JOHANNES BRAHMS
German composer

One of the greatest composers of his century, Brahms left an enduring body of work, which demonstrated that the forms and genres of Viennese classicism would continue to have artistic validity during the late nineteenth century and that they were not incompatible with the ethos of Romanticism.

Born: May 7, 1833; Hamburg (now in Germany)
Died: April 3, 1897; Vienna, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now in Austria)
Area of achievement: Music

Early Life
Johannes Brahms (brahmz) was the son of Johann Jakob Brahms, a double bassist in the municipal orchestra of Hamburg, and Johanna Henrika Christiane Nissen, a small, disabled woman who was seventeen years her husband’s senior. Though romantic biographers often exaggerated the humble origins of their subjects, accounts of Brahms’s childhood in a Dickensian tenement in Hamburg are largely accurate, and it appears true that Brahms was required at an early age to play the piano in dockside taverns and dance halls in order to augment the family income. Certainly Brahms’s childhood was not altogether wretched: It seems clear that his parents offered considerable affection (Brahms worshiped his mother throughout his life) and did what could be done, given their straitened circumstances, to develop their son’s gifts.

Brahms’s remarkable musical talent was discovered at an early age by his father. He was given competent instruction at the piano by Otto F. W. Cosel and distinguished, if conservative, instruction in composition by Eduard Marxsen. Though Brahms was not a prodigy on the order of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or Felix Mendelssohn, his talent developed rapidly. During the 1848-1849 season, he gave two public piano recitals, performing works as formidable as Ludwig van Beethoven’s Waldstein Sonata, Op. 53. He was also composing prolifically, though the works from this period are no longer extant; Brahms, ever self-critical, later destroyed these “youthful indiscretions” by the trunkful.

In 1853, Brahms seized an opportunity to participate in a concert tour with the flamboyant Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi. The tour proved to be a turning point in Brahms’s life. Through Reményi’s offices, Brahms was introduced first to Franz Liszt in Weimar and then to Robert and Clara Schumann in Düsseldorf. The initial meeting with the Schumanns—he the leading spirit in the German Romantic musical movement and she the greatest female pianist of the century—took place on September 30, 1853.

The three immediately experienced a remarkable personal and musical communion, and Brahms became virtually a member of the Schumann household. At this time, Brahms was twenty years old, small, slightly built, blond, unbearded, and androgynously fair of face (not the bearded, well-fleshed, cigar-smoking doyen of later photographs), and he seems to have exercised a complex fascination on both the Schumanns. So impressed by Brahms’s playing and compositions was Robert Schumann that he was moved to issue a review in the prestigious New Journal for Music declaring Brahms to be a “young eagle” who had sprung forth “fully armed.” Schumann had, in effect, anointed Brahms as his musical heir; the younger man’s public career had begun.

Life’s Work
The first works that Brahms allowed posterity to see date from the period of the first meeting with the Schumanns. It is easy to see why Robert Schumann admired the three piano sonatas (Opp. 1, 2, and 5) that Brahms presented to him. Though the shadow of Beethoven looms over these works, they display an emerging individuality, a formal mastery, and a seriousness of purpose that justify Schumann’s description of Brahms as already “fully armed.” The Sonata in F Minor, Op. 5 is particularly impressive: It is a big-boned work in five movements whose carefully organized ideas are alternately fiery and lyrical. Brahms’s unique, thick-textured, robust, and occasionally awkward keyboard idiom, doubtless deriving from his own idiosyncratic piano technique, is already fully present.

The years from 1854 to 1856 were years of personal turmoil for Brahms. Early in 1854, Robert Schumann suffered a nervous collapse that required his institutionalization and that led ultimately to his death in 1856. Brahms devoted much of his energy during this time of trial to the emotional support of Clara. There is no doubt that Brahms believed himself to be in love with Clara at this time. The degree of intimacy to which Brahms and Clara progressed is not known. Shortly after Robert’s death, the two evidently agreed to maintain their friendship on a purely platonic basis.

The years of Schumann’s illness had not been productive ones for Brahms. Shortly before Schumann’s col-
lapse, Brahms had completed his first major chamber work: the Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8. It was an auspicious beginning. The next large works date from the end of the decade. In 1857, Brahms accepted a post as pianist and choral conductor at the small court of Detmold. There he had an opportunity to work with the court’s forty-piece orchestra. In 1859, Brahms completed his first work employing full orchestra, the Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15. The work had a complicated genesis: Brahms had first intended to write a symphony, and the work lacks the surface brilliance of most Romantic concertos. Though it was not well received at first, it is a great, if somewhat austere, work. The piano part is in some respects ungracefully written, and the work was long considered unplayable.

Though Brahms was by no means a reactionary, he found himself increasingly allied during the 1850’s and 1860’s with musical conservatives such as the Schumanns and violinist Joseph Joachim in opposition to radical Romantics such as Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner. Brahms himself had little interest in critical polemics of any sort, but in 1860 he allowed his name to be placed on a manifesto decrying the so-called music of the future of Liszt and his cohorts. Ultimately, Brahms was made to suffer for this gesture: He became the bête noire of radical critics and was the victim of critical vituperation for the remainder of his life. To these thrusts, Brahms appeared stoically indifferent; on later occasions, he expressed admiration for the works of Wagner, the leader of the opposing camp.

In 1863, Brahms accepted a post as director of the Vienna Singakademie (choral society) and for the remainder of his life resided chiefly in Vienna. The city of the Habsburgs, with its Gemütlichkeit and its memories of Franz Schubert, Mozart, and Beethoven, thus became the backdrop for Brahms’s supreme achievements as a composer. The move was probably a healthy one for Brahms: The sunniness of the Viennese doubtless helped to mitigate Brahms’s North German dourness and enabled Brahms to show on occasion a more genial and charming face. As Brahms aged, he seemed in some respects to personify the aging of the century itself; his works increasingly assumed that cast that generations of critics have called “autumnal.” Brahms’s late works are indeed the Indian summer of Romanticism, warmed by a low sun whose rays shine obliquely.

Brahms’s great work of the 1860’s, and the work that firmly established his international reputation, was the German Requiem, Op. 45, for chorus, soloists, and orchestra. Despite its title, this is not a liturgical mass. Brahms assembled his own text from the German Bible, and as Karl Geiringer has observed, Brahms’s requiem is not so much a prayer for the dead as an attempt to comfort and reassure the living who mourn. The occasion that gave rise to this work was the death of Brahms’s mother in 1865; the great seven-movement edifice that he constructed in her memory was completed in 1868. Brahms’s compositional technique was by this time completely assured in both choral and orchestral idioms, and the German Requiem shows Brahms working at a sustained level of inspiration throughout.

Among numerous other works that Brahms composed in his fourth decade, mention should be made of the Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34 (1864); the Horn Trio in E-flat Major, Op. 40 (1865); and the orchestral Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a (1873). The quintet for piano and strings began life as a duet for two pianos but is heard to greatest effect as a quartet. The trio was written for the unusual combination of violin, French horn, and piano; in its euphony and elegiac quality, it is purest Brahms. The Haydn variations show Brahms in his highest spirits; although the theme was not