

Brahms Symphony No. 1
October 19, 2019

P (is for play)

Sydney Wang, b. 2002

From the moment I started writing this piece, I knew that I wanted to write something fun, playful, and upbeat. Inspired by the works of Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and George Gershwin, P (is for play) draws upon elements of concerto grosso, blues improvisation, and Italian overture.

The piece consists of three distinct sections. The first section, from the very first chord, is fast and fiery. The music alternates between lively, festive melodies played by the winds and percussion and bursts of dissonant harmony played by the entire orchestra. The second section is a stark contrast, both stylistically and harmonically. It serves as a brief musical respite, an interlude of sorts, from the vibrant and rapid-fire nature of the first section. The brass and wind instruments trade off in fragmented blues-esque solos, with no melodic line receiving the opportunity to develop into a full idea. The third and final section returns to the excitement of the first and drives the piece to a climactic close.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26

Max Bruch, 1838-1920

One of the hallmarks of nineteenth-century Romanticism in music was the rise of the virtuoso violin or piano soloist, epitomized by those two great showmen, Niccoló Paganini and Franz Liszt respectively. The demand for new virtuosic concertos inspired nearly all composers of the period to try their hand at this new kind of bravura work. One composer remembered primarily for his contribution to this genre was German composer, conductor and music teacher Max Bruch.

One of the minor figures of German late Romanticism, Bruch had a singularly peripatetic career moving around Germany from one minor post to another. Only in 1891 were his talents finally recognized, and he became professor of composition at the prestigious Berlin Conservatory. Among his students were Ottorino Respighi and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Bruch was a musical conservative who, drawing his inspiration from Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms, had little use for the musical innovations of the second half of the nineteenth century. Since his youth, he had been a prodigious composer, best known for his choral works. Today, however, he is remembered mainly for the Violin Concerto No. 1, the *Scottish Fantasy* for Violin and Orchestra, and *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra, based on a melody from the Jewish Yom Kippur liturgy.

Bruch began work on the Concerto in 1857 but finished it only in 1866. Then, once again, immediately after the premiere, he revised the manuscript upon the advice of the great violinist Joseph Joachim, who premiered the revised version two years later. Joachim called it the “richest and most seductive” of the Romantic violin concertos – quite a compliment from Europe’s leading virtuoso.

Bruch had originally called the first movement *Introduzione-Fantasia* because, lacking much of a development section, it does not conform to classical sonata form; he finally settled on

the simpler title, *Vorspiel* (Prelude.) The melancholy mood of the first movement is intensified by the slow tempo and brooding presence of the timpani, which opens the movement and literally provides a heartbeat throughout. The *Adagio*, which follows without pause, is the heart of the Concerto, intensifying the emotional tone set in the previous movement. The fiery *Finale: Allegro Energetico* is aptly named. Its pyrotechnics may have inspired Brahms, who composed his Violin Concerto with its folk-like final movement more than ten years later.

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 Johannes Brahms, 1833-1897

“You don’t know what it is like always to hear that giant marching along behind me,” Brahms wrote to the conductor Hermann Levi, in reference to Beethoven. As a classically-oriented composer who revered Beethoven, Brahms found writing a symphony a daunting proposition. It took fame, respectability, middle age and numerous false starts before he finally finished his First Symphony at age 43, after at least 14 years’ gestation. An earlier attempt at a symphony, in 1854, ended up, after numerous transformations, as part of the D-minor Piano Concerto and the *German Requiem*.

Despite Brahms’s reputation and the positive anticipation of the public, the Symphony, premiered in 1876, was at first coolly received. The rigorous classical form baffled the public and critics, who expected something more romantic and innovative. Wagner, Liszt and programmatic music were all the rage, and most critics considered the classical form backward looking and reactionary. But it was not long before the Symphony’s riveting power was recognized, along with its own contribution to symphonic innovation.

If, indeed, the First Symphony cannot strictly be considered program music, it nevertheless unfolds with great drama – even, one might say, a musical plot. While the typical classical symphony gives the greatest weight to the first movement, ending with a faster rousing finale, often a dance, Mozart, in his last three symphonies, and Beethoven in the Third, Fifth and especially the Ninth Symphonies, recast the pattern. In these works, the finale provides the culmination to the entire symphony. When listening to Brahms’s First, one can easily imagine the composer’s reticence at treading in the great man’s shadow. Nevertheless, his combined sense for musical drama and structure prevailed as he launched what conductor Hans von Bülow called “The Tenth.” Only Mendelssohn in his Symphony No. 3, “The Scottish,” had trod that path.

The ominous pounding of the timpani under slow ascending and descending chromatic scales, fragmentary motives and the ambiguous tonality of the Introduction poses a musical question – actually more of a demand – that remains unresolved until the final movement. It is one of the most spine-chilling introductions in all of classical music. The following *Allegro* fleshes out motives from the Introduction into full-fledged themes, first by combining them contrapuntally, then developing them with an almost savage energy.

The middle two movements are a respite from the drive of the first. The second movement, a classic ABA form, although with a highly modified repeat, is reminiscent of Beethoven's variations in the slow movement of the Ninth Symphony. The movement also contains allusions to thematic material from the first and hints at the main theme of the third movement to come.

The third movement, a modified scherzo, is more of an intermezzo that opens with a lilting clarinet theme, already foreshadowed in the preceding movement. The contrapuntal accompaniment to the repeat of the clarinet theme, after the Trio section, foreshadows the principal theme from the Finale.

Rumbling timpani now reassert the serious mood of the first movement, reminding the listener of unresolved issues. Suddenly, as if from behind a cloud, an alpenhorn calls out, answered by the flute, turning the turgid C minor into a resounding C major chorale melody. Brahms clearly modeled the effect on Beethoven's Ninth.

The alpenhorn solo has its own little history. In 1868, eight years before the Symphony was premiered, Brahms had quarreled with his friend, and probably secret love, Clara Schumann, about whether she should cut back on her concretizing to spend more time at home with her eight children. That September, he sent her a mollifying postcard with the alpenhorn theme scrawled on it to the words, "High on the mountain, deep in the valley, I greet you a thousand fold."

Unlike Beethoven, whose choral Finale was a set of variations, Brahms's chorale tune does battle with the music from the stormy introduction to emerge triumphant in an exultant coda.

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