

Charles Gambetta, DMA
7801 Cedar Point Drive
Summerfield, NC 27358
dirigent@triad.rr.com
336.643.8730

Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a

Johannes Brahms (1833-97)

Work on his Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68 was already well under way when Brahms (no doubt feeling intimidated by the titan Beethoven) decided to test his mastery of orchestral technique with a more familiar form. Confident from earlier successes using the architectural paradigm of variations for solo piano including Variations on a Theme of R. Schuman, Op. 23 (1861), Variations and Fugue on a Theme of G. F. Handel, Op. 14 (1861) and Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35 (1863), Brahms selected the "Chorale St. Antonii" as the material upon which he would compose his set of variations for orchestra. He began work on his *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* in 1872 and finished (rather hastily by Brahms's standards) during a summer residence on the banks of the Starnberger See in 1873. He also set the variations for two pianos (Op. 56b) concurrent with the composition of Op. 56a. The premiere in Vienna on November 2, 1873 was answered with enthusiastic applause, and Brahms, reassured by this triumph, resumed work on his First Symphony. The "Chorale St. Antonii" comes from a set of six *divertimenti* for wind instruments originally attributed to Joseph Haydn as they were discovered in late 1870 amongst papers belonging to his biographer, D. F. Pohl. The *divertimenti* have since been identified as forgeries, possibly by one of Haydn's students, but the title of Brahms's work remains unchanged.

The theme is stated simply and elegantly, preserving the wind textures found in the original. Though the tonal center (B flat major) and the rounded binary form (ten measures followed by nineteen measures) are preserved throughout, Brahms achieves extraordinary variety and spontaneity within what would otherwise appear to a rigid framework. Each successive variation explores and develops different aspects of the theme and effectively foreshadows textures, colors and devices Brahms would later use in his symphonies. His affection for variations as compositional genre and the discipline that Brahms observes in this context throughout his career is perhaps best summed up with an excerpt from a letter written in 1856 to his colleague and friend Joseph Joachim. "Sometimes I reflect on the form of variations and find they should be stricter, more pure. The old composers consistently retained the bass of the theme, their real theme... Yet sometimes I find that contemporary composers (Including both of us!) rummage about on top of the theme. We are all anxious to preserve the melody, yet we fail to treat it with liberty, not really turning it into something new, but instead only weighing it down."

—Charles Gambetta

