Chapter 25: The Musical Museum and the Return of the Symphony

I. The Idea of the Symphony
A. Introduction
   1. After Beethoven’s Ninth, there were few noteworthy symphonies until after the mid-century.
   2. It fell into the realm of conservatory professors, such as Rubenstein.
   3. In the 1880s, one music text questioned the future of the symphony, unaware of revivals already underway.

B. New Halls and New Orchestras
   1. As urban areas grew, so did the need for larger concert halls.
   2. Permanent orchestras became part of the new concert hall scene.

C. The Triumph of Museum Culture
   1. As the audience for symphonies grew, the genre was falling into decline.
   2. The repertory, then, was necessarily an older one: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.
   3. A growth in music journalism accompanied the increase in music halls and permanent orchestras.
   4. The quandary for composers was to create pieces that were instant classics, combining high-minded seriousness with what was popular. Brahms succeeded.

II. Brahms
A. New Paths: Johannes Brahms
   1. Brahms grew up under the early Romantics, but was the first composer to grow up with our modern ideas about classical music.
   2. At a young age, Brahms met the Schumanns.
   3. Schumann wrote his last article for Neue Zeitschrift about the young Brahms, describing him as the one who would save music and the successor to Beethoven.
   4. Even though Brahms had not composed a symphony, Schumann predicted that he would be the one to take up the legacy of Beethoven.

B. Symphonic Attempts
   1. Concerned about his place in history and living up to Schumann’s expectations, Brahms was hesitant to write a symphony.
   2. When Schumann was committed to an asylum, Brahms took over as the head of the Schumann household and as the poster child for the Mendelssohn/Schumann heritage in the War of the Romantics.
   3. Brahms began a symphony in D minor, but through various stages it became the first movement to his Piano Concerto in D minor.
   4. Brahms knew that, considering Liszt’s new challenges to the idea of a symphony (the symphonic poem), post-Beethoven symphonies would have to look different.

C. Brahms’s Chamber Music and “Developing Variation”
   1. Before establishing himself as a symphonist, Brahms worked on chamber music.
2. Like the symphony, chamber music had fallen by the wayside, as the New German School composers were not interested in it.

3. The nineteenth century saw an increasing interest in middle-class musical connoisseurs who looked beyond fireworks to substance.

D. Choral Fame
1. Brahms’s first fame came as a composer of choral music.
2. He directed one of the main choral societies in Vienna, the Singakademie, and he worked on older repertory, enlisting the help of musical scholars to publish the scores.
3. Brahms’s *A German Requiem* is not a liturgical work.

E. Inventing Tradition
1. Brahms’s initial success with pure orchestral music was the set of Variations on a Theme by Haydn of 1873.
2. With his *German Requiem* and Haydn Variations, Brahms’s fame grew.
3. By the time he was forty, Brahms was highly acclaimed.
   a. He offered a successful alternative to the New German School.
   b. Wagner, old enough to be his father, saw him as a threat.
4. In 1876 Brahms offered a real challenge to Wagner with his Symphony No. 1.
5. The symphony follows the harmonic structure of Schubert’s *Wanderer Fantasy* (circle of major thirds).
6. By casting the symphony in C minor, Brahms invited comparison with Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.
7. The First Symphony incorporates allusions to multiple composers and is full of symbolism—but without a program by which to decipher the symbols.
8. Instead of the traditional use of themes, Brahms overlays motives in ever-varying contrapuntal textures.

F. Victory Through Critique
1. Wagner and his circle saw Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as the work that essentially said universal music had to include text to be complete.
2. Brahms challenged this assumption in his First Symphony.
   a. At about the same point as in Beethoven’s Ninth finale, the tempo changes and we are presented with the movement’s main theme.
      1) This theme evokes a hymn, similar to the “Ode to Joy.”
      2) By invoking the “Ode to Joy,” Brahms issues a challenge: to do all that Beethoven did with words, without using words. He thus makes the ultimate claim for instrumental music.
3. More similarities can be drawn between the final movements of Brahms’s First and Beethoven’s Ninth, particularly in how the form seems to change from one type to another.

G. Reconciliation and Backlash
1. Hans von Bülow, an ardent member of the New German School, conductor of Wagner’s operas, and a well-respected pianist, was moved to hail Brahms’s First Symphony “Beethoven’s Tenth Symphony” in print.
2. After the success of his first symphony, Brahms composed three more in less than ten years.

III. Other Symphonists
A. The Symphony as Sacrament
   1. The other main symphonist in Vienna was Bruckner, who was ten years older than Brahms.
   2. Bruckner was an organist and choirmaster. Some said he was the greatest organist and improvisor of the day.
   3. Hanslick (and others) heard elements of Wagner’s dramatic music in Bruckner’s symphonies.
   4. Bruckner’s symphonies sound similar to organ improvisations in both the use of harmonic structures and orchestration.

B. Antonín Dvořák
   1. Brahms’s symphonies stimulated a new interest in the genre.
   2. Dvořák was the leading Czech composer after Smetana and also a protégé of Brahms.
   3. His early works reflect national styles and include opera as well as smaller works.
   4. His orchestral works include concertos for piano, violin, and cello, as well as symphonic poems.
   5. Dvořák composed nine symphonies.

C. Dvořák in the New World
   1. In 1892–95 Dvořák lived in the United States, serving as director of a National Conservatory of Music in New York City.
   2. During this time, he composed the “New World” (Ninth) Symphony.
   3. Questions immediately arose as to what “New World” meant.
   4. Dvořák also admired African American spirituals, and one of the students at the National Conservatory, Harry T. Burleigh, sang many for him.
   5. Dvořák encouraged American composers to use indigenous music in their art music.

D. An American Response
   1. MacDowell, an American-born but European-educated composer, had already incorporated Native American melodies in his “Indian Suite.”
   2. He composed four large piano sonatas in the style of Liszt’s B-Minor Sonata.
   3. MacDowell began his career in earnest in Boston, the musical center of American composition.
   4. Another member of the Boston group was Amy Marcy Beach (née Cheney).
      a. Her Symphony in E Minor achieved a degree of international success.
         1) Her idea of “American” music was broader than Dvořák’s, and she used tunes from Ireland to paint a picture of the mixed groups that made up America.

E. War Brings Symphonies to France
   1. In addition to Dvořák’s “New World,” American symphonists looked to Franck’s Symphony in D Minor as a model for composition.
2. Unlike other French composers, Franck made his reputation solely on instrumental music.

3. In 1871, after the Germans defeated the French, French musicians (headed by Saint-Saëns) formed a National Music Society with the motto *Ars gallica*. Its purpose was to support serious French compositions.

4. In 1889, Franck premiered a Symphony in D Minor, which evokes Beethoven’s Ninth by key association.

5. Franck’s music is marked by cyclicism, frequent modulation, Wagnerian chromaticism, and spirituality.

6. Saint-Saëns’s Organ Symphony bears hallmarks of Liszt: thematic transformation, organ in a symphonic work, use of the *Dies irae* chant to invoke death.