

# Silicon Valley Symphony

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## Program Notes by Julian Brown

### **Brahms** - *Academic Festival Overture*

#### 1. Allegro - Maestoso - Animato - Maestoso

As a virtuoso pianist constantly in demand for performances, the young Johannes Brahms never had the opportunity to go to college but if this piece is anything to go by it's tempting to think he would have enjoyed the more rowdy elements of student life. Although he was also an obsessive perfectionist, academia did not really enter his sphere until he was in his forties when his fame and success as a composer were such that Cambridge University offered him an honorary Doctorate in Music. With news of lavish plans to celebrate his visit to the UK, the composer's distaste for being the focus of a lot of public razzmatazz and his fear of crossing the Channel compelled him to leave the honor uncollected. A few years later the University of Breslau had better luck when they offered him an honorary Doctor of Philosophy and Brahms responded with a grateful message of thanks on a postcard. However, a postcard was not quite what the Director of Music at Breslau, Bernhard Scholz, had in mind when he invited Brahms to pen a musical thank you, optimistically suggesting a symphony. Brahms being something of a joker, responded with the Academic Festival Overture, an infectious concoction that he described as "a very boisterous potpourri of student songs."

The overture, certainly tips its hat a lot more to the festive than to the academic, weaving together, as only Brahms could do, a bunch of songs starting with one of his favorites from his youth, the Rakóczy March, a tune both Berlioz and Liszt had exploited many years earlier. Brahms then ushers in a series of tunes which at one point he cleverly plays off against each other until culminating in his take of "Gaudeamus Igitur" ("Therefore, let us be merry") in the form of a rousing, rambunctious finale with brass at full blast, strings doing power scales, and the whole orchestra generally ablaze. Brahms conducted the overture at a special convocation held at the university in 1881, and no doubt cause not a few academics to raise their eyebrows at its tongue in cheek ebullience.

### **Saint-Saens** - *Violin Concerto Number 3*

1. Allegro non troppo
2. Andantino quasi allegretto
3. Molto moderato e maestoso

While it's easy to think the 19th century German musical powerhouse of Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, and Wagner more or less left all other countries in the dust, France was not without musical talent. Among them was Camille Saint-Saens, who erupted onto the world as phenomenally precocious piano virtuoso. Aged 10 after his debut recital he offered to rattle off as

an encore any of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas *from memory*. While he developed into an extraordinary polymath with interests in math, philosophy, geology, archeology, and botany, Saint-Saens also became a prolific composer producing hundreds of compositions over the course of a long life. Among them were several works for the Spanish violin virtuoso. Pablo Sarasate, including the much loved *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* and this the last and most popular of his violin concertos.

The concerto exudes Spanish, Italian, and French idioms and with Saint-Saens' usual flair combines violin pyrotechnics with moments of lyrical sweetness. Such moments may remind of us of what the composer's contemporary Claude Debussy once rather harshly said: "I have a horror of sentimentality, and I cannot forget that its name is Saint-Saëns." The feeling of disdain between the two French composers was mutual though Debussy occasionally admitted a sneaking respect for Saint-Saëns' musical abilities, evidenced by his arrangement of the *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* for two pianos. Dwelling on the lyrical, the end of the second movement offers a moment of great impressionistic beauty where we hear the solo violin elaborate arpeggios of harmonics together with the clarinet against a hushed background of orchestral sultriness. It's a strikingly memorable moment. But perhaps the moment of greatest enlightenment comes in the last movement with a hymn like chorale that interrupts the flow of passionate storminess.

### **Brahms** - *Symphony Number 4 in E minor*

1. Allegro non troppo
2. Andante moderato
3. Allegro giocoso
4. Allegro energico e passionato

While the Academic Festival Overture reflected the jovial side of Brahms' character, in the same year he also wrote "The Tragic Overture", a companion piece that reflected his darker side. In his fourth and last symphony which he wrote several years later, this aspect of his temperament was also very much on display. The work follows a tragic arc that was unusual in breaking the rule that a symphony that starts in a minor key should finish in the major. One only has to listen to Beethoven's 5th to remind oneself of how Beethoven could turn adversity portrayed in the stormy key of C minor into the heroic triumph of C major in the rousing climax of that work's final moments. Not so Brahms. We start in dark E minor and that's where we resolutely end.

After the drama and passion of the first movement, a solo French Horn announces the opening of the slow requiem like second movement using notes from the so-called Phrygian mode, a scale familiar from Baroque and Medieval music that is what you get when you play the white keys on the piano starting and ending on E. The mode actually makes frequent appearances throughout the symphony but it's particularly prominent in this movement. Brahms himself noted that this musical mode expressed a longing for "heavenly comfort".

In the third movement we are suddenly catapulted into a joyfully vibrant scherzo that almost seems out of place given the seriousness of the other movements. But it's what makes the tragedy and genius of the last movement all the more compelling. In one of the most unusual inventions in the symphonic repertoire, Brahms adopted a neglected Baroque musical form, the passacaglia in which a set of variations is based on a eight bar opening theme. A passacaglia is essentially the same idea as that of a chaconne and it's worth noting that in his famous D minor chaconne for solo violin, J S Bach fashioned from this deceptively simple formula an epic work that stands at the pinnacle of musical creation for a solo instrument. Brahms' pasacaglia in this symphony

consists of a simple but dramatic eight bar theme followed by thirty magnificent variations and a coda. The result makes for a masterful end that without doubt rounded off his achievement as one of the greatest of all symphonists.

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