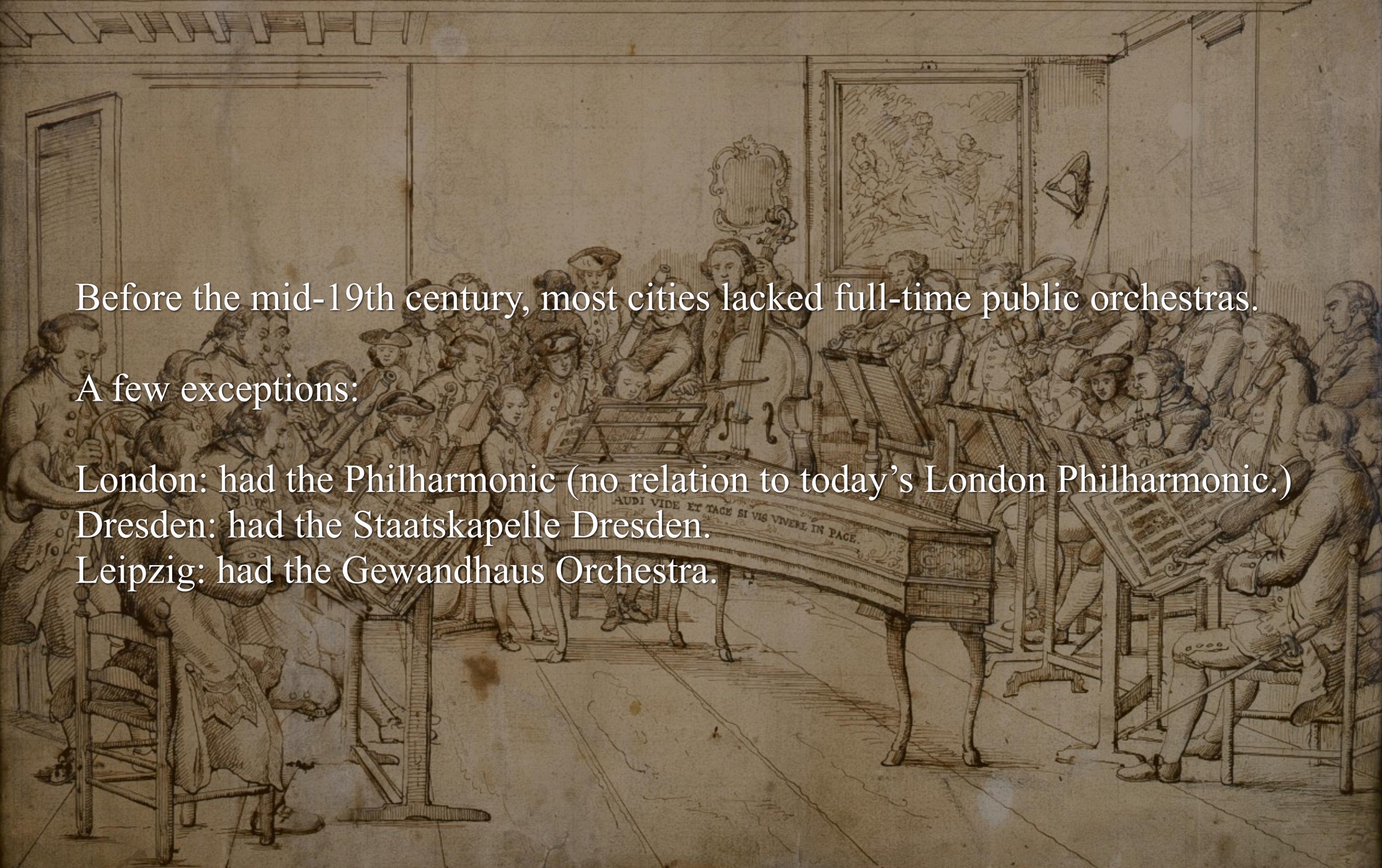


Music as Mirror

5 - The Symphony Reborn: Brahms and the First Symphony



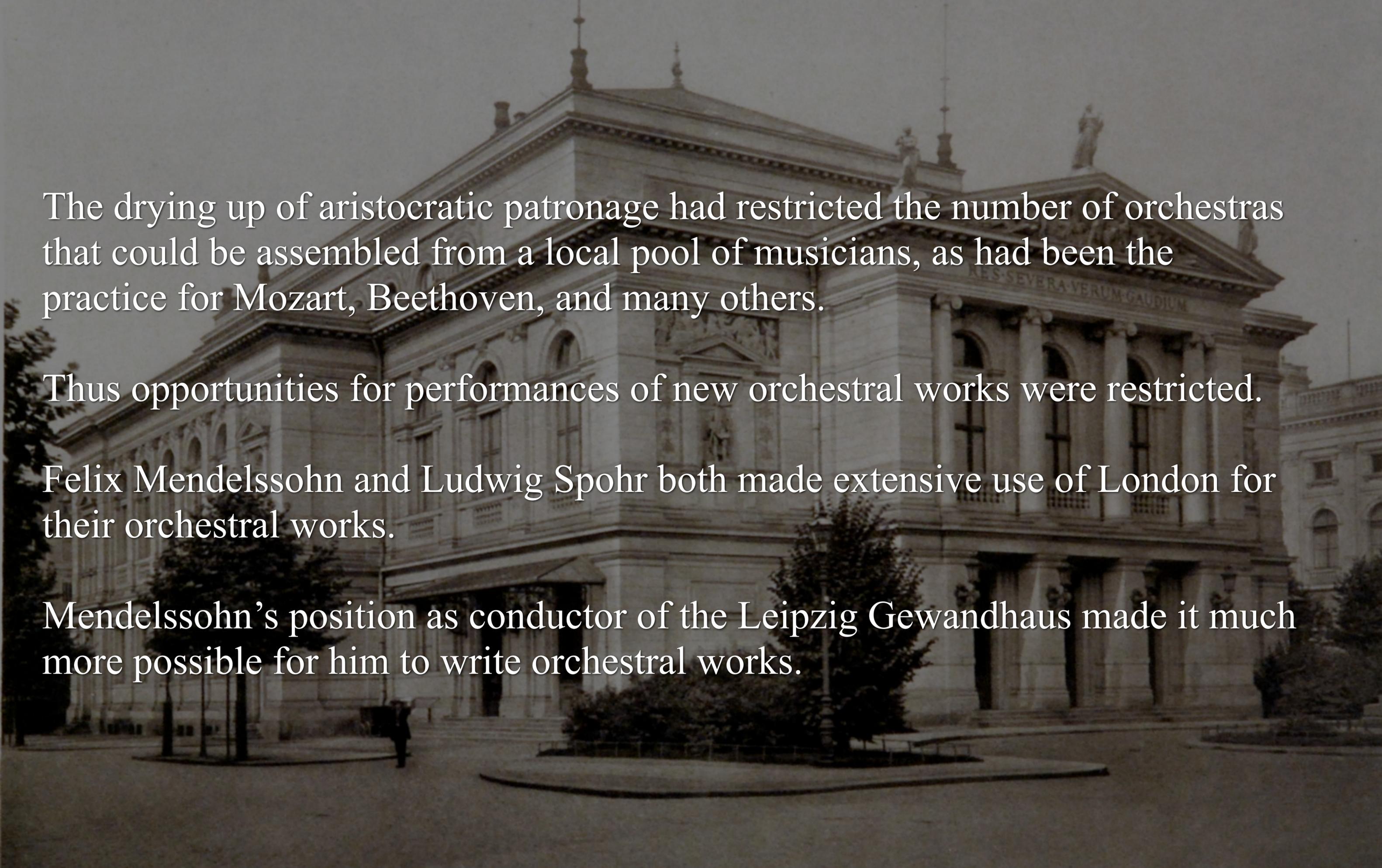
Before the mid-19th century, most cities lacked full-time public orchestras.

A few exceptions:

London: had the Philharmonic (no relation to today's London Philharmonic.)

Dresden: had the Staatskapelle Dresden.

Leipzig: had the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

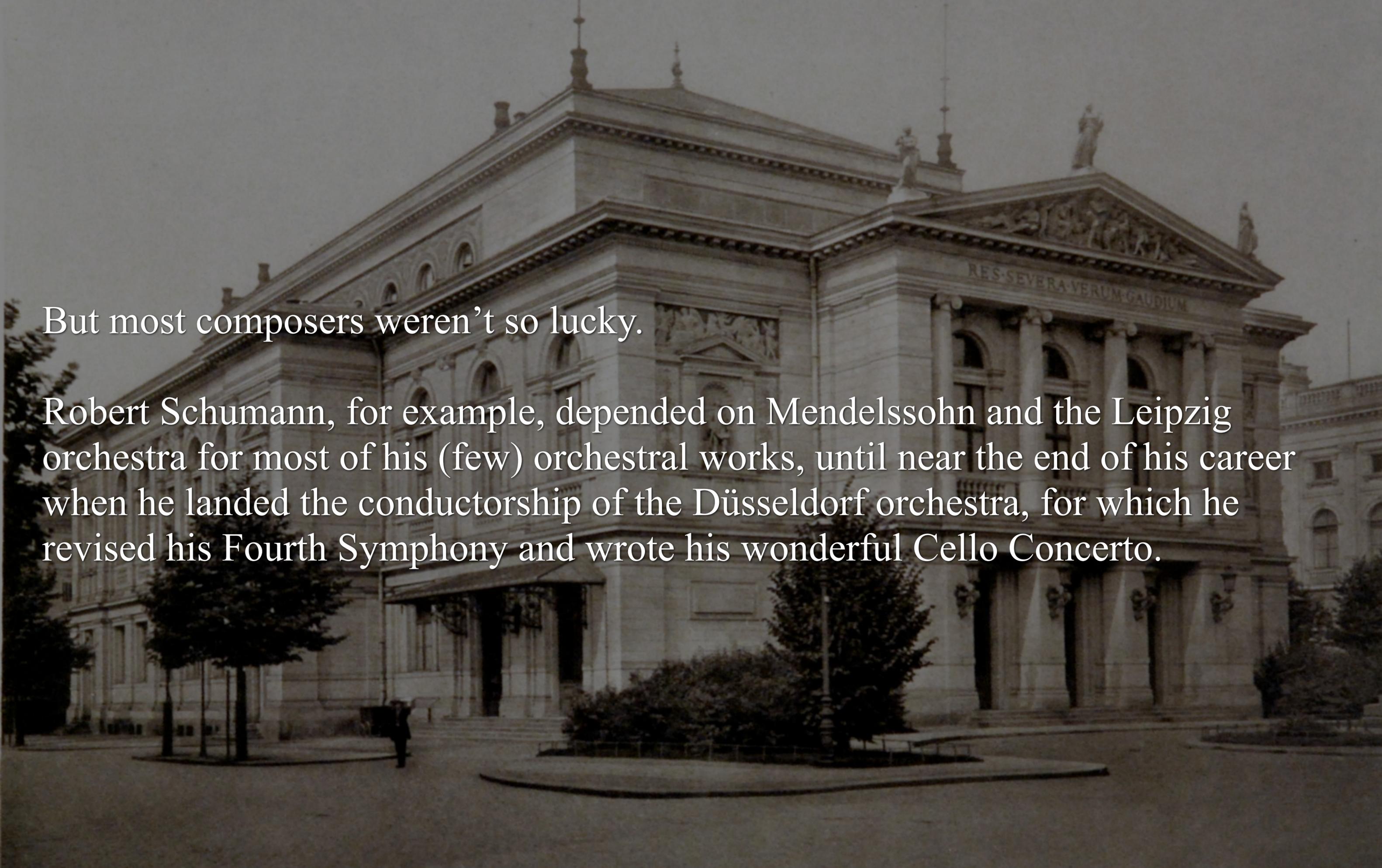


The drying up of aristocratic patronage had restricted the number of orchestras that could be assembled from a local pool of musicians, as had been the practice for Mozart, Beethoven, and many others.

Thus opportunities for performances of new orchestral works were restricted.

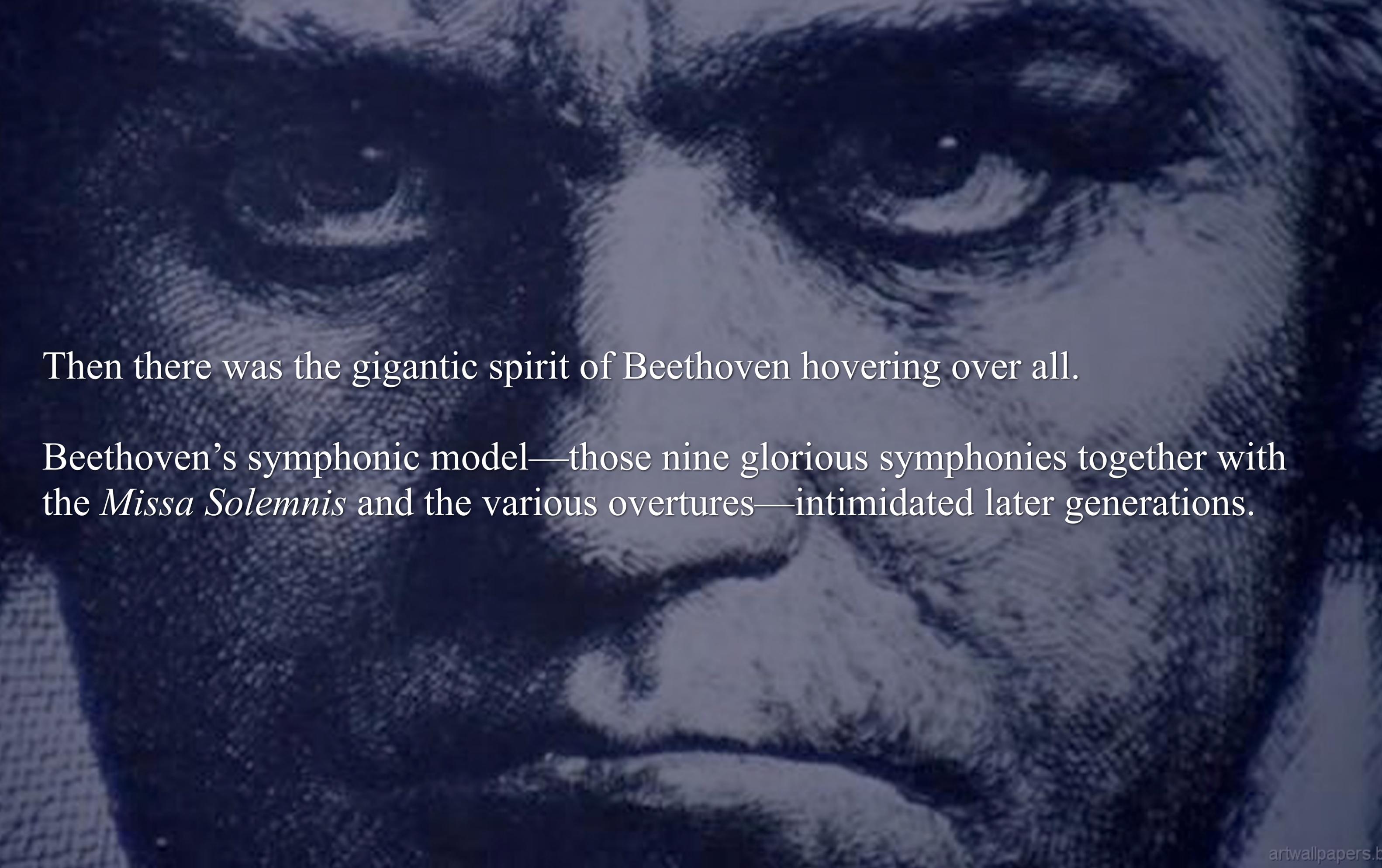
Felix Mendelssohn and Ludwig Spohr both made extensive use of London for their orchestral works.

Mendelssohn's position as conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus made it much more possible for him to write orchestral works.



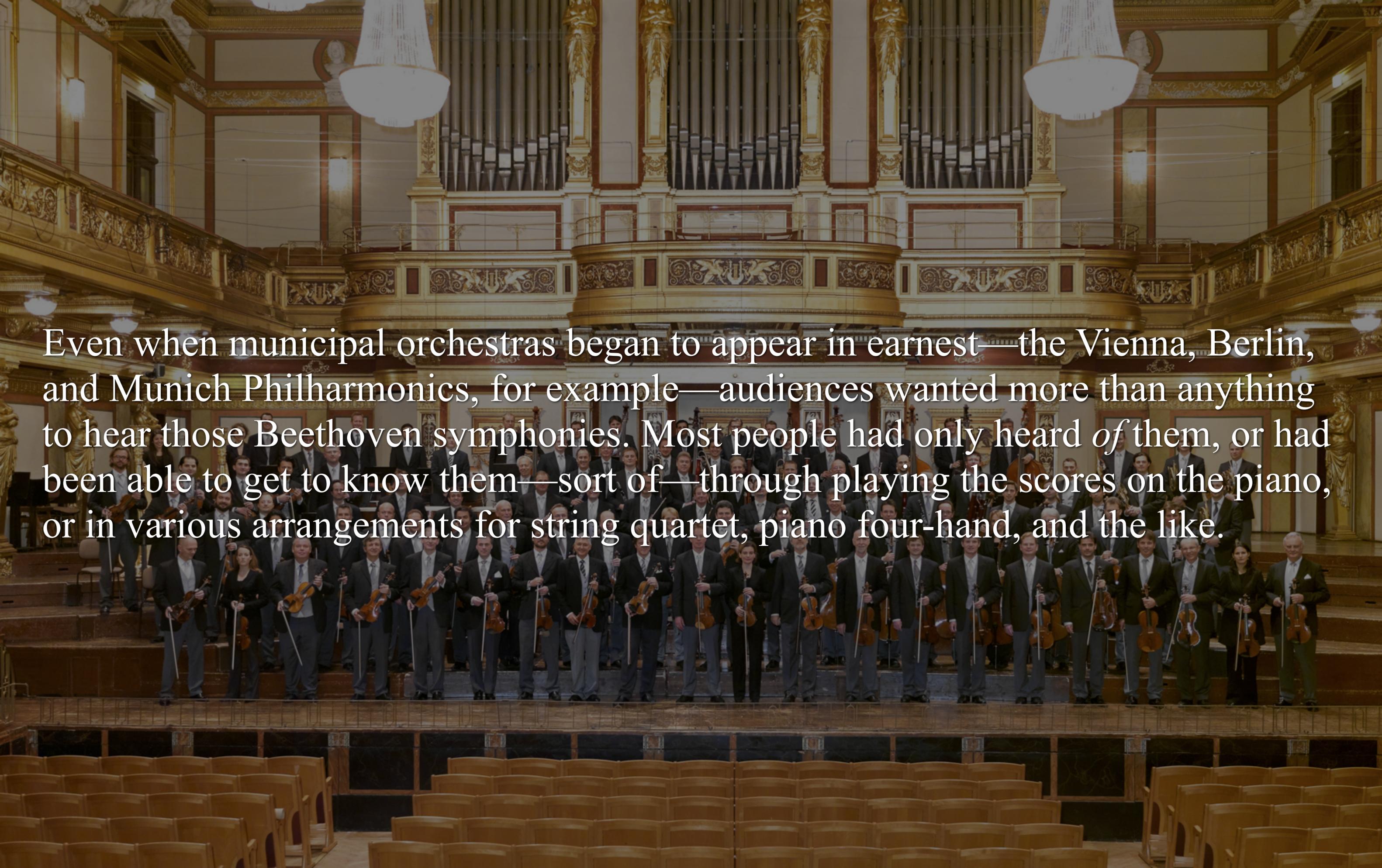
But most composers weren't so lucky.

Robert Schumann, for example, depended on Mendelssohn and the Leipzig orchestra for most of his (few) orchestral works, until near the end of his career when he landed the conductorship of the Düsseldorf orchestra, for which he revised his Fourth Symphony and wrote his wonderful Cello Concerto.



Then there was the gigantic spirit of Beethoven hovering over all.

Beethoven's symphonic model—those nine glorious symphonies together with the *Missa Solemnis* and the various overtures—intimidated later generations.

A large orchestra is performing in a grand, ornate concert hall. The musicians are arranged in multiple rows on a stage, with a large pipe organ visible in the background. The hall features intricate architectural details, including gold-colored moldings and large chandeliers. The foreground shows rows of empty wooden seats, suggesting a performance in progress or a rehearsal.

Even when municipal orchestras began to appear in earnest—the Vienna, Berlin, and Munich Philharmonics, for example—audiences wanted more than anything to hear those Beethoven symphonies. Most people had only heard *of* them, or had been able to get to know them—sort of—through playing the scores on the piano, or in various arrangements for string quartet, piano four-hand, and the like.

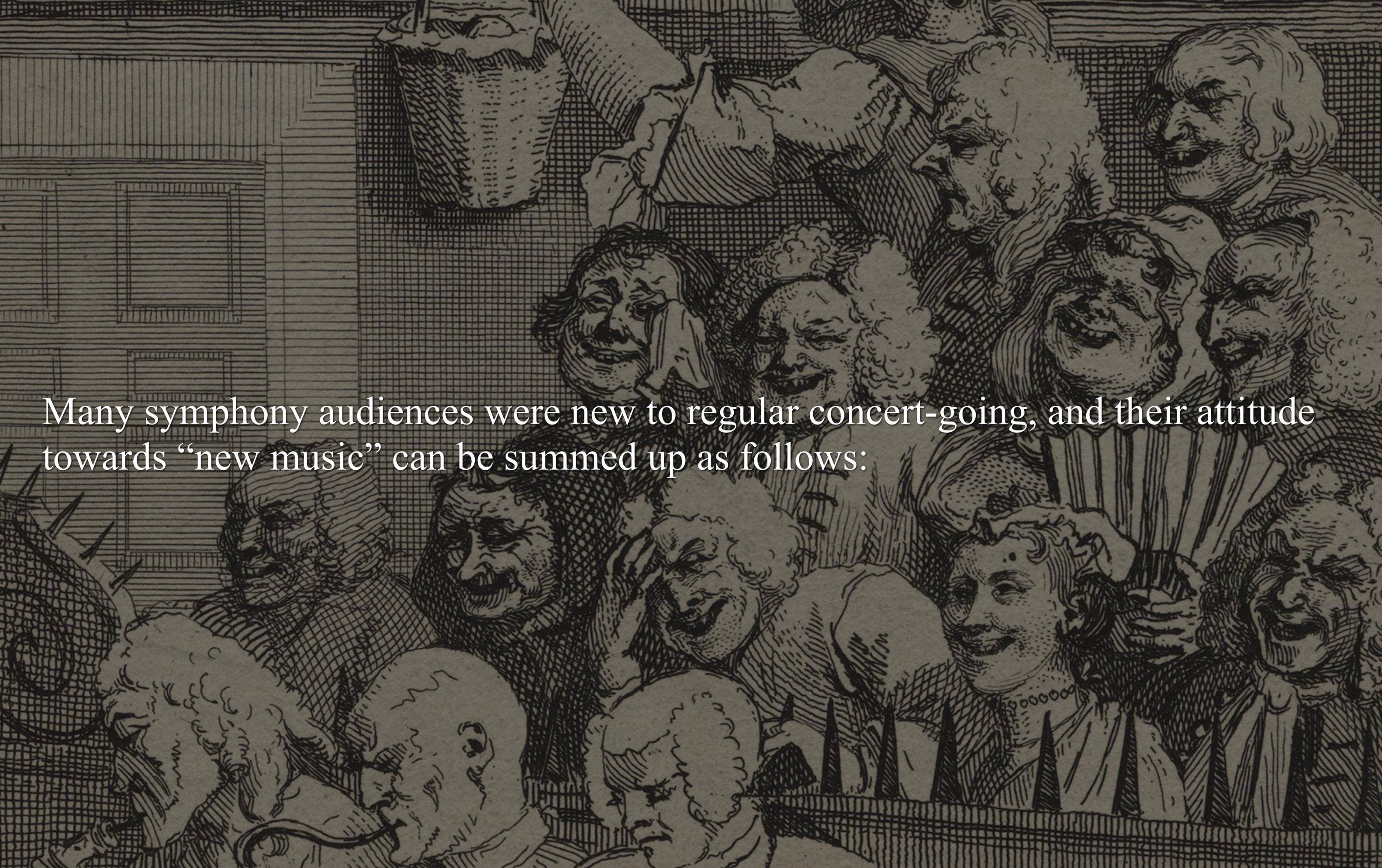
A large orchestra of musicians in formal attire is performing in a grand, ornate concert hall. The musicians are arranged in multiple rows on a stage, with some holding violins and others holding larger instruments. The background features a large, multi-tiered organ with intricate carvings and gold accents. The hall has high ceilings with decorative moldings and large chandeliers. The foreground shows rows of empty wooden seats, suggesting the audience is not visible in this shot.

Because of the hunger audiences had to hear the Beethoven symphonies—and Mozart to a lesser extent (Haydn had to wait another century)—the notion of the “standard repertory” began to set in. The orchestral repertory centered around Beethoven and slowly expanded to include Mozart, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and eventually Schubert.

Interestingly enough, Louis (Ludwig) Spohr’s symphonies were considered nearly on par with Beethoven’s during the mid-19th century. They certainly aren’t considered as such now.

Has the symphony made “progress” since Beethoven? Has the formal aspect of this genre been expanded? Has the content been made greater, more significant in the sense in which we can say Beethoven did in relation to Mozart? All things considered—including everything subjectively new and therefore epoch-making that Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Schumann have created—the answer to this question is no.

—Anonymous critic in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 1863

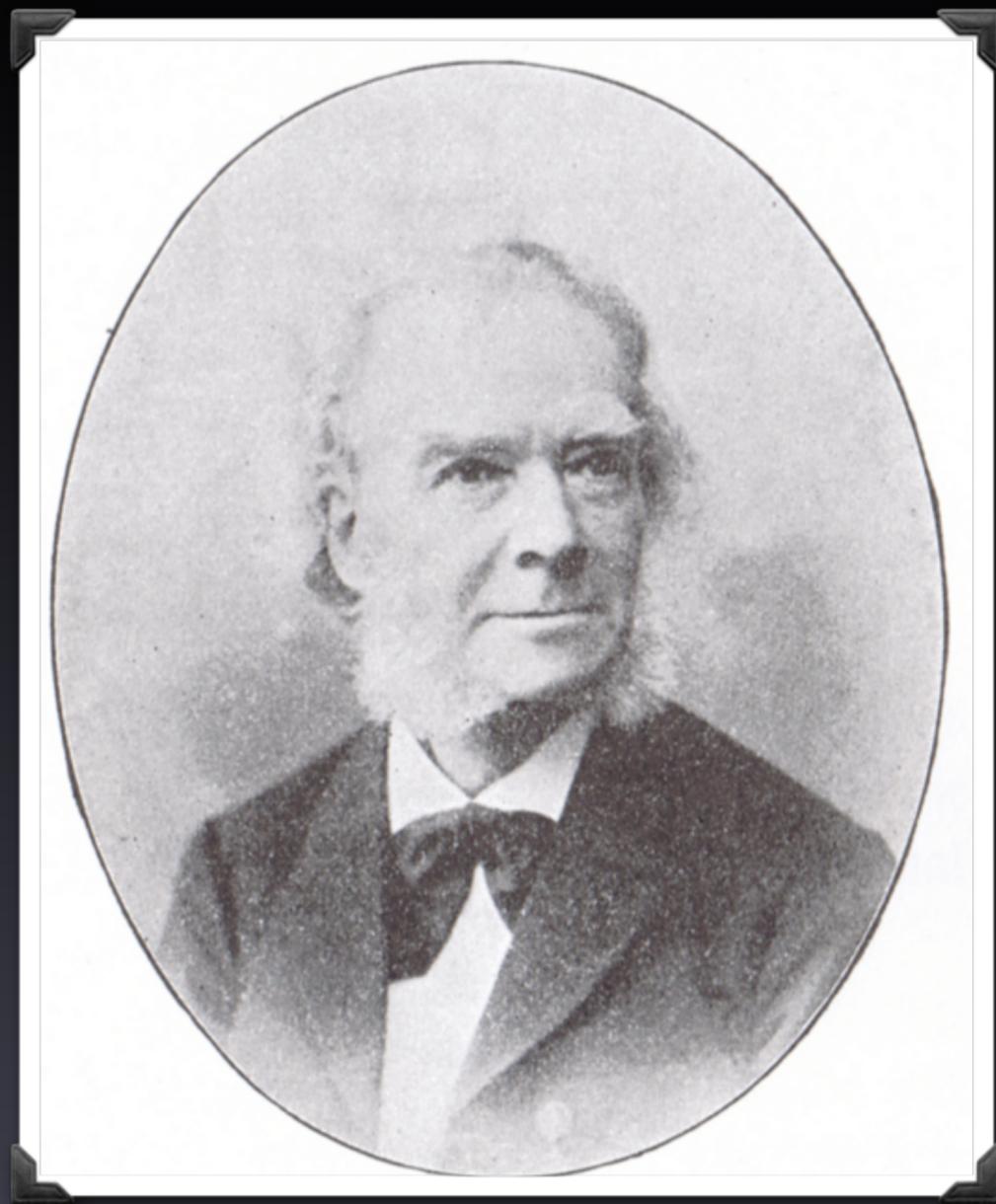


Many symphony audiences were new to regular concert-going, and their attitude towards “new music” can be summed up as follows:



It's not that new symphonies weren't being written. They were. Unfortunately, they were the work of second-raters who tended to write faux-Mendelssohn and, even worse, faux-Beethoven. Consider some of the symphonists of the 1850s and 1860s:

- Goldmark
- Volkmann
- Rheinberger
- Reinecke
- Gersheim
- Raff
- Draeske

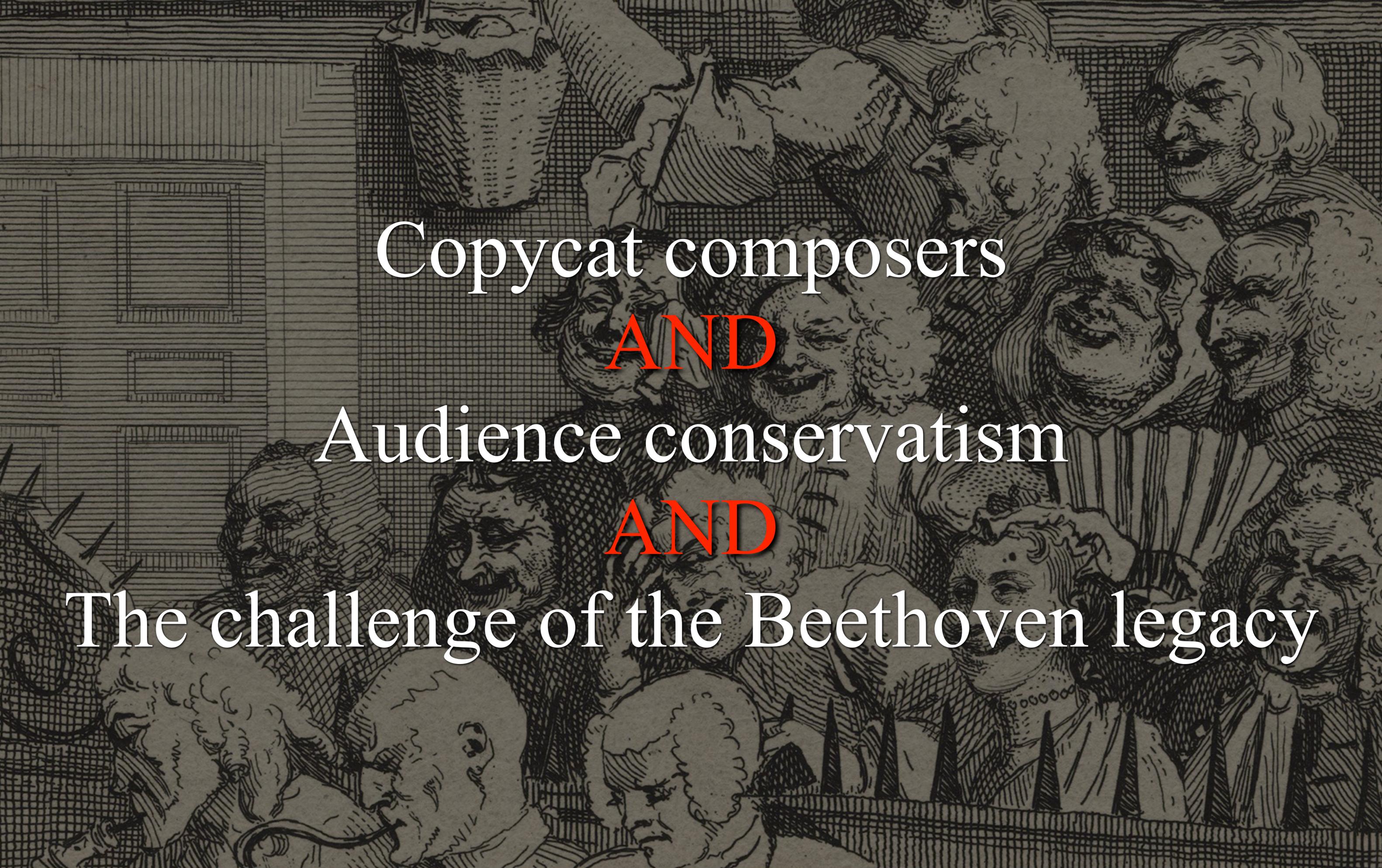


Consider Carl Reinecke's oh-so-Mendelssohnian Symphony No. 2, Op. 134.



Or Felix Draeske, another Mendelssohn follower.

This is from the scherzo movement of his Symphony No. 1 in G Major, Op. 12.



Copycat composers

AND

Audience conservatism

AND

The challenge of the Beethoven legacy

Here Lies
- The Symphony -

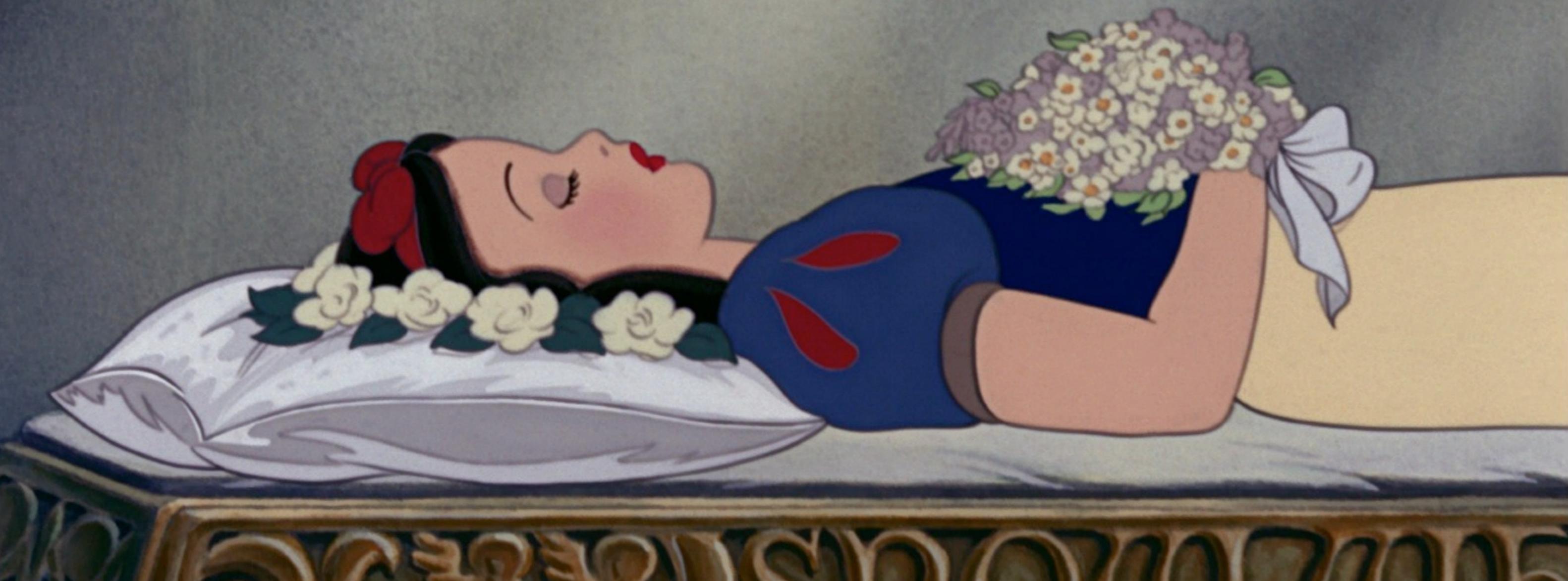


1730 - 1850

A photograph of a cemetery with numerous grey, rectangular headstones of varying heights and widths, arranged in rows on a green lawn. The scene is captured from a slightly elevated perspective, looking down at the graves. The lighting is soft, suggesting an overcast day or late afternoon. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

Rumors of the symphony's death were, as it turned out, greatly exaggerated.

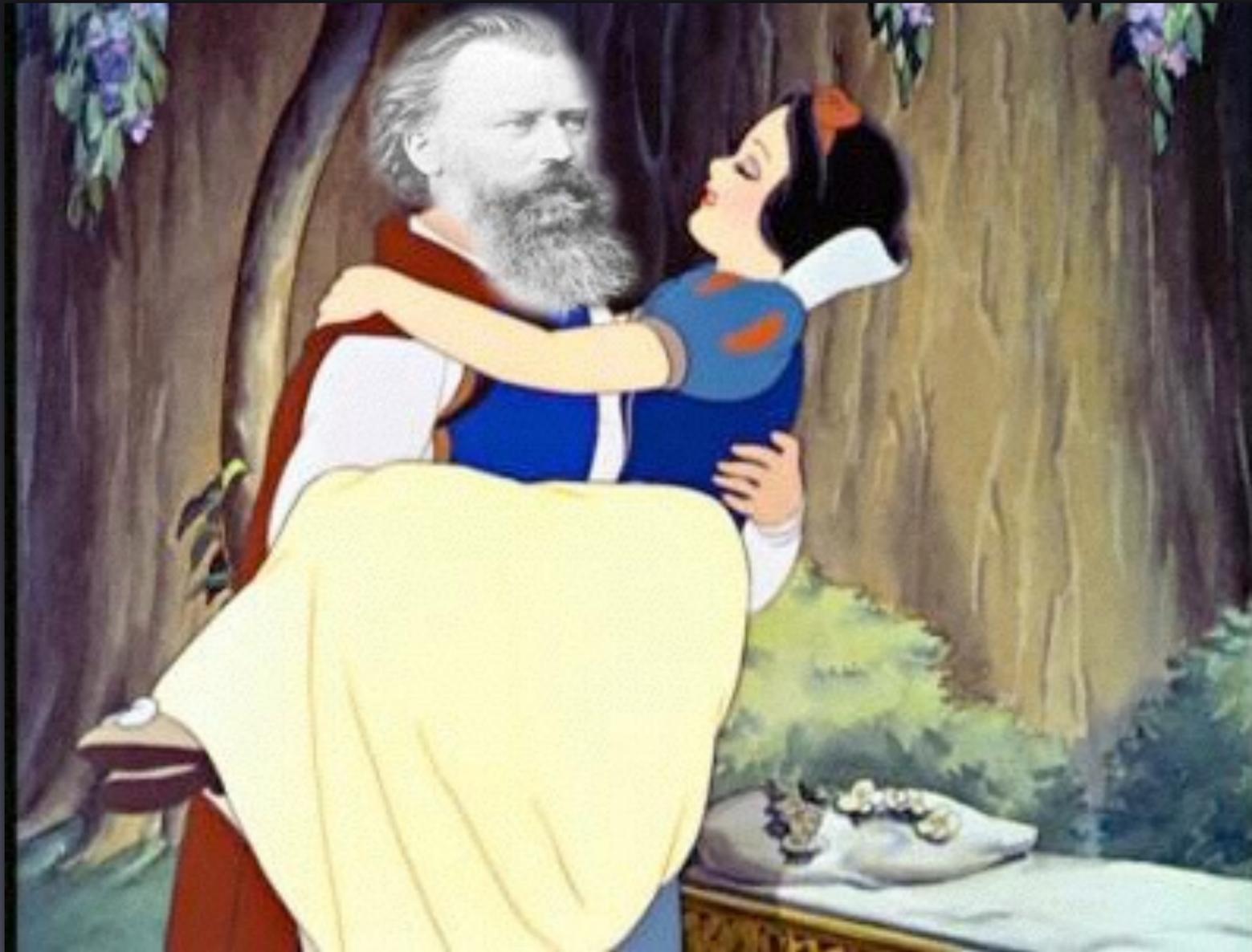
It was merely sleeping, not actually dead.



The snoozing symphony needed a Prince Charming to wake it up, though.



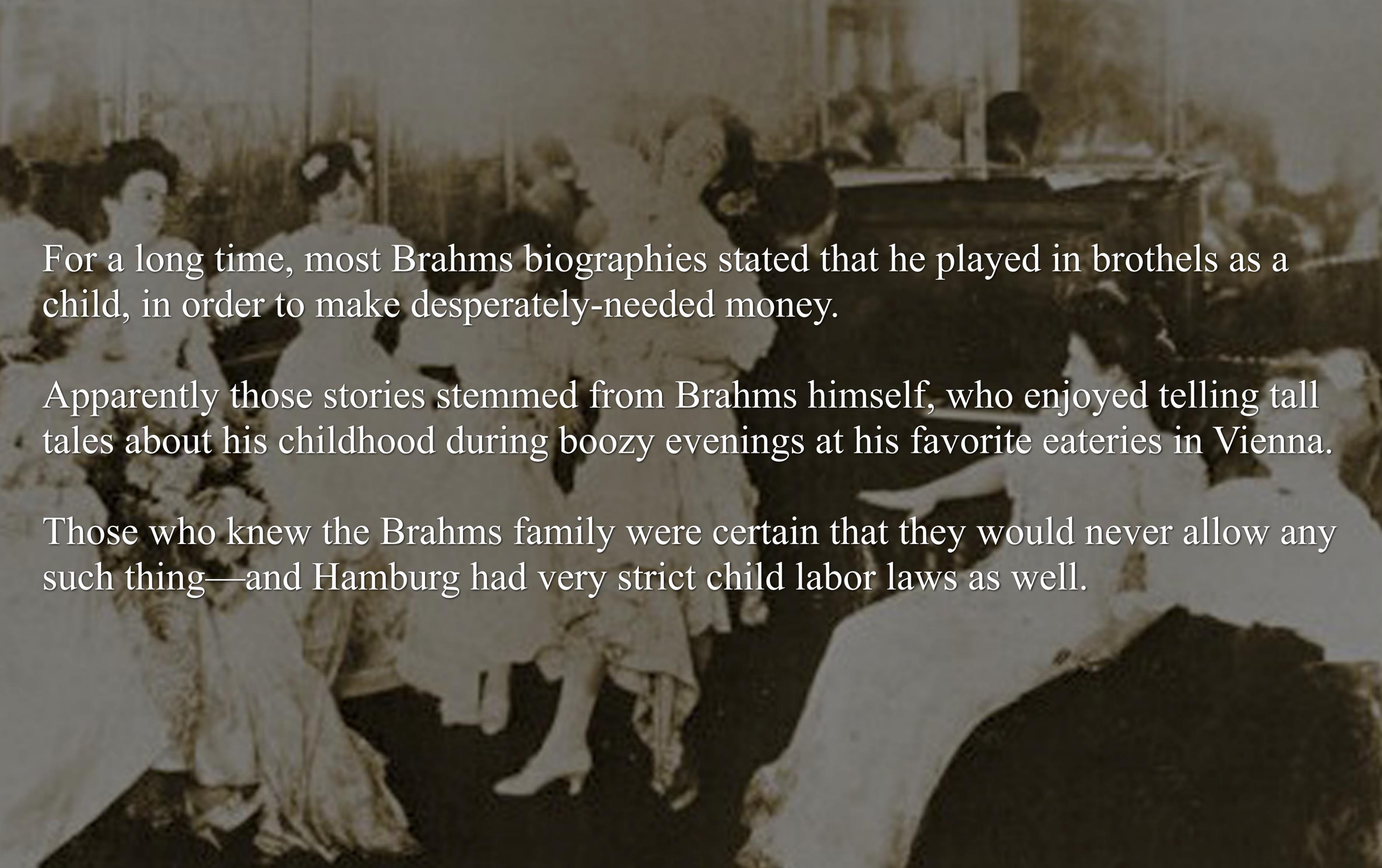
and he eventually came along...



Brahms was born to a poor, but not starving, family in Hamburg. His father was a freelance musician and his mother was a seamstress.

As a very young man he had a certain androgynous quality about him—extremely small and lightly built.

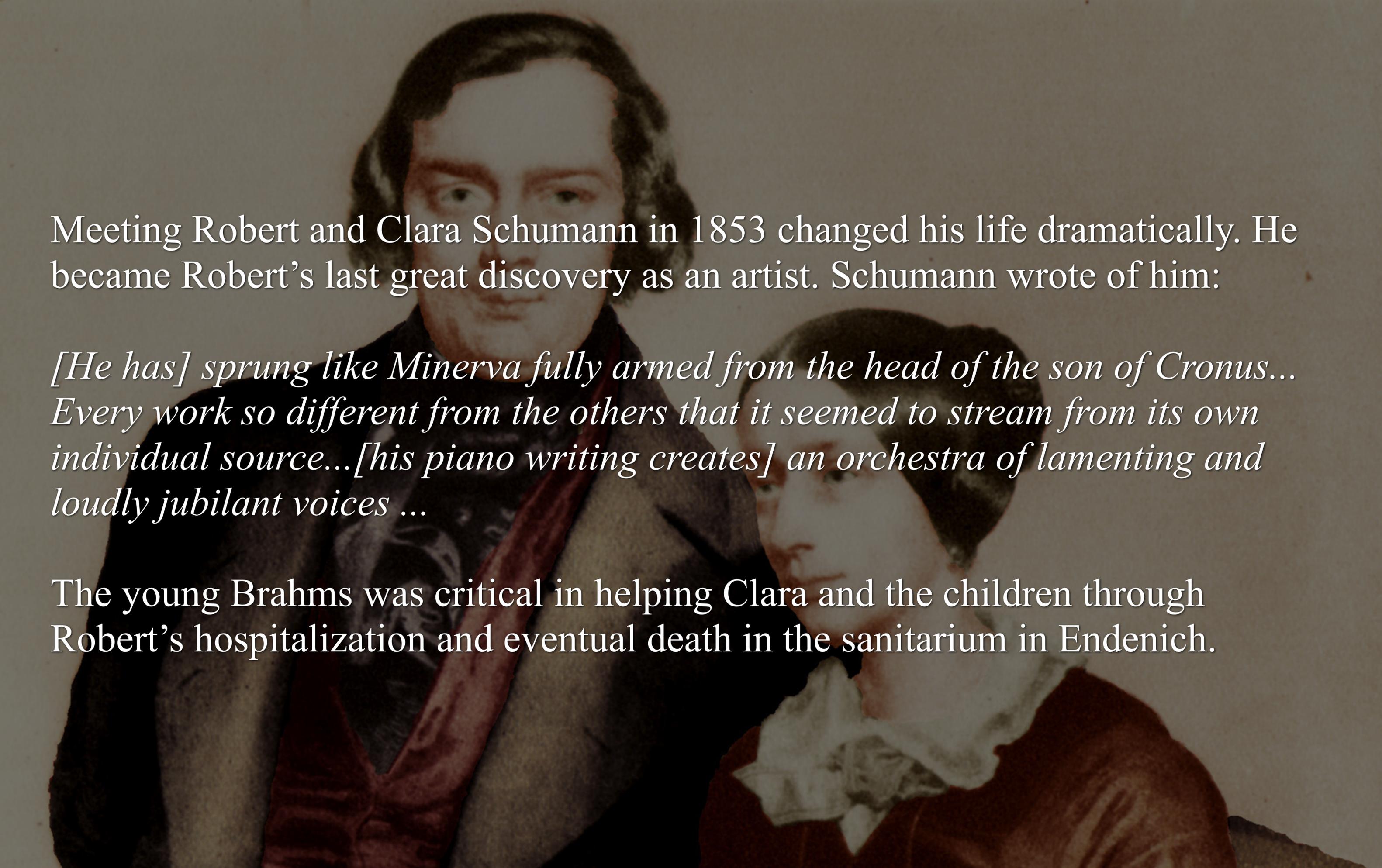




For a long time, most Brahms biographies stated that he played in brothels as a child, in order to make desperately-needed money.

Apparently those stories stemmed from Brahms himself, who enjoyed telling tall tales about his childhood during boozy evenings at his favorite eateries in Vienna.

Those who knew the Brahms family were certain that they would never allow any such thing—and Hamburg had very strict child labor laws as well.



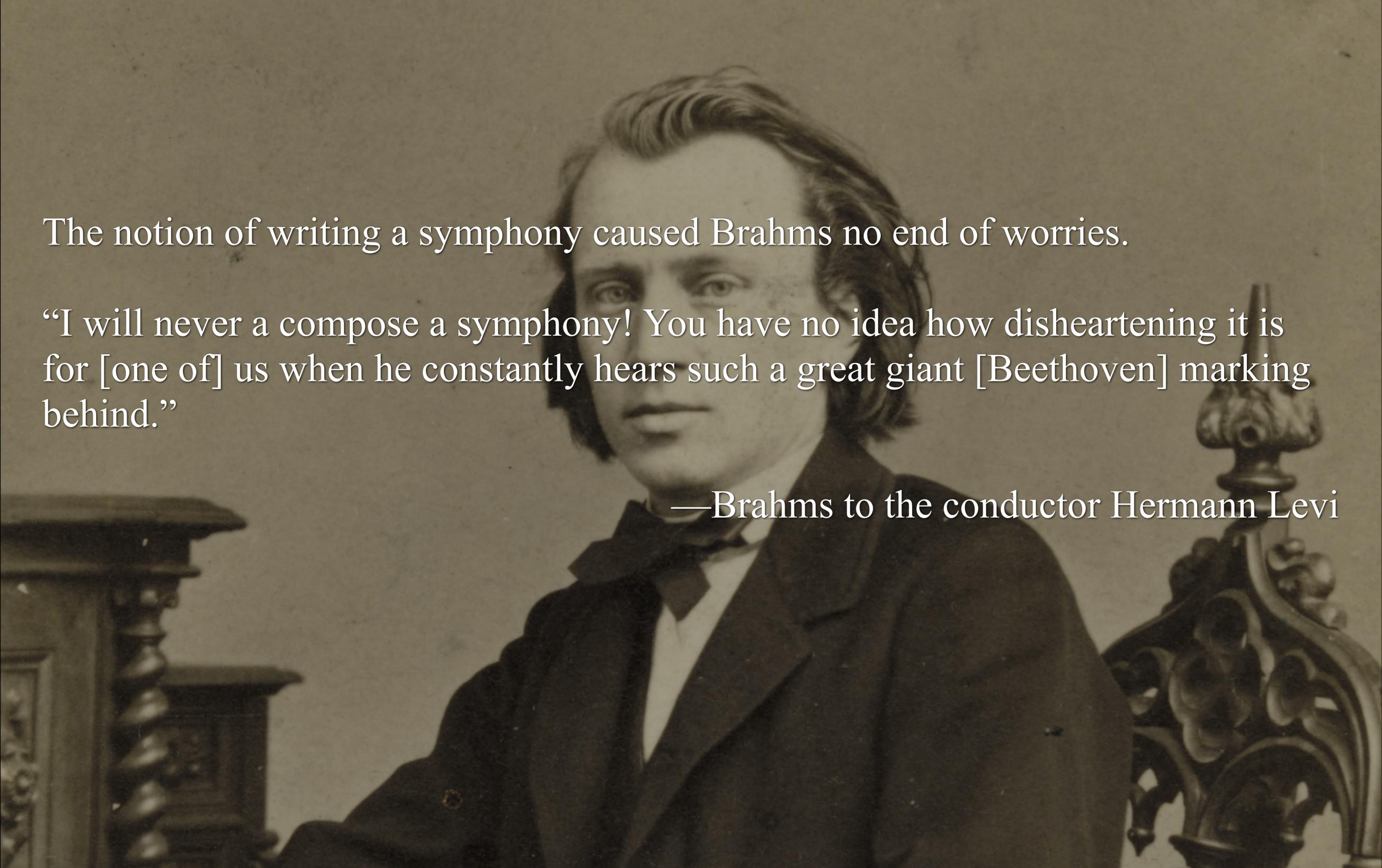
Meeting Robert and Clara Schumann in 1853 changed his life dramatically. He became Robert's last great discovery as an artist. Schumann wrote of him:

[He has] sprung like Minerva fully armed from the head of the son of Cronus... Every work so different from the others that it seemed to stream from its own individual source... [his piano writing creates] an orchestra of lamenting and loudly jubilant voices ...

The young Brahms was critical in helping Clara and the children through Robert's hospitalization and eventual death in the sanitarium in Endenich.



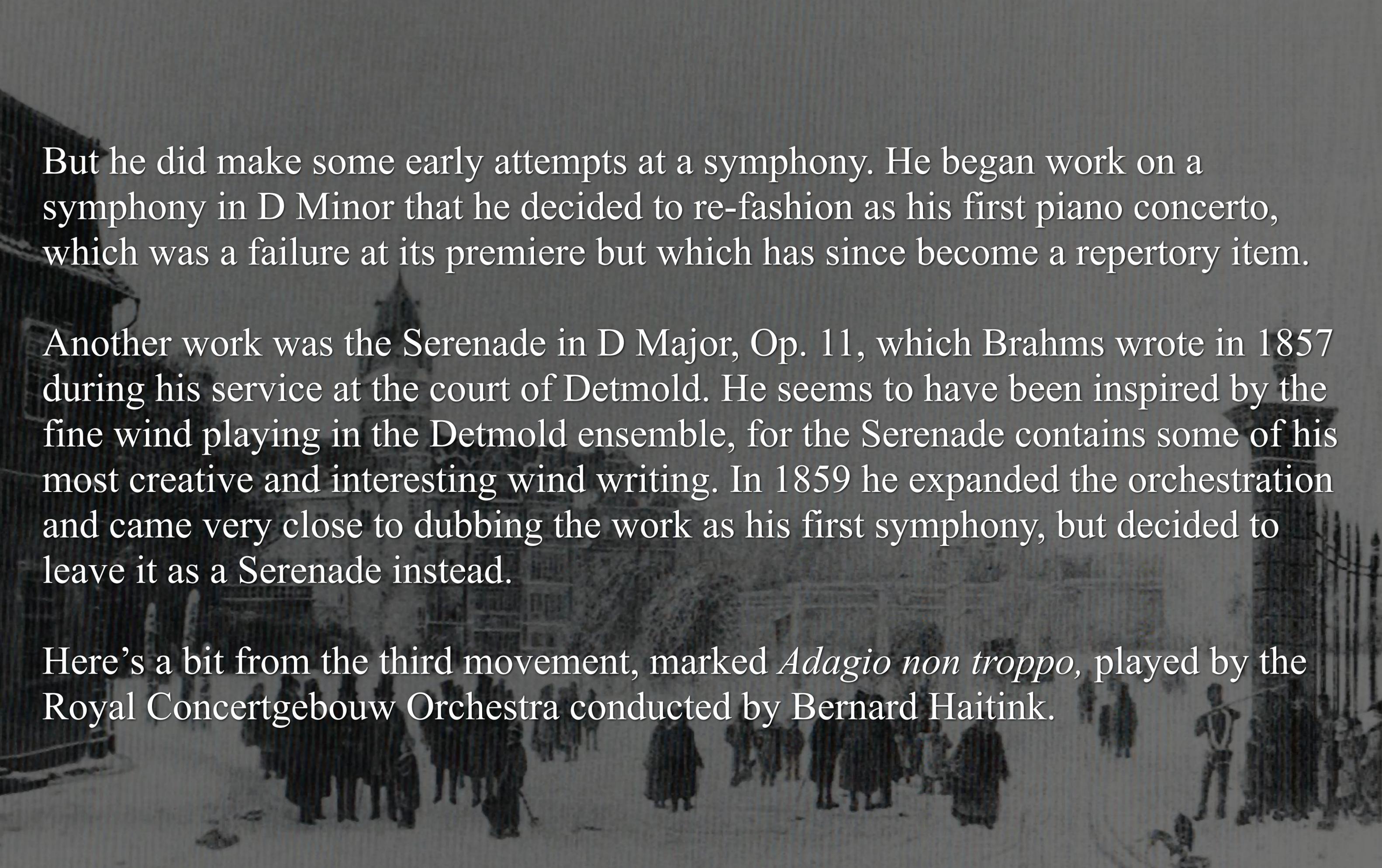
After the extraordinary success of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* in 1869, Brahms settled in Vienna, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.



The notion of writing a symphony caused Brahms no end of worries.

“I will never compose a symphony! You have no idea how disheartening it is for [one of] us when he constantly hears such a great giant [Beethoven] marking behind.”

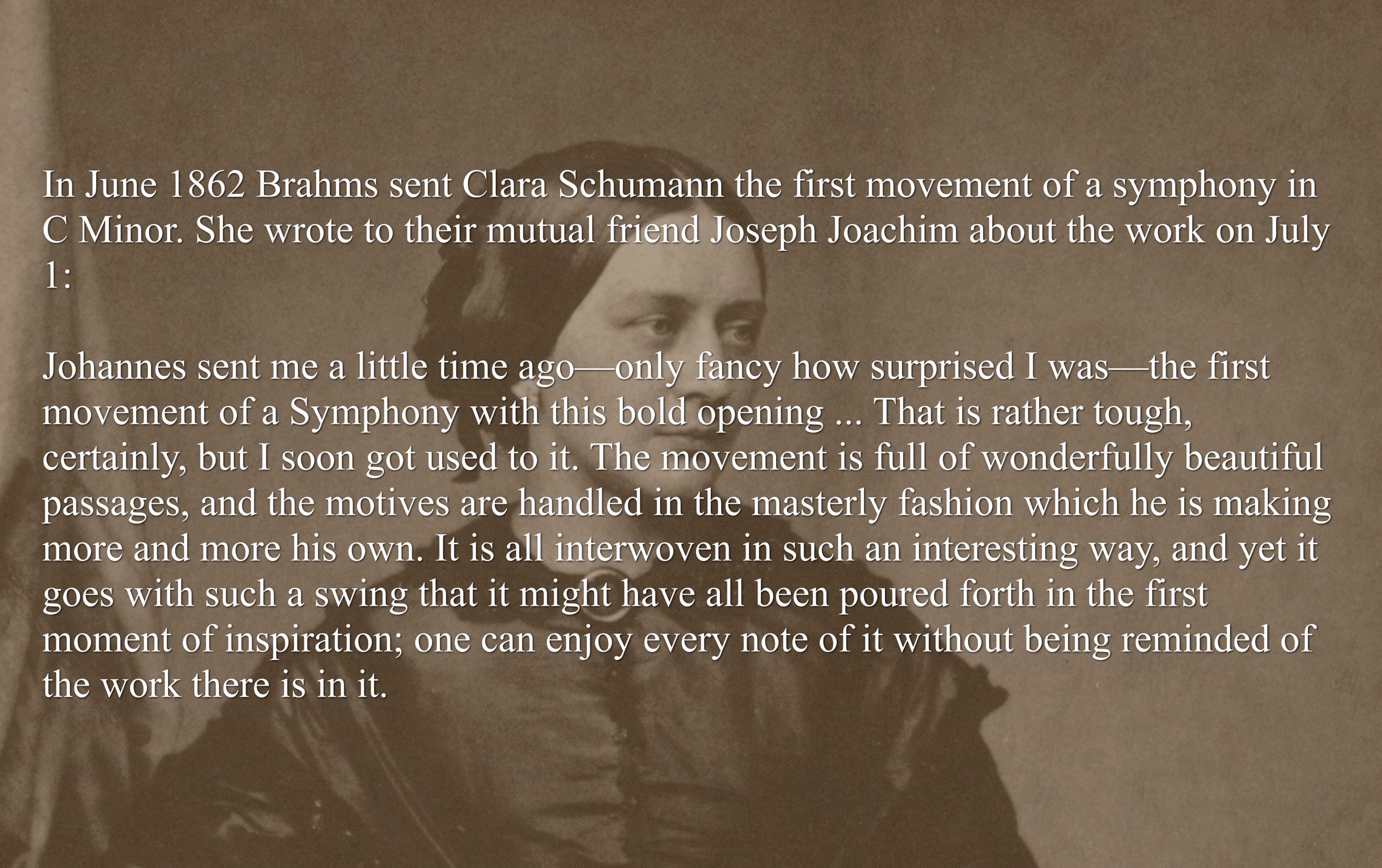
—Brahms to the conductor Hermann Levi



But he did make some early attempts at a symphony. He began work on a symphony in D Minor that he decided to re-fashion as his first piano concerto, which was a failure at its premiere but which has since become a repertory item.

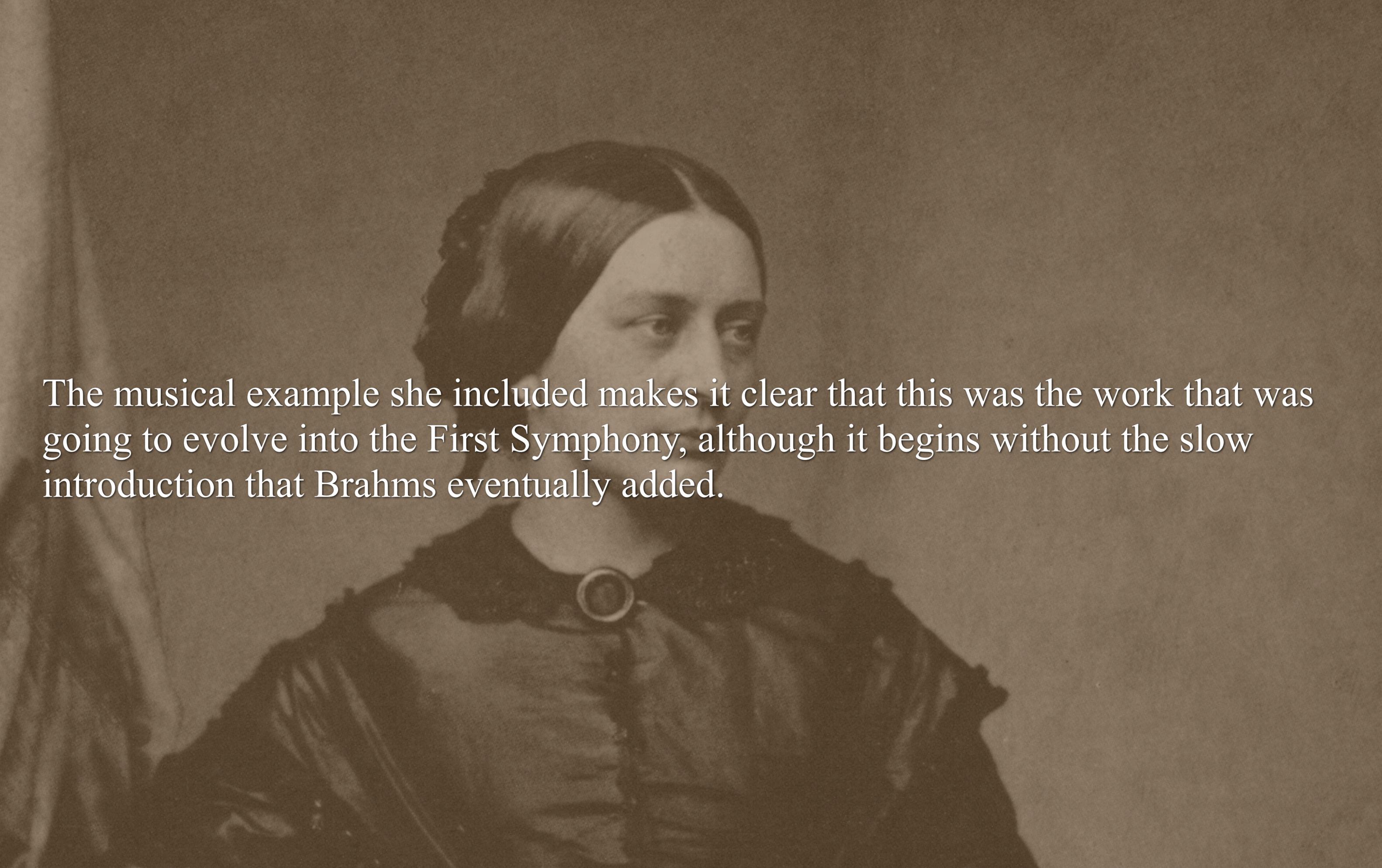
Another work was the Serenade in D Major, Op. 11, which Brahms wrote in 1857 during his service at the court of Detmold. He seems to have been inspired by the fine wind playing in the Detmold ensemble, for the Serenade contains some of his most creative and interesting wind writing. In 1859 he expanded the orchestration and came very close to dubbing the work as his first symphony, but decided to leave it as a Serenade instead.

Here's a bit from the third movement, marked *Adagio non troppo*, played by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Bernard Haitink.

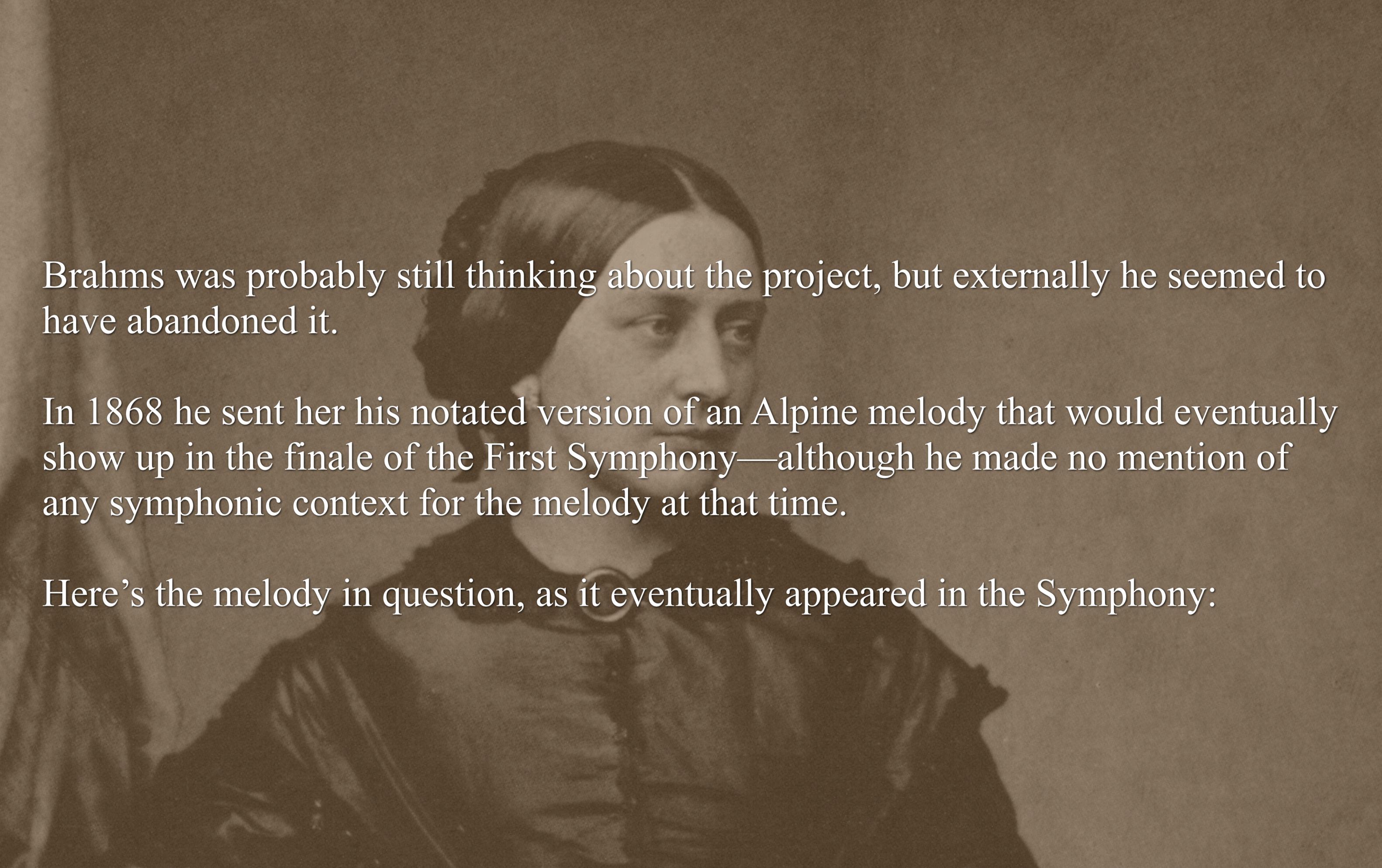


In June 1862 Brahms sent Clara Schumann the first movement of a symphony in C Minor. She wrote to their mutual friend Joseph Joachim about the work on July 1:

Johannes sent me a little time ago—only fancy how surprised I was—the first movement of a Symphony with this bold opening ... That is rather tough, certainly, but I soon got used to it. The movement is full of wonderfully beautiful passages, and the motives are handled in the masterly fashion which he is making more and more his own. It is all interwoven in such an interesting way, and yet it goes with such a swing that it might have all been poured forth in the first moment of inspiration; one can enjoy every note of it without being reminded of the work there is in it.



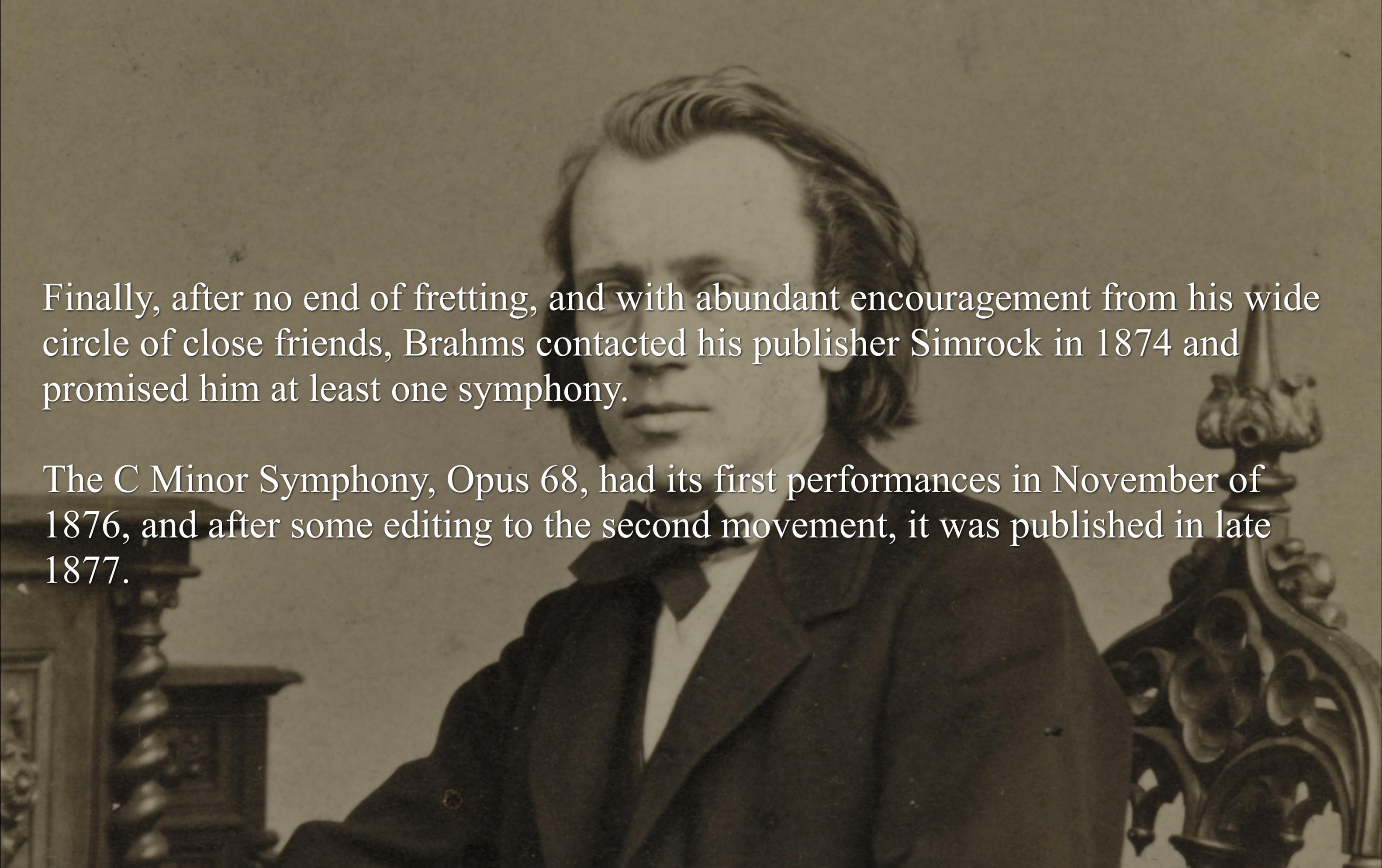
The musical example she included makes it clear that this was the work that was going to evolve into the First Symphony, although it begins without the slow introduction that Brahms eventually added.



Brahms was probably still thinking about the project, but externally he seemed to have abandoned it.

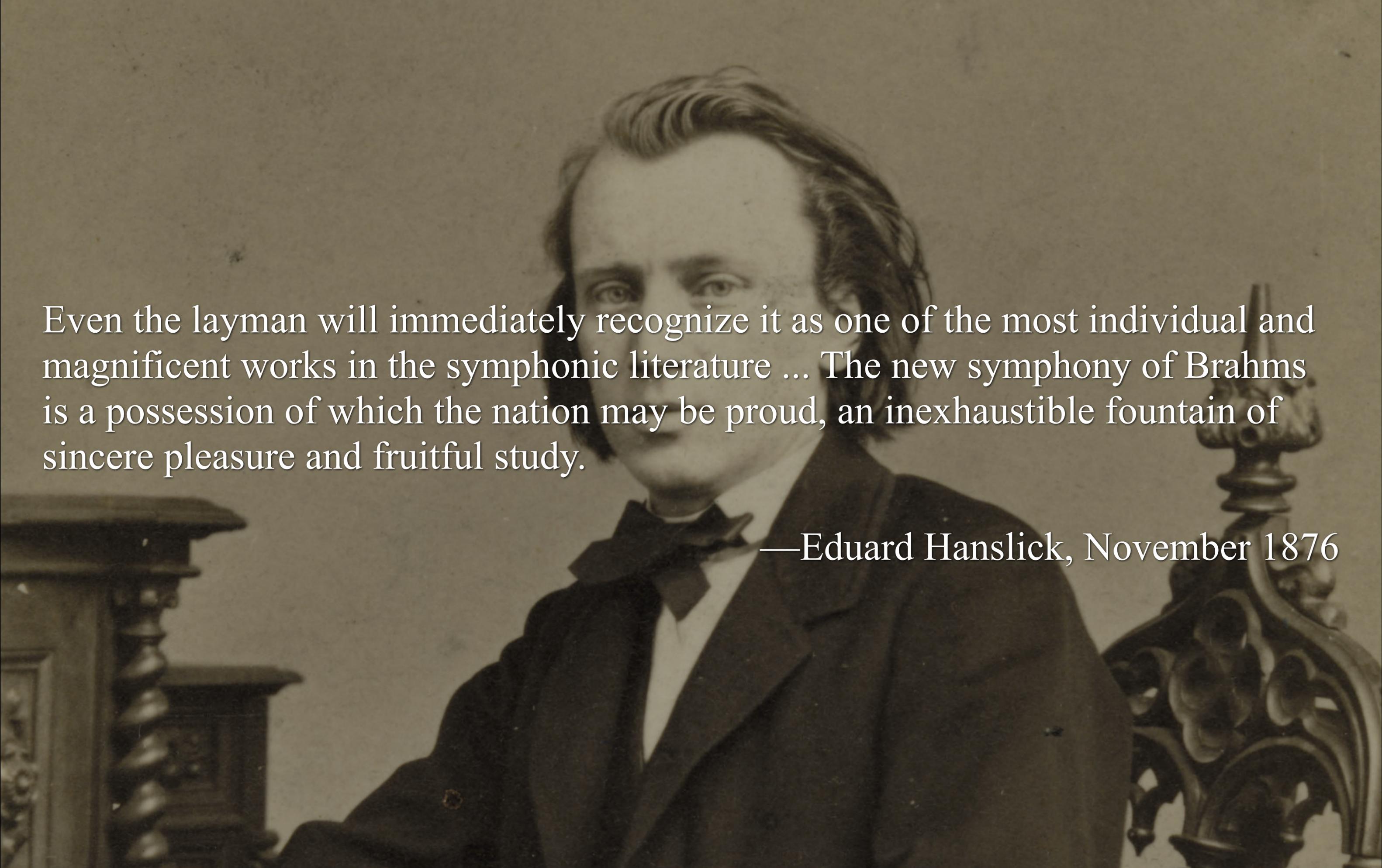
In 1868 he sent her his notated version of an Alpine melody that would eventually show up in the finale of the First Symphony—although he made no mention of any symphonic context for the melody at that time.

Here's the melody in question, as it eventually appeared in the Symphony:



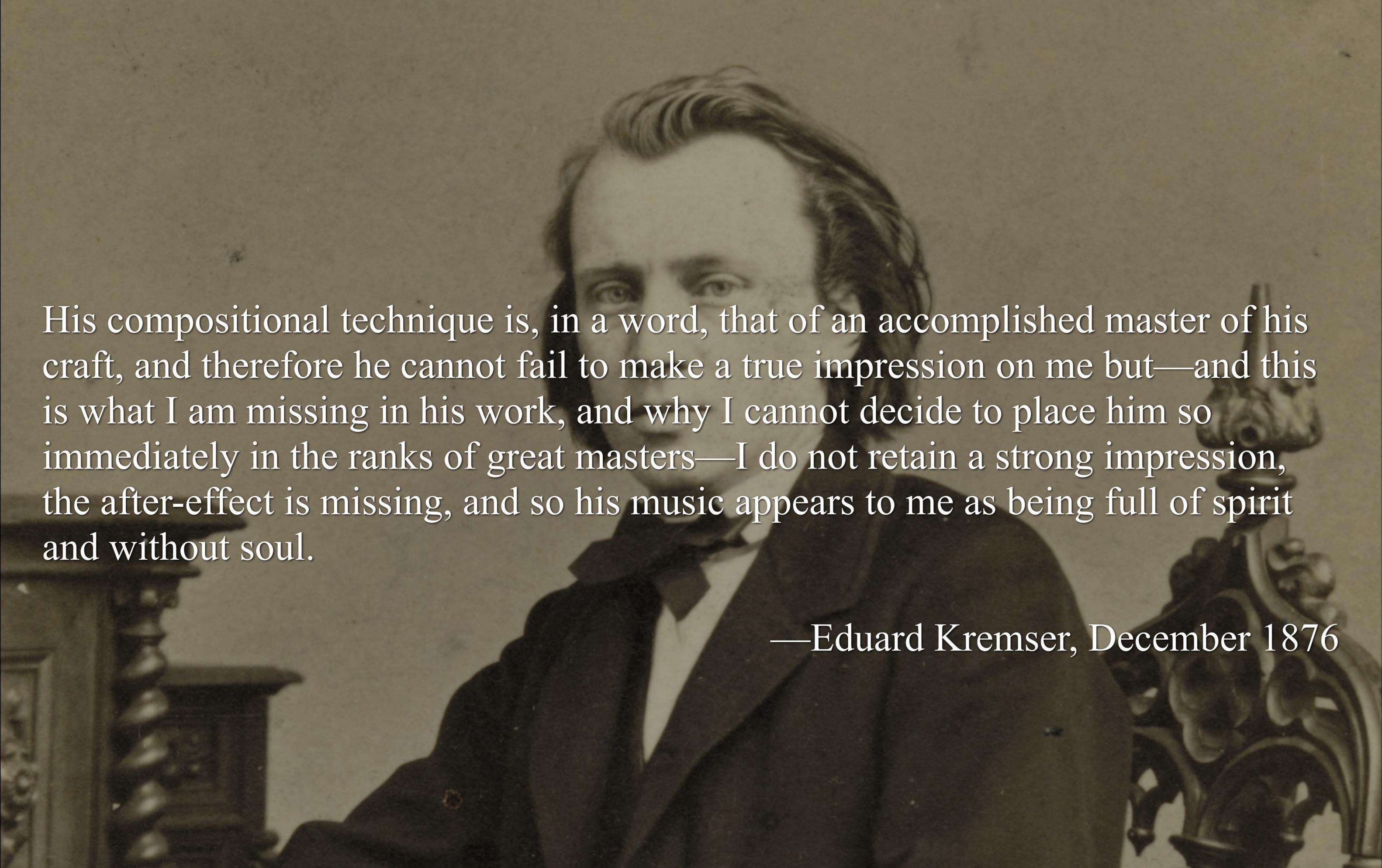
Finally, after no end of fretting, and with abundant encouragement from his wide circle of close friends, Brahms contacted his publisher Simrock in 1874 and promised him at least one symphony.

The C Minor Symphony, Opus 68, had its first performances in November of 1876, and after some editing to the second movement, it was published in late 1877.



Even the layman will immediately recognize it as one of the most individual and magnificent works in the symphonic literature ... The new symphony of Brahms is a possession of which the nation may be proud, an inexhaustible fountain of sincere pleasure and fruitful study.

—Eduard Hanslick, November 1876



His compositional technique is, in a word, that of an accomplished master of his craft, and therefore he cannot fail to make a true impression on me but—and this is what I am missing in his work, and why I cannot decide to place him so immediately in the ranks of great masters—I do not retain a strong impression, the after-effect is missing, and so his music appears to me as being full of spirit and without soul.

—Eduard Kremser, December 1876

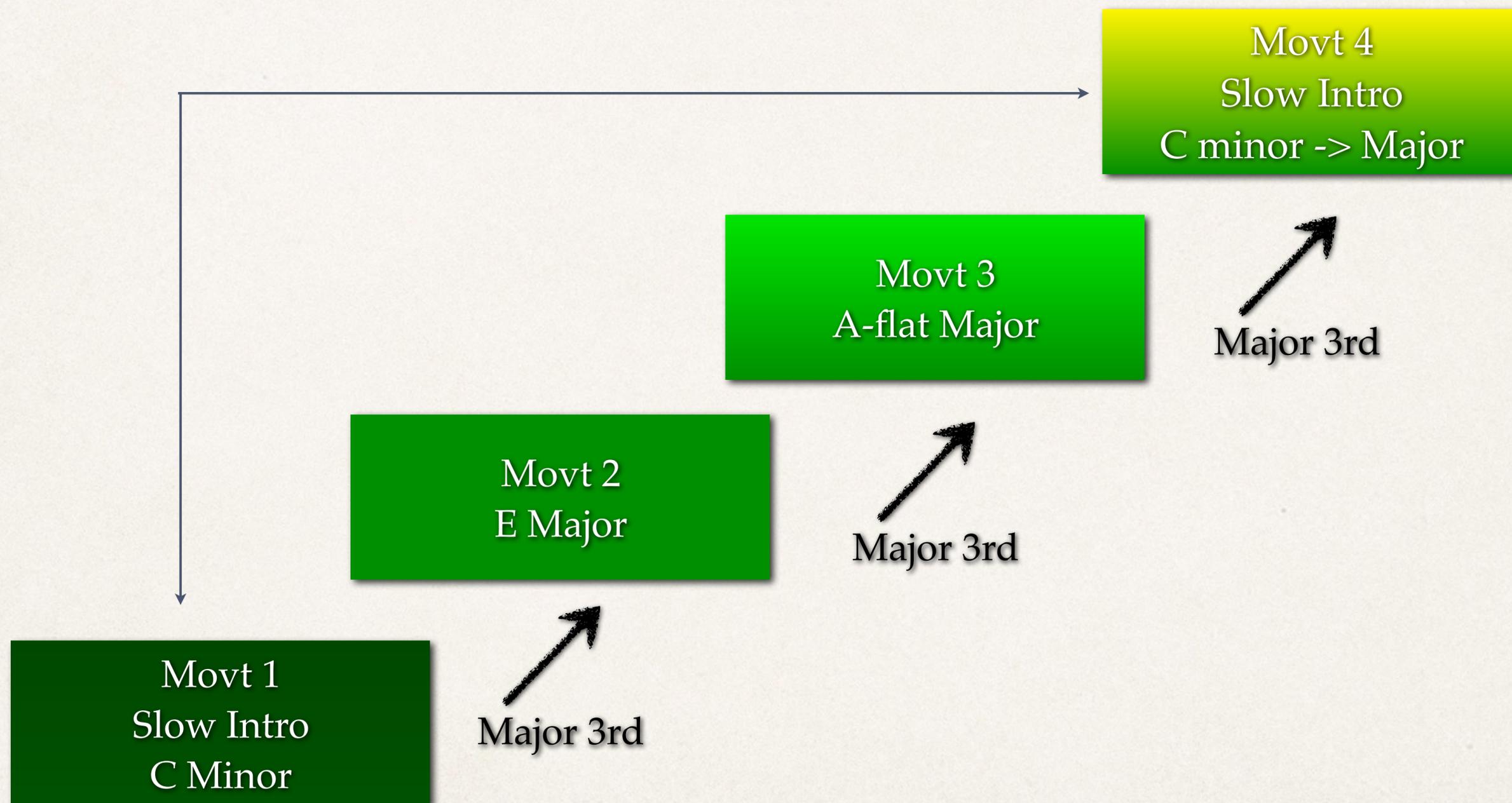


Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68: I

Characteristics

- ✦ Intensely worked out motivic development
- ✦ One of the most rigorously organized symphonies ever written

Mirroring



The Chromatic Idea

- * A rising chromatic scale is heard right at the very opening of the grandiose, slow introduction

The Chromatic Idea

- ✦ That becomes the first part of the primary theme in the allegro proper

The Chromatic Idea

- ✦ That idea is almost immediately echoed in the ending of the primary theme, which descends instead of ascends

The Thirds Idea

- ❖ A leaping figure made of a pair of ascending thirds is the other main idea
- ❖ It is introduced and immediately repeated
- ❖ And then is answered by its inversion—a pair of descending sixths

Mirroring

- * So mirroring is an important idea throughout the symphony
- * Things that go up also go down
- * Sometimes they do it at the same time
- * Consider that opening again, and listen to the interaction of strings & winds

WINDS

C

C

STRINGS

SYMPHONY No. 1 IN C MINOR, OP. 68

JAMES LEVINE, CONDUCTOR

VIENNA PHILHARMONIC

INTRODUCTION AND EXPOSITION

INTRODUCTION

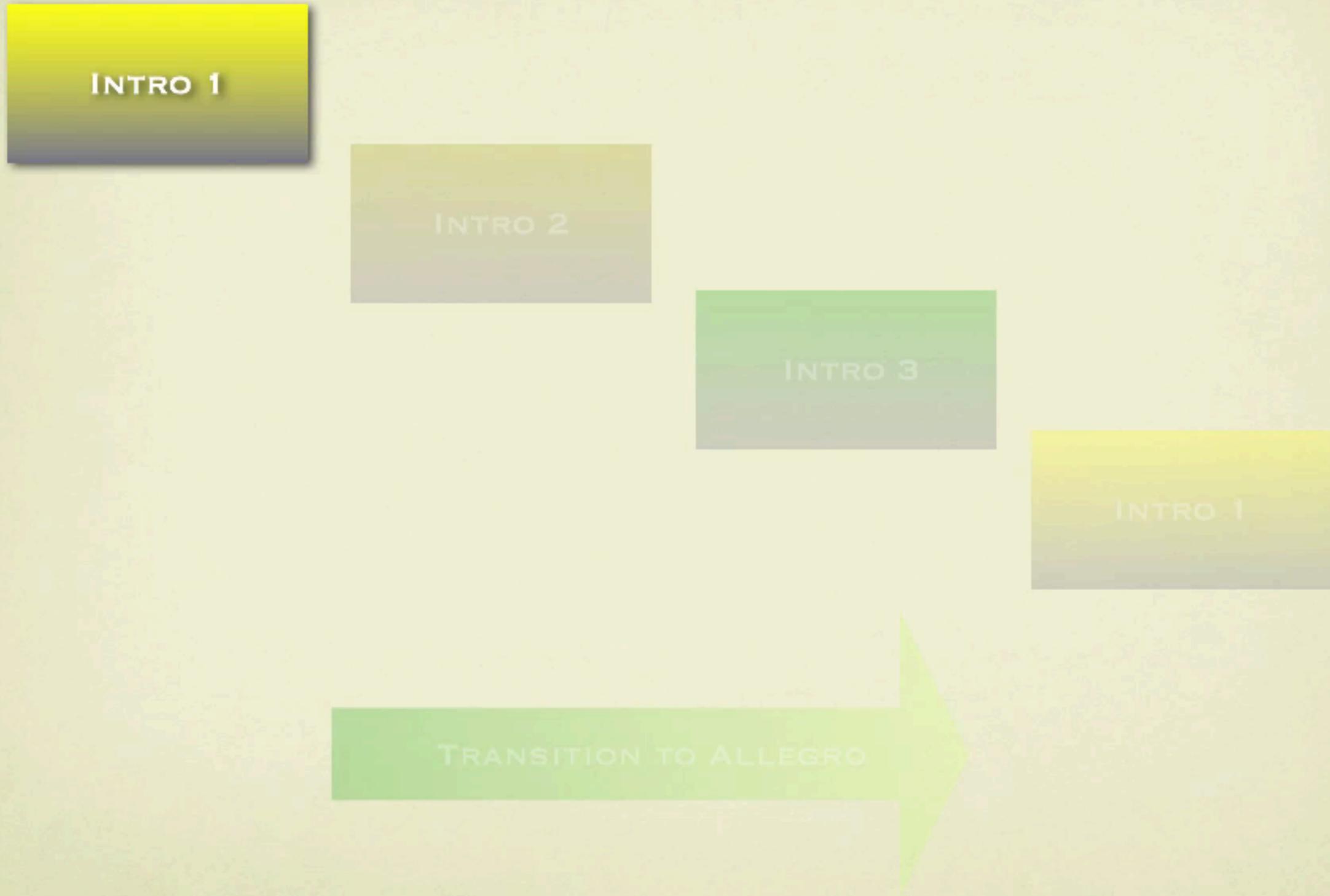
INTRO 1

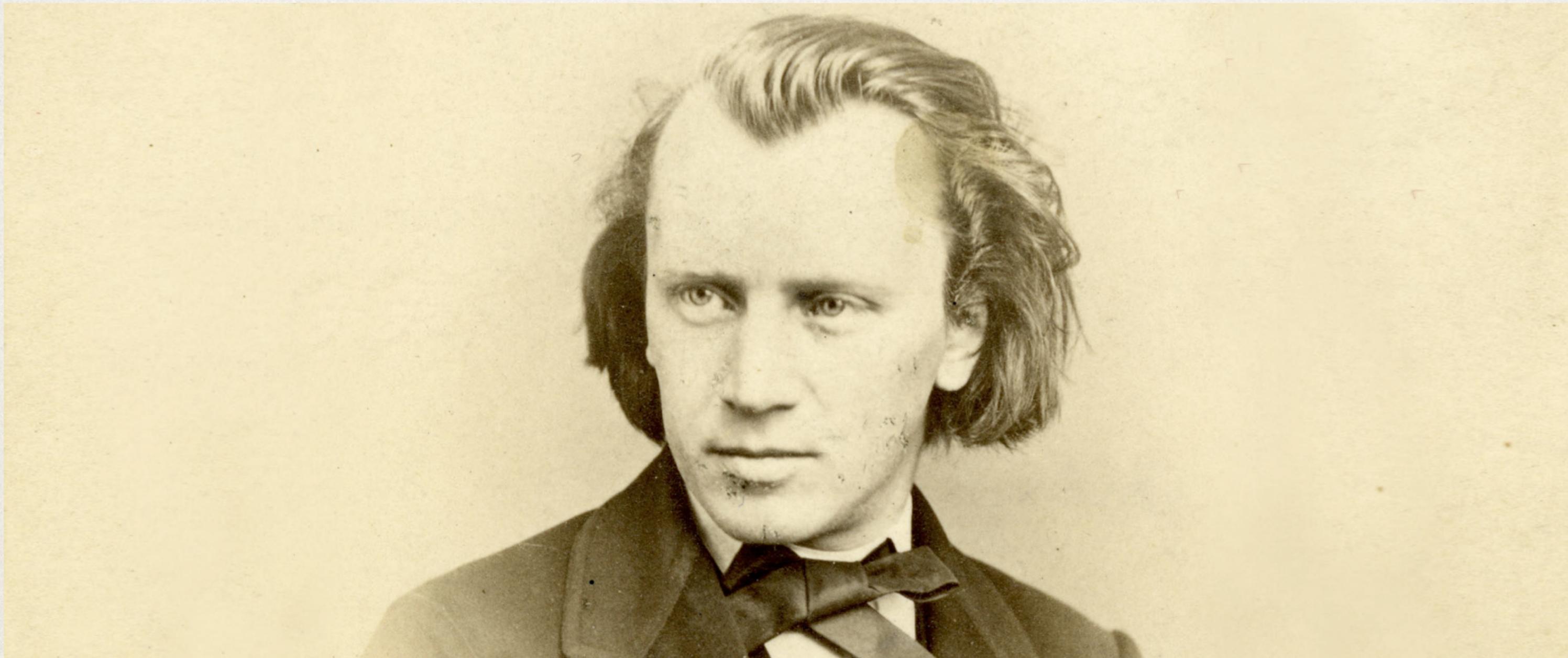
INTRO 2

INTRO 3

INTRO 1

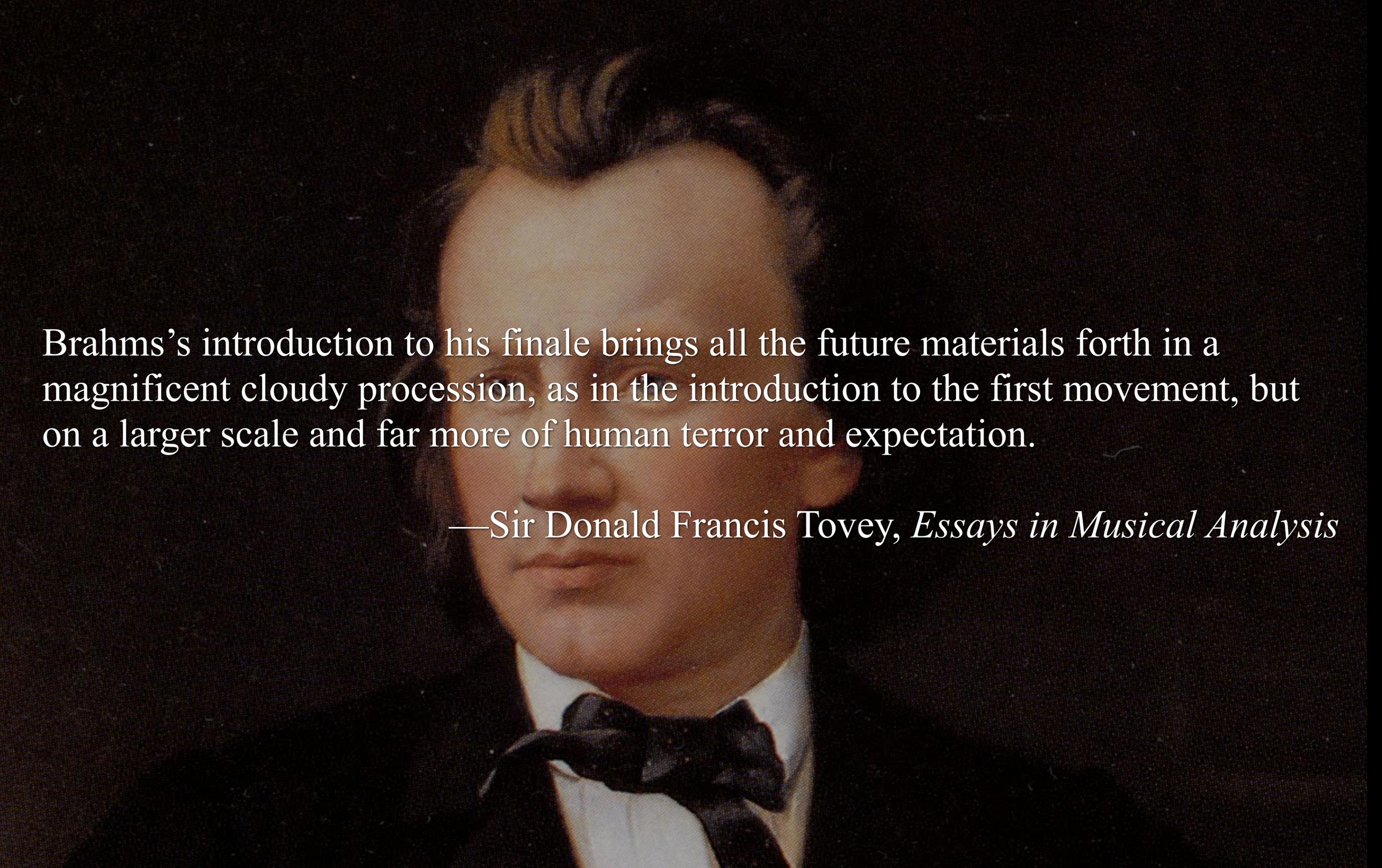
TRANSITION TO ALLEGRO





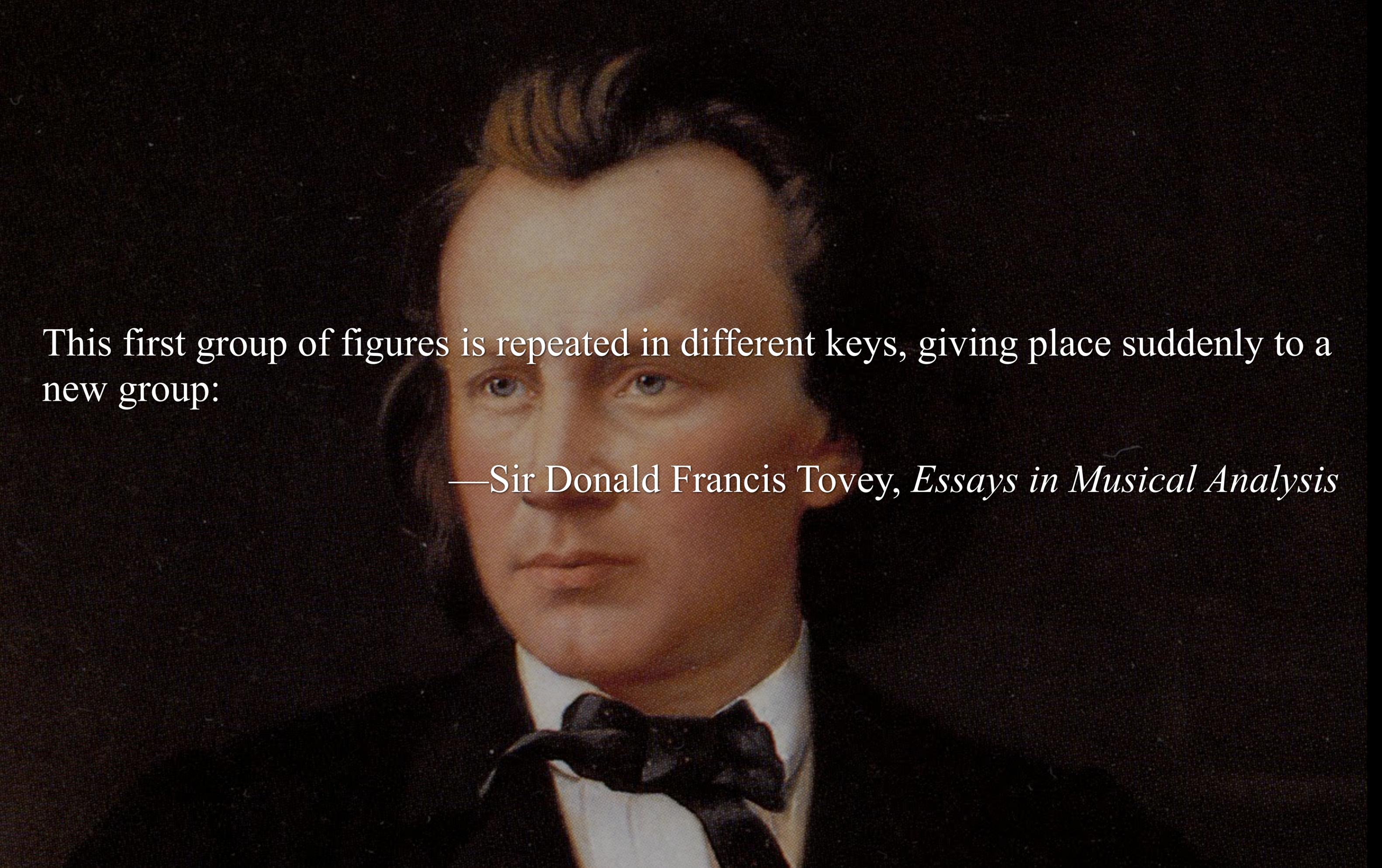
Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68: IV

Iván Fischer / Budapest Festival Orchestra



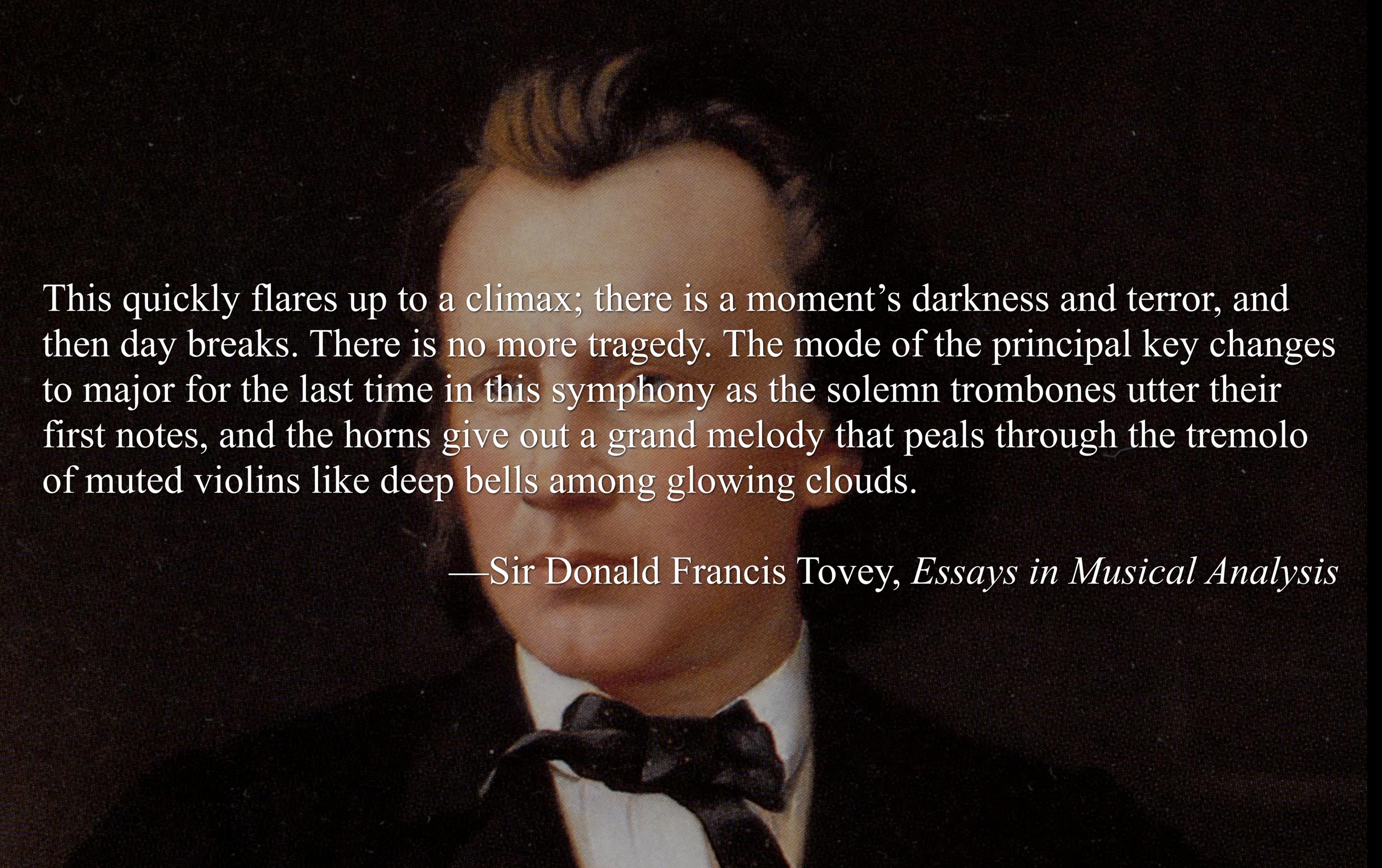
Brahms's introduction to his finale brings all the future materials forth in a magnificent cloudy procession, as in the introduction to the first movement, but on a larger scale and far more of human terror and expectation.

—Sir Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*

A portrait of Sir Donald Francis Tovey, a man with dark, wavy hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark bow tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

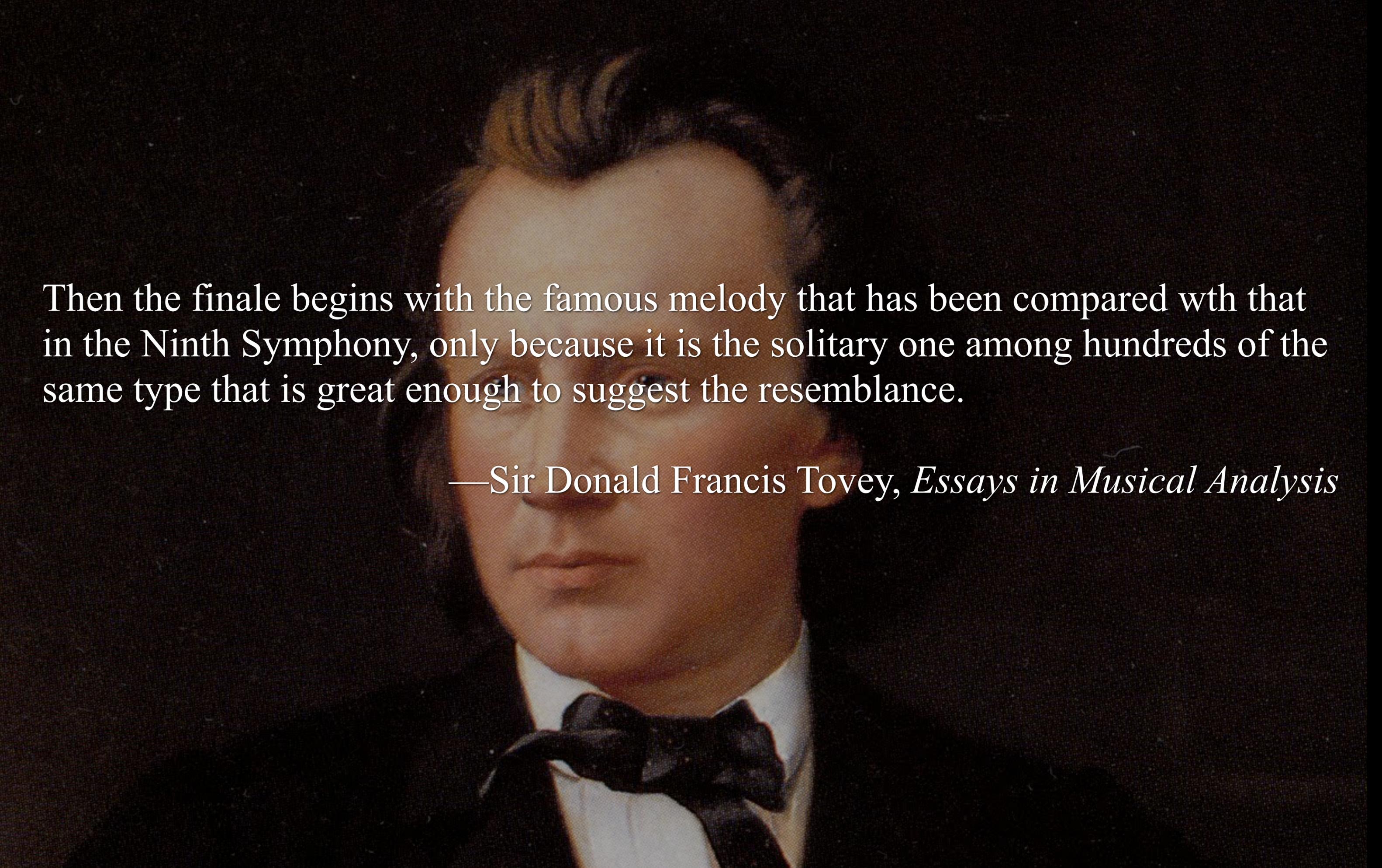
This first group of figures is repeated in different keys, giving place suddenly to a new group:

—Sir Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*



This quickly flares up to a climax; there is a moment's darkness and terror, and then day breaks. There is no more tragedy. The mode of the principal key changes to major for the last time in this symphony as the solemn trombones utter their first notes, and the horns give out a grand melody that peals through the tremolo of muted violins like deep bells among glowing clouds.

—Sir Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*



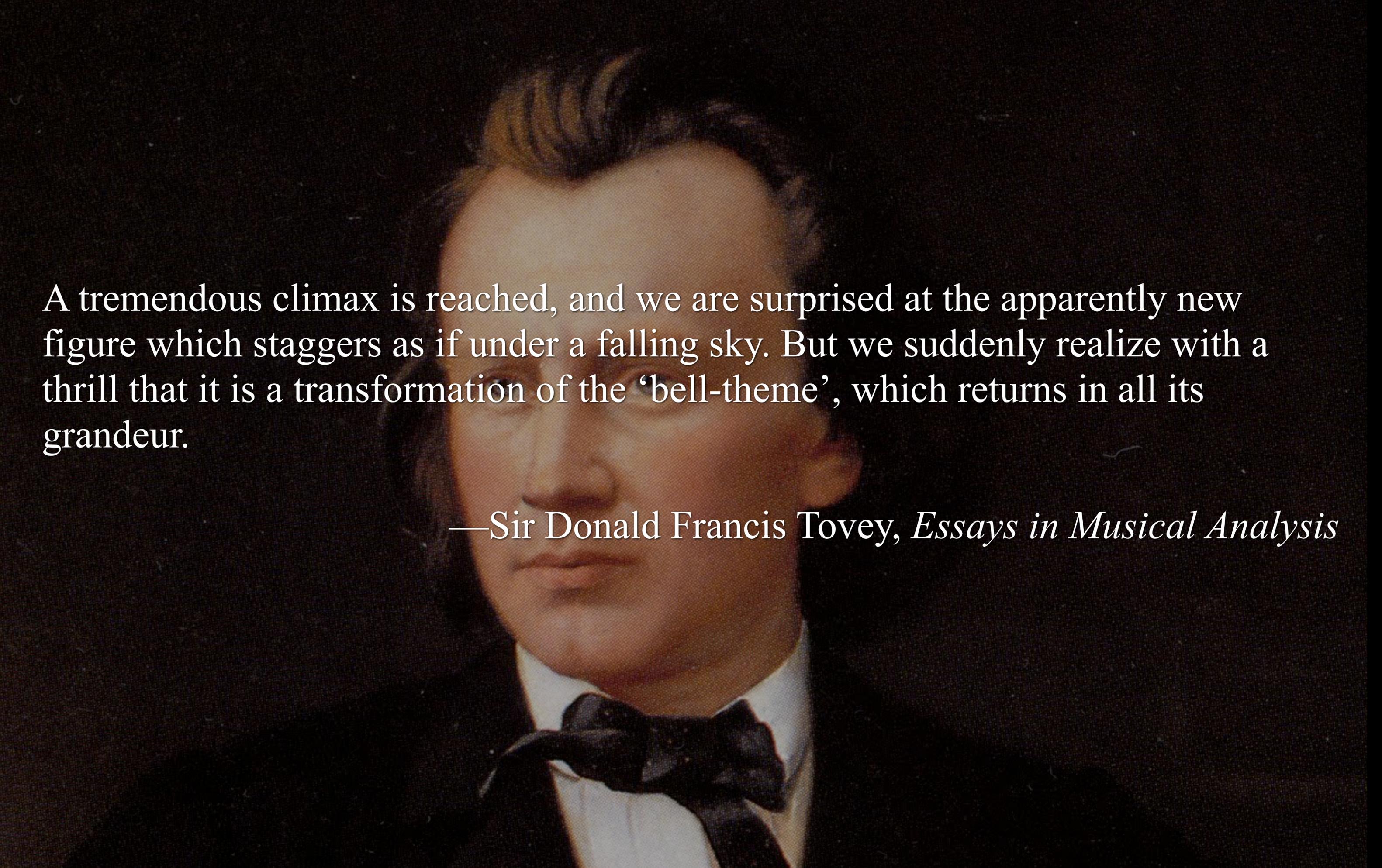
Then the finale begins with the famous melody that has been compared with that in the Ninth Symphony, only because it is the solitary one among hundreds of the same type that is great enough to suggest the resemblance.

—Sir Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*

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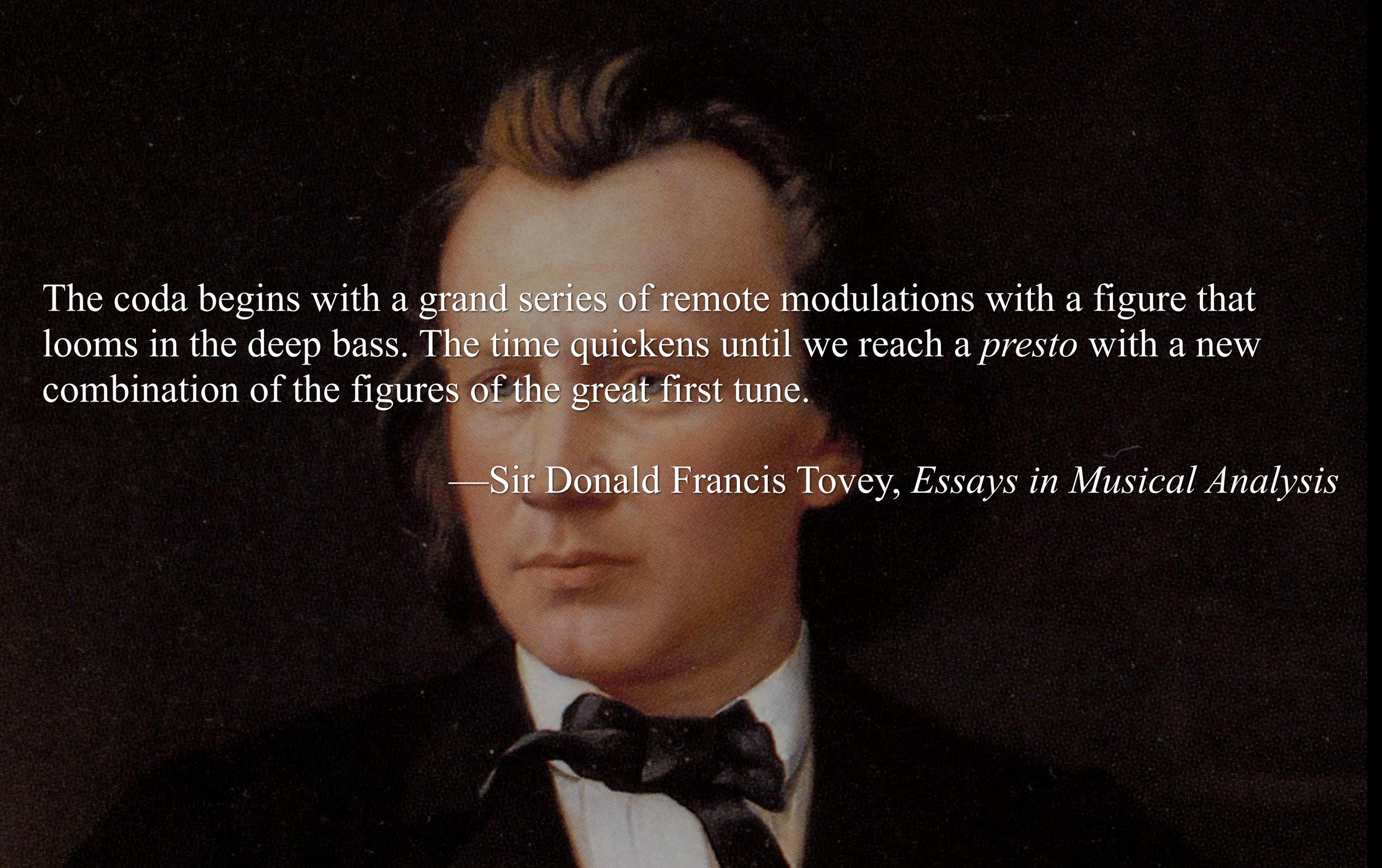
The second subject begins, playfully at first, with a long theme ... then follows a subsidiary in the minor, epigrammatic in style and treatment.

—Sir Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*



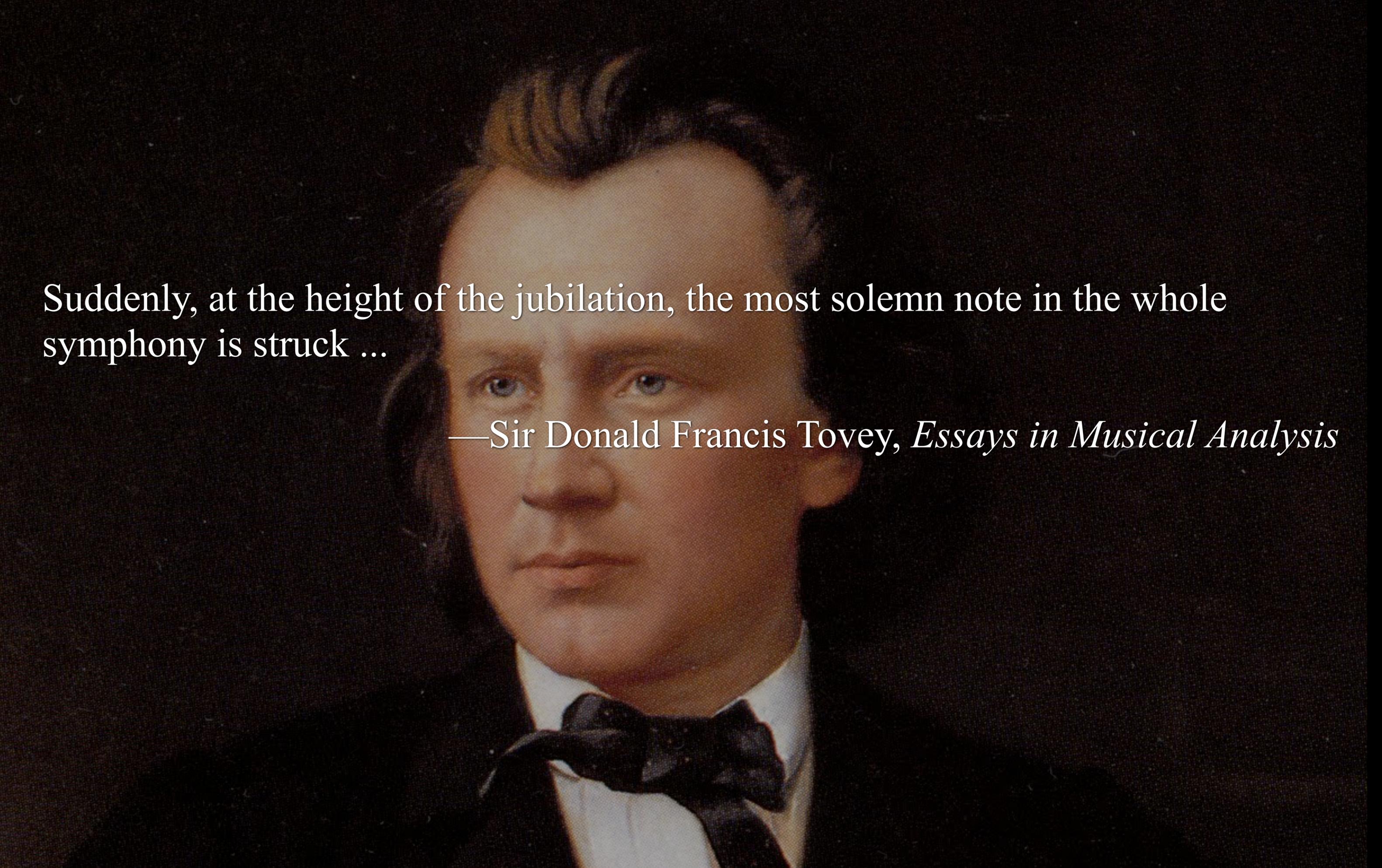
A tremendous climax is reached, and we are surprised at the apparently new figure which staggers as if under a falling sky. But we suddenly realize with a thrill that it is a transformation of the 'bell-theme', which returns in all its grandeur.

—Sir Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*



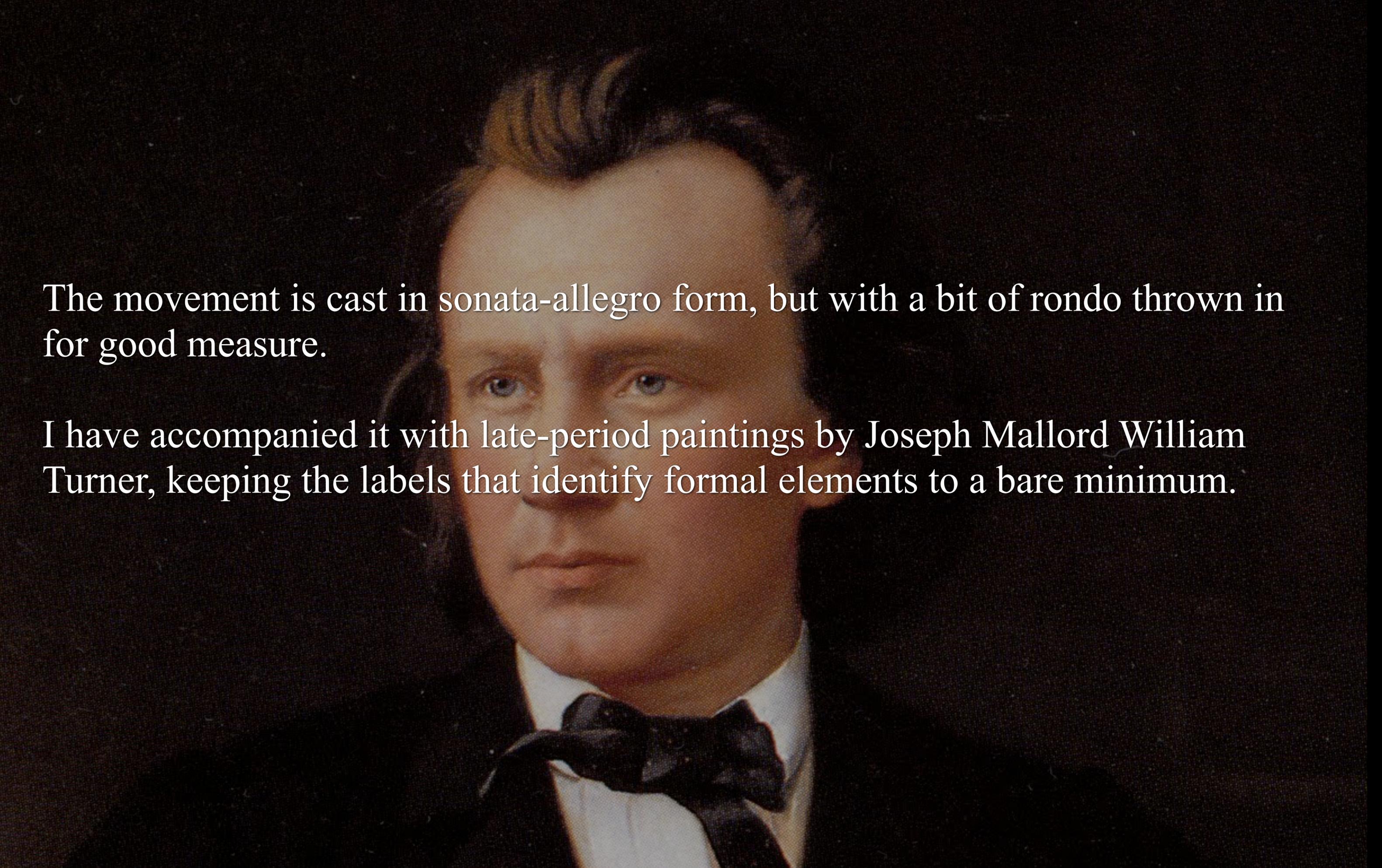
The coda begins with a grand series of remote modulations with a figure that looms in the deep bass. The time quickens until we reach a *presto* with a new combination of the figures of the great first tune.

—Sir Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*

A portrait of Sir Donald Francis Tovey, a man with dark, wavy hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark bow tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and textured.

Suddenly, at the height of the jubilation, the most solemn note in the whole symphony is struck ...

—Sir Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*



The movement is cast in sonata-allegro form, but with a bit of rondo thrown in for good measure.

I have accompanied it with late-period paintings by Joseph Mallord William Turner, keeping the labels that identify formal elements to a bare minimum.

