What to Listen For

Brahms: Symphony No. 3 in F Major, III

Here's what to listen for in the third movement of Symphony No. 3 in F Major by Johannes Brahms.

■ Triple meter

This symphony movement by Brahms is in triple meter, a recurring beat pattern of one strong beat followed by two weak ones. At the beginning, the orchestra emphasizes the first beat (the strong one) by playing it louder than the following two beats. As you listen, tap along with the beat and notice the strong one followed by two quieter ones: [0:00–0:27].

■ Opening melody played several times by different instruments.

Listen again to the opening melody played by the cellos and then immediately repeated by the violins: [0:00–0:27]. Now listen to the same melody when it returns later, played by flutes and oboes: [1:28–1:54]. The woodwinds play only the first few notes of this melody at the end of a contrasting section of music. Listen to the woodwinds hint at the melody: [3:28–3:45]. Listen to the horn play the main melody in this excerpt: [3:47–4:15]. The cellos return near the end of the movement, and the violins join them in playing the melody one more time: [5:18–5:44].

■ Three-part structure (A-B-A')

This movement is in three-part structure, in which the first section (A) returns slightly changed (A') after a contrasting middle section (B), creating the form A-B-A'. The sections are characterized by melodies. The A sections feature the opening melody, while the contrasting middle section (B) features different melodies. First listen to the main melody in the first A section [0:00–0:27] and in the return of the A section [3:47–4:15]. And now listen to the contrasting melody in the B section: [1:58–2:33].

So remember to listen for triple meter and the three-part structure in which the first and last sections feature a melody several times, and the contrasting middle section with a different melody.