

**Las Vegas Philharmonic
2009-2010 Season
Program Notes**

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Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), *Concerto for Violin, Cello and Orchestra in A minor*, Opus 102

Just as Mendelssohn was compared to Mozart, many contemporaries thought of Johannes Brahms as the rightful successor to Beethoven. Brahms' orchestral output does not compare in sheer quantity to some Romantic masters; he composed only four symphonies and four concerti. However, these works have had a timeless appeal and honesty that does indeed remind one of Beethoven's music.

Much has been written about Brahms' rejection of descriptive program music, and his affection for Classical structures. The "Double" *Concerto for Violin and Cello* was the product of Brahms' admiration for the Baroque concerto grosso, an older form that featured multiple soloists in a three-movement form. Actually, the concerto grosso was the direct predecessor of the "modern" solo concerto, and Brahms wished to employ the interplay of two instruments pitted against the orchestra, rather than one. The idea was not without precedent; many composers, including Mozart and Beethoven, had written concerti for multiple soloists. However, the last of these has been many years earlier, and Brahms chose this format for more than just musical reasons. First, Brahms wanted to restore good relations with his close friend, virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim, by composing a work for him. Brahms and Joachim had had a falling out some years earlier. Secondly, Brahms had promised to compose a concerto for another friend, cellist Robert Hausmann, but had not written it by this time. Brahms created a masterpiece that resulted from the blending of the two solo voices with the homogeneous sound of the orchestra. The first movement is typical of Brahms' symphonic writing at its best: powerful and serious without any trace of melancholy. As in the Baroque concerto grosso, the soloists perform alternate roles; sometimes they are featured in a soloistic manner, and at times they are interlaced into the fabric of the orchestration. The second movement is, in contrast, as sweet and lyrical as one of Brahms' own lieder. The third movement is marked *vivace non troppo*, a rollicking folk-like dance.

As it turns out, the Double Concerto was Brahms' last concerto. In fact, it was the last work composed by Brahms that employed a full orchestra. The 1887 premiere of the work in Cologne was a joyous and personally rewarding occasion, with friends Hausmann and Joachim performing, and Brahms himself conducting.

Cesar Franck (1822-1890), *Symphony in D minor*

Belgian-born composer Cesar Franck did not have the compositional output of some others; in fact, his fame comes from the popularity of fairly few works. Perhaps his two best-known works are the familiar *Panis Angelicus* and the *Symphony in D minor*. The symphony, completed in 1886, had its birth amid controversy. Franck, an open

admirer of Beethoven, Wagner, and the “German” symphonic style, was widely criticized by French nationals, including Camille Saint-Saens, for not embracing a more nationalistic approach to his orchestral writing. It was no secret that very few symphonies emanated from France in the 19th century. After Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, the most well-known works of the genre from France were from Saint-Saens and Franck, whose symphonic masterpieces were both composed in the same year. Franck had such a hard time getting the symphony performed that he ended up using a college orchestra (albeit from the Paris Conservatory) to premiere the work. The premiere was not stellar, and critics were not kind in their criticism of the symphony. Interestingly though, audiences and orchestras outside France were enthusiastic about the *Symphony in D minor*, which enjoyed great popularity and many performances throughout the rest of Europe and America.

On the surface the symphony is a little bit unusual in the fact that it has only three movements, unlike the more traditional four. However, the slow (second) movement contains a lighter, faster section, somewhat reminiscent of a typical third movement *scherzo*. As such, the traditional third movement is hardly missed. Another interesting characteristic of the work is its cyclic nature. Many composers used cyclic writing in their works; in other words, revisiting themes in subsequent movements to “bind” the work together. Beethoven and Berlioz did it, along with Liszt, Wagner, and many other composers. Yet, Franck’s *Symphony* has become the quintessential cyclic symphony, and has stood as the most obvious and clearly crafted work of its type. Each principal theme, in every movement, is revisited in the fresh settings of the symphony’s three movements. This quality is itself controversial; to some, the cyclic nature of the piece is redundant, and to others, it is climactic and inspirational.

The first movement begins with a motive that sounds very similar to the opening of Liszt’s *Les Preludes*; the motion of a step, then a skip in the opposite direction sounds very much like a question. If that is the case, then the symphony itself must provide the answers. The allegro that follows is a classically derived sonata-allegro form, with the main theme based on the opening motive. The second movement employs the English horn in a beautiful solo, accompanied by pizzicato strings and harp. The use of the English horn was also criticized by some, since at that time, it was seldom used in this context. Yet, within a very few years, Dvorak would himself use the English horn as the solo vehicle for the lovely theme in the second movement of his *New World Symphony*. Franck’s beautiful movement is punctuated by two trios, each quicker and in triple meter, again reducing the “need” for a separate *scherzo* movement. The third movement is a heroic sonata-allegro form, which recalls each of the primary themes from earlier movements. In each case, we find the presentations more conclusive, more final, as the triumphant conclusion is approached.