why, then, does Brahms choose to use an Ab instead of natural A? Probably because the Ab gives his harmony a non-traditional sound. Instead of the regular chord progression he uses an F major chord to a diminished 7th. This should resolve to a C major, but instead it goes back to F major. It then slides to an F minor chord, and then to an unexpected Db minor chord before another diminished 7th, finally resolving to C major, as it should.

This motive is heard throughout the symphony, whether quite obvious as in the first three bars, or in the bass line as in bars 4-6. This unusual chord progression also explains why the last movement is in F minor, instead of the expected F major. The final movement of this piece leads you to think of dark, dramatic struggle due to the F minor. Rather than a tragic ending, he lets the clouds part and brings back the motive of F – Ab – F, and finishes his symphony as it began.

The finale is lyrical, passionate and rich in melody. The motive is quoted just before the recapitulation and the symphony ends very peacefully. Julie White Symphony No. 3, Free Scores at The International Music Score Library Project. Leonard Burkat; notes for the 1998 recording (Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra) Kamien R, (2000) Johannes Brahms. In Music: An Appreciation (9th edition, P. 352) McGraw- Hill Walter Frisch. Brahms: The Four Symphonies, New Haven: Yale University Press (2003) : 91 – 114