

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)
Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

Written: 1877

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 40 minutes

These days, the popular characterization of Brahms is that of a melancholy, forever-old man: balding, with a long, disheveled gray beard. We listen to his music as if he were always stuck in the autumn of his life. However, Brahms was young once and, at the time he wrote his Second Symphony, even happy! In the summer of 1877, he was in the village of Pörschach, near Lake Worth in southern Austria. There were inspirational views of snow-capped peaks towering over the lake, the eating was good and, as Brahms wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, “The melodies fly so thick here that you have to be careful not to step on one.” Just the year before, Brahms finally broke his decades-long symphonic writer’s block by finishing his First Symphony—what Han von Bülow called “Beethoven’s Tenth.” He was in a cheery mood and produced this light-hearted work, his Second Symphony, in about four months.

He was also in a playful mood. This is undoubtedly Brahms’s cheeriest symphony. However, writing to a friend the day before the symphony’s premiere, he claimed that the orchestra would play “with crepe bands on their sleeves because of its dirge-like effect.” He wrote to his publisher, “The new symphony is so melancholic that you can’t stand it. I have never written anything so sad, so minor-ish: the score must appear with a black border.” Writing to another friend, he claimed that his Second Symphony wasn’t really a symphony, but more like a serenade: “You have only to sit down at the piano and with your little feet on both pedals alternating, strike the chord of F minor several times in succession, first in the treble, then in the bass, *fortissimo* (very loud) and *pianissimo* (very soft), and you will

gradually get a vivid impression of my latest.” The joke is that the symphony is in D Major, containing not one F minor chord!

Maybe Brahms wasn't being so funny when he described this symphony to friends. There are some dark moments, most notably near the beginning of the first movement when the timpani sounds a roll like distant thunder, and the trombones play dark ominous chords. Vincenz Lachner wrote to Brahms asking why he injected this darkness into such a lighthearted work. Brahms replied: “I would have to confess that I am . . . a severely melancholic person, that black wings are constantly flapping about us . . . ”

After a performance of a Brahms symphony, the critic Virgil Thomson once heard a patron exclaim, “Brahms is so dependable!” This symphony is no exception. All of the movements follow the normal pattern for a symphony. The first movement presents the opening theme right away. In it you'll hear the motives that permeate the entire work. The second theme, played by the cellos and violas is typical for Brahms: soaring and lyrical. The melody in the second movement is an extended one, again played by the cellos. After a contrasting middle section, it comes back at the end of the movement, this time ornamented by the rest of the orchestra.

The third movement is a gentle little Austrian dance with a kick on the third beat, known as a *ländler*. Two faster and more robust episodes interrupt the pastoral setting. The final movement begins in a hushed manner. As it progresses it becomes more ebullient until even the trombones, which were responsible for the only gloom in the first movement, join the merrymaking and go out in a blaze of glory.