

## **Johannes Brahms**

### **Piano Trio in B Major (1853-4, rev 1899)**

Johannes Brahms was 20 when Robert Schumann declared him the heir to Beethoven. The heavy burden of expectation did not rest lightly on Brahms' self-critical shoulders but it must have reinforced his opinion that he had something to say. Shortly thereafter Brahms published his first chamber composition, *Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8*, a work of large-scale proportions. Thirty-six years later the publisher *Simrock* acquired its rights and offered Brahms the opportunity to make changes. He accepted and in 1889 began the task of making it "not as dreary as before," instituting major cuts with the removal of 458 measures and curbing "youthful excesses" with entirely new music. The trio is the only work of Brahms to exist in two published versions, the latter of which—today's—is the more frequently performed. The exuberance and intellectual invention of youth, leavened with the wisdom of maturity, combine to create an accessible and deeply satisfying work.

An unhurried, creamy-smooth, alto-register theme announces the first movement. Brahms' intuitive sense for rich texture and anthem-like melody were already evident. A new, minor-mode second theme gracefully moves by leap while sustaining an aura of lyricism. The scherzo, crackling with rhythmic energy, is lashed forward with explosive piano outbursts. Its contrasting trio floats along, subtly accompanied with an echo of the scherzo's rhythmic motive. Brahms must have been pleased with this movement; he left it entirely intact.

The Adagio begins with a mysterious, piano-chord motive sounding from opposite ends of the keyboard. Recurring throughout, it defines boundaries and tonal areas. In the middle section a rhapsodic cello melody creates an expressive plateau of human warmth. The concluding Allegro's first theme is built on nervous energy and displays Brahms' ability to build mighty climaxes from modest morsels. The newly composed second theme is a soaring minor-mode melody. When it returns in the major mode, the change will prove fleeting as the movement and piece end in b-minor, an unusual twist for a multi-movement work that began in B-Major.