Symphony No. 4 in e minor, Op. 98
Johannes Brahms
Born: May 7, 1833 – Hamburg, Germany
Died: April 3, 1897 – Vienna, Austria

Piece Length: Approximately 45 minutes.

A year after the successful premiere of his Symphony No. 3 in F Major in 1883, Brahms began work on a fourth symphony. In September 1885, one month before the world premiere of this new symphony, Brahms invited a number of close friends to hear him and Ignaz Brüll perform the work on piano. After playing through the first movement, there was silence among the normally supportive friends. Among those present, the critic Eduard Hanslick apparently broke the silence by stating "I feel like I've just been beaten up by two terribly intelligent people." It briefly lightened the mood in the room. Brahms and Brüll proceeded to complete the performance of the symphony, but again the reception was rather cold. Brahms, understandably anxious about this, gruffly argued that it would make a better impression when one could hear his orchestral colors verses on the piano.

The premiere on October 25, 1885 with the Meiningen Court Orchestra conducted by the composer was met with a similar lukewarm reception. However, some of those present at the private performance in September had a better response to the music upon a second hearing. In fact, Hanslick would describe the work as a "dark well", adding "the longer we look into it, the more brightly the stars shine bright."

Indeed the craftsmanship found in the symphony reveals Brahms at the heights of his creative powers. Not only is the mastery of the development of musical ideas rarely surpassed in the symphonic literature, but the invention of formal structure is a marvel. While the premiere performance was met with a lukewarm response, the symphony has since become a staple of the orchestra literature, with the musicologist Donald Tovey going as far as to call it "one of the greatest orchestral works since Beethoven."

What might have caused some trouble for first listeners is the previously mentioned inventive approach to form. In each movement, Brahms bends the rules of sonata form while also deviating from the expectations of symphonic movements to breathe fresh life in an old genre.

The first movement, marked Allegro non troppo (Fast, but not too fast) is in sonata form, featuring an exposition that contains contrasting musical ideas, a development section where the composer typically fragments their ideas and rapidly moves to different keys to produce tonal instability and excitement, and a recapitulation where the music returns to the original key while restating the themes from the exposition one last time. Certainly audiences of the day would be expecting this. But Brahms creates some structural slight of hand that may have thrown the audiences at the premiere off. The movement presents the melancholic first theme without introduction in the violins. The contrasting second thematic group contains two distinct themes. The first is a lyrical melody heard in the horns and cellos, the second an idyllic theme introduced in the winds. The exposition's closing material features a conflict between two musical worlds: a bold, almost fanfare-like musical idea that is interrupted by a more static, mysterious musical world. Then the exposition seems to be repeated with a return of the first theme, a common trait of sonata form. Here is where Brahms might have thrown the listeners off a bit: shortly after the restatement of the first theme, Brahms changes key signaling that we are, in fact, in the development section. At the end of the development, Brahms once again throws the listener for a loop. The first few bars of the first theme are heard in a much slower, tentative version. This would be in keeping with a development section of sonata form. However, after a brief pause, the second half of the

theme continues in its original form, revealing that the recapitulation has in fact begun. This first theme makes one last, bold appearance played by the entire orchestra in the coda before the movement ends defiantly.

The second movement, Andante moderato (moderately slow walking pace), lightens the mood. This movement is in modified sonata form where the exposition and recapitulation are present, but there is no real development section. What Brahms does instead is develop his themes almost immediately after stating them, a device Arnold Schoenberg would call "Developing Variation." After a short introduction in which the horns present the main motif of the movement, the gentle first theme is heard in the clarinets against pizzicato strings. The transition section, using material from the first theme, eventually leads to the delicate second theme introduced in the bassoon and violas. Brahms further develops these themes in the recapitulation before a coda brings the movement to a quiet ending.

For the third movement, Brahms replaces what would normally be a scherzo and trio movement with, once again, a movement in sonata form. This movement, marked Allegro giocoso (Fast and playful) immediately launches into the boisterous first theme played by the entire orchestra. One key element to note of this theme is the use of a triangle, an instrument rarely used in Brahms' orchestral works, that adds to the brightness of this musical idea. The second theme, first heard in the violins, is a quieter, but no less energetic melody. Interestingly, during the development section, there is a long passage where the music slows down a bit and the orchestration thins out which would align with what listeners would expect in the trio section of a typical scherzo movement. This blending of form could very well have confused first listeners of the piece. Nevertheless, this brilliant movement seems to be shifting the mood of the symphony from tragedy to triumph.

But the triumph is short lived as the finale, marked Allegro energico e passionate (Fast, energetic, and passionate), plunges back into e minor. The mastery of Brahms' craft is most evident in this movement. This remarkable achievement showcases both his ability to develop ideas while also innovating older musical forms as it is in this movement that Brahms also saves his largest formal twist. What one would expect for a last movement of a symphony would be either a movement in rondo form (A-B-A-C-A-B-A) or another sonata form. Instead, Brahms uses a Baroque era variation form called a passacaglia. Passacaglias presents a repeated bass line over which variations are written. Perhaps the most famous passacaglia is Bach's Passacaglia in c minor. Like Bach, Brahms will weave the bass line throughout the orchestra: sometimes it will appear in the bass, sometimes the highest instruments, and other times in the middle of the texture. But it will be present throughout. The main theme is heard in the first eight bars, loudly proclaimed by the winds and brass. What follows are 30 variations and a coda. Interestingly, within this format one can still see hints of sonata form: together the first 11 variations suggest a bold first theme in sonata form followed by a slower, gentler version of the passacaglia that is similar to a contrasting second theme found in the next several variations. To further support the idea of a "contrasting second theme", these next few variations shift back and forth between e minor and E major. A restatement of the original theme signals what one might hear as a sort of development section before the last few variations of the passacaglia bring back music similar to the first variations, suggesting a recapitulation. A powerful, dramatic coda brings the symphony to a close. Any brightness that the third movement suggested is now tragically gone.