

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

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Next to Beethoven, Brahms is the greatest composer. In some ways Brahms is preferable since his music has a greater polish and a more fluid style than Beethoven. While the form and structure of most of Beethoven's work is admirable Brahms added a new dimension. He is classical but he is also romantic. And it must be remembered that romantic has nothing to do with sexual interest between people but the word means imaginative and much more!



But Brahms has been maligned. He was plagued with the inane charge that his superlative Symphony no. 1 was really Beethoven's Tenth.

Sadly, there is a lot of nonsense talked about classical and serious music. The greater tragedy is that some of it is believed and therefore is accepted as fact.

People complain about Brahms' orchestration whereas it is very good but it is not spectacular. And, in one sense, Brahms is to be congratulated on this. He was not a showman and although people talk of his late works being mellow the same could be said of many of his early works as well.

He was an interesting man. He was an atheist and yet kept a Bible by his bedside and could quote passages and verse by heart. He remained a bachelor all his life and yet was in love with another man's wife, a man who was his friend, and so Brahms did not seduce this woman or cause her to be unfaithful to his husband. Of course, I refer to Robert Schumann and his wife Clara. Even when Clara was a widow Brahms was still faithful to the memory of his friend.

It has been said that Brahms did not write any love music or erotic music but that is another story perpetuated by those who are out to discredit this fine composer.

But, curiously, his faithfulness applied to other matters. He had a favourite tavern, The Red Hedgehog and he did not visit others unless it was necessary. He was a valued regular.

He was a touchy individual at times. He liked his privacy and his opinions were precise. He did not like the music of Wagner, Bruckner or Mahler although he had some regard for Mahler as a conductor.

The other advantage Brahms may have over Beethoven is that his music is warmer. There are moments in Brahms that are unparalleled and unmissable and have a durability that will last as long as music endures. The final section of the "Alto Rhapsody", the broad theme in the finale of the "Symphony no. 1", as long as it is played broadly, the sublime slow movement of the "Double Concerto" (again it must have the right tempo being slow without being sentimental), the second subject of the slow movement of the "Symphony no. 4" which is as gorgeous a melody as you will ever hear, as are moments of the "German Requiem" and so on.

Brahms became a wealthy man but never an arrogant one. He helped the Schumanns financially as he did Dvorák who would not have survived without him and therefore the musical world would have been robbed of the Czech composer's splendid symphonies and the greatest Cello Concerto ever written.

Johann Jakob Brahms was born in 1806. He was a musician in the local band and a jolly fellow. He married Johanna Henrika Christiane Nissen in 1830 who was older, being born in 1789, and had a higher social standing than Johann. They had three children, Elisabeth known as Elise born in 1831, Johannes born on 7 May 1833 and Friedrich Fritz born in 1835.

Johannes' schooling was somewhat inadequate but he showed a tremendous gift for music. His father allowed him to learn the piano for in so doing he could play it in taverns and earn some music. And so his first piano lessons were in 1840 with Otto Cossel. The boy taught himself the violin, cello and even the French horn so that he could deputise for his father in the band.

As a youngster Brahms was offered a tour of the United States but this was discouraged by his second teacher, Eduard Marxsen, who saw that the show-biz style of America would damage the teenager's career. In our day this happens. Marxsen took music seriously and this seriousness is inherent in much of Brahms' music. His teacher having trained for the ministry meant that he was a disciplinarian.

Johannes made his debut at the age of ten playing Thalberg's Fantasia on themes from Bellini's Norma. His first solo concert was in 1848 which included Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata. That same year he attended a concert in which Joachim played the Beethoven Violin Concerto.

Brahms's first compositions were written under the pseudonym of G.W. Marks.

Eduard Remenyi fled the Hungarian revolution and found himself in Hamburg where he met up with Brahms. In April 1853 they toured neighbouring towns to give concerts. On one of these trips Remenyi introduced Brahms to Joachim who was Konzertmeister at the Court of Hanover. Brahms and Joachim developed a friendship which was later to suffer before being healed. Joachim presented Brahms to the King of Hanover, to Liszt and to Robert and Clara Schumann.

Liszt was the greatest pianist of all time. He took Brahms' "Scherzo in E flat minor, Op. 4" and played it at sight. On the other hand, when Brahms heard Liszt play his own Sonata in B minor Brahms was allegedly not impressed. One wonders why. It is the finest piano sonata ever written. But Brahms was welcomed into Liszt society and met fellow composers including Raff whose talent has yet to be recognised. But Johannes was not comfortable. The Liszt society was not exclusively German.

As there are lies in music which become accepted as facts so there are disputes which cause tremendous divisions. Liszt supported Wagner fervently and this was counterproductive as it caused other composers and musicians to devalue Wagner. Today there are cult figures in music. People worship at the shrine of a composer and are so indoctrinated that they will not accept that their hero is not flawless as a person or as a musician and they become enraged at evidence that this might be the case. There are those who believe that their favourite composer is the greatest composer whereas that may not be the case either. But the Liszt/Wagner alliance, the New German Music of The Music of the Future really annoyed many people.

But new music has always annoyed some people, who are then scathing about it.

Remenyi who was something of a rogue latched on to this new concept of music whereas Brahms and Joachim were more conservative. The Schumanns felt the same and with a letter of introduction from Joachim Brahms visited Robert Schumann.

It is my opinion that Schumann is not a great composer yet some of his songs are magnificent. His mental health and the traumas of his life precluded his being a great composer. Nonetheless there are many works of his that are very fine and which I happily play such as Kreisleriana, the Symphonic Studies and the Piano Concerto, but other works such as Carnival, which is not popular with many concert pianists, are quite badly written. His Symphony no. 2 is his masterpiece.

Clara Schumann was fourteen years older than Brahms and for the rest of her life she and Brahms had a wonderful friendship.

While staying with the Schumanns, Johannes searched for his identity. He composed a dreadful piece entitled "Hymn to the Veneration of the great Joachim", as nauseating a piece in content and purpose as Elgar's

Second Symphony, dedicated to the memory King Edward VII. But on a more productive note Brahms studied with Schumann as well as playing duets and trios.

But Robert Schumann could be adolescent in his exaggerated comments such as his opinion of Chopin in those absurd words which he made about him, "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!". Clearly this was a rebuff against Liszt who was a genius. Chopin, for all his qualities, was not in the same league.

When it was known that Joachim was returning to the Schumann household Robert, Johannes and another composer called Albert Dietrich wrote a violin sonata for him which became known as the FAE sonata, *Frei aber einsam* (free but alone, or solitary). Brahms wrote the scherzo movement. Mottoes were all the rage in Germany and, therefore, in Brahms' "Symphony no. 3 in F" he uses *Frei aber Froh* (free but happy).



*Brahms (age 27)*

It was Schumann who was instrumental in getting Brahms' work published. Among the first works published are the three piano sonatas "Opus 1 in C", "Opus 2 in F sharp minor" and "Opus 5 in F minor". They are all substantial works. Breitkopf and Härtel took the first two sonatas, a set of six songs and the "Scherzo, Op. 4", the first work written.

During part of 1853 Brahms was in Leipzig the home of his publishers. Later that year he performed his "Sonata in C, Op. 1". He met the virtuoso Ignaz Moscheles and Karl Franz Brendel. He struck up a friendship with Julius Otto Grimm and they became friends setting up The League of Asses. It is difficult to understand this humour today.

In January 1854 Brahms journeyed to Hanover to see Joachim and Grimm and to be present at the premiere of Robert's Symphony no. 4 in D minor. Hanover saw the usual cheerful, fun-loving Brahms.

He met the conductor Hans von Bülow and they remained friends for the rest of their lives. But the madness that was going to engulf Schumann began to show. He was moody, unpredictable and had 'psychic revelations' from the spirits of Mendelssohn and Schubert who dictated music to him. In February, dressed in his dressing gown, he jumped into the Rhine from a bridge. He was rescued by some fishermen and was eventually taken to an asylum in Eendenich where he died two years later.

It has been said that during the illness of Schumann Brahms was Clara's great support. She was pregnant at the time of his confinement and it was deemed unwise for her to see her husband. But Brahms visited Robert regularly. They also corresponded and Brahms's letters were always cheerful. Clara's child, Felix, was born on 11 June 1854 and Brahms took on the family's financial burdens. His concert appearances were few. He was so concerned with keeping the Schumann family emotionally as well as financially that musical activity was precluded somewhat.

Nasty rumours began about Brahms and Clara. Lies can be devastating and ruin lives. They can also be used to cover other lies.

Brahms was affected and went back to public appearances. In November 1855 he played two concertos for which he supplied his own cadenzas, the superb Mozart D minor and Beethoven's scintillating Emperor concert. As a further evidence of Brahms' commendable character he often played Robert Schumann's works in public. Clara reciprocated by giving the first performances of Brahms "Sonata no 3 in F minor, Op. 5" in 1854.

These dysfunctional lives hindered Brahms, however. In 1856 he began composing a Piano Quartet which caused him many problems and was later to become his “Piano Quartet, Op. 60” which is a conflict expressing his own feelings. Clara was also very troubled. The seriousness of his music was a reflection of the Schumann situation.

Robert died on 29 July 1856. The relationship between Clara and Johannes changed. She moved to Berlin. Evil talk persisted. Was Robert’s breakdown due to an intimate relationship between his wife and Brahms? The rumours were emphasised by Brahms’ honesty in his devotion to Clara. It is also shown in a letter Brahms wrote to Joachim in 1854:

“Often I have to force myself to restraint from putting my arm gently around Clara. It seems so natural for me to do this and I do not think she would think badly of me if I did. I don’t think I could now love a young girl. In fact I have forgotten about them. They may promise heaven but Clara reveals it to me.”

I have often wondered how Brahms coped without Clara. After some procrastination he took an appointment at the Court at Detmold some fifty miles south of Hamburg. Here he wrote his two orchestral serenades, “opus 11” and “opus 16” respectively. About this time he met Agathe von Siebold in Göttingen, a soprano who inspired his “Eight Songs and Romances, Op. 14” and the “Five Poems, Op. 19”. He was in a turmoil. He loved Agathe but he did not want to be bound in a relationship or marriage.

Brahms was still in turmoil.

He began work on a sonata for two pianos. Then it became a symphony and, eventually, the “Piano Concerto no. 1 in D minor, Op. 15”. The opening movement is one of tremendous power and anger. The second movement has been called a Requiem for Schumann with its hymn-like qualities and the finale is a frantic dance which must be played at speed. One remembers with great pleasure a stunning performance at the Proms with Alfred Brendel and Claudio Abbado.

Here is one of the finest piano concertos of all time, ranking with the Emperor and Rachmaninov’s Third.

Its premiere in Hamburg on 22 January 1859 with Brahms as soloist and Joachim conducting was not a success. Two performances in Leipzig encountered hissing. A second performance in Hamburg in March under Julius Rietz was also badly received.

Brahms was confused. His first big work failed. But why? Was it because he did not subscribe to the New German Music or that he could have lapses of good manners? Was it because the concerto is so strong that it was considered overwhelming? Was it because his friend Joachim was not in favour of new musical developments in Germany?

It is almost certainly due to jealousy and bad behaviour occasioned by rivalry. It has happened since and, no doubt, will happen again. Brahms, Clara and Joachim were said to be opposed to the new culture in Germany and were therefore its enemies. It is all too ridiculous for words. Brahms had had enough. He published his manifesto in which he said that the new culture was contrary to the German spirit. The tragedy was that the supposed hatred between Brahms and Wagner concealed their admiration for each other. That Brahms wrote no opera may have its root in this rivalry problem. But he did write songs and very beautiful songs at that as, incidentally, did Schumann and Liszt.

Brahms’ desire to maintain traditional German culture was shown in his dedication to earlier composers. He edited some works of C.P.E. Bach and W.F. Bach and some Ländler by Schubert. He also ventured in the French repertoire by editing works of Couperin.

Brahms did not like to deal with business or financial matters and handed some of these responsibilities over to his brother Fritz.

And he wanted a change.

Vienna was the city of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert and it attracted Brahms who settled there in 1862 and where the first performances of his two piano quartets, “opus 25” and “opus 26” respectively, were given. Here Brahms met Eduard Hanslick, a music critic who had tremendous power and a consuming hatred of Wagner. He was so wrong about Wagner. In *Die Meistersinger* Wagner, having endured unfair criticism for so long, imitates Hanslick in the character of Beckmesser.

Sadly, Vienna has always been the home of trivial music as well later exemplified by the Strauss family. It is very tedious to listen to music that is usually three in a bar and therefore the endless bonbons of sickly waltz music. But when in Rome... Brahms wrote his “Waltzes for piano duet”. In 1864 Brahms had met Johann Strauss II, the so-called Waltz King and they became friends to the extent that people believed that Brahms liked his music. That opinion still holds today but I suspect it is that Brahms’ good character preventing his saying anything against this trite music.

In February 1865 Brahms’ mother died. In a subsequent letter to Clara Brahms was more concerned with an injury to her hand which prevented her playing and the illness of his sister Elise. His father later remarried.

Another change was necessary in Brahms’ life. He took to travelling to Holland, Denmark and Switzerland. He walked with friends in these countries and enjoyed the countryside and it is my view that his “Symphony no. 2 in D, Op. 73” is a pastoral symphony or a symphony about the seasons. It is a work that I dismissed for years to my shame. Now it gives me great pleasure.

Brahms was still devoted to Schumann and played his Piano Concerto which, because of repetitious passages, can cause a pianist to lose his place. Brahms did this at least once and I remember a dreadful performance with Vlado Perlemuter when he did likewise and the orchestra’s leader had to put him right.

The failure of his own piano concerto had prompted Brahms to compose chamber music. The “Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34” is a masterpiece of the highest order. The “Horn Trio, Op. 40” is a truly marvellous piece. There is no comparable work in the whole output of music for this combination of instruments to challenge this. He wrote his first two string quartets but they have not really caught on. But the death of his mother led him to compose his “German Requiem, Op. 45”, although a work of this type had been in mind for some time. The use of the word ‘German’ in the title was in accordance with his manifesto in opposition to new German ‘art’. Although he used Luther’s translation of the Old Testament Brahms suppressed any Christian doctrine. The first three movements were premiered in Vienna on 1 December 1867 and it was not a complete success. Hanslick showed his true colours by referring to the third movement as the din of a train. The cantata “Rinaldo, Op. 50”, was not a success either but the sublime “Alto Rhapsody, Op. 53” fared better as did the “Song of Destiny, Op. 54”.

In February 1863 Joachim became engaged to Amalie Schneeweis. Brahms wrote a letter of congratulation but he was to regret it.

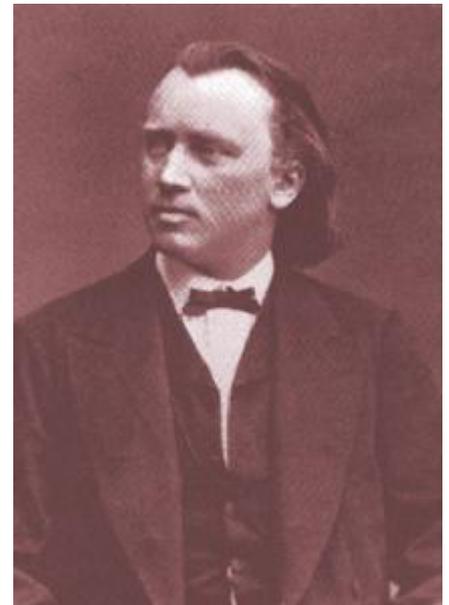
In February 1872 his father died. In Vienna he was looking for a prestigious appointment and wrote to Joachim to put his name forward as a possible director of the Choral Society of Vienna. He got the job, succeeding Rubinstein, but only after he had written a gruff letter himself.

It was Hanslick who referred to Brahms’ “Symphony no. 1 in C minor, Op. 68” as Beethoven’s Tenth. It was a statement of crass stupidity which calls into question everything that Hanslick said or wrote and, indeed, his hatred of Wagner. Brahms wanted to write a symphony but when he was ready. Beethoven had written nine and they had received acclaim. How does one follow that?

People have said that Walton and his music was merely an extension of Elgar and his music, that Walton inherited Elgar’s mantle and so on. It is so utterly stupid and incorrect.

But to return to Brahms. Perhaps the death of his father encouraged the composition of the symphony.

The opening is in 6/8 time with the timpani sounding like a throbbing heart beat. While the music is mournful and tragic it packs a terrific punch. The Allegro is very sad with descending sevenths and sixths prominent. But the music takes on a message of hope despite some clever modulations and grand intensity. The second movement, Andante sostenuto, is lyrical and an example of his 'love music' seen elsewhere as, for example, the opening of the glorious "Violin Sonata in G, Op.78" and the "Clarinet Sonata no. 2 in E flat". The wonderful E major theme on the violins continued by the oboe is a real delight. The introduction of a solo violin makes it even lovelier. There is calm and grace here. The third movement, Un poco allegretto e grazioso is light and charming whereas the fourth movement begins with the tragic recall of the opening. The great C major theme has to be played broadly. It must breathe. Conductors who take it too fast ruin the theme but the presentation of this majestic theme does require an accelerando later on to accommodate the power and noble excitement that follows. The music is incisive, defiant and stupendous.



*Brahms (age 43)*

It was first performed in Karlsruhe under Dessoff on 4 November 1876 some eighteen months after he had resigned his post in Vienna.

The success of this symphony led to the "Symphony no. 2" which is a very different work. The opening movement has a graceful beauty... perhaps a dreamy quality. Occasionally there is a blaze of golden sunlight. The second movement Adagio non troppo is a gentle, lovely movement deeply introspective. The third movement, Allegretto grazioso is unsophisticated and happy in a calm way. Untroubled music Bryden Thomson rightly called it. The finale, Allegro con spirito is a real joy with a swinging theme first played sotto voce. There are two passages of more tranquil music but the ending blazes in glorious sunshine and triumphant D major. The premiere was entrusted to Hans Richter in Vienna on 30 December 1877.

The following year Brahms visited Italy where he grew his beard.

International recognition was now secure and Brahms, like Mendelssohn and Dvorák, had a following in England. Parry and Stanford were impressed with Brahms. Cambridge offered him a honorary degree which both pleased and troubled Brahms. Crossing the sea was not fun for him. The University of Breslau offered him an honorary doctorate and he wrote the engaging "Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80" in 1880 as an acknowledgement.

The year 1879 saw the premiere of the "Violin Concerto, Op. 77", given by Joachim in Leipzig with Brahms conducting. A leisurely opening movement teeming with melodic invention gives way to a tender slow movement with an exquisite oboe solo which can create problems of orchestral balance. The finale has been described as a gypsy rondo. It is a pity that Brahms slows the tempo done at the end before an unconvincing brief flourish. The momentum is lost. But it is a fine work.

The 1880s saw problems. Firstly there was a quarrel with Joachim. The great violinist's marriage to Amalie was always strained. She had asked Brahms to mediate between her husband and herself from time to time. Brahms had always thought this Joachim's behaviour was the most unreasonable of the two and in a letter to Amalie he said so and listed some of Joachim's faults. That was unwise for Amalie used in court when suing for a divorce and, of course Joachim was there. As a result Joachim wanted nothing more to do with Brahms. Six years later Brahms began writing a new concerto... his finest... but for two soloists, violinist and cellist. The violin part represents Joachim and the cello Brahms himself. It was music to reconcile. The middle

movement is gorgeous. Listen to the Milstein, Piatigorsky, Reiner version for its sheer beauty although it is too quick for me. I like it to be lingered over. But this is also love music.

The concerto was first performed in Cologne on 15 October 1887 with Joachim and Hausmann as soloists and Brahms conducting. Reconciliation was made.

The second dispute was with Hans von Bülow, who had married Liszt's daughter, Cosima. Brahms never took to Liszt and when Cosima entered into an affair with Wagner that was that. But, in addition, Brahms had accepted an appointment at the Court of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, with which he was to premiere his "Symphony no. 4 in E minor, Op. 98". But Bülow believed that he was to give the premiere. He felt maligned. Brahms apologised although it would appear that he had no intention to slight Bülow.

He composed his "Piano Concerto no.2 in B flat, Op. 83" in 1882. It is quite different from the stormy first concerto and suffers from an unconvincing finale. The slow movement which also includes a cello solo, reminiscent of the Schumann, is a delight. I was fortunate to be at a Prom when the great British pianist Peter Katin presented it.

The "Symphony no. 3 in F, Op. 90" which Richter first presented in Vienna on 2 December 1883. It is played the least of his four symphonies and one wonders why. As a boy I was told it was because it has a quiet ending and everyone wants a symphony to end with power! The symphony is terse and passionate, more love music lives here. The F A F motto theme recurs throughout the work and unifies it. The second movement, Andante, is leisurely, but has some extraordinary harmonies for its time. The third movement, Poco allegretto, uses a small orchestra and is suave and flowing. The finale is a wonderful kaleidoscope of ideas put together as a convincing whole. In the hands of a great composer episodic music can work. There is some terrific energy and noble statements without any Elgarian nobilmentes but the work ends in a quiet radiance.

After the "Third Symphony" Brahms edited the symphonies of Schubert. I do not believe it was because Brahms regarded Schubert highly but his friend Robert Schumann did. There are so many flaws in Schubert and that includes his symphonies. Take, as an example, his Symphony no. 5 in B flat. The main theme of the first movement which first appears in bar five reappears so often and without any development or major variation that it becomes tedious. The same can be said for the Minuet which is in G minor and too close to the Minuet of Mozart Symphony no. 40 in G minor to be a coincidence. If you run out of ideas copy someone else. The finale again overkills the main theme in boring repetition. Similar failings can be examined in the Symphony no. 6 where the main theme of the opening movement, and an inane theme it is at that, is done to death. Schubert did not vary the orchestration. The music is not only boring but tame. But, as far as Brahms was concerned, it was a labour of love in memory of a friend.

Brahms's "Symphony no. 4 in E minor, Op. 98" is another masterpiece. It is a serious piece but it is the seriousness of someone who takes a pride in their work and does not want to compose something that will just do. It is an intense work with an opening fine theme, nineteen bars in length, announced by the violins. The dropping third and the rising sixth gives it a cohesion. Unlike the dreary Schubert, Brahms varies his themes and sometimes in a splendid filigree of sound. The second movement is truly beautiful with a melody of unsurpassed glory. The third movement is probably the only symphonic scherzo Brahms ever wrote which is ebullient and full of life. The finale is a set of variations on an eight-bar theme from Bach's cantata 150 (Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich). There are thirty variations in all but, again, the episodic character is not noticed because Brahms is so adept and makes the music flow effortlessly. Variation 14 has solemn pianissimo chords on the trombones which is profoundly effective. Variation 21 is very exciting. The final variation is a magnificent example of amazing modulations. A truly amazing symphony.

In his last years Brahms concentrated on collection of mellow piano works and had a love affair with the clarinet. He was impressed with the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld who was the first clarinet in Wagner's Bayreuth Festival Orchestra. This led to four clarinet works, the two sonatas that make up "Opus 120", the "Clarinet Trio, Op. 114" and the unmistakable masterpiece the "Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op. 115".

Brahms had wanted to retire. Around him friends had come to the end of their respective lives. Marxsen had died in 1887, von Bülow in 1894 and his beloved Clara in 1896. He spent his sixtieth birthday with Victor Widmann, a walking friend, who was confined to bed with a foot injury. He continued his daily routine of endless strong coffee and cigars and a beer in the local tavern in the evening. His serious demeanour, which never really left him, returned for his last work, the “Four Serious Songs, Op. 121”. The texts are mainly taken from Ecclesiastes. He would not set anything Christian.

It is strange that Richard Strauss’s last work is his sublime Four Last Songs.

Brahms had a interesting relationship with the song writer Hugo Wolf who, at one time, showed Brahms his songs. Brahms had advised Wolf but the highly strung young man did not take his advice. In 1896 Brahms sat next to Dvorák for the Vienna premiere of the New World Symphony. Brahms had wanted the Czech composer to settle in Vienna and had financially helped Dvorák. “You have a large family”, he said, “And I have nobody”. Brahms met Mahler and admired him as a conductor but thought that his music was too self-indulgent.

In 1896 Brahms sorted out his affairs and wrote his will, a task made more urgent by the death of Clara after she had suffered a stroke. He was too late in his last visit to her. In July he did not feel well and went to a doctor. He was not told the gravity of his condition which was cancer of the liver. His last concert where Mühlfeld asked if he should play Brahms’ “Clarinet Quintet” or that by Weber. Brahms choose the Weber.

Brahms died on 3 April 1897. His funeral was a grand affair and he was buried next to both Schubert and the great Beethoven.

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