

Johannes Brahms

(Yoh-han-es BRAHMS)

Romantic Era Composer

B: 7 May 1833, Hamburg, German Confederation (modern Germany)

D: 3 April 1897 Vienna, Austro-Hungarian Empire (modern Austria)



When little Johann announced to his father that he wanted to become a professional musician, just like his dad, Johann Sr. was delighted...until little Johann was not interested in professionally playing the double bass, or the violin, or the zither, or any of the instruments his father knew how to play and the family owned. No, little Johann wanted to be a piano player. (that was a LOT less portable to gigs!) Nonetheless, Johann, then his brother Fritz, insisted on the piano, and so the family made it work. Johann worked very hard under the best teachers in Hamburg, and gave his first public concert when he was 10.¹ The first teacher tried to get Brahms to give up his little compositions to focus on playing better. His second, Marxsen, not only encouraged the composing, he gave Brahms, now a teenager, lessons in music theory, compositions, and more.

Brahms struggled to make a living as a musician and composer until a mutual friend introduced him to music's leading couple: Robert and Clara Schumann. Both accomplished musicians and composers, they welcomed young Brahms and encouraged him. Robert was so impressed with Brahms's music, he wrote an article in the leading Vienna paper, announcing Brahms as the next great composer of the future.

That was great...in a way. Brahms's music suddenly had a publisher, people were asking him to conduct and compose...but Brahms felt like none of his pieces could measure up to Robert Schumann's ideals. Brahms even burnt pieces (lots of them) he didn't feel lived up to what they "should be." He also didn't debut major symphonies until he was 43, because they weren't "good enough." (by 43, Beethoven had composed 8 symphonies and gone deaf; Mozart had composed 41 and been dead for 8 years!) Brahms preferred to stick with smaller pieces designed for private performances, until he finally trusted himself.

When Robert Schumann had a mental health breakdown, Brahms moved into the Schumann house, helping Clara with their eight children and working with the doctors to help Robert (the doctors felt seeing Clara would be too distressing.) When Robert died, Brahms and Clara decided to not marry, but Brahms did occasionally babysit the eight little Schumanns while Clara earned money touring. Brahms loved children and babysitting: he laughed and played tin soldiers with them (he even brought his own toys from childhood) and watched them perform magic tricks, demanding to know they did them!

Brahms toured and composed, worked and published, but was, socially, difficult to understand. With adults, he was very reserved and gruff, didn't seem to have emotions in public, and often insulted people (sometimes on purpose, but not always.) Even Clara Schumann, his best friend, said she didn't understand him. His emotions must have been poured out into his music however, which often reduced people to tears. Today, when people talk about the great composers of Classical History, they often mean the "Three B's of Music...Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms."

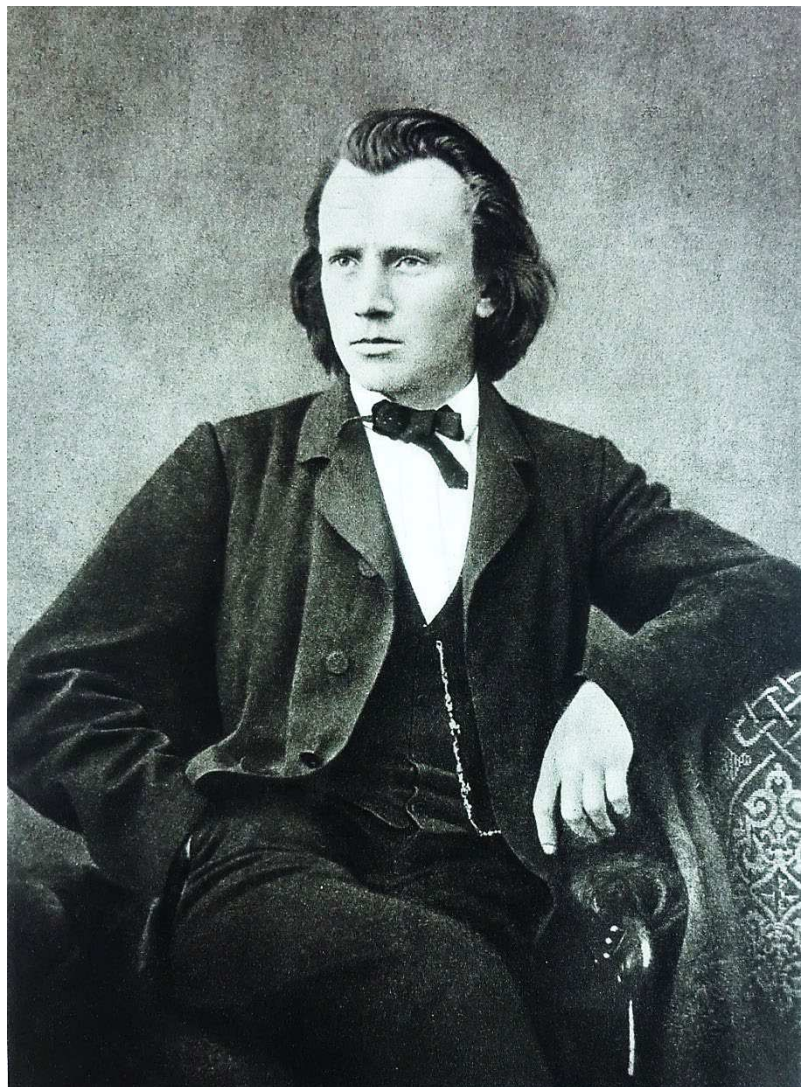
¹ According to the adult Brahms, during this time, Johann would help the family financially by professionally playing dance tunes at the pianos at the drinking taverns and houses of ill repute of Hamburg. However, that would have been illegal (both music and minors were banned from house of ill repute by law) so music historians are unsure if this actually happened.

Quotes

“The idea comes to me from outside of me - and is like a gift. I then take the idea and make it my own - that is where the skill lies.”

“Without craftsmanship, inspiration is a mere reed shaken in the wind.”

Brahms as a young man before he grew his beard. He loved that beard because it gave him a sense of anonymity among his adoring public...at least until they recognized him BY the beard!



Vocabulary

Tempo: From the Italian word “tempo” meaning time, tempo in music is how fast a piece of music is played. In Brahms’s time, the composer would name a type of beat and sense of emotion he wanted the musician to convey.

Allegro giocoso : *Allegro* is an Italian word meaning “fast, lively”, while “giocoso” means playful or lively.

Tuplets and Triplets:

A Tuplet is an irrational musical notation. Anytime a composer wanted to wedge more notes than the beat would technically allow, he or she used a tuplet, and noted how many notes needed to fit into the new beat by setting a number over the grouping. The most common type of tuplet is a triplet (see below) but quintuplets/pentuplets (5 notes), sextuplets (6 notes), and septuplets (seven notes), and nested tuplets also exist.



Shown here is a nested tuplet. the 5:4 in the mother tuplet bracket means "I've put 5 beats where normally we have four beats" then each of the triplet (3) and quintuplet (5) are nested inside that mother quintuplet

Triplet:

Most of the time, a quarter note, split in two, produced two eighth notes. But a TRIPLET is when three eighth notes are wedged into one beat. (Three now fit where two usually go). A triplet is indicated by a “3” posted over the notes, so the musician knows there are now three notes in that beat, rather than two.



Today, we will hear a lot of triplets in Brahms’s 4th Symphony.

Etymology and History: In math, when things happen in a sequence or in groups, we get a word that ends in -le. Single (one) Couple (two) Triple (three) Quadruple (four), Quintuple (five) and so on. When it appears with the ending “-et” instead of “-le” (Triplet vs. Triple) the “et” is a noun describing that group. So triple babies are three babies that are born one after another, however, the whole group of babies together are called “triplets.” And so, the three groups of notes together are also “triplets.”

“Triplet” itself comes from the Latin “*Triplare*” meaning “threefold”

Originally applied to poetry (a triplet was three successive lines of poetry) In music, triplets were invented around 1801.

More Brahms Compositions

Brahms was one of the last early Romantic composers: he defied the rising loud brash Romantic composers like Wagner and Tchaikovsky with their overly dramatic, emotional works.

Piano Concerto No. 1 Composed 1858; Premiered 1859

The first piano concerto Brahms publicly composed and publicly played did not go over well at all. During the first TWO concerts, the audience refused to clap, hissed, and booed. A disappointed Brahms wrote to a friend afterwards, *"I am only experimenting and feeling my way... all the same, the hissing was rather too much."* Thankfully, the third performance, in his hometown of Hamburg, was a smash hit! Today, it is considered one of the best Piano Concertos available, and is frequently performed.

The Cradle Song Completed 1868

This is probably Brahms's most well-known piece by most people. Originally called "Wiegenlied" it is now known as "the Cradle Song" or "Brahms's Lullaby."

Symphony No 1: Composed 1855 – 1876; Premiered 4 November 1876

Thanks to Robert Schumann's pronouncement that Brahms was the next great composer, the heir of Beethoven, Brahms talked himself out of many larger compositions for many years. To be fair, if anyone had been nominated the heir to Beethoven's greatness, they too would have been nervous! Nonetheless, Brahms did well for his debut symphony; it was called "Beethoven's Tenth" in some circles.

Hungarian Dances 1- 21: Completed 1869 – 1880

Brahms enjoyed doing fun little pieces. These twenty-one dances are based upon the folk melodies and dances of Hungary, which "joined" the Austrian Empire around the time these tunes were composed. Only three of the 21, (nos. 11, 14, and 16) are entirely original to Brahms's pen (most are variations and arrangements of popular tunes) and two (Nos. 1 and 5) are the most famous of the set. No 5 in particular is quite well known, (look it up, you'll probably recognize it), and was even used by Warner Bros', 1943 cartoon, "Pigs in a Polka," a rendition of the Three Little Pigs.

Symphony No. 4 in E Minor Composed 1884; Premiered October 25, 1885

Often considered the greatest of all Brahms's Symphonic works, Symphony No 4 was the piece of music played during Brahms's final public appearance. Sick with cancer (uncurable at that time,) Brahms attended the concert and heard the audience give a loud ovation (applause) after each movement. He died exactly one month later.

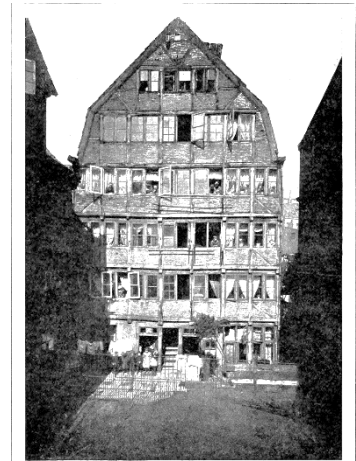
Fun Facts (that didn't fit in the bio)



The surname “Brahms” derives from the German word for the “Shrub Broom,” better known in English as the Lupine family of plants (like the one on the left). It was called a “broom” (both in English and German) because the stiff branches of this plant were commonly bundled into brooms for sweeping homes. In English, the original name transformed into “broom” but later, when the German word “Bram” (the root of Brahms) was introduced, it transformed into “bramble.” This plant has another historical connection: in Latin, this group of plants were sometimes called “*planta genista*” which is where the name “Plantagenet” came from; the English royal dynasty that included King Richard the Lionhearted, Edward I (Longshanks), and Edward III, among others.

Brahms the composer was technically Johann Brahms III. Both his father, (the string musician) and grandfather (the anti-music innkeeper) were also Johann Brahms. Johan I was appalled when his son, Johann II, wanted to be a musician, and so banned music from the house. Johann II continued to sneak out anyway, learning music from anyone he could. Johann I grounded him, so Johann II ran away...again...and again...and again...trying to learn music. Eventually, Johan I saw that God must have made Johann II a musician and relented. Johann I lived long enough to see the birth of his soon-to-be-famous grandson Johann III.

Brahms was 9 years old when one-quarter of his home of Hamburg was destroyed by a great fire of May 4- May 8. Several churches, the Hamburg Town Hall, and thousands of homes were destroyed during the 4-day blaze. Even the firefighters were hampered because the Elbe River, which flows through Hamburg to the sea, was low, and firefighters couldn't pump enough water high enough to extinguish the blaze. The town, probably including Brahms's family, evacuated to the countryside until the fire extinguished. In the end, it didn't impact the Brahms family much, as, at the time, they lived in the poorer waterfront district, which the blaze never came near. Indeed, Brahms's birth home (see on the right), made of wood and bricks, remained standing until 1943, when it was destroyed during an Allied bombing of Hamburg.



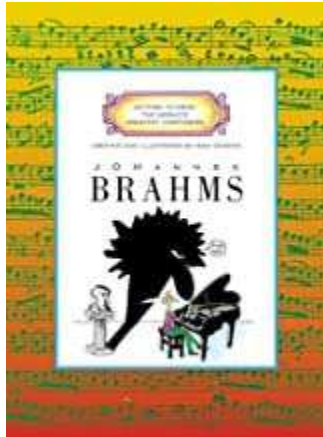
Despite the fact that Brahms had many female friends and admirers, (Clara Schumann, among others), Brahms never married. He even got engaged once, to Agathe von Siebold, but got cold feet and broke the engagement. Historians love to ask why he never married, but it is interesting to note that his little brother Felix also never married.

Russian composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky intensely disliked Brahms's carefully crafted music. He preferred the wildly intense music of Wagner, and imagined Brahms was a spoilt celebrity. When he met Brahms at a house of a friend in 1889, Tchaikovsky discovered Brahms was down-to-earth and funny, so the two men hit it off! Over several days, as both listened to the other's music, they came to a mutual conclusion: they liked each other as friends and HATED each other's music. And that was fine with them.

Brahms mounted a bust of Beethoven high on the wall behind his piano bench, so Beethoven could always look down his nose on Brahms when he played! (not the most comforting thought!)

Take Home:

For Younger Kids:

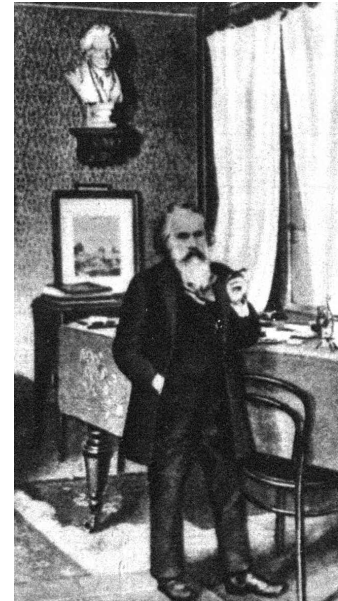


Getting to know the World's Greatest Composers: Brahms

by Mike Venezia.

Like many other books in Venezia's works, this one covers the story of Brahms using a combination of cartoons and period photos and paintings. I love the cover: showing Beethoven's bust looming of Brahms, telling him "Don't Screw Up!" Because it's based on a real thing Brahms did! He actually mounted a bust of Beethoven high on the wall behind

his piano bench so Beethoven could look over Brahms's shoulder. Not something I would want, if I were a composer! *(I had to include the picture on the right: there is Brahms in his parlor, leaning against his piano, and you can see the bust of Beethoven behind him high on the wall!)*

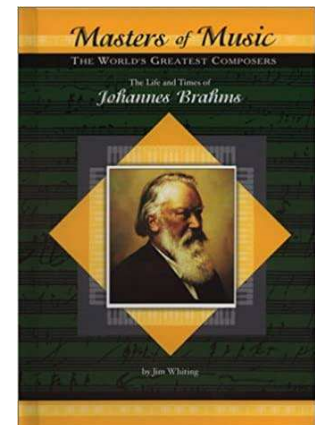


For Older Kids:

Masters of Music: The World's Greatest Composers. The Life and Times of Johannes Brahms

By Jim Whiting

This is a great book which is a more in-depth but still child-friendly biography of Brahms separated into chapters. There is lots of photos of Brahms and the places he lived and his friends and family. I also loved the inset articles about the world events going on during Brahms's lifetime, so you can get a more complete picture of his world. It is older, you may only find it at the library or second-hand.



LISTEN TO THE MUSIC:

Get to know Brahms and his music. Listen to Brahms music on youtube, spotify, Pandora, or on CDs. Go to a concert, if at all possible. Before long, you'll be able to listen to Classical music, and say, "Hey! That's a Romantic era piece!" and sometimes, even "That's Brahms!" "That's Beethoven!" "That's Liszt!"

Enjoy!