



BRAHMS

Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) wrote the **Academic Festival Overture, op. 80** (German: *Akademische Festouvertüre*) in 1881. It was written for and premiered at the University of Breslau, which had awarded Brahms with an honorary doctorate two years prior.

By this point in his career, Brahms had become a composer of international renown. His *German Requiem* (published in 1869) had cemented his position as a great composer of large-scale music, and his First Symphony (published in 1877) was hailed at the time as Beethoven's Tenth, marking Brahms as a worthy successor to the titan who had dominated musical Europe since the beginnings of Romanticism. Brahms had gained a following not only in German-speaking Europe but also across the Channel in England – the University of Cambridge had in fact offered Brahms an honorary doctorate several years before Breslau (Brahms had declined the honour because he was unwilling to travel to England, however). The revenue from composing and performing allowed Brahms to live comfortably and travel frequently, allowing him to compose with many inspirations and few interferences.

Convinced by Bernhard Scholz, conductor of the Breslau Orchestral Society and the man who had nominated Brahms for the honour, Brahms began work on the Academic Festival Overture in 1880. Calling on some of the largest performing forces he had ever used, Brahms weaves no fewer than five separate themes together into a single grand composition. Only a single theme – the first – is original, while the other four are student songs common at the University. The first of four student songs is *Wir hatten gebauet ein stattliches Haus* (We have built a stately house...). This hymn is later displayed by a brass choir, spearheaded by trumpets and supported by woodwinds; the second, *Der Landesvater*, is presented as a “second theme” first in violins then in woodwinds. The third song is *Fuchslied* (Freshman Song) – a drinking song! Like many composers before and after him, Brahms calls upon the bassoons to make the first statement of this amusing song. The oboes answer the bassoons call to joviality, followed by the cellos, and then the entire orchestra joins in the frivolous partying. The fourth song is kept hidden until the very end, when *Gaudeamus Igitur* is finally unveiled, a grand hymn which could be presented by nothing less than the full orchestra in *fortissimo*. Woodwinds and brass sing the majestic coda, strings race beneath the theme, and the full force of percussion instruments drive the overture to a brilliant climax and conclusion.