



BRAHMS

Tragic Overture

Johannes Brahms, born on May 7, 1833 in Hamburg was a German composer and pianist and one of the leading musicians of the Romantic period. Brahms spent much of his professional life in Vienna, Austria, where he was a leader of the musical scene. In his lifetime, Brahms's popularity and influence were considerable; following a comment by the nineteenth-century conductor Hans von Bülow, he is sometimes grouped with Bach and Beethoven as one of the Three Bs. Brahms is often considered both a traditionalist and an innovator. His music is firmly rooted in the structures and compositional techniques of the Baroque and Classical masters. He was a master of counterpoint, the complex and highly disciplined method of composition for which Bach is famous, and also of development, a compositional ethos pioneered by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Brahms aimed to honor the "purity" of these venerable "German" structures and advance them into a Romantic idiom, in the process creating new approaches to harmony, melody and, especially, rhythm. While many contemporaries found his music too academic, his craftsmanship have been admired by subsequent figures as diverse as the progressive Arnold Schoenberg and the conservative Edward Elgar. The diligent, highly constructed nature of Brahms's works was a starting point and an inspiration for a generation of composers.

The **Tragic Overture** (German: *Tragische Ouvertüre*), Op. 81, is a concert overture written during the summer of 1880. It premiered on 26 December 1880 in Vienna. Most performances last between twelve and fifteen minutes. Brahms chose the title "Tragic" to emphasize the turbulent, tormented character of the piece, in essence a free-standing symphonic movement, in contrast to the mirthful ebullience of a companion piece he wrote the same year, the *Academic Festival Overture*. Despite its name, the *Tragic Overture* does not follow any specific dramatic program. Brahms was not very interested in musical storytelling and was more concerned with conveying and eliciting emotional impressions. He summed up the effective difference between the two overtures when he declared "one laughs while the other cries." Brahms quotes some material from the last movement of the *Second Symphony* in this overture. Theorists have disagreed in analyzing the form of the piece: music theorist Timothy Jackson labels the work's form as a "reversed sonata design" in which the second group (or subordinate theme) is brought back before the first (or main theme) in the recapitulation. Jackson suggests that Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture* was a possible formal model.