

# Harnoy and Hammer capture essence of Brahms at Massey Hall

by Stanley Feldman

The Toronto Philharmonic with guest soloists Moshe Hammer and Ofra Harnoy at Massey Hall

Robert Schumann hailed him as "the Messiah of music" outstanding flattery for the young Johannes Brahms, (then in his twenties) whose talent belied his humble origins in Hamburg.

The recent Sunday program at Massey Hall, gave us a brief insight into the scope of Brahms' compositions, which were well-performed by the Toronto Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted by Paul Robinson.

The evening warmed up with a selection of orchestrated versions of five of the 21 Hungarian dances, originally composed for piano duet.

The defeat at Sadowa of Austrian Emperor, Franz Joseph, led in 1867 to administrative independence for Hungary, and it was at this juncture that Brahms chose to publish his first dances "in Hungarian style." Their immediate success won him international fame and the gratitude of the Hungarians.

The four books of dances were produced between 1858 and 1880.

Brahms had his early "field" experience in the taverns and sailors' dance-halls of Hamburg, where he had to churn out sentimental popular tunes of central European or Russian origin: he was also influenced by a partnership with his Hungarian violinist Hoffmann, alias the famous Eduard Remenyi.

It is interesting to observe that the Hungarian dances remain contemporary. (With such ambitious masterworks as Variations on a Theme of Handel, and the famous 'Paganini' Variations.)

Brahms intended the dances to be the happy, light counterparts of these more sombre and searching works. On this score the dances give false notion to the once widespread view of Brahms as an austere and cerebral composer.

The program continued with the innovative double concerto for Violin and Cello in A Minor, Op. 102. Brahms composed it at Thun in Switzerland during the summer of 1887, and it was to be his last concerto.

Brahms opposed the romantic philosophy of his time which stressed the subjective and emotional possibilities of music and denigrated formal structure. Although his music is Romantically expressive and moving, it is characterized by

Classical restraint and control; never did he allow himself to be carried away by passion at the expense of the strict form that he imposed on his works.

Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Brahms did not need any literary or poetic excuse to compose and, therefore, was not inclined to produce program music (music that tells a story). Instead, he was the most successful composer of his day in the realm of absolute music.

No music is more absolute than chamber music, and the Double Concerto is an innovative blend of chamber music and symphony composition. This late opus epitomizes the maturity of Brahms brought to his music, though it remains the least popular of his concertos. One wonders whether this is not due to the difficulty of finding two soloists capable of performing it, rather than due to the music itself.

We're fortunate in Toronto to have such local talent of world-calibre.

Ofra Harnoy, (wearing it must be said, an absolutely stunning gown) and violinist Moshe Hammer, both

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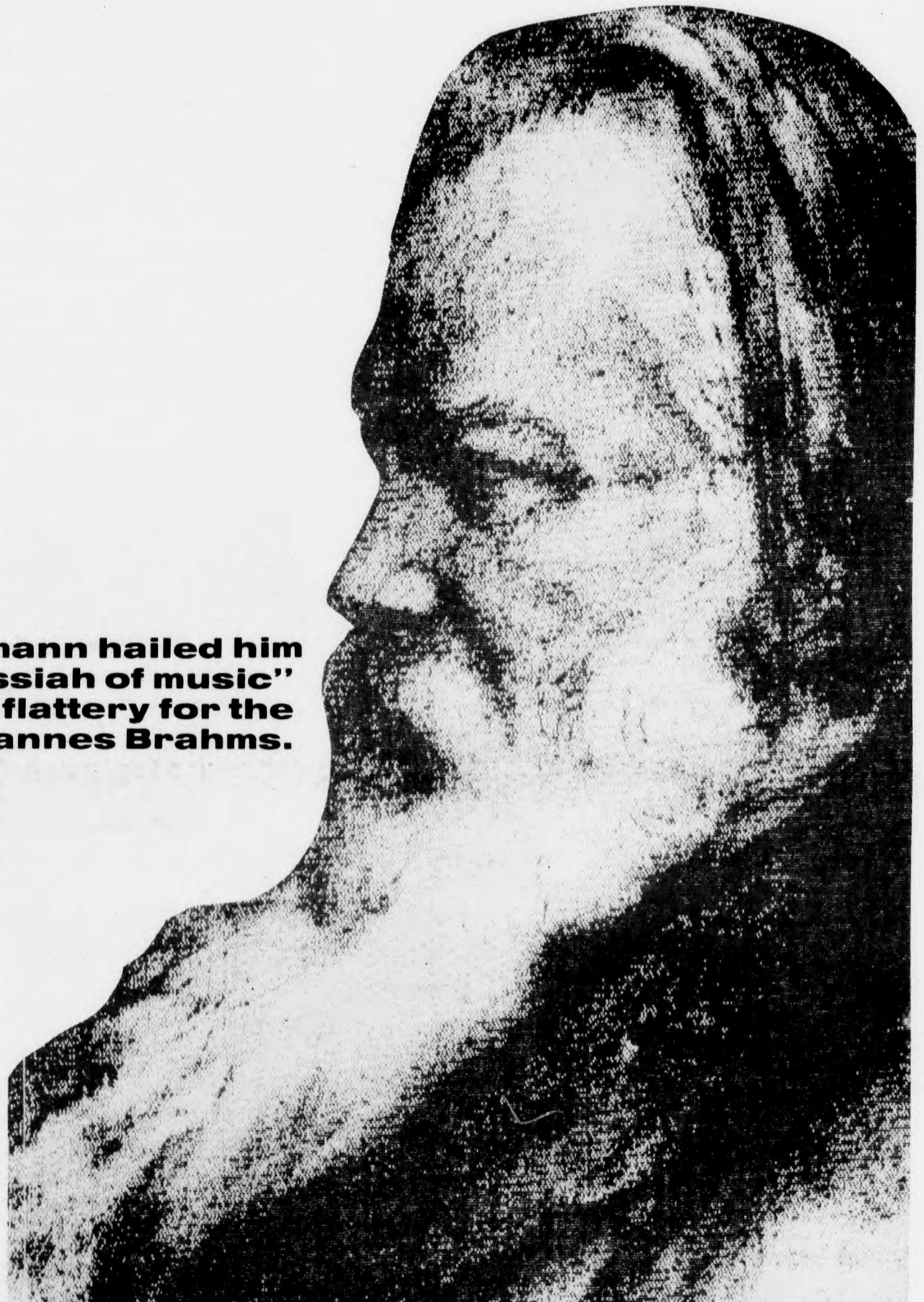
played in apparent harmony. The famed Massey Hall acoustics helped to make this a truly memorable performance.

After the intermission, the evening continued with the Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98, composed in 1885.

The first movement was evocative of the Third Symphony, with its gently flowing 'heartbeat,' whereas the second movement 'adante' has Brahms stamped all over it with its lush orchestration.

This was followed by the boisterous 'allegro giocoso'. The fourth and final movement introduces trombones and a further exploration of the opening theme. The variations are constantly linked; the annotation is 'allegro energico e passionata.'

The music's pulse beat to a majestic and grandiose climax which received enthusiastic applause. Thus illustrating that the Toronto Philharmonic Orchestra and Maestro Robinson, so well suited to the scale of Massey Hall, again managed a wonderful performance in the midst of their talented guests.



Johannes Brahms, hailed as "the Messiah of music," received symphonic justification on January 20th, when the Toronto Philharmonic Orchestra presented five of his 21 Hungarian Dances. The orchestra, conducted by Paul Robinson, were joined by Ofra Harnoy and Moshe Hammer.

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