

# JOHANNES BRAHMS

COMPLETE STRING SEXTETS

audite



MANDELRING QUARTETT

ROLAND GLASSL & WOLFGANG EMANUEL SCHMIDT





## JOHANNES BRAHMS: STRING SEXTETS

### NO. 1 IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 18

- Allegro ma non troppo 13:14
- Andante ma moderato 8:14
- Scherzo. Allegro molto 3:02
- Rondo. Poco Allegretto e grazioso 9:32

### NO. 2 IN G MAJOR, OP. 36

- Allegro non troppo 13:42
- Scherzo. Allegro non troppo 7:17
- Poco Adagio 8:00
- Poco Allegro 8:34

## MANDELRING QUARTETT

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

ROLAND GLASSL viola II

WOLFGANG EMANUEL SCHMIDT cello II

### Johannes Brahms' String Sextets

Johannes Brahms' Op. 18 Sextet was not only his first valid chamber work without piano, it also marks the beginning of a series of compositions for smaller instrumental ensembles, stretching across five years up to the second Sextet and his Horn Trio, Op. 40. Sir Donald Tovey called this period Brahms' "first maturity". This statement applies on both counts: various composers on whom the young Brahms modelled his music – Beethoven, Schubert, Bach, Mendelssohn and Schumann – appear clearly, and sometimes reacting against each other, in the first version of his Op. 8 Piano Trio. In the first sextet and the great works written around that time, especially the two serenades for orchestra and the Handel variations for piano, he managed to blend the various influences, both inspiring and burdening, to form a personal style of unmistakeable individuality: this represents their "maturity".

The fact that Brahms had, for the first time, reached a sense of musical confidence and self-assuredness is emphasised by another creative development: after this period, chamber music production came to a halt for around eight years; the two string quartets which Brahms started, possibly as early as 1865, were not completed until 1873; instead, he turned towards larger-scale vocal and instrumental works. The period between 1859 and 1865 also brought several existential decisions and upheavals for Brahms which left their marks in his oeuvre. The relationship with Clara Schumann was straightened out, inasmuch as this was possible. In 1859 Brahms broke off his engagement with Agathe von Siebold, the daughter of a Göttingen professor which was to have repercussions for some time: the sequence A-G-A-B[=H in German notation]-E, containing all the letters of her name which can be translated into music notation, can be found not only in a prominent position in his Op. 44 works for women's chorus, written in 1860, but also in the sextet of 1865. In this latter work, the sequence concludes the presentation of the themes in the first movement and, in the process, is repeated and transformed several times; a retrospective analysis reveals that an entire chain of motivic metamorphoses leads up to this anagram. Brahms confided in his Viennese friend Josef Gänsbacher, the dedicatee of his Cello Sonata Op. 38, that the G major sextet had "untied him" from his "last love".

Did this comment refer only to Agathe von Siebold, as Brahms scholars seem to agree? In this context, two further musical references are worth mentioning. The second movement of the G major sextet, a scherzo, is based on an earlier piano piece, a gavotte of 1855 which formed part of a suite fragment, a *Sarabande and Gavotte*. The latter is cast into a common tripartite form, gavotte I – gavotte II – gavotte I. These two pieces were premiered by Brahms himself at a concert that he gave together with Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim in Danzig on 14 November 1855. Later on, both he and Clara regularly included them in their concert programmes. For the sextet, he used the gavotte I, whilst the sarabande and gavotte II were reused in 1882 in his String Quartet Op. 88 (see audite 97.724).



The dominant motif of the adagio theme, on which Brahms writes a series of variations, can also be found in other works, such as the First Piano Concerto. It originates in Robert Schumann's *Introduction and Allegro appassionato* in G major, Op. 92, for piano and orchestra. The relationship and formation of variants is so apparent that coincidence seems unlikely. In the context of the sextet it appears as a relation of the initial motif of the first movement with which, at the same time, the unique harmonic idiom of the work is fixed; in reverse form, it seems to relate to the trio theme in the scherzo, whose central section creates a vivid contrast to the outer sections. Similarly as with the Agathe motif in the first movement, there is a build-up towards the theme which is charged with memories. Technically, such a build-up is achieved by varying certain elements. This begins well before the actual variations which then represent the climax. In each of the first three movements, motifs and themes are developed that are linked to Brahms' biography. They point towards Agathe von Siebold, to Clara and to Robert Schumann: the three people with whom he had, alongside Joseph Joachim, the closest relationships from 1853 onwards. It is surely not insignificant to note that these three movements were written around the same time, whilst the finale was composed several months later, almost from a distance. These two creative spurts were separated by a dual existential caesura: his mother's death in February 1865 (the Horn Trio as well as parts of the *German Requiem* were written in her memory) and the ultimate decision to make Vienna his home city.

In his second sextet, Brahms, as he does in other works, stages a part of his personal history. He does not, however, set stories from his life to music. The artistic form remains crucial for him; what he has to say needs to stand the test of its tradition. For art itself, not just life and social history with its impulses and themes, represents "existential experience" for Brahms, as Helmut Lachenmann puts it. Life events may have inspired musical signs and symbols, or suggested perspectives. Thus the finale of Op. 36 presents a few reminiscences of previous movements, without quoting directly. Playing with memories and connections creates a sense of distance. This becomes reality in the élan and lightness of the last movement which effectively seals the conclusion of a process that took place in the first three movements.

The two sextets provide eloquent examples of Brahms' preference to create certain types of works in pairs. Opp. 18 and 36 share many similarities. The themes of the opening movements are lyrical, the slow movements are conceived as variations – Brahms later explained: "In a theme of variations, it is almost only the bass that means something to me. But the bass is sacred, it is the firm ground on which I build my creations." The bass, at the same time, determines the harmonic system of the piece. The final movements are not elevated into a special position. The tonal relationships between the four movements create the specific harmonic characters, lending the works their unique colours.

Against this background the differences emerge clearly: in the B flat major sextet, the scherzo appears as the third movement, whilst in the G major work it represents the second movement; correspondingly, the variation movements are also

interchanged. In the G major sextet, the finale responds to the three previous movements, which are also interconnected by shared motifs. In the B flat major work, the finale recalls the first movement by opening with the same three-part constellation (main part in cello I, accompanied by cello II and a viola), and despite the altered metres there are apparent motivic parallels. However, in the finale it is not the entire ensemble that answers the opening trio but only the three top instruments. Thereby the composer evokes a principle which was dominant in the central section of the first movements. There, he increasingly dissolved the rigid thematic progressions into dialogues between instruments and instrumental groups. The intensive *tête-à-tête* becomes a characteristic of what is otherwise termed as “development section”. The friendly to and fro, however, is met with harsh ripostes and dramatically pointed passages threatening and interrupting the lyrical flow.

The harsh confrontation of opposites constitutes another difference between the first and second sextets: opus 18 has a more expansive conception, both in its contrasts and also in its accumulation of material. The first section of the opening movement presents three, instead of the usual two, themes; some might argue that the middle theme merely fulfils a transitional function, but the significance which it assumes in the development section disproves that claim. Comparing the scherzos, the one in the B flat major sextet seems more hands-on, but also less intricately fashioned. In contrast to the G major work, the variations are based on a song-like, closed theme whose harmonic and expressive potential is tested out. The melody, although vivid, does not play a crucial role in terms of the internal cohesion of the andante. Brahms himself was very fond of this ballad-like piece and often performed it at the piano.

The romantic ideal of the folk-like tone is realised to a far greater extent in the B flat major sextet – especially in the outer movements – than in its counterpart. Even the first theme of the opening allegro has distinctly vocal qualities. The second one could originate in one of Brahms’ folksong arrangements, and the third, with its wide intervals, is reminiscent of Alpine folklore; the gamut, however, considerably exceeds a feasible vocal range. Brahms achieved an elegant translation of the popular gestures into the instrumental sphere.

As in his orchestral music, in his chamber works Brahms also did not head directly for the most exploited genre, namely the string quartet. But he put in motion a genre tradition for the sextet which, in the course of the following decades, was to be enriched by several masterpieces: Brahms, crucially, was their initiator.

*Habakuk Traber*

Translation: Viola Scheffel





## 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.

The Mandelring Quartet's success in winning some great competitions – in Munich (ARD), Evian and Reggio Emilia (Premio Paolo Borciani) – was what launched their international career. Today their performing commitments take them to international musical centres such as Vienna, Paris, London, Madrid, New York, Los Angeles and Vancouver. In addition their concert diary includes regular tours to Central and South America, the Near East and Asia. They are also warmly welcomed as guest performers at leading festivals including the Schwarzenberg Schubertiade and those at Schleswig-Holstein, Rheingau, Lockenhaus and Montpellier.

The HAMBACHERMusikFEST, the Mandelring Quartet's own festival in its home town of Neustadt on the Weinstrasse, has developed into a meeting point for lovers of chamber music from all over the globe. Since 2010 the ensemble has had a concert series of its own in the Berliner Philharmonie, and since 2016 another in the Residenz, Munich.

The Mandelring Quartet celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2013 in the Berlin Radialsystem V with a project called "3 from amongst 30", five concerts at each of which the audience was invited to select a programme of three works from a list of thirty immediately before the start.

Numerous prize-winning CD recordings testify to the quartet's exceptional quality and wide-ranging repertoire. Their recording of the complete quartets of Shostakovich attracted particular attention and came to be regarded by critics as the benchmark recording of these works. Their recording of all Mendelssohn's chamber music for strings also received outstanding reviews. The current release completes the series of Johannes Brahms' chamber music for strings at audite.





## 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.





## WOLFGANG EMANUEL SCHMIDT

Already during his studies with David Geringas (Musikhochschule Lübeck), Mstislav Rostropovitch and Aldo Parisot (Juilliard School New York) Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt attracted attention through numerous awards at competitions (Grand Prix de la Ville de Paris at the International Rostropovich Competition Paris; First Prizes at the German National Music Competition Bonn and the International Australian Cello Competition New Zealand; prize winner at the International Tchaikovsky Competition Moscow and the International Leonard Rose Cello Competition USA). Ever since he has performed in Europe, Russia, Japan and the USA as a soloist with renowned international orchestras, among them the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, Prague Philharmonia as well as the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. He has played under the baton of e.g. Charles Dutoit, Marek Janowski, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, Jiří Bělohlávek und Yutaka Sado.

Alongside his solo career, Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt devotes himself also to chamber music. Among his partners are Lang Lang, Christoph Eschenbach, Emanuel Ax, Gil Shaham, Nicolaj Znaider, Leonidas Kavakos, Edgar Meyer and David Shifrin. Performances led him to venues such as the Carnegie Hall New York, London's Wigmore Hall, Berliner Philharmonie, Alte Oper Frankfurt, Philharmonie am Gasteig, Herkulessaal Munich, Rudolfinum Prague, Kennedy Center Washington, Alice Tully Hall New York and Tokyo's Suntory Hall.

Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt holds a professorship at the Kronberg Academy, at the Universität der Künste Berlin as well as at the Hochschule für Musik Franz Liszt in Weimar. He plays an instrument built by Matteo Goffriller, which previously belonged to Hugo Becker.



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