

JOHANNES BRAHMS

COMPLETE STRING QUINTETS

audite



MANDELRING QUARTETT
& ROLAND GLASSL



STRING QUINTET NO. 1 IN F MAJOR, OP. 88

- Allegro non troppo ma con brio 10:24
- Grave ed appassionato – Allegretto vivace – Tempo I – Presto – Tempo I 9:56
- Allegro energico – Presto 5:36

STRING QUINTET IN G MAJOR, OP. III

- Allegro non troppo, ma con brio 12:21
- Adagio 6:06
- Un poco allegretto 5:19
- Vivace, ma non troppo presto 5:07

MANDELRING QUARTETT

Sebastian Schmidt, violin
Nanette Schmidt, violin
Andreas Willwohl, viola
Bernhard Schmidt, Cello

ROLAND GLASSL, viola

Brahms's String Quintets

Chamber music written exclusively for stringed instruments is not very well represented in Brahms's oeuvre. The seven works (three quartets, two quintets, and two sextets) are distributed among three creative periods, with one of the forms featuring in each: the sextets in the early, the quartets in the middle, and the quintets in the late period. In the field of orchestral music, he only gradually approached the symphony, doing so from many angles; in the same way, he did not begin writing string quartets (the pinnacle of the chamber music genre) straight away, and destroyed all his early quartet sketches.

With his sextets Op. 18 and Op. 36, he completed his first group. The larger instrumentation, which in addition to two violins also includes two violas and cellos, was a fitting match given Brahms's predilection for dark, subdued tone colors; he also felt much less pressure here than he would have in other genres, with their strong traditions of previous works. The middle group consists of the three string quartets, which were composed just before and during the First Symphony. Brahms took on the central genre first in chamber, then in orchestral music. In terms of their composition, the two string quintets frame the third and fourth symphonies; the first in F major was written before, the second in G major after them. As he once stated, he had hoped with opus III to conclude his life's work and bid farewell to composition. If his overabundance of creative ideas had not prevented him from fulfilling this intention, it would have been an amiable and cheerful farewell.

The F major Quintet, Op. 88

In the first quintet, Brahms combines two characteristic features of his musical thinking in a way that we rarely encounter elsewhere: integrating elements of the past, and striving toward new musical and formal solutions. With its lyrical character, song-like themes (that are not set against each other in conflict, but tend to reveal the basic mood in different ways), and strategies of thematic development, the first movement clearly has much in common with Felix Mendelssohn. Brahms's relationship with the composer and his aesthetics is usually not given much attention, and was not limited to his personal connection through the Schumanns and Joseph Joachim. The gestures and fugue-like structure of the finale recall the final movement of Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 59, No. 3 and Schumann's Piano Quartet, Op. 47 – both attempts to bring together Bach's fugal technique with classical sonata form. Occasionally we also hear flashes of Mendelssohn's Octet.

The middle movement of opus 88 is a special matter. In a letter to his publisher, Brahms underlined the fact that the piece had only three movements (he usually included four in his chamber music works). He already regarded the inner movements of cyclical compositions as an area for challenges and experimentation. How high should they aim compared

to the outer movements? Do they represent a passage in between where “the mind can rest for a moment” (Clara Schumann), or should they become a third pillar in their own right? Should they work together as a differentiated unity, or stand in sharp contrast to one another? Do they belong together, or are they conceived in relation to one of the outer movements – as a prelude or postlude? In the first quintet, where he writes only a single movement, Brahms seems to sidestep these questions. However, it is actually two movements in one – a slow section and a stylized dance. They are arranged in the five-part pattern A – B’ – A’ – B – A’’. A and its variants represent the slow section, while B is the dance. In both of them he drew from works dating from his period of crisis in the 1850s. He performed the *Sarabande* and *Gavotte* (both initially conceived as studies, and the latter in three sections: *Gavotte I – Gavotte II – Gavotte I*) in concert for the first time on November 14, 1855 in Danzig, together with Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim. Afterwards, the pieces often featured in his and Clara’s programs. For the A section of the quintet’s middle movement, written in 1882, he made use of the slow *Sarabande*, developing and varying it for the A’ und A’’ sections. For the B section he borrowed the *Gavotte II*; it immediately precedes the final section, and a variation in brisk tempo also appears in the second section. In this way, the original and its transformation present themselves in reverse order, with the theme being revealed afterward. The middle movement of opus 88 presents a relatively complex structure to the listener, thus acquiring an importance that is further underscored by its length (it is nearly as long as the first movement).

With its stylized, song-like themes, which are set apart from each other mainly by their key and by how animated they are, it calls to mind not only Mendelssohn, but also Franz Schubert; Schubert’s final chamber music works, however, were conceived on a large scale, as he hoped with them to pave “the way to the great symphony.” Brahms, in contrast, is more concerned with concentration, and in the passages where the themes are normally developed, he employs an almost nonchalant, novellistic approach, as side thoughts prepare the main themes’ emphatic return through a climax. In this respect, and in view of its even proportions, it is closer to Mendelssohn’s classicism. In the finale, Brahms created a terse and masterful synthesis of the fugue and sonata forms. The former is generally developed out of a single theme, while the latter is characterized by a dualism of musical ideas. Brahms resolves this contradiction in a productive way by initially presenting the fugue with a fast theme in quasi perpetual motion; however, he later superimposes a calm, flowing melody, making the rapid figurations seem like an accompaniment. The fugue itself serves as the first, its upper voice as the second theme. The way the two themes are interconnected and differentiated eventually gives rise to a form where the elements of sonata structure (exposition of the themes, development, recapitulation, and conclusion) are telescopically compressed. Some have criticized the movement’s brevity for not being balanced with the preceding. Such criticism is unfair, however, as the movement does not derive its effect from epic proportions, but from the intensity and compression of interrelated ideas.

All homages to the past – with clear references to Bach, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Schumann as well as Brahms’s own compositions – have been integrated in a work that meets the classic demands of historical uniqueness and is fully convincing in and of itself, even without any awareness of the external references. A reflection on history is transformed into something new.

At the same time, all the references ultimately point to the circle of Robert and Clara Schumann, Joseph Joachim, and Johannes Brahms, who met in 1853, discovering, cultivating, and enjoying the harmony of their aesthetic views. For Brahms’s development as an artist and person, these were crucial years that included both inspiring and tragic experiences. Now, almost three decades later, Brahms was at the height of his career, and the promise, hopes, and early praise of those years had been largely fulfilled. It was not by chance that immediately before writing his first quintet, he turned once again to the piano trio genre for the first time in 28 years. After completing the second quintet, he created a second version of this Trio in B major, Op. 8, which had been composed just before the *Sarabande* and *Gavotte*. There is certainly reason to believe that by artistically “reworking” these earlier years, he was doing so at an existential level as well.

The G major Quintet, Op. III

Brahms was interested in contrasts that are so intimately interwoven with one another that they cannot be separated. This also holds true for the G major Quintet. Brahms, who had made Vienna his adopted home, was very successful in championing Schubert’s oeuvre, and knew that Schubert was hoping in his quintet to sound out new symphonic terrain. But in contrast to the Vienna Romanticist, Brahms doubled the viola rather than the cello part, thus opting for an instrumentation that had often been used in Mozart’s time for divertimenti (a kind of serenade). He was building a bridge here to some of his own early compositions, having begun his series of orchestral works with a serenade which, despite its title, harbored symphonic ambitions. In the quintet, he touches on the borders of the symphonic realm without crossing them. Biographer Max Kalbeck believed that the opening theme originated in sketches for a fifth symphony. But in spite of its surging, sweeping character, the dimensions of the G major Quintet remain clear and concise. “How it [the G major Quintet] presents itself to the understanding with marvelous transparency and terse concision; how clear the formal components are, since only what is essential is said throughout, and each of them so completely corresponds to the function that it is meant to express,” as Elisabeth von Herzogenberg praised the work, which she was the first to see.

On the one hand, we have the distant outlines of a symphony, and on the other, sensible musical conversation in the background – both points of reference receive their due in opus III. In the opening movement, Brahms stretches the ensemble’s tonal possibilities to the limit. The first theme presses forward. The motif in the cello at the outset strides forth energetically, but can hardly assert itself through the animated layer of sound created by the other instruments.

After the premiere, Brahms attempted to solve this problem by thinning out the musical texture, but later returned to the original version. The fact that the “leading voice only gradually emerges from the tonal fabric” (Friedhelm Krummacher) certainly serves a dramaturgical function: hearing means becoming aware, not just registering processes. The resolute musical lines unfold into an “enmeshed thematic complex” (Mathias Hansen). The second theme does not serve the role of antithesis, but is instead a passage where things become calmer for a few moments. This function is underscored at the beginning of the middle section, when a fragment from the second theme spreads over the sonic backdrop of the first. As in the F major Quintet, the full recapitulation of the themes is prepared by a climax. Here motifs from the main theme gradually join together again into the whole.

In the slow movement, a mostly melancholy romance, Brahms gives full rein to his love of the middle tonal range and its muted colors. The first viola plays an important part in what is happening melodically. Elisabeth von Herzogenberg noted: “I may be permitted to say how wonderful I find the Adagio [...]. I am always a bit pained by middle movements of a contrasting nature, and here one color is only contrasted with another in order to enhance the luminosity of both; the atmosphere flows with the same great pulsating waves up to the very end. A delightful work! The Allegretto is quite welcome after the great seriousness of the preceding, resolving the tension without (like so many of the world’s Allegrettos) being more humorous than is musically justified!” This third movement reveals more than a reverence (typical of its time) of the folk idiom, offering a kaleidoscope of stylized dances. The young Brahms earned money for his family with dance music, and also became famous with Hungarian dances. The quintet’s third movement is a brief reminiscence – memoirs in music. The finale plays with a light mood considered typical of serenades. It does not seek to summarize the whole or appeal to the essential ideas. It is not a final stocktaking, condensing and surpassing what Brahms had achieved up until then. Instead he took a step backward, so to speak, commenting on his life’s work from a cheerful distance. His G major Quintet realizes in part what has been said of Gustav Mahler’s G major Symphony: a musical world embodying the idea “as if.”

Habakuk Traber

Translation: *Aaron Epstein*



MANDELRING QUARTETT

The Mandelring Quartet's trademark is its expressivity and phenomenal homogeneity. At the same time, their approach to music is always both emotional and personal.

Winning a number of prestigious international competitions – Munich (ARD), Evian (Concours International de Quatuor à Cordes) and Reggio Emilia (Premio Paolo Borciani) – initiated the Mandelring Quartet's international concert career. The ensemble has appeared in Amsterdam, Brussels, London, Madrid, Paris and Vienna. The cities of New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Vancouver and Tokyo are also on their agenda, alongside frequent concert tours to Central and South America, the Middle East and Asia. The quartet has appeared at the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival, the Oleg Kagan Music Festival, the festivals in Montpellier, Lockenhaus and Kuhmo, the Enescu Festival Bukarest and the Salzburger Festival. Since 2010 the quartet has presented its own concert series' at the Berlin Philharmonie and in its home town Neustadt an der Weinstrasse, also in Munich since 2016. The Mandelring Quartet repeatedly performed the complete cycle of all 15 Shostakovich quartets in venues such as Berlin and the Salzburg Festival. The HAMBACHERMusikFEST, founded by the ensemble in 1997, is an annual meeting point for lovers of chamber music from all over the world.

Numerous CD recordings, awarded with the German Music Critics' Prize and nominations for the International Classical Music Award, confirm the Quartet's exceptional quality and wide-ranging repertoire. Their discs of works by Schubert and Schumann and the complete string quartets of Shostakovich and Mendelssohn have been selected as new benchmark performances. Their recording of the string quartets of Leoš Janáček has also received numerous awards. Their current project is the complete recording of the string quintets and sextets of Johannes Brahms.



ROLAND GLASSL

Roland Glassl has established his reputation as a soloist and chamber musician. Numerous prizes at international competitions (first prize at Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition plus Peter Schidlof Prize for the finalist with the most beautiful tone; first prize at Washington International Competition for Strings; winner of the first International Viola Competition Vienna; first prize at the Viola Competition of the German Viola Society, Celle) as well as sixteen years of playing in the Mandelring Quartet have taken him to many of the great international concert stages and festivals.

Roland Glassl has appeared in cities such as Berlin, London, Beijing, Chicago, Dallas and New York. As a soloist, he has performed alongside numerous orchestras under conductors such as Sir Colin Davis and Hermann Bäumer. His chamber music partners include Leon Fleisher, Julia Fischer, Sophia Jaffé, Lisa Batiashvili, Pekka Kuusisto, Sharon Kam as well as the Danel and Henschel Quartets.

Roland Glassl studied violin with Prof. Ana Chumachenco at the Munich Musikhochschule and viola with Atar Arad at Indiana University in Bloomington, USA. After graduating, Roland Glassl returned to Germany in order to start his career as a chamber musician and soloist. Alongside his intensive involvement with the Mandelring Quartet (1999-2015) he has given many concerts with the Trio Charolca and has also continued performing as a soloist.

Roland Glassl teaches at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Frankfurt am Main, whose staff he joined as professor of viola in 2004.

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recording:

April 25 - 27, 2016

recording location:

Konzertsaal Abtei Marienmünster

recording format:

pcm, 96 kHz / 24bit

recording producer:

Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff

recording engineer:

Dipl.-Tonmeister Simon Böckenhoff

editing:

Dipl.-Tonmeister Reinhard Geller

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