



Johannes Brahms

(1833-1897)

Johannes Brahms

- ▶ Brahms was a great “traditionalist,” conservatively using traditional forms and genres long after they had been abandoned by other late-Romantic composers
- ▶ Musicians of the day aligned themselves either with the Wagnerian camp or with the Brahmsian camp
- ▶ Brahms was a composer of “absolute music” rather than programmatic music, writing:
 - ▶ 4 symphonies, 4 concertos, and 2 overtures
 - ▶ Chamber music for strings, piano, clarinet, cello, and horns
 - ▶ Much piano music, including sonatas, ballades, intermezzi, rhapsodies, and variations
 - ▶ Choral music, including his *German Requiem*, and 200 art songs

Brahms the man

- ▶ Brahms grew up in the slums of Hamburg, playing piano in local brothels for drunken sailors and their girls
- ▶ In 1853 he was taken in by the Schumanns—Robert praised him highly in his writings
- ▶ Brahms fell in love with Clara Schumann, but due to his high regard for Robert, she remained only a lifelong friend
- ▶ The influence of Beethoven weighed strongly upon him, causing him to destroy his early attempts at symphonies—his first symphony was completed at the age of 40
- ▶ In later years, he became a typical bachelor, with an untidy, ragged, and somewhat gruff demeanor

Brahms’s style

- ▶ Brahms’s compositional style synthesizes Romantic expression with Classical traditions
- ▶ Like Beethoven, he very carefully develops motivic ideas
- ▶ He uses functional tonal harmonies but blurs and shades these harmonies in interesting ways
- ▶ He prefers dark, thick sonorities and the lower register
- ▶ He prefers plagal cadences and sometimes uses modes
- ▶ He writes warm, lyrical melodies, drawing on folk music
- ▶ He frequently experiments with rhythm and meter through the use of hemiola and other rhythmic devices
- ▶ He makes very skillful use of counterpoint