



Recording at Henry Wood Hall, London, on 1 and 2 May, 2022
Producer: Michael Ponder
Engineer: Adaq Khan

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BRAHMS

RIMMA SUSHANSKAYA
NATIONAL SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

Tragic Overture
Variations on a Theme by Haydn
Symphony No.2



Foreword

The National Symphony Orchestra is delighted that **Rimma Sushanskaya**, the distinguished violinist and conductor, has accepted a formal role with the orchestra. Critically acclaimed performances and recordings in recent years have developed a synergy, a shared passion, for music making. This is no more apparent than found in their recent recordings of Beethoven's 5th Symphony and the two Romances for violin, partnering Mathilde Milwidsky as soloist, and a disc of Mozart Symphony No.40 and the *Elvira Madigan* Piano Concerto No.21 in C with John Lenehan.

Sushanskaya has found an energy and vision, giving inspiration for the present and a huge sense of eager anticipation for the future.

This disc of works by Brahms was recorded during the height of covid restrictions whereby social distancing in studios was a requirement for British orchestras, representing huge challenges for both performers and recording engineers alike. The recording is a tribute to the indefatigable efforts of our conductor, musicians, producer Michael Ponder and sound engineer Adaq Khan and the supportive staff at Henry Wood Hall, all who managed to keep the candle burning for music and musicians when almost all artistic activity fell silent.

JOHANNES BRAHMS 1833 – 1897

TRAGIC OVERTURE Op.81

- | | | |
|---|--------------------|-------|
| 1 | Allegro non troppo | 14'56 |
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VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY HAYDN Op.56a

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------|------|
| 2 | CHORALE ST ANTONI Andante | 2'17 |
| 3 | VAR 1 Poco più animato | 1'27 |
| 4 | VAR 2 Più Vivace | 1'05 |
| 5 | VAR 3 Con moto | 2'02 |
| 6 | VAR 4 Andante con moto | 1'52 |
| 7 | VAR 5 Vivace | 1'02 |
| 8 | VAR 6 Vivace | 1'32 |
| 9 | VAR 7 Grazioso | 2'58 |
| 10 | VAR 8 Presto non troppo | 1'09 |
| 11 | FINALE Andante | 3'55 |

SYMPHONY NO.2 Op.73

- | | | |
|----|---------------------|-------|
| 12 | Allegro non troppo | 16'48 |
| 13 | Adagio non troppo | 9'57 |
| 14 | Allegretto grazioso | 5'46 |
| 15 | Allegro con spirito | 10'34 |

Total playing time: **77'25**

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1834–1897)

TRAGIC OVERTURE Op.81

VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY HAYDN (Chorale St Antoni) Op.56a

SYMPHONY NO.2 in D major Op.73

In considering Brahms's creative life as a composer, we often find examples where, having begun a work, ideas of a very different nature would occur to him, virtually contemporaneously, leading to the creation of a new piece, frequently in a similar format but almost invariably different in character. This creative characteristic can be found throughout his life, from the early two Serenades for orchestra to his final Sonatas for clarinet.

Perhaps the most remarkable chain of creative circumstances in this vein can be discerned in Brahms's compositions which followed the Fourth Symphony in E minor. This great work appeared in 1886, and the Symphony is in four-movements, broadly acknowledging traditional formal sonata structures – except for the innovative passacaglia-based last movement. Brahms soon followed the Symphony with a similar four-movement chamber work – his Second Sonata for cello and piano – most intriguingly, we may note that the cello's opening phrase can be related to the first subject of the Fourth Symphony. Brahms's next work was another Sonata, for violin and piano - but in three movements; this was followed by another chamber-music work, the third in succession, which combined the violin and cello of the two preceding Sonatas with piano, to form his Third Piano Trio in C minor. Finally, completing this quintet of successive works, Brahms combined the cello and violin of the preceding chamber works as soloists with symphony orchestra in his Double Concerto.

This sequence may well be the most intriguing example of Brahms's consecutive works inspired (or, at the very least, suggested) by the immediately preceding composition, but the most famous 'dualism' in his output are undoubtedly two Overtures, composed in 1879-80: the *Academic Festival*, Opus 80, and the *Tragic Overture*, Opus 81.

In character, as their titles suggest, they could not be more different. The *Academic Festival Overture* arose through the award to Brahms by the University of Breslau of an honorary doctorate. Brahms was flattered by this, as he did not attend university as a young man (nor, indeed, any seat of learning); his response was a brilliant overture based largely on student songs.

But no sooner had the *Academic Festival Overture* appeared than Brahms followed it with the great – and vastly different in character – *Tragic Overture*.

Brahms' *Tragic Overture* was claimed at one point to have arisen through a frustrated attempt to stage Goethe's *Faust* in Vienna, but – whether true or not – Brahms, in this magnificent work, created a symphonic portrait of defiance against adversity, within a genuinely symphonic mould lasting around a quarter of an hour. No overt literary connection is claimed for the *Tragic Overture*, giving the work - in three broadly continuous sections, subtly related thematically - a powerful sense of organic unity of universal relevance. The manner by which Brahms moulds his dramatic themes, maintaining an overall tragic atmosphere, is the work of a composer of genius – and the final sense of fierce triumph over adversity, through the symphonic nature of the recapitulation, is powerfully impressive.

Brahms' *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* (the 'St Anthony' Chorale) Opus 56a occupies such a regular position in the international orchestral repertoire today that it may be difficult for us to appreciate how unusual it must have seemed when the work first appeared in 1873.

For Brahms, the concept of writing variations was not a new departure for him. From his Opus 9 (1854), *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann* (dedicated to Clara Schumann, Robert's wife) for solo piano, Brahms had been drawn to the form on many occasions, sometimes including a set of variations within a much larger work.

Yet independent, self-contained, sets of variations for orchestra were almost unheard-of at that time. Despite coming to compositional adulthood during the most significant era of Romantic music (broadly speaking, from the middle of the 19th-century), Brahms retained an abiding interest in composers of the 18th-century – in particular, JS Bach, Handel, Mozart and Haydn. When his attention was drawn by Carl Pohl - an early biographer of Haydn - in 1870 to a previously unknown *Feld-Partita* for wind band, attributed to Haydn, Brahms' interest was aroused.

So much so in fact, that, three years later, Brahms took the theme (itself used as the subject for variations in the original *Partita* – when it was termed the *St Antoni Chorale*) as the basis for his own original set of variations. Perhaps the rarity of orchestral variations at that time led Brahms to compose the work both for two pianos and for symphony orchestra.

Interestingly, it was the two-piano version that was published first, by N. Simrock, in 1873, followed a year later by the orchestral version: more intriguingly, the orchestral version was termed Opus 56a, the two-piano version Opus 56b – so we cannot be certain which came first from Brahms' pen. As if to complicate matters further, a version for piano duet (two pianists at one keyboard) by Robert Keller (Simrock's Editor) appeared (with Brahms' approval) in 1877. Indeed, so popular did this work become that Simrock issued transcriptions (neither by Brahms nor Keller) for various instrumental combinations, including one for solo piano, which Brahms admired and is known to have played himself on several occasions for friends.

However, it is the orchestral version which is heard most often today, and it is Brahms' preferred version of this masterpiece that we hear in our concert of his music on this disc. It is interesting to note that Brahms acknowledged the original scoring for wind instruments by presenting the theme initially on the orchestra's wind section, simply supported by pizzicato cellos and double-basses. The two-part *St Anthoni* chorale is then subjected to eight consecutive variations, each finely balanced within itself, flowing one after another, until the concluding variation, a passacaglia, heralds the arrival of a characteristic nineteenth-century coda.

The chorale theme is now known not to be an original by Haydn – although his name is appended today to the title in deference to Brahms, and is sanctioned by long usage, if not accurate in musicological terms. In the closing pages of this endearing masterpiece, the theme is now heard, sturdily triumphant, as the *Variations* stride to their uplifting conclusion.

Brahms had spent many years composing and revising his First Symphony (in C minor Opus 68) before he finally released it for performance in 1876, but his Second Symphony, in D major Opus 73, was written entirely during the summer and autumn of the following year. A large part of the new symphony was composed during an extended holiday in Pörschach in the Carinthian Alps. The score was ready by October 1877 in time for the first performance on December 30 by the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Hans Richter.

There is no doubt that the successful premiere of the C minor Symphony freed any doubts Brahms may have harboured over his symphonic abilities, and the success of that dramatic work prepared for the tremendous reception the Second Symphony enjoyed at its premiere a year later, the Viennese music-loving audience being clearly thrilled by the famous composer's new-found symphonic mastery. The positive, outward-looking mood of the Second Symphony might well be more 'approachable' than that of the mighty C minor, but Brahms' consummate skill and genuine symphonic sense of integration is no less subtle than in the previous work. Indeed, the Second Symphony reveals a depth of creative originality that contains Brahms' genius just as admirably. It is surely equally true that the essentially relaxed nature of much of the work tends to hide, rather than obscure, Brahms' profound mastery of his material.

The nature of the Second Symphony - its sunny, optimistic disposition, most of all - is enhanced by the wondrous sense of colour the music possesses, the opening three-note phrase on cellos and double-basses admirably setting the work's sylvan scene, as well as being the melodic germ from which much of the

succeeding themes and development are to grow. Brahms' expressive qualities throughout the Symphony exude an atmosphere of flexibility and varied phrasing within the work's carefully planned and executed proportions.

We can hear those qualities throughout the Symphony's first movement, during which Brahms continues to build one of his broadest and most finely-expressive structures. In this music, we experience a subtly combined rhythm with lyrical aspects that flow equally throughout the *Adagio* second movement, which combines warmth and strength in a manner unmatched by any symphonic composer since Beethoven.

The third movement, *Allegretto*, brings a unique combination of fine delicacy and subtle humour, flavoured with what has been well described as twinkling vivacity. In the finale, Brahms' release of the Symphony's slowly growing inner tension is a further mark of the great composer: the music accepts occasional tragic overtones but it is inherently invigorating throughout. The means by which Brahms acknowledges the contemporaneous Romanticism of his fellow-composers, and reserving it for the moment that is psychologically the most suitable - the best, softest and tensest part before the restatement - demonstrates that here is pure music before the Symphony proceeds on its inherently outward-looking way to a wonderfully positive conclusion.

RIMMA SUSHANSKAYA

Rimma Sushanskaya is an experienced conductor with an international conducting career spanning over a decade. Following her achieving a PhD at the famous St Petersburg Conservatoire, she was the last pupil of David Oistrakh, with whom she studied at Moscow Conservatoire, and under whose tutelage she won many prestigious awards. Upon leaving the Soviet Union she rapidly established a glowing reputation in the West as a virtuoso violinist; the Washington Post, described her as “one of the greatest violinists alive today,” and commented on her “extraordinary intensity and brilliant virtuosity.”

In recent years Sushanskaya has performed as a conductor in concert halls of an ever-growing list of countries including Germany, Russia, Israel, Romania, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Switzerland, China and the United Kingdom. She has enjoyed successful performances and re-engagements in prestigious venues such as: Gewandhaus, Leipzig, Germany; Philharmonic Hall and Konzerthaus Berlin, Germany; Philharmonic Hall, Kharkov Ukraine; Tonhalle, Zurich, Switzerland. Among the list of orchestras conducted by Rimma Sushanskaya include Berlin Sinfonietta, Neues Sinfonia Orchestra, Leipzig Chamber Orchestra, Kharkov Philharmonic, Ukraine, St. Petersburg State Orchestra, Russia, State Philharmonic of Satu-Mare, Romania, Orchestra of the Swan, UK.

She made her highly acclaimed London Debut with the National Symphony Orchestra at Cadogan Hall in 2017 conducting Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Ravel's *La Valse*, followed by a hugely successful series of concerts at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, St John's Smith Square and Cheltenham Town Hall.



Among the many important orchestral works in Dr.Sushanskaya's repertoire, the following are to be noted: Beethoven Symphony No.9, 'Choral', Rachmaninoff Symphony No.2, Mozart *Requiem*, Mahler Symphony No.4 and Orff's *Carmina Burana*.

Following in the traditions of her own legendary teacher, Sushanskaya is equally anxious to pass on her knowledge and experience to talented young musicians. She was a distinguished professor at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, and her Virtuoso Violin Festival every summer in Stratford-upon-Avon (her home in England) attracts string students of the highest calibre from the UK and abroad.

JUSTIN PEARSON (*Artistic Director, National Symphony Orchestra*)



Justin Pearson is one of London's busiest and most versatile musicians. He is principal cellist, Managing Director and Artistic Director of the National Symphony Orchestra (UK), and Guest Principal cellist of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Justin is Artistic Director and Manager of the Locrian Ensemble of London, one of the most sought after, and often-recorded chamber ensembles in Britain. He frequently performs in West End theatre and continues to record scores for both film and television, often in a solo capacity. In 2021

he completed a recording of the unaccompanied Bach Cello Suites for Chasing the Dragon records, to critical acclaim. Born in Dublin, Justin left Ireland at 14 to study in England with Derek Simpson of the Aeolian String Quartet. He entered the Royal Academy of Music where he won all available prizes for chamber music playing. Justin formed the Locrian String Quartet, who became Resident String Quartet at The University of Hertfordshire. The Locrian Quartet was prize winners at both Evian and Belgrade International String Quartet competitions. The quartet commissioned premieres of works by Maconchy, Bedford, Lutyens, Crosse, McGuire, and collaborated with composers such as Penderecki, Lutoslawski and Kurtag, undertaking very many tours, both national and international.

Justin has served as a Chairman to the Royal Society of Musicians, Britain's oldest charity, supporting musicians in need. He is Musical Patron of Sunbeams Music Trust, helping children and adults with special needs, through music, in Cumbria. Justin is a trustee of the London Cello Society and the Sacconi Trust and was made an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music in 2012.

NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Managing Director and Artistic Director: Justin Pearson
Principal Associate Conductor: Rimma Sushanskaya

The National Symphony Orchestra is one of the longest-established and most versatile professional freelance orchestras working in Britain today. It has an impressive, recorded legacy as well as a busy diary of live concert performances. The NSO is admired for both its versatility, its ability to communicate, connecting with audiences with consistent commitment and passion. The orchestra has found renewed energy and direction under its managing director, Justin Pearson.

During the challenges of the 2020 pandemic, NSO was the first orchestra to return to Air Lyndhurst studios, recording Debbie Wiseman's score for the film *To Olivia* and reaching number one in the classical charts with the composer's album for Classic FM, *Kings and Queens*, with narrators Dame Helen Mirren and Damian Lewis.

Though based in London, the NSO performs throughout the United Kingdom. The orchestra prides itself on the huge audiences that regularly support its concerts. It has performed opera evenings with artistes such as Dame Kiri Te Kanawa and Lesley Garrett. With Principal Associate Conductor Rimma Sushanskaya, the orchestra recorded discs of Mozart concerti and symphonies, Beethoven 5th Symphony and the Romances for violin (Mathilda Milwidsky), released on the Guild label.

The orchestra was chosen to record the scores for Queen Elizabeth II 90th birthday celebrations and to perform for Her Majesty's 95th Platinum Jubilee in 2022 at Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace.

NSO was proud to play at the ceremony marking the handover to the nation of the new DNRC Rehabilitation Centre in Loughborough in the presence of Prince

William and the Prime Minister. In March 2019, NSO performed at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In the Autumn of 2019 NSO appeared in a nationwide UK tour with Tasmin Little and Philip Dukes as soloists, conducted by Rimma Sushanskaya. Performances of Beethoven symphonies and the Emperor Piano Concerto have been released on Chasing the Dragon records in 2019.



The National Symphony Orchestra was founded in the 1940's and immediately became a significant recording orchestra. From the 1980's the reputation and

standing of the orchestra surged forward, successfully performing and recording for audiences in a dynamic range of genres: classical, film and TV scores, West End and Broadway musicals, accompanying celebrated international singers, all of which it continues to do to this day.

Viennese Nights, Tchaikovsky Galas and programmes of popular classics have been performed to capacity houses at prestigious venues including The Royal Festival Hall, Barbican, Royal Albert Hall and Symphony Hall, Birmingham, to name but a few.

The NSO played seasons with the New York City Ballet when they visited the London Coliseum, performing under the baton of Charles Barker and Jack Everly; the orchestra toured extensively for The Moscow City Ballet for many years each time they visited Britain.

The NSO has recorded more than 40 complete major classic musicals. This significant legacy means that the NSO is one of the most recorded orchestras at EMI Abbey Road Studios. These musicals, marketed mainly in the USA, often sold more than 1.5 million discs, including a recording of West Side Story. The Leonard Bernstein Estate remarked, There is no finer recording of West Side Story than that which was laid down by NSO. The orchestra has also performed a number of spectacular televised and recorded concerts under the direction of distinguished composer conductors from the worlds of TV and Film, such as Barrington Pheloung, the Oscar-winning composer Anne Dudley, Ron Goodwin and with Debbie Wiseman, currently Classic FM's Composer-in-Residence.