Growing up and learning to love classical music, symphonic music in particular, I allowed myself to develop the unquestioning belief that 'symphonies' from Mozart, through Beethoven, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Mahler and Sibelius et al, were all the product of great musical imaginations poured into largely similar molds. And also, that orchestral instruments had always been the same and, that ensembles were of similar dimensions. I'm sure I'm not the only one who was under the same misapprehension. After all, this whole classical music genre covers a substantial time period and there is such a vast array of language, literature and aesthetic to absorb. No wonder I was confused!

Fast forward from that era to the middle of the Twentieth Century and the business of presenting classical music to a dedicated, ticket-buying public had followed a path that caused the complete homogenization of orchestral concerts. Music from the 17th century was presented alongside new music and everything in between, all played with the same performing criteria and very little accommodation of historical context! Symphony orchestras around the world aspired to be stunningly virtuosic machines and their appetite for commercial appeal through more and more recordings knew no bounds. 'Maestros' of every generation claimed to be upholding only the composers' intentions - all with vastly different results!

Of course, what I've just written is a huge simplification and there were many other factors across these hundreds of years which brought about this situation. But, gradually, questions started to be asked; Is this what the composer wanted? Can we really go back, study the practices and styles of the past, and claim we are presenting and performing in a truly authentic manner?

This leads us to where we are tonight.

Hopefully you will have noticed a theme running throughout this Fort Wayne Philharmonic season that is looking for connections in the world of the great composer, Johannes Brahms. **'The Romance of Brahms'** aims to explore what inspired Brahms, who Brahms inspired himself and, indeed, who were the other characters who contributed to this incredible era of music creation and consumption. Some of the composers, like Clara Schumann and Ethel Smyth, are only gaining public recognition today whilst others, such as Tchaikovsky and Grieg, are so absorbed into our musical appreciation that we only need to mention them by their last names.

As we look to perform Brahms' symphonies I'm very aware of the dangers of trying to put ourselves into other people's shoes. We only have the capacity to go so far in reflecting Brahms' 'sound world', but some of the more vexed questions are easy to address and explore. And this really is only exploration, not pontification!

What we do know for fact though, is that Brahms preferred and even chose to have smaller string sections for his symphonic music than the ones we use today. And that, like all composers of the Classical and Romantic eras, he expected his first and second violins to be divided to the left and the right of the stage. This of course creates challenges to any orchestra used to performing with a larger body of strings and with all the violins seated next to each other. But it also gives us the opportunity to experience the musical writing differently. We can appreciate what appears to be Brahms' intention of the woodwinds being equal partners as a section, and of the brass bringing their own coloristic values to the ensemble, rather than just being there to 'supercharge' the dynamic! Beyond this, ideas concerning tempo, phrasing and string vibrato are all part of the myriad of subtle nuancing that I hope we are able to venture in to without, of course, ever diminishing either our or your enjoyment of this glorious music.

By 1876 when he first presented his Symphony No.1 to the world, Brahms was already 43 years old. However, it would appear that the idea of the symphony had occupied his mind for many years, and he had even begun sketches for it back in 1855. The mantle of Beethoven's legacy had been placed very firmly upon Brahms' shoulders and it seems to have weighed heavily! That, and the composer's usual fastidiousness, seem to have been the cause of such a long gestation period.

The first performance took place in Karlsruhe on November 4th, 1876, with Brahms' friend Felix Dessoff conducting - *"It was always a secret, fond wish of mine to hear the thing for the first time in the small town which has a good friend, good conductor, and good orchestra".*

There are four movements, the first of which begins with a lengthy introduction - interestingly this was composed after the rest of the movement and is an elaborate variation of the first theme. The second movement is an intensely lyrical Andante in the key of E major whilst the third movement, in A-flat major, is a calm stroll around the countryside led by the clarinet before a slightly more turbulent central trio section. The return to C (major) for the finale reveals a compositional device which spans the whole work; we begin in C minor then in each movement rise the interval of a major third to return to 'C' (C minor, E major, A-flat major and back to C). Perhaps Brahms takes the concept of 'rising' even further when, emerging from the murky, dank clouds of the mountain landscape which inspired him, the famous Alp-horn theme is heard, leading us into the finale. Eight years earlier, Brahms had written this theme on the back of a postcard to his muse and confidant Clara Schumann, *"Thus blew the shepherd's horn today!"*

With the burden of his first symphony lifted, the Symphony No.2 followed remarkably soon afterwards in 1877. Again, the inspiration was the relaxed surroundings of a summer vacation - this time the Austrian town of Pörtschach am Wörthersee. Where the Symphony No. 1 had been serious and even dark at times, the Symphony No. 2 was all sunlight and boisterousness. Brahms' mischief nature at this time even went so far as to misdirect his publisher, Simrock by telling him: *"it is so melancholy that you will not be able to bear it. I have never written anything so sad, and the score must come out in mourning."* There are, as in the first symphony, four movements, and the orchestra is the same save for the absence of a contrabassoon and, the addition of a tuba.

-Andrew Constantine