

Orchestral
Excerpt
CLASS

By Dennis Bubert

Brahms Symphony No. 4 in *e* minor

Brahms' *Fourth Symphony in E minor*, op. 98, was written during the summers of 1884 and 1885, and was first performed on October 25, 1885 by the orchestra of the Meiningen Ducal Chapel conducted by the composer. As in his first symphony, Brahms uses the trombone section only in the final movement, where it is used to state an eight-bar theme based on the chaconne heard at the end of Bach's *Cantata No. 150 (Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich)*. For the trombonist, the passage of greatest interest here is the 16-bar chorale at letter E. Soft, delicate, and exposed, this offers an unparalleled moment of beauty for the trombone section and is very frequently heard in the section round of auditions for all three trombone parts.

Like the chorale in Brahms' *First Symphony*, the trombone variation at letter E is marked with a seemingly contradictory combination of slurs and dots. Understandably, this is often a source of confusion for many young players (and apparently some conductors, too, if my collection of recordings is any indication). To a string player, the "dotted-slur" mark — as used by composers since Beethoven — means a clearly defined slurred articulation, to the degree that the bow may actually stop momentarily, particularly at loud dynamics. For trombonists, this seems to be as good a starting point as any in interpreting this notation. (For further discussion of this articulation, read the comments on Brahms' *Symphony No. 7* in the Winter 2001 issue of the *I.T.A. Journal*.)

Like many of you, I grew up listening to the wonderful recordings of the Brahms symphonies by the Chicago Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra and New York Philharmonic and have the thick, luxurious sound of a large string section clearly imprinted on my ear. In recent years, however, I have read a number of concert reviews in which the critic expressed his disapproval of a large string count, citing Brahms' own preference for smaller orchestras. For the premiere of his *First Symphony*, for instance, Brahms chose the orchestra of the Grand-Ducal Theatre in Karlsruhe with a string count of 9-9-4-4-4, and in fact he declined an offer to employ additional strings for an 1886 performance of the *Fourth Symphony* by the Meiningen Orchestra. For the curious, recent recordings by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra demonstrate the sound of an ensemble that is

closer in size to that of the orchestras apparently preferred by Brahms. There seems to be historical precedence, then, for those trombonists who may want to explore lighter, clearer sounds in performing these works.

In this issue, Debra Taylor, principal trombone of the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra, and Darren McHenry, Dallas Symphony Orchestra bass trombonist, share their thoughts on preparing and performing Brahms' *Symphony No. 4*. My thanks to them for taking time from their busy schedules to do so.

**Debra Taylor, principal trombonist
New Mexico Symphony Orchestra**

I fell in love with the music of Johannes Brahms as a freshman in college. I spent countless hours listening to and learning his symphonies intimately, before ever considering the trombone part. Over the years my reverence for Brahms has grown. I always make sure to bring my best musicianship to his music. During the weeks before a performance of Brahms with the New Mexico Symphony, I take extra time to polish my technique. Pianissimo playing, intonation work in the keys of the piece, soft, slow work on slurs (buzzing and playing first with gliss and then adding legato tongue), high playing for sound and accuracy — these are the basics I revisit before delving into Brahms' music. I also spend time finding a great "Brahms sound," one that is resonant, pure, rich, noble and well-defined.

The pianissimo chorale at letter E in the last movement of Brahms' *Fourth Symphony* requires careful preparation. The most valuable skill I have learned for soft playing is to sing every note in my head while playing. The stimulus of singing activates the brain and sends the right kind of message to the muscles to give a great response, even under pressure. If this concept is new to the reader, the best way to begin is by singing any words while playing a melody, clearly imagining the pitch and sound of the words, but without making any vocal sound. Try changing the words if your concentration fades. You want the balance between what you hear in your head and what comes out the bell to be at least 60/40 (the melody in your head is dominant). This takes great concentration, so be patient. Once you have mastered this, your pianissimo playing will be really consistent. In addition to creating great soft articulations, this helps project the pianissimo sound and improves phrasing.

In performance, the trombone section doesn't play for the first three movements (about 33 minutes). Then in the fourth movement, after 22 brief measures of playing and more waiting, you take center stage with the pianissimo chorale. With solid preparation, including singing in your head while playing, the chorale can be a transcendent moment for you as well as the audience. The common worry about how your chops feel becomes inconsequential, leaving you free to make great music.

One of the fundamentals underlying great phrasing is great rhythm. I subdivide throughout the chorale, thinking

Symphony No. 4

Johannes Brahms, Op. 98
(1838-1897)

IV. Allergo energico e passionato

Score preparation by Jon Hinton

eight notes. This makes it quite clear where to place the quarter notes after rests. The general tendency is to play these a bit late. Once this subdividing is second nature it becomes part of the background, the engine which propels the phrases.

Sometimes musicians become overly focused on the rhythm in the chorale, which results in a static rendition of this beautiful melody. This is made worse by inattention to phrase direction during the quarter rests. A valuable exercise is to play dotted half notes in the Brahms chorale, instead of the written half notes with quarter rests. This helps you feel the momentum intended during the rests. When returning to the written rhythm, be sure to maintain a singing style, be clear about where the phrases rise and fall, play the half notes on beat two a bit long, and you will preserve the feeling of long lines. The peaks of the phrases are on the downbeat of measures two, four, six, 10, 12 and 13. (The phrase lengths, in measures, are as follows: 2,2,4,2,2,4.) Depending on the tempo and the conductor's approach, the line can be made longer, into four-bar phrases.

After playing for 13 years with the same trombone section in the New Mexico Symphony, we still get together to work on intonation and balance. Complete knowledge of the chord structure is step one. We play through a section, focusing on adjusting the pitch of thirds, fifths, and sevenths to make the chords ring. Then we often ask a trusted colleague to stand on the conductor's podium or in the hall to give us feedback about balance. The subject of "correct" section balance is a dynamic one for us (no pun intended), because the variety of musical and acoustical circumstances are endless.

Studying the score can help in making decisions about balance. At the beginning of the chorale the pianissimo trombones are supported by bassoons. Throughout the chorale strings accentuate beat two with eighth notes. After four bars the horn takes over the melody, so the principal trombonist needs to switch to a supporting role. The pick-up to bar eight is a great place to show a dramatically soft ppp. In measure nine more woodwinds and strings enter, and the oboe has the melody. At this point it is critical to maintain a dynamic level of pp and avoid the temptation to play louder. In an audition setting it is important to show control of soft playing by exhibiting three clearly different dynamic levels: p, pp and ppp.

In the music at letter E the marking of dots and slurs together can be confusing. In my section we use natural slurs whenever possible, striving for smoothness and clarity on note changes (my understanding of what the dots mean). Depending on the conductor's wishes and the hall's acoustics, I may vary the syllable I use for slurs, from a "la" to a soft "da" (from super-smooth to well-enunciated).

One last idea... I suggest taking time to get in touch with the emotions evoked by the Brahms chorale. Obviously there is no "correct" answer, and opinions vary from one person to another. My opinion is that the chorale is both majestic and nostalgic. As a principal player, I greatly enjoy

having even four brief measures of melody to bring those feelings to life.

What a lot to think about for only 16 measures of music! This, however, is the depth of preparation that Brahms' music demands. There is much more to cover about the rest of this movement, but I am out of space and time. In summary, knowing the piece thoroughly cannot be stressed enough. Learn to hear the whole orchestra in your head while practicing your own part. It is important to prepare for Brahms' music by reviewing and polishing your fundamentals. For soft playing I feel strongly about using the technique of singing in your head while playing. In the chorale, think eighth-note subdivisions for rhythmic integrity, be ready to play p, pp and ppp, focus on the phrase direction during rests, have a complete understanding of the chord structure, be conscious of balance, and make it beautiful. Whew! And don't forget to enjoy the magnificence of one of the truly great composers.

In addition to her current positions in New Mexico, Debra Taylor is a former member of Chicago's Grant Park Symphony, the San Diego Symphony, the Santa Fe Opera Orchestra and the Florida Symphony. She has been a soloist and clinician at several international brass conferences.

Darren McHenry, bass trombonist Dallas Symphony Orchestra

Playing the music of Johannes Brahms is an amazing and rewarding experience and leads to great satisfaction after sitting through three long movements of the *Fourth Symphony*, finally reaching that moment when the trombone section shines through like a beam of light from above. Brahms' use of the trombone in his orchestral works is quite unique. Other composers of the time were using the instrument in all the large tutti sections, in all the movements, as well as the chorale sections. But Brahms used the trombones sparingly, carefully choosing each entrance much like Beethoven did. It's that selective use and wonderfully rich scoring for the trombone section that draws me in to his works.

Studying the music

It is important to study the score carefully to understand the big picture and how the movements are put together. The fourth movement is a passacaglia, using a ground bass line, introduced right from the start in the bass trombone and bassoons. It is important to study each of the 30 settings of this opening eight-bar phrase, as Brahms cleverly modifies each phrase, while leading us on a long journey through the movement. As is the case with the chorale in the *First Symphony*, the flute solo leads us into the beginning of the chorale. After sitting for approximately 30 minutes and having only played a few notes in the opening of the movement, the chorale begins. This innocent looking passage challenges your soft playing, control, concentration on soft sectional attacks and musical phrasing. For all of these reasons, this passage is on most orchestral auditions for trombone.

The Approach to Practicing

I usually begin to practice this excerpt by playing in four-bar phrases, without rests, at a comfortable dynamic, much like the style of a melodious etude. It is also a good idea to start right away with a metronome just so you don't get lazy and free with the time in this passage. Right from the first play through, always try to feel the first half note leading to the next. During the second half note there is an ascending arpeggio in the cellos with a diminuendo to the third half rest. It is important to hear this in your head as you are practicing because it makes the phrasing much easier. Keep the quarter note pick up as long as possible and the same length each time. Dealing with the staccato under the slur marking poses a problem that is common in Brahms' music. In my experience of performing and listening to this passage, I feel that the intent is for the start of each of the notes to sound very clearly with a sustained lyric sound. Again, practice a *Melodious Etude*, but with a clearer articulation to achieve this sound. In order to verify that this clear articulation is just right, I recommend that you tape yourself in a large room such as a church, with the microphone for away (like where the committee would sit). Listen to the tape and see just what it sounds like. You might be surprised by what happens to the articulation over a long distance!

Musically, you want to play this excerpt with expression, as it is marked in the parts in the second measure. Don't play with static dynamics, but rather play a touch above pianissimo and a touch below pianissimo in the first

The Complete Low Brass Excerpt Collection

*compiled by Gordon Cherry
Principal Trombone, Vancouver Symphony*

- The largest excerpt collection ever published
- Original trombone & tuba parts on CD-ROM
- Hundreds of complete parts (many rare)
- All major composers (public domain)
- Actual authentic orchestral & operatic parts
- Print your parts on demand from PDF files
- Prepare properly for auditions
- Choose from 15 separate packages
- Individual packages start at \$9.99
- Complete collection \$89.99
- 100% Satisfaction Guaranteed!

Order now
sales@cherry-classics.com
(604) 261-5454 (Pacific Time)
www.Cherry-Classics.com

**Complete Collection:
Only \$89.99+S&H**

Brass Quintet
C. M. von Weber
Jägerchor

G. Puccini
Nessun Dorma

Trombone Trio
Franz Gruber
Stille Nacht

Trombone Quartet
J. S. Bach
Six Choral Preludes

R. Schumann
Kinderszenen op. 15
Albumblätter op. 124

J. Brahms
Hungarian Dances 3, 5, 7
Hungarian Dances 14, 15, 17
Canons a 3, a 4 & a 6 voices
41 pieces for trombone ensembles

sfz

www.editionelm.org

Edition Elm

P.O.Box 32, Sofia 1231, Bulgaria fax +359 2 9344644
U.S. Distributor: Kagarice Brass Editions

four measures. Make a nice, small crescendo into the sixth measure of the chorale and a nice two-bar diminuendo into your softest orchestral tone into measure eight. Then, start the second eight-bar phrase just as you did for the start of the chorale. I like to hear a new start to all of the half notes in the trombones because the trumpets enter, along with horns and woodwinds. Only the first horn connects the two chorale statements with a descending quarter note solo. The first piano marking occurs in the fifth bar of the second chorale phrase, so make this your strongest point. Be careful to not diminuendo too quickly because the end of the chorale is only pianissimo. This is a very difficult three-bar diminuendo and most players have problems here because they just try to get too soft! Lastly, do not slow down as you make your decrescendo. The only instruments that have a ritardando are the first flute and cellos. Bass trombonists are the worst at this because we desperately want to enjoy our one quarter note alone (the b natural). Instead, hold the last whole note slightly longer, while you sing the last notes of the flute in your head.

Last Impressions

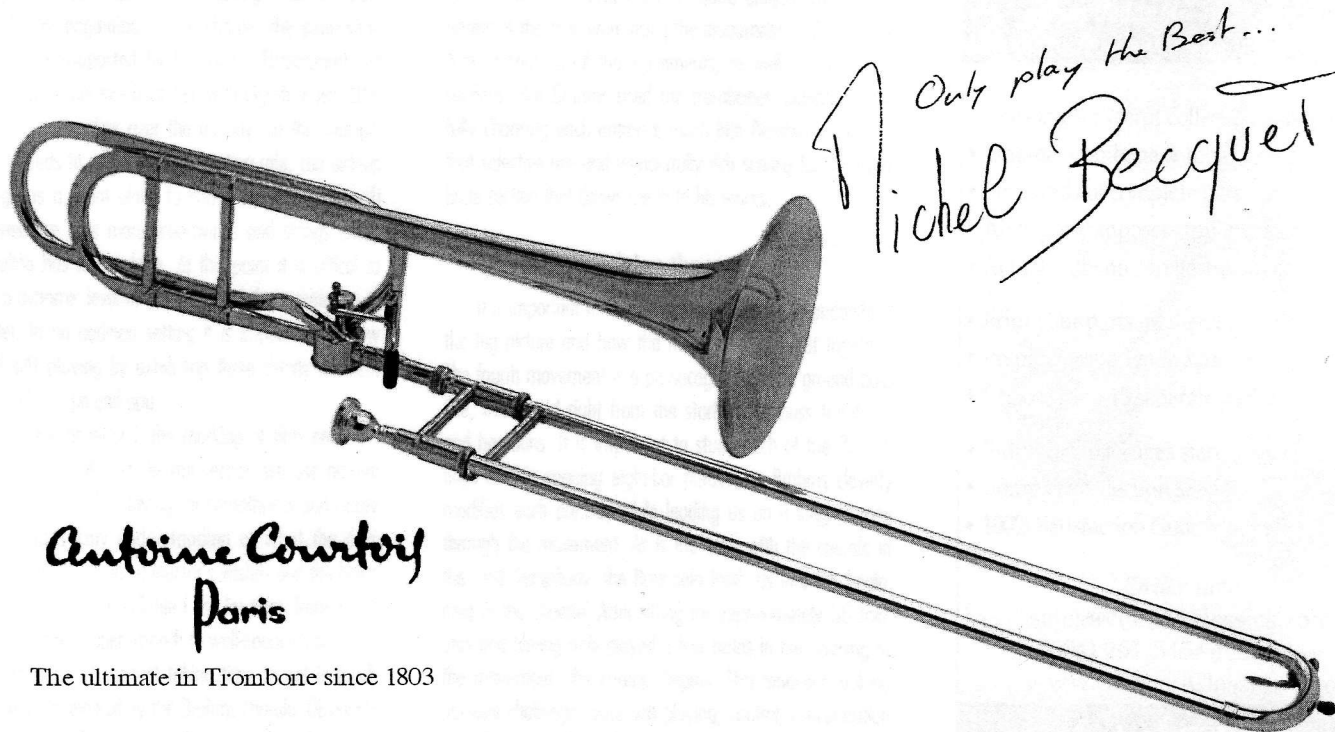
Practice playing the passage immediately after the chorale, because some conductors like to see how loud you intend to play your Brahms forte and fortissimo. Be especially careful on the sforzando in the eighth bar. Be sure to practice the chorale as a section because you never know when you might actually have to sit in a section on the final round. There could be two candidates who both play great,

and this could decide it all! Mark your part well with the up and down arrows for the correct intonation for each chord and know when your voice is doubled by another trombone part. I always play the unison notes with a carefully blended sound so the voicing sounds right. Playing the passage as a section will also help you to figure out if your attacks are consistent and clear. Studying these symphonies will really help make your approach to these passages at auditions much easier. I still recommend the old Cleveland, Szell recordings as a way to interpret Brahms' tremendous symphonies, but you should listen to as many as you can!

**Start an I.T.A. Local
Chapter Today**

**contact Brian Brink
for information at**

<bbrink@flsouthern.edu>



Antoine Courtois
Paris

The ultimate in Trombone since 1803

Antoine Courtois - P.O.Box - 341 Amboise Cedex - France - <http://www.courtois-paris.com>
G.Lebanc - 7001 Leblanc Boulevard - P.O.Box 1415 Kenosha, Wisconsin 53141-1415 USA