



BRAHMS

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Four Hand Piano Music Vol. 13 String Sextets Nos. 1 and 2

Silke-Thora Matthies • Christian Köhn



Johannes Brahms (1833–1897): Four Hand Piano Music, Vol. 13

String Sextets, Nos. 1 and 2

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg in 1833, the son of a double-bass player and his much older wife, a seamstress. His childhood was spent in relative poverty, and his early studies in music, as a pianist rather than as a string-player, developed his talent to such an extent that there was talk of touring as a prodigy at the age of eleven. It was Eduard Marxsen who gave him a grounding in the technical basis of composition, while the boy helped his family by playing the piano to entertain visitors to summer inn.

In 1851 Brahms met the émigré Hungarian violinist Reményi, who introduced him to Hungarian dance music that had a later influence on his work. Two years later he set out in his company on his first concert tour, their journey taking them, on the recommendation of the Hungarian violinist Joachim, to Weimar, where Franz Liszt held court and might have been expected to show particular favour to a fellow-countryman. Reményi profited from the visit, but Brahms, with a lack of tact that was later accentuated, failed to impress the Master. Later in the year, however, he met the Schumanns, through Joachim's agency. The meeting was a fruitful one.

In 1850 Schumann had taken up the offer from the previous incumbent, Ferdinand Hiller, of the position of municipal director of music in Düsseldorf, the first official appointment of his career and the last. Now in the music of Brahms he detected a promise of greatness and published his views in the journal he had once edited, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, declaring Brahms the long-awaited successor to Beethoven. In the following year Schumann, who had long suffered from intermittent periods of intense depression, attempted suicide. His final years, until his death in 1856, were to be spent in an asylum, while Brahms rallied to the support of Schumann's wife, the gifted pianist Clara Schumann, and her young family, remaining a firm friend until her death in 1896, shortly before his own in the following year.

Brahms had always hoped that sooner or later he

would be able to return in triumph to a position of distinction in the musical life of Hamburg. This ambition was never fulfilled. Instead he settled in Vienna, intermittently from 1863 and definitively in 1869, establishing himself there and seeming to many to fulfil Schumann's early prophecy. In him his supporters, including, above all, the distinguished critic and writer Eduard Hanslick, saw a true successor to Beethoven and a champion of music untrammelled by extra-musical associations, of pure music, as opposed to the Music of the Future promoted by Wagner and Liszt, a path to which Joachim and Brahms both later publicly expressed their opposition.

In 1857 Brahms had accepted an invitation to visit the court of Detmold. Clara Schumann had been giving lessons there to Princess Frederike, but after the death of Robert Schumann she had handed over her responsibilities to Brahms. In Detmold he was offered employment for three months as pianist and chorus conductor, an offer he gladly accepted, returning there in the autumn of 1858 and 1859, but thereafter preferring to devote his time to composition in Hamburg without the limitations and distractions that Detmold offered. He completed the first of his two *Sextets*, scored for two violins, two violas and two cellos, in 1860, when he was again in Hamburg. The form allowed him greater freedom than that of the string quartet, particularly in the handling of the first cello, which introduces the first subject of the opening movement, a theme taken up by the first violin and first viola, a procedure followed also with the second subject in a tripartite sonata-form movement. The slow movement is a series of variations, a form of which Brahms was to demonstrate particular mastery. The D minor theme is stated by the first viola, in the full version, accompanied by the second viola and cellos in a characteristically full lower texture, before passing to the first violin. Shorter note values appear in the following variations, with a fourth version in D major. The original minor key is restored in the final version of the material, in which the first cello plays a

leading part. There is a lively F major *Scherzo* and *Trio*, leading to a closing *Rondo*, which continues to make use of the possibilities of contrasting sonorities that the original scoring allows.

Brahms wrote the greater part of his *Second String Sextet* during the summer of 1864, when he visited Clara Schumann and her family at Lichtenthal, near Baden-Baden, while he himself stayed in the house of Anton Rubinstein. The work, which is in G major, was completed the following May. The first movement starts with an air of mystery and tonal ambiguity, leading to a second subject of particular beauty, and a transition that makes use of a motif associated with Agathe von Siebold, to whom Brahms had become attached during a stay in Göttingen in the summer of 1858. The relationship was broken off the following year, but remembered by both. The motif uses the letters of her name, A - G - A - (D) - H (= B natural) - E. The second movement is a G minor *Scherzo*, partly derived from a dance movement written some ten years before. This is

contrasted with a major-key syncopated *Trio* marked *Presto giocoso*. Once again Brahms turns to variation form for the slow movement, with a theme of Baroque suggestion in the key of E minor, derived from an earlier melody that he associated with Clara Schumann and which is transformed in the opening theme of the first movement. The coda is in E major in a return to the original *tempo* of the movement, after five variations that have offered changes of pace, rhythm and texture. The *Second Sextet* ends with a sonata-rondo movement, concluding a work that seems to suggest what is to come, while the *First Sextet* reflects rather the spirit of Detmold and the two earlier *Serenades*, written during the composer's period of employment there.

Following current practice, both sextets were arranged for piano duo, a form in which these and other works became more widely available well into the twentieth century.

Keith Anderson

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Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn

The pianists Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn, with individual solo careers, came together in 1986 to form a piano duo and played their first concert in public the last day of October 1988. As a duo the two players have won wide acclaim, with international prizes, and appearances in recital and as soloists. They broadcast regularly and have been responsible for a number of first performances of music by notable contemporary composers. They have held international master classes for piano duo and duet playing. In addition to their recordings of Brahms for Naxos, they have also recorded works by Dvořák and Giselher Klebe.

Silke-Thora Matthies was born in Gütersloh, in North Rhine-Westphalia, and studied in Detmold with Renate Kretschmar-Fischer and at the Juilliard School of Music in New York with Joseph Kalichstein, winning first prize at the New York Gina Bachauer Competition and further awards in the Budapest Liszt/Bartók Competition, the Bordeaux Jeunes Solistes, and the Cleveland (Ohio) Robert Casadesus Competition. She has recorded music ranging from Domenico Scarlatti to the contemporary and appears as a soloist and recitalist in Germany and abroad. Since 1992 she has served as a professor of piano at the Hochschule für Musik Würzburg in Bavaria and in October 2003 became Rector of the school. She leads master classes and is often a jury member for international piano competitions.

Christian Köhn was born in Bochum, North Rhine-Westphalia, and studied in Dortmund with Joseph Matthias Blome and in Detmold with Renate Kretschmar-Fischer. He won prizes in the Hamburg Steinway Piano Competition, and the Dortmund International Schubert Competition, with awards from the Hamburg Oscar-und-Vera-Ritter-Stiftung and the Bonn German Music Competition. His career has taken him as soloist and recitalist to various countries of Europe and the Near East. At the Musikhochschule Detmold he is an assistant professor of piano, and is the editor of *Brahms Four Hand Piano Music*, published by Bärenreiter.

Brahms was an accomplished pianist, whose output for the piano spanned his entire life. In addition to his solo works he made four-hand piano arrangements of many of his orchestral, chamber and vocal scores, to give them greater accessibility. Written in 1859-60 and 1864-5 respectively – a period characterized by several commentators as the composer's 'first maturity' – the *String Sextets* are among the most radiantly melodic and attractive of all his chamber works.

Johannes
BRAHMS
(1833-1897)

Four Hand Piano Music Vol. 13

String Sextet No. 1 in B flat major, Op. 18 22:26
(arranged for piano duet)

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------|--|------|
| 1 Allegro ma non troppo | 13:47 | 3 Scherzo: Allegro molto | 2:48 |
| 2 Andante ma moderato | 10:13 | 4 Rondo: Poco allegretto e grazioso | 9:26 |

String Sextet No. 2 in G major, Op. 36 38:22
(arranged for piano duet)

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------|------|
| 5 Allegro non troppo | 13:00 | 7 Poco adagio | 9:44 |
| 6 Scherzo: Allegro non troppo | 7:02 | 8 Poco allegro | 8:36 |

Silke-Thora Matthies • Christian Köhn
(One piano, four hands)

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