

Johannes Brahms

Like Mozart and Beethoven before him, German-born Johannes Brahms (1833–1897 — see Figure 2-14) was a musical child prodigy. Luckily for him and for us, his father (a bass player) recognized and nurtured his talent during the formative years.

But unlike his musical predecessors, who acquired musical posts in such exalted surroundings as cathedrals and castles, Brahms got jobs playing piano in Hamburg's taverns and brothels. (For more on brothel experiences, we gently refer you to another ...*For Dummies* book — the one written by Dr. Ruth Westheimer.) Still, a job was a job, and Brahms became familiar with a huge amount of music — especially dance music, which he performed every night during his teenage years.

A lucky break

Brahms was 20 when he got to meet the famous Robert Schumann. Upon experiencing Brahms' music, Schumann wrote in a musical journal: "Hats off, gentlemen — a genius!"

But Robert wasn't the only Schumann who took an interest in young Brahms; so did Robert's pretty wife, Clara. History doesn't record exactly *how* close she and Brahms became — except to note that after Robert Schumann's death, Brahms and Clara spent more and more time together.

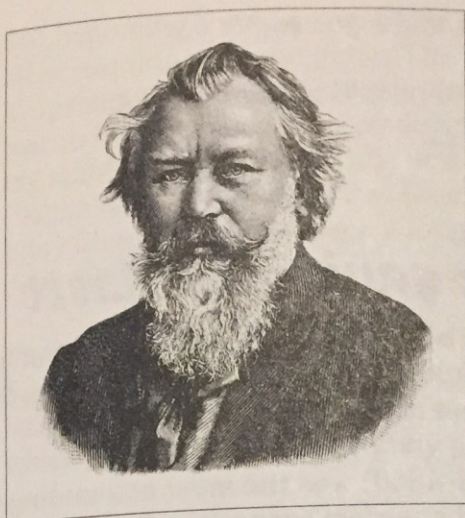
Eventually, Brahms became one of the leading composers of the day; his fame spread throughout his native Germany and beyond.

The big leagues

The celebrity German pianist/conductor Hans von Bülow coined the phrase "the three B's: Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms." This honor must have been incredibly flattering to Brahms, but it also saddled him with a great feeling of responsibility to carry on the great German-Austrian tradition in music. He even settled in Vienna, where all the greatest masters had lived.

Brahms carried out his responsibility well, adding a warm, rich, Romantic expressiveness to the forms and structures of Baroque and Classical music. But he was one of the most self-critical composers in history. He threw out dozens or even hundreds of compositions before anyone had a chance to hear them. In fact, he didn't publish his first symphony until he was 43. By way of contrast, by the time *Mozart* was that age, he'd published 41 symphonies, died, and been buried for eight years.

Figure 2-14:
Johannes
Brahms,
one of the
greatest
of all
composers
of classical
music.



What's amazing to us now is that Brahms' music, so lush in harmony and charming in style, was considered academic, plodding, harsh, and sometimes even dissonant by the public of his time. (Listen to Track 5 of your free CD and judge for yourself.) As recently as 1930, a concertgoer at a major American concert hall added some graffiti to an exit sign to make it read: "Exit in Case of Brahms."

The reason for these complaints, we think, is that melody was not Brahms' strongest suit. Like Beethoven, he often worked with little musical ideas called *motives* — just two- or three-note licks, for example — and worked them out in ingenious ways, exploring all the possibilities and permutations. The result was stunning, but not always what you'd call hummable. Brahms certainly *wished* that he'd been blessed with a gift for catchy tunes, however. "I would give up everything I have ever composed," he once said, "to have written the *Blue Danube Waltz*!"

Boning up on Brahms

Because there's perfection aplenty in most of Brahms' works, you can start almost anywhere and get an awesome sampling. But here are some of our favorites.



For orchestral forces, try the following:

- ✓ All four of his symphonies — but listen to no. 2 first!
- ✓ *Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn*
- ✓ Piano Concerto no. 2 in B-flat major, opus 83
- ✓ Violin Concerto in D major, opus 77
- ✓ *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (also known as *A German Requiem*) for solo singers, chorus, and orchestra

Coda

5:54 Just when you thought the music was going to come to a halt (as it did at the end of the exposition), it goes on. And on! The intensity continues to build as Beethoven takes you into the *coda*, or tail, of the movement. The four-note theme plays again and again; the notes repeat in a frantic, driving rhythm.

5:59 Then, to add to the excitement, the melody note in the violins goes *up* a notch exactly at this point, as if shifting into a higher gear. Then, for a moment, the storm pauses — just long enough for a quiet bassoon rendition of the four-note theme.

6:05 And then the music rages again. From here on, Beethoven is unrelenting. He shouts, he rages, he pounds his fist, until . . .

7:00 All the forces in nature and music convene in this one moment. A final statement of the two four-note themes, each with an earth-shaking hold. And then, with a series of concise blows, Beethoven ends the movement.

5 Brahms: Symphony No. 4, Third Movement

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) was incredibly self-critical; he never let a piece out of his sight until it was perfect. He didn't give birth to his first symphony until he reached the age of 43; and he wrote only four symphonies in all.

The final symphony is perhaps the most severe and intense of the four — except for the third movement. This charming *Allegro giocoso* (“Lively and joyous”) movement is a ray of sunshine. It's Brahms in one of his rare, “unbuttoned” moods. At its first performance, this movement caused such spontaneous cheers that it had to be repeated.



It also has the distinction of being the only movement of a Brahms symphony that uses a triangle.

0:00 A *fortissimo* (very loud) burst from the entire orchestra (except triangle, that is) starts the boisterous mood. Remember this rhythm, because it comes back later. “Come and get your beans, boys! Come and get your beans, boys!” would accurately describe this rhythm, although we're quite confident that's not how *Brahms* would have described it.

0:04 Suddenly, the music comes to rest on a low, accented chord, as if to say, “No-o-o-o . . . !” This chord comes back later, too.

0:06 As if that chord were gathering up energy, it now launches on a lively, jagged course, a series of chords in the rhythm of “Giddy-up, giddy-up, giddy-up, giddy-up . . .”

0:09 . . . leading to a rousing brass fanfare. This fanfare is full of *triplets* — three notes to a beat. They, too, come back later, so lodge them in your memory bank.

0:18 Suddenly, the music quiets down and smoothes out, playing a *transitional* theme (a theme that leads to a new musical idea); but listen to the voices beginning (as if whispering, “Come and get your beans” between their teeth). They refuse to let you relax completely.

0:34 At the climax of this crescendo, the “Come and get your beans, boys!” theme seems to return. You can hear it in the low strings, way down low. As for the violins, Brahms does something ingenious here: He turns the main melody *upside-down*. While in the double basses the theme goes *down* the scale, turning up at the last moment, in the violins, the theme goes *up* the scale, turning *down* at the last moment. By changing a note or two, Brahms gets both of these — the theme and its inversion — to fit together in the same harmony!

0:38 Here’s that held, accented chord “No-o-o-o . . .” — except that, this time, it’s not just played low but also quite high in some instruments, continuing Brahms’s inversion of the melody. (Listen for the first long-promised entrance of the triangle!) But once again, this chord launches you off on the “Giddy-up” chords.

0:43 Everything’s hushed. What’s happening?

0:50 It’s the second main theme, much more quiet and lyrical than the first. Here it is, sung first by the violins and then echoed in the woodwinds (with triangle accompaniment), but in a different rhythm. The smooth lyricism of the violins is replaced here by short, staccato notes — like little raindrops. But they’re outlining the very same theme.

1:23 All this leads to a big buildup — a huge one, in fact. Then at **1:28**, the main “beans, boys” theme again.

1:32 And here’s the low “No-o-o-o” chord. But as soon as the chord ends, it’s echoed, way up high, by quiet winds and triangle. Almost as if the “No-o-o-o” is contradicted by a soft-spoken “Yes-s-s.”

1:41 The argument between low and high, “No” and “Yes,” becomes heated now.

1:52 The debate’s not over yet. Amid a weird, minor version of “Come and get your beans” in the cellos, the violins spin furiously in their orbits. Then, against some ferocious offbeat chords in the rest of the string section, the violins sound a wild *minor key* version of that quiet and smooth *transitional* theme first heard at **0:18** — echoed by the woodwinds a few seconds later.

2:18 Now the woodwinds play the inverted version of “Come and get your beans” — and the strings, in unison, answer with the theme in its original form. Then, at **2:34**, the depths of quietude, the sounds of silence.

2:47 With a ding on the triangle, the woodwinds enter with a beautiful, innocent rendition of “Come and get your beans,” and the pulse slows down, along with your own heart rate.

3:03 A beautiful horn melody, completely new and different — or is it? Actually, this theme is the same melody that you heard in the rousing brass fanfare way back at **0:09** (the one that was full of triplets). Except now, this theme appears in sheep’s clothing, a lilting, relaxing melody for horn —

3:29 Only to rouse you abruptly. The theme’s back in its original *triplet* brass fanfare form, an almost exact repeat of what you heard at **0:09** to **0:38**, leading to that loud, high *and* low version of the “No-o-o-o” chord and a whole mess o’ “Giddy-ups.”

4:16 That beautiful second theme originally heard at **0:50**. But now, instead of a quiet imitation in the woodwinds, Brahms gives us a super-loud rendition by the entire orchestra (at **4:27**), with the rhythm changed so that it consists mainly of *triplets* — thereby reminding us of that brass fanfare. (Ingenious idea, don’t you think?) These triplets culminate in short, staccato notes . . . but instead of raindrops as before, we get karate chops (at **4:45**).

4:51 Now everything simmers . . . and one long crescendo leads to a low, loud rendition of “beans, boys” at **5:18**.

5:25 “Yessssss.” “No-o-o-o.” “Yessssss.” “No-o-o-o.” “Yessssss.” And the ayes have it. Finally, one last brass fanfare and a boisterous, bubbling, all-around foot-stompin’ good time of an ending. We can only assume that the boys did, in fact, come and get their beans.

The most amazing thing about Brahms is how all the elements of his music fit together and are intricately interrelated, even when they appear to be completely different — even in his most lighthearted works. The music of Brahms is a masterful jigsaw puzzle, put together in such a way that you see not only the pieces but the whole picture as well.