While Schumann, Mendelssohn, and other early Romantics struggled with the legacy of Beethoven’s symphonies, Brahms, a generation younger, faced somewhat different challenges and enjoyed new opportunities. One of his greatest challenges was unintentionally created by Schumann, whom the 20-year-old Brahms first met in 1853. The older composer’s mental health had been declining for some time and the next year he attempted suicide by throwing himself in the river Rhine. He would live in a sanatorium in Endenich for the remaining two-and-a-half years of his life. He only saw Clara once, a few days before he died, although Brahms visited regularly.

“NEW PATHS”
But before these sad events, Robert and Clara took the young composer into their home and hearts. Robert, who had been a brilliant and powerful music critic years before, came out of journalistic retirement and submitted a brief review, his last, to the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, the prominent venue he had helped start nearly 20 years earlier.

Schumann’s article, *Neue Bahnen* (New Paths), hailed Brahms as the musical messiah the world had been awaiting since Beethoven’s death. It was a dream review, especially from the pen of one of the leading critics and composers of the era, but also one that created expectations that put severe pressure on the 20-year-old Brahms. Schumann in fact based his praise on relatively few works, mainly ones for piano. The piano sonatas already were “like disguised symphonies,” Schumann wrote, and gave hope for greater things to come. Although not the only reason, the pressure was surely a contributing factor in Brahms not completing his First Symphony until the age of 43, when it was immediately welcomed as “Beethoven’s Tenth.” But there were many false starts along the way.

**DISGUISED SYMPHONIES**
Brahms’s path to writing a symphony worthy of Beethoven’s heritage was littered with musical materials that he diverted to other projects, as well as to what might be considered other “symphonies in disguise.” The mighty orchestral opening of his First Piano Concerto in D minor was at one time intended for a symphony, as were parts of A *German Requiem* and other compositions. The closest Brahms got in his 20s to composing an actual symphony are two orchestral serenades that were performed and published in 1860. The First Serenade, in D major, Op. 11, for a time even bore the title “Symphony-Serenade.”

Brahms wrote the serenades during the years when he was splitting his time between Hamburg and the Court of Lippe-Detmold, where he taught piano, gave concerts, composed, and served as a choral conductor. The First Serenade was originally written as a chamber work for eight or nine wind and string instruments, partly in the tradition of similar instrumental combinations by Beethoven, Schubert, Spohr, Hummel,
and others. But the serenades also take on the earlier Classical tradition of Mozart. Allegedly at Clara’s suggestion, Brahms expanded this four-movement chamber work (now lost) to a six-movement composition for large orchestra. While working on the piece he began the five-movement Second Serenade we hear tonight, a work scored for a smaller ensemble lacking trumpets, timpani, and, more unusually, violins. (The piccolo, however, is used to delightful effect in the final movement.)

SEEKING CLARA’S SUGGESTIONS
As Brahms did throughout his life—but especially in these earlier years—he sent the work-in-progress to Clara Schumann for her candid opinion (she gave no other kind). It was she, in fact, who complained that even one of Mozart’s greatest serenades lacked variety in its instrumental color. This may have posed a challenge that Brahms’s unusual instrumentation and interaction of wind, brass, and lower strings was meant to address. Although he dispatched the opening movement to Clara in late 1858, she had to wait, notwithstanding repeated requests, for the next three movements to arrive on her 39th birthday in September of the next year. Brahms asked if the slow movement was “worth all the trouble I have taken with it.”

Within a week he got his answer. Clara wrote, “What shall I say about the Adagio? ... I cannot find the words to express the joy it has given me and yet you want me to write at length! It is difficult for me to analyze what I feel; it impels me to something which gives me pleasure, as though I were to gaze at each filament of a wondrous flower. It is most beautiful! ... The whole movement has a spiritual atmosphere; it might almost be an Eleison [from a Mass]. Dear Johannes, you must know that I feel it better than express it in words. The Menuett has great charm (a trifle Haydnish), and the oboe in the Trio is delightful. ... The first movement gave me the same pleasure all over again; one or two things perhaps do not please me in it but they are quite minor details in a beautiful whole.” Clara’s enthusiasm continued when she received the final movement in November. Brahms conducted the first performance in Hamburg on February 10, 1860, about three weeks before the premiere of the orchestral version of the First Serenade. A few months later he crafted a four-hand piano arrangement. As he did so, the intensely self-critical composer commented, “I have seldom written music with greater delight. It seemed to sound so beautiful that I was overjoyed.”

—Christopher H. Gibbs

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