

## Program Notes

The first biography of Johannes (meaning “son of” Johann) Brahms was written by Max Kalbeck, a Viennese critic and writer. He tells us that Brahms was born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany. Johannes, the second born, was the first son, with an older sister named Elizabeth (1831). Friedrich (1835) was his younger brother. They were the children of twenty-seven-year-old Johann Jakob Brahms, a dance hall musician, and his forty-four-year-old wife, Johanna Henrike Christian Nissen Brahms, a seamstress, when Johannes was born.

Johannes received his earliest music lessons from his father, who played several instruments. And since Elizabeth was too sickly to attend any schools, the sons were sent to excellent private elementary and secondary schools.

At age eight Brahms started piano lessons with Otto F. W. Cossel, who immediately recognized the boy's talent. So he persuaded Brahms' parents to have him study piano and music theory, free of charge, with Eduard Marxsen, Hamburg's finest piano teacher.

Although Brahms had a lifelong love of learning, as his large private library proved, he never went on to the university. It was because his father's modest pay and Johannes' meager earnings later as a piano teacher never allowed him such an opportunity.

Brahms continued his self-taught music composition lessons. However, at twenty years of age it was his prodigious piano skills that led him to the major opportunity in his career. In 1853 he was asked to be the piano accompanist to go on a concert tour with the famous Hungarian violinist, Eduard Reményi.

The tour opened many doors for him. Brahms was introduced to Joseph Joachim, the virtuoso violinist, who became his closest friend. Later he met Hans von Bülow, the famous conductor. The tour also led to his later meeting Robert and Clara Schumann, who changed and enriched his life forever.

Robert Schumann examined some of Brahms' music and was very impressed by it. So much so that, in his 1853 article called “The Young Eagle,” he praised Brahms as “the new hope of the future of music!” And indeed, Johannes Brahms did go on to fulfill that promise.

*Die Mainacht* is the second in a series of four songs in opus 43, which he composed in 1866, at the age of thirty-three, in Karlsruhe. Its form is ternary (ABA) in structure. The original key was E flat major. Brahms had not originally intended to group the four songs together. He was also composing his *German Requiem* in Karlsruhe and later in Winterthur, although he completed it in Zürcherberg. His beloved mother had died in 1865, the year before.

*Die Mainacht* waited a long time for a first performance. It came in March of 1868; the exact date is unknown. The composer accompanied at the piano the celebrated baritone, Julius Stockhausen (1826–1906). “Von ewiger Liebe” (first in the series) was also performed.

The text of *Die Mainacht*, a free verse poem, is by Ludwig Christoph Heinrich Hölty. He was born on December 21, 1748, in Mariensee, a village in Hanover, Germany, where his father was pastor.

At the University of Göttingen in 1769, Ludwig was a Theology student, and soon started a society of poets called the Göttinger Hain, or Dichterbund.

Nature, folklore, and ballads influenced his lyric poetry, which was inspired by the major poets, Johann Peter Uz and Gottlieb Friedrich Klopstock.

Hölty supported himself by becoming a tutor and translator. Later, however, he never became a clergyman, and died early in 1776 of tuberculosis.

This poem first appeared in the *Göttingen Musenalmanach* in May 1774. It was written in a poetic form called *asclepiadic ode* (a Greek classical metrical beat structure for each line), and was heavily edited by Johann Heinrich Voss.

Much discussion has been made of the fact that Brahms only used three of the four verses, eliminating the second one. The reason given by many musicologists is that, since most of Brahms' songs are strophic (the same themes repeated continually) in structure, he wanted this work to remain ternary in form, thus, *three* verses.

However, I have always felt that Brahms inherently saw the following weaknesses in the original second verse: poor word choices; an overt sentimentality; and weepy story language such as “my blessed, warbling nightingale wife will drown me in a thousand, tender kisses.” The assertion of those thoughts was clearly not Brahms’ creative *cup of tea*. Although, he greatly admired Höfly’s poetry (a minor poet), and used his poems often—as did Schubert and Mendelssohn.

The ear—not theoretical symbols—is the best guide to understanding the tonal organization found in *Die Mainacht*. After a brief (two measure-long) piano introduction (m. 3), the voices begin the pensive, first-person-singular storytelling. It is a narrative of self-imposed loneliness (“yet, do I turn away”), and of the comfort and power always found in nature (“and the nightingale singing” and “I wonder from bush to bush”).

The beginning, restless, off-the-beat piano line is a telling musical metaphor to the floating melody, harmony, and story above it (“silvery moon,” “shimmering light,” and “glowing grass”).

The nightingales are the secondary characters of the story (m. 15). They introduce the middle section of this work in a new tonal center (key), and after a double bar. The piano line supports the change by introducing the insistent and repeated pelting of new harmonies. This middle section also gives us the true essence of the entire work. It comes in the line “yet, do I turn away” (m. 21). The interval-leap (space between) at “turn away” is unusual and not really expected. I have always felt that this leap-device is an inclusion of the use of the musical theme-symbol “Clara” (as in Clara Schumann). This device is a musical spelling out of Clara’s name as represented in the notes C, B, A, G sharp, A. An altered inversion of the leap from the first “A” in her name **down** to the G sharp below is the “smoking gun” here.

I have treated this short line (m. 21) in a *stretto* (overlapping) style. As in his *German Requiem*, it is like the end of the line, “Nun Herr, wes soll ich mich trösten?” (*Now, Lord, how can I console myself?*) This device closes the third movement *Requiem* middle section, only to be followed by the line, “Ich hoppe auf dich.” (*My hope is in Thee.*)

This clever compositional device clearly lifts the folksong-like qualities of this title well into the realm of the Art Song. Even though some musicologists have found that *Die Mainacht* has a strong similarity to the Ukrainian folk song used in Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *May Night*.

Johannes Brahms and Robert Schumann were fond of using this “Clara” theme-symbol in their works. In fact, there is little doubt that the device is used in three other of Brahms’ songs that I have been able to find. They are titled, “Vom verwundeten Knaben” (Op. 14, No. 2), “Wie Melodien zieht es mir” (Op. 105, No. 1), and “Wir wandelten” (Op. 96, No. 2). Some other composers used their own names in a similar formula. Even J. S. Bach did it. However, this leap-device (m. 21) adds a glorious climax to the middle section.

Then, at “When, O Friend, smiling bright” (m. 33) the beginning music is heard again, and moves into the same sound pallet (key) as before. This is the second “A” section. I have treated the return by having the voices all sing in unison (the same notes together), as Brahms often did in his large choral works.

Note also that the wonderful tonal wedge device, symbolism, metaphor, or word-painting use of “tears” (“And a burning, hot tear”) appears twice. First, marking the end of the middle “B” section (m. 27), and near the end of the closing, second “A” section (m. 39). His use of the dissonance interval of a second, used twice on “tears” is the most heart-rending and achingly sad moments in this entire opus for me.

Finally, in the last four measures, with a floating Neapolitan harmony, and riding on a bed of musical sharps or flats (m. 48), Brahms’ piano postlude ends this poignant story on its only and last tonic root position sounds (home chord) in the entire work. It is a magnificent, miniature masterpiece of lost love, humility, and the comfort of nature over humans.

*Die Mainacht* is, to me, one of Brahms’ finest efforts. It has always been one of his most performed songs by singers. I hope this choral version will increase the popularity of this exemplary and glorious song.

#### **Selected Sources:**

Malcolm MacDonald, Eric Sams, Dr. Lucien Stark, and others.

—James McCullough

**Die Mainacht**  
*(The May Night)*

Music by Johannes Brahms  
(1833–1897)

Op. 43, No. 2 (1866)

Poem by Ludwig Heinrich Christoph Hölty  
(1748–1776)

English translation by James McCullough

Wann der silberne Mond durch die Gesträuche blinkt,  
und sein schlummerndes Licht über den Rasen streut,  
und die Nachtigall flötet,  
wandl' ich traurig von Busch zu Busch.

Überhüllet vom Laub girret ein Taubenpaar  
sein Entzücken mir vor; aber ich wende mich,  
suche dunklere Schatten,  
und die einsame Thräne rinnt.

Wann, o lächelndes Bild, welches wie Morgenroth  
durch die Seele mir strahlt, find' ich auf Erden dich?  
Und die einsame Thräne  
bebt mir heisser die Wang' herab.

*When the silvery moon shines through the tall, dark trees,  
And sheds shimmering light over the glowing grass,  
And the nightingale singing:  
There I wonder from bush to bush.*

*Hiding there in the leaves, I hear two turtledoves  
Cooing softly of love. Yet, do I turn away,  
Seeking dark, lonely shadows:  
And a burning, hot tear now flows.*

*When, O friend, smiling bright, here in the morning light,  
My soul shines in your face. Shall I find you on earth?  
And a burning, hot tear still flows,  
While burning my cheek with grief.*

**James McCullough (b. 1939)**

For biographical information visit:  
[www.ecspublishing.com/composers](http://www.ecspublishing.com/composers)

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Professor, and The Louise Moen Endowed Chair in Music

# Die Mainacht

## (The May Night)

for TTBB Chorus and Piano

Ludwig Heinrich Christoph Hölty  
(1748–1776)

English translation by  
James McCullough

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)  
Op. 43, No. 2 (1866)

Choral version edited and arranged by  
James McCullough

**Sehr langsam und ausdrucksvoll** ♩ = 62  
Largo ed espressivo  
always flowing,  
with great fervor and inconsolable grief

**Tenor 1**  
**Tenor 2**

**Bass 1**  
**Bass 2**

**Piano**

*p* *unis.*

Wann der sil - ber-ne  
When the sil - ver - y

*p* *unis.*

Wan der sil - ber-ne  
When the sil - ver - y

**4**

*poco* *p*

Mond durch die Ge-sträu - che blinkt, — und sein schlum - mern-des  
moon shines thro' the tall, dark trees, — And sheds shim - mer - ing

*poco* *p*

Mond durch die Ge-sträu - che blinkt, — und sein schlum - mern-des  
moon shines thro' the tall, dark trees, — And sheds shim - mer - ing

*poco* *p*

\* pronounced "through"

Published in 1868; original key, E $\flat$ .

7

*poco*

*dolce*  
**p** light and bright

Licht ü - ber den Ra - sen streut, und die Nach - ti - gall  
light o - ver the glow - ing grass, And the night - in - gale

*poco*

*dolce*  
**p** light and bright

Licht ü - ber den Ra - sen streut, und die Nach - ti - gall  
light o - ver the glow - ing grass, And the night - in - gale

*poco*

**p**

10

Busch zu  
bush to

flö - tet, wandl' ich trau - rig von Busch zu  
sing - ing There I won - der from bush to

flö - tet, wandl' ich trau - rig von Busch zu  
sing - ing There I won - der from bush to

13

Busch.  
bush.

**p** warmly

Ü - ber - hül - let vom  
Hid - ing there in the

Busch.  
bush.

**p** warmly

Ü - ber - hül - let vom  
Hid - ing there in the

**p**

16 *mp*

Laub gir - ret ein Tau - ben - paar — sein Ent - zü - cken mir vor,  
 leaves, I hear two tur - tle - doves — Coo - ing soft - ly of love.

Laub gir - ret ein Tau - ben - paar — sein Ent - zü - cken mir vor  
 leaves, I hear two tur - tle - doves — Coo - ing soft - ly of love

20 *f unis. dramatically*

a - ber ich wen - de mich,  
 Yet, do I turn a - way,

a - ber ich wen - de mich,  
 Yet, do I turn a - way,

23 *p slower and mysteriously*

su che dunk - le - re Schat - - ten:  
 Seek - ing dark, lone - ly shad - - ows:

su che ein - sam Schat - - ten:  
 Seek - ing lone - ly shad - - ows:

*p slower and mysteriously* *pp*

27 *mp a tempo; espressivo e crescendo* *poco ritardando*

und die ein - sa - me Thrä - - - - - ne  
 And a burn - ing, hot tear - - - - - now

*mp a tempo; espressivo e crescendo* *poco ritardando*

und die ein - sa - me Thrä - - - - - ne  
 And a burn - ing, hot tear - - - - - now

*espressivo* *poco ritardando*

*mp a tempo; crescendo* *f poco diminuendo*

31 **With great fervor**  
*mf a tempo*

rinnt. Wann, O lä - cheln - des  
 flows. When, O friend, smil - ing

*mf a tempo*

rinnt. Wann, O lä - cheln - des  
 flows. When, O friend, smil - ing

**With great fervor**

*pp* *mf a tempo*

34

Bild, wel - ches wie Mor - gen - roth durch die See - le mir  
 bright, here in the morn - ing light, My soul shines in your

Bild, wel - ches wie Mor - gen - roth durch die See - le mir  
 bright here in the morn - ing light, My soul shines in your

*mf*

37 *p espressivo e crescendo*

strahlt, find' ich auf Er - den dich? Und die  
 face. Shall I find you on earth? And a

*p espressivo e crescendo*

strahlt, find' ich auf Er - den dich? Und die  
 face. Shall I find you on earth? And a

*mf* *p cresc. legato*

40 *f* *poco ritardando*

ein - sa - me Thrä - ne  
 burn - ing, hot tear still

*f* *poco ritardando*

ein - sa - me Thrä - ne  
 burn - ing, hot tear still

*f*

43 *p* *Allargando* *f*

bebt mir hei - sser hei - sser die  
 flows, While burn - ing, burn - - ing my

*p* *f*

bebt mir hei - sser hei - sser die  
 flows, While burn - ing, burn - - ing my

*Allargando*

*mp* *f*



46 *p*

Wang' \_\_\_\_\_ (g) her - ab.  
 cheek \_\_\_\_\_ (k) with grief.

*p*

Wang' \_\_\_\_\_ (g) her - ab.  
 cheek \_\_\_\_\_ (k) with grief.

*p* *ritardando al fine*

*p* *diminuendo al fine*

49