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# BRAHMS

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AKADEMISCHE FESTOUVERTÜRE  
ACADEMIC FESTIVAL OVERTURE

for Orchestra  
Op. 80



Eulenburg

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JOHANNES BRAHMS

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AKADEMISCHE  
FESTOUVERTÜRE  
ACADEMIC FESTIVAL  
OVERTURE

Op. 80

Edited by  
Richard Clarke



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The text of the present edition of Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture* Op.80 is based on *Johannes Brahms: Sämtliche Werke. Ausgabe der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien* edited by Hans Gál (Leipzig, 1926).

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# PREFACE

On 11 March 1879 Breslau's Friedrich Wilhelm University conferred an honorary doctorate on Brahms. The award described the composer, who was then living in Vienna, as 'artis musicae severioris in Germania nunc princeps' (now the leading exponent of the stricter art of music in Germany),<sup>1</sup> the teaching staff evidently assuming that the composer would be sufficiently flattered as to find some way of expressing his gratitude for the honour that had been bestowed on him. There was even talk of a 'doctoral symphony' or a festive cantata.<sup>2</sup> In the event, however, more than a year was to pass before Brahms gratified their expectations, and it was not until 31 March 1880 that he wrote to the University to announce that he would travel to Breslau early the next year 'for a doctoral carousel with a game of skittles'.<sup>3</sup>

Even though we have no documentary evidence to support such a suggestion, it seems likely that by this date Brahms already had in his head certain ideas concerning his new work, which he proceeded to set down on paper during his 1880 summer vacation at Bad Ischl in the Salzkammergut. It is striking that in writing the work, to which he gave the title *Academic Festival Overture*, he had recourse to none of the orchestral genres with which he was familiar, be they serenade, variations or symphony. Instead, he fell back on what for him was the completely new medium of the concert overture 'à la Weber, Cherubini and Mendelssohn'.<sup>4</sup> This was a medium that had symphonic ambitions but which permitted the composer a certain formal freedom. In this respect the genre came close to Brahms's idea of what his new work should be like: central to it were musical quotations from student songs that were universally popular at this period. This was a point that

Brahms described jokingly in a letter to his publisher, in which he referred to the piece as 'a very jolly potpourri of student songs à la Suppé'.<sup>5</sup>

Brahms used four song tunes that he almost certainly found in the 1861 edition of the *Commers-Buch für den deutschen Studenten* (Book of Drinking Songs for the German Student), a copy of which he owned:<sup>6</sup>

(1) the tune of the student song 'Wir hatten gebauet ein stattliches Haus' (We had built a magnificent house) that is quoted episodically in bars 63ff.:

**Mäßig und innig**



Wir hat - ten ge - bau - et ein statt - li - ches  
Haus. und drin auf Gott ver - trau - et trotz  
Wet - ter - Sturm und Graus.

(2) the central section of the song 'Alles schweige! Jeder neige ernsten Tönen nun sein Ohr!' (Let all fall silent! Let each man lend an ear to earnest tones), which includes the words 'Hört, ich sing das Lied der Lieder' (Listen, I am singing the song of songs) that are developed in the second subject-group in bars 129ff.:



Al - les\_schwei-ge! Je - der nei-ge ern-sten  
Tö-nen nun sein Ohr! - Hört, ich sing' das  
Lied der Lie-der; hört es mei-ne deut-schen Brü-der,  
hall' es, hall' es wie - der, fro-her Chor!

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 4 Vols., 2nd edn (Berlin, 1912), iii.251–2

<sup>2</sup> Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (note 1), iii.251

<sup>3</sup> Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (note 1), iii.251

<sup>4</sup> Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (note 1), iii.266, note 31

<sup>5</sup> Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (note 1), iii.266, note 19

<sup>6</sup> See Christian Martin Schmidt, *Reclams Musikführer Johannes Brahms* (Stuttgart, 1994), 82

## IV

(3) the melody of the freshmen's song 'Was kommt dort von der Höh' (What is coming there from the heights?), cited as an episode in bars 156ff.:

**Lebhaft**

Was kommt dort von der Höh', was  
kommt dort von der Höh'? was kommt dort von der  
le-der-nen Höh', ça ça le-der-nen Höh', was  
kommt dort von der Höh'?

(4) the melody of arguably the best-known of all German student songs, 'Gaudeamus igitur', which is quoted at the climax of the coda in bars 379ff. ('Maestoso'):

**Feierlich**

Gau-de-a-mus i-gi-tur, ju-ve-nes dum  
su-mus; post ju-cun-dum ju-ven-tu-tem,  
post mo-les-tam se-nec-tu-tem nos ha-be-bit  
hu-mus, nos ha-be-bit hu-mus.

This underlying idea seems to have less to do with a solemn ceremony at which faculty rectors and members of the teaching staff were to bestow an honorary doctorate on the composer than with the more carefree aspects of student life. At first sight, it certainly gives us pause for thought, causing even Max Kalbeck to write in his life of Brahms:

Superficially, the overture, which has more to say to the student body than to their teachers, might be regarded as a prank played by a composer fundamentally opposed to all stereotypical, periwigged nonsense. And it is impossible to exclude the notion that the composer, who had finally been forced to don a doctor's cap and gown, allowed himself a joke

at the expense of the learned professors striding on to the platform in all their finery – the thought of summoning them into the concert hall and introducing them to the strains of a freshmen's song, before sending them home with 'Gaudeamus igitur' ringing in their ears, is by no means out of the question, given his roguish sense of humour.<sup>7</sup>

But on closer examination, the piece proves to contain potential allusions to the actual occasion for which it was composed. To take an example: the opening line of the song that Brahms chose for his first quotation and that was familiar to every contemporary listener – 'We had built a magnificent house' – may be seen as a reference to the re-establishment and expansion of Breslau University following the merger of the old Leopoldina and the Viadrina of Frankfurt an der Oder in 1811, while the second quotation – 'Let all fall silent', from which Brahms took only the original music to the words 'Listen, I am singing the song of songs' for his second subject-group – could be interpreted as a gesture of gratitude on the part of the overture's author. Finally, it may have been not so much the opening strophe of 'Gaudeamus igitur' that Brahms had in mind when he chose this song for the hymn-like conclusion of his overture as the fourth strophe, which contains the lines: 'Vivat academia / Vivant professores / Vivat membrum quodlibet / Vivat membra quaelibet / Semper sint in flore' (Long live the academy, long live its professors, long live each member and each department, may they flourish for ever).<sup>8</sup>

Brahms's Op. 80 received its successful first performance in Breslau on 4 January 1881 under the composer's own direction. The programme also included his *Tragic Overture* Op. 81, the *Academic Festival Overture*'s companion piece, these two overtures from the same period showing different aspects of the composer – 'One of them weeps, the other one laughs.'<sup>9</sup> The fact that the overture that expresses laughter entered

<sup>7</sup> Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (note 1), iii.252

<sup>8</sup> L. Benda (ed.), *Buch der Lieder: 262 beliebte Volksweisen aus alter und neuer Zeit* (Braunschweig, n.d. [c.1910])

<sup>9</sup> Thus Brahms in a letter to Carl Reinecke of 7 October 1880; see *Johannes Brahms Briefwechsel*, ed. Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 16 vols. (Berlin, 1907–22), iii.143

the repertory more quickly than its more sombre counterpart and retained a dominant position there is something that Brahms himself noted wryly in a letter to his Berlin publisher Fritz Simrock in 1881: 'But I advise you to have the *Academic Overture* arranged for mil-

itary band. I myself would be tempted by this if I knew anything more about it.'<sup>10</sup>

Klaus Döge

Translation: Stewart Spencer

<sup>10</sup> Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* (note 1), iii.266

