

BEST OF BRAHMS

7.30PM, Thursday 19 February
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Academic Festival Overture (1880)

DURATION: c.10'

In 1879, the University of Breslau informed Brahms that they were awarding him an honorary doctorate, proclaiming him (in Latin) to be 'the foremost composer of serious music in Germany'. Brahms sent a thank-you note saying that he would visit Breslau the following year to enjoy a few 'doctoral beers'. The director of music in Breslau however indicated that the university expected nothing less than a newly composed symphony in acknowledgement of the honour. Somewhat taken aback, Brahms engaged his wicked sense of humour to compose the Academic Festival Overture. The piece is a medley of student drinking songs, brilliantly orchestrated and woven together with contrapuntal mastery. The ending, a majestic chorale to the tune of *Gaudeamus igitur*, may even be a wry allusion to Wagner's Overture to *Die Meistersinger*. Academic indeed!

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Double Concerto for Violin & Cello (1887)

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante
- III. Vivace non troppo – Poco meno allegro

DURATION: c.32'

Brahms first met the Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim in 1853, and the two quickly became firm friends as well as musical collaborators. When Brahms was composing for strings he always conferred with Joachim before submitting the scores to his publishers. It was Joachim who nurtured Brahms' interest in Hungarian music, which resulted in the *Hungarian Dances* and many other works – not least the third movement of Brahms' Violin Concerto, composed for Joachim in 1878.

Just two years later the friendship suffered a potentially terminal blow. Joachim accused his wife of adultery and began divorce proceedings. Convinced of her innocence, Brahms wrote her a letter of support which she later produced in court in defence of her character. Furious at what he saw as betrayal, Joachim broke off all contact with Brahms.

In 1887, Brahms composed his Double Concerto as something of a peace offering. The violin's first entry after the orchestral tutti is on the notes F-E-A – an allusion to Joachim's personal F-A-E motto (*Frei aber einsam*, 'free but alone'). The expressive second subject of the first movement alludes to Viotti's Violin Concerto No.22, a work greatly admired by both Joachim and Brahms.

Throughout the concerto Brahms imbues the solo instruments with an almost vocal aspect, and the central Andante is surely a love duet. As in the Violin Concerto the finale has a strongly Hungarian character, driven by powerful rhythms.

Conductor Giordano Bellincampi
Violin Andrew Beer
Cello Ashley Brown

INTERVAL

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No.4 (1884-1885)

- I. Allegro non troppo
- II. Andante moderato
- III. Allegro giocoso
- IV. Allegro energico e passionato

DURATION: c.39'

The Fourth Symphony was composed at Mürzzuschlag in the shadow of the Styrian Alps during the summers of 1884 and 1885. Brahms was apprehensive about how its tragic and austere qualities would be received, and he wrote sardonically to the conductor Hans von Bülow: 'I am afraid that it tastes of the climate here. The cherries don't ripen in these parts; you wouldn't want to eat them'.

The first movement opens immediately with its first subject, alternating falling thirds with rising sixths. The effect is of an ineffable sadness comparable to that of some of Brahms' late intermezzi for piano. Instead of an exposition repeat, Brahms gives us just the opening eight bars, then plunges immediately into an extensive development section. The recapitulation also begins in a most unusual way. The first two sequences of the original theme are presented in hushed tones by the winds, as long held notes punctuated by mysterious arpeggios from the strings, before the main theme resumes in its original form. The final climax of the movement is harrowing in its intensity.

The opening of the noble slow movement has an archaic quality, thanks partly to Brahms' use of the medieval Phrygian mode. An energetic scherzo follows, quite different from corresponding movements in Brahms' previous symphonies. Rather than following the traditional scherzo and trio model, Brahms instead casts the movement in sonata form.

The imposing finale introduces the trombones, silent until this moment. The movement is a passacaglia, its theme drawn from the concluding chaconne of Bach's Cantata No.150, the text of which begins: 'My days spent in sorrow / God ends nevertheless with joy'. Brahms had been considering a symphonic movement based on this chaconne for several years, and it appears to have been the kernel from which the entire symphony grew. There are 30 continuous variations of this eight-bar theme, but the structure of the movement also encompasses elements of sonata form. The music becomes increasingly violent and implacable, concluding in a mood of profound tragedy.

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