

*Introduction: I am providing a set of commentaries on the introduction to the last movement of Brahms Symphony No. 1 in C Minor. The commentaries are arranged in approximately chronological order, and demonstrate quite vividly, I think, changing styles of general-audience commentary over the past century.*

*I have replaced musical examples with measure numbers in brackets.*

### **Hermann Kretschmar (1886)**

*Commentators in Brahms's day tended to look upon this particular movement as being some kind of cosmic battlefield between the forces of evil (minor) and those of good (major), à la Beethoven. Kretschmar's commentary is in many ways the epitome of this approach. Even the orchestra itself gets drawn into the skirmish.*

The introductory Adagio commences with melancholy strings [mm. 1-5]. The violins try energetically and desperately to distract from the path of melancholy, in a phrase that is very sharply characterized by *pizzicato* and *stringendo* and that reappears at critical points in the Allegro. In vain! The imagination strays agitatedly in a dark circle; at the motive [woodwinds, m. 22] the orchestra reaches a state of open revolt. The timpani give out a terrifying roll. Then the French horn appears, like a peaceful messenger from heaven, with the following melody [horn, mm. 30-38]. We are in the Andante, the second part of the introduction. The mood softens, becomes more elevated, and prepares for the mighty, joyful hymn with which the principal section of the finale, the Allegro, begins [mm. 62-65].

A long and folk-like melody develops out of this first section. This melody serves as the primary bearer of representation in this movement.

### **Philip Goepf (1902)**

*This stands at the summit of over-the-top effusive commentary. It's pompous, even within the context of turn-of-the-century literary styles. Yet there is some analysis buried within the flowery descriptions. Note that Goepf connects the opening of this movement with the opening of the first movement—something which several other commentators note as well.*

*Adagio* begins a dim passing of chords like clouds across the tonal horizon, all in the spirit of the first thought of the symphony. But now the harmonies of the woodwind are topped by a clear melodic idea in the high strings [mm. 1-2] that

marks a new token. No reminiscent phrase is here that harks back to earlier prophecy; the outcome is at hand, the bright result and reward of the groping and striving...

Finally come mere pelting accents (still of an ancient motive) [woodwinds, m. 27] against basses marching steadily up the chromatic line. There is an overpowering mass of heaped and strained expectation. As the answer sings 'mid softest hum of light wood and lowest brass and strings, in clear and passionate notes of the horn, here is one of the most overwhelming moments of sublime beauty in all poetry [mm. 30-32]...

Slowly a madrigal of responsive voices is reared. In the midst is a single strain of pure hymn, in low brass and wind, in strict choral steps,—a passing touch, in still higher empyrean, as of pure religious truth. Even the hum of strings has ceased. There is somehow a more human ring as the clarion message bursts out again, more joyously, with new echo in companion horn. The pace, though faster than the first *Adagio*, is still a serenely slow Andante swing. As it moves, now with almost feverish glow, we feel dimly that it is itself mere herald for the new song that breaks forth in firm array of martial tones and step [mm. 62-65].

### **Max Kalbeck (1910)**

*By 1910 the first stirrings of "Freudian" commentary are heard. This provides an early example: note how we're being told how the music affects us—compare that to the previous two commentaries, which place the music in a more cosmic, or abstract, context. The religiosity that flavored Goepf's writing now comes fully into its own, as we experience madness, chaos, and anguish—and then a 'call from above'.*

It is like a first, weak ray of light that the sun sends forth into the gray dawn of morning. The rubato-pizzicato of the strings, an effect that has become famous, flutters up in agitation, like a frightened night-bird that shudders at the daylight... The dawning day has also affected us powerfully; caught up, we stare down into the turbulent, chaotic night, into a dark abyss of madness, where objects change place, where thoughts change their order, where everything whirls around in crazy anguish—shreds of spiritual connections that have been torn apart, ruins of systems that have collapsed and fragments of beloved idols!...

All at once we hear, like a call from above, the melody of the first horn speaking in tones [mm. 30-38]. It is a strong voice, a "voice of the Lord"... Pious spirits even like to place under the melody the words: "Fürchte dich nicht, spricht der Herr, sei getrost, ich bin bei dir!" [Do not fear, saith the Lord, be of good hope, I am with

thee!] And when we recall “Mynheer Dominus,” as the twenty-one-year-old Brahms used to call his fatherly friend Schumann, who showed him the “new paths” and set him his future task, then we discern the same meaning. We also enjoy reminding ourselves of the dying Roland and his good horn Oliphant—as well as many another hero or genius of humanity, who from Ronceval, the earthly vale of stones, thorns, and tears, has entered in glory the paradise of eternal day. The trombones [mm. 47-50] blow not to the dead, but to him arisen in a new existence, him to whom, with the entrance of the splendid C-major theme [mm. 62-78], flowing forth broadly in full sonorities, appears the sun of victory, nevermore to set.

### **Julius Harrison (1939)**

*After the near-surrealism of the previous selection, this seems almost drab. It is a bit more analytical in style—note how the centrality of the note ‘c’ is emphasized. There is considerably less Freudian styling, although we are still being told what we’re thinking to some extent. There is a fair amount of religiosity remaining, but the luxuriant grandiosity of the Kalbeck is missing.*

The note C, that central orb of the music, is the quintessential feature of the *Adagio* introduction. What themes cluster round it, and they are many, but serve to demonstrate its omnipotence. Whatever modulations occur are short-lived, the music being drawn back to the C as if by some centripetal force...

Ghosts of the past stalk about in barely recognizable shapes...[At m. 24] the Violins break out into rapid figurations which, taken with their context, form a remarkable epitome of all the black despairing moods that have haunted the Symphony from its very first C...

And in this instant Brahms makes us understand that these last convulsive efforts are not so much the death-pangs of evil spirits as the struggle of positive forces breaking through darkness to the refulgence of a never-ending day...

A long conflict is ended at the Horn theme with the appearance of the C major chord [m. 30], to which the solemn hymn [mm. 47-51] acts as a natural and mystical corollary. From this music arises a great song of jubilation [mm. 62-78], one that might well express the joy of a man whose soul is loosed from bondage.

### **Milton Cross (1953)**

*Program/liner notes in their most pristine form. Notice that this is almost a play-by-play commentary on the movement, as though coming from a sportscaster over the radio. Plenty of descriptive phrases remain, but the religiosity, Freudianism, and cosmological flavor of earlier commentaries is now wholly absent. For better or worse, this is the standard program note style for the last 50-60 years.*

The concluding movement is the apogee of the entire symphony. The winds sound chromatic chords as a cry of anguish is heard in the violins. Plucked strings then introduce a mysterious atmosphere. The pace grows faster and faster until, at last, a song of triumph emerges in the horn and is repeated by the flute, against tremolos in the strings. This brings on the most famous theme of the work: the exultant song of joy (not unlike the song of joy in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony) in the strings.

### **Michael Steinberg (1995)**

*How little program-note style has changed since 1953 is demonstrated by this modern example, written for the San Francisco Symphony. It reads rather like an expansion of the Cross commentary. It is slightly more analytical than the Cross; nonetheless, for the most part, it remains a play-by-play commentary, albeit a very good one.*

The movement begins with an outcry similar in character to the music with which the symphony begins. This is followed by an accelerating passage for plucked strings. Both these ideas are immediately repeated in dramatically condensed form. Next, a swirling, syncopated music rises to an urgent climax. A sudden parting of the storm clouds reveals, in major, a horn call that is luminously continued in the flute. Bassoons and trombones declaim a solemn phrase that could come from a hymn. The horn call is heard again, half as long as before, but more elaborate because another horn, flute, oboe, and clarinet add a series of overlapping imitations. It will be the task of the finale to integrate this diversity of material into a cohesive movement, something Brahms will accomplish with sovereign command and stunning originality.

Now comes the Allegro and, with it *the* tune, in Brahmsian understated *poco forte*. This melody, both deeply personal and greatly in debt to the Beethoven Ninth, is an expansion and clarification of the outcry that began the movement.

### Preston Stedman (1992)

*Some commentators eschew just about any hint of an interpretative remark in favor of a just-the-facts-ma'am approach. Needless to say, such commentary risks dullness, and this is about as dull as it gets. For the most part it's another program-note style with a vanishingly light touch of analysis, almost descending down to bare description of the notation. It represents the absolute opposite end of the scale from commentary such as that of Goepf or Kalbeck.*

Like the first movement, the finale's introduction contains motives upon which the main tunes of the *Allegro* are based. A slow tune in c minor opens the introduction followed by a mysterious pizzicato passage, both ideas reappearing later in the main body of the movement. After a change to the tonic major key, a broader theme is heard in the first horn and is repeated by the first flute. A choralelike section in the trombones and bassoons interrupts this broad tune. A return to the introductory tune closes the introduction. The *Allegro* is placed in the tonic major, starting with another broadly flowing tune that is related to the first motive of the introduction.

### Walter Frisch (2003)

*The concluding selection is actual analysis directed towards readers with some musical training, rather than commentary aimed at general audiences. Frisch provides a splendid demonstration that analytical writing can be interesting, while maintaining a professional, technical tone throughout. Ideas present in some of the previous commentaries—such as religiosity—are brought in, not as sensationalist extrapolations, but as illuminations of the formal structures in the movement. In my opinion, this is superb analytical writing.*

The first four notes in the bass, C-B<sup>b</sup>-A<sup>b</sup>-G, serve to lead us from the world of the Allegretto to that of the finale. The four-note descending figure has already been heard in the transition from the Trio back to the Allegretto; now it makes the next transition, to the finale. The four-note descent seems to be a direct response to the ending of the Allegretto, the elegant triplet triadic descent to the tonic A<sup>b</sup>. At the opening of the finale, Brahms seems to dismiss that cadence as too light, too easy. He begins on the third of A<sup>b</sup>—and the tonic of this movement—and instead of a quick downward swoop, as at the end of the Allegretto, comes a measured stepwise descent to the dominant.

The spacious introduction divides on the largest scale into two sections, marked off by the change of key signature and tempo in m. 30. On the one side are agitation, chromaticism, thematic fragmentation, and the minor mode; on the other, hope and redemption, conveyed by the major-mode tuneful themes. The minor section of the introduction makes obvious reference to the introduction of the first movement. The accompanying voices descending chromatically in thirds in mm. 2-5 recall, of course, the similar accompaniment to motives *x* and *y* at the opening of the symphony. And the strong Neapolitan chord on the downbeat of m. 12 directly evokes the similar moment in m. 19 of the first movement.

Also recalling the first movement is the way Brahms builds this part of the introduction in “waves” that break into contrasting material. Through m. 29, the introduction to the finale has three such parallel segments, which might be represented as A (mm. 1-5) B (mm. 6-12) // A' (mm. 12-15) B' (mm. 16-19) // A'' (mm. 20-21) B'' (mm. 21-29). In each case an ever more laconic lyrical, sustained line gives way to an increasingly longer passage characterized by detached, disjunct motion.

The Più andante segment of the introduction (mm. 30-60), which moves to the major mode, is based on the radiant Alphorn melody that Brahms had sent to Clara Schumann in 1868 and a solemn theme that Giselher Schubert has aptly called an “imaginary chorale.” [footnote omitted]. Together they create a small rounded binary form with the shape: A (mm. 30-38) A (mm. 38-46) B (mm. 47-52) A' (mm. 53-60). As Schubert has suggested, these two themes bring a new dimension into the symphony—or bring the symphony into a new dimension: “The horn theme has associations of the sphere of ideal nature, the chorale that of religiosity. At this moment the music not only changes suddenly its expressive character, but this character itself becomes more concrete.” [footnote omitted]

When the broad Allegro theme emerges in m. 62, it sounds at once familiar and new (“Es klang so alt, und war doch so neu,” as Sachs says of Walter's Trial Song in *Meistersinger*). It is new because it opens the finale proper as a first theme. It is familiar in part, of course, because of the apparent allusion to the “Freude” theme of Beethoven, but also because it is the result of a compelling thematic evolution that has unfolded across the whole symphony, most intensively in the introduction itself. [footnote omitted]