

A 60th Birthday Tribute to Alexander ('Sandy') Baillie

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Sonata for Piano and Cello No. 1 in E minor, Op. 38

Sonata for Piano and Cello No. 2 in F, Op. 99

Four Serious Songs, Op. 121 (transcr. Shafran/Baillie)

Alexander Baillie *cello* · John Thwaites *piano*

Sonata No. 1 in E minor, Op. 38

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I Allegro non troppo | 14:25 |
| 2 | II Adagio – Andante con moto | 6:01 |
| 3 | III Allegro | 6:23 |

recorded on Rönisch grand piano

Sonata No. 2 in F, Op. 99

- | | | |
|---|------------------------|------|
| 4 | I Allegro vivace | 8:54 |
| 5 | II Adagio affettuoso | 6:30 |
| 6 | III Allegro passionato | 7:38 |
| 7 | IV Allegro molto | 5:05 |

recorded on Ehrbar grand piano

Four Serious Songs, Op. 121

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 8 | 1. Denn es gehet dem Menschen | 3:56 |
| 9 | 2. Ich wandte mich | 3:24 |
| 10 | 3. O Tod, wie bitter bist du | 3:41 |
| 11 | 4. Wenn ich mit Menschen –
und mit Engelszungen redete | 5:08 |

recorded on Streicher grand piano

Total duration 71:19

Alexander Baillie plays a 1670 Cassini cello in this recording

Recorded at Gert Hecher Klavier-Athelier, Vienna 18th-21st May 2015

Recording Engineer and Piano Technician: Joachim Eiden

Executive Producer: Siva Oke Final Mastering: Paul Arden-Taylor

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Alexander Baillie & John Thwaites play

BRAHMS

Sonatas for Cello & Piano · Four Serious Songs

Recorded on the grand pianos of Rönisch, Ehrbar & Streicher



The Music

Brahms's first duo sonata emerged slowly. He had drafted three movements in 1862, including an *Adagio* that was later suppressed. On February 2nd 1865 his mother died in Hamburg. Having returned to Vienna, the cellist Josef Gansbacher, for whom the sonata was completed in June, visited to find Brahms playing Bach with tears streaming down his cheeks, confiding the news of his bereavement without taking leave of the ivories. Op. 38's fugal finale is clearly modelled on Contrapunctus XIII from Bach's *The Art of Fugue*.

The second movement comprises a lighter dance movement with a wistful, yearning Trio haunted with melancholy and in a free Gypsy style where the piano imitates the cimbalom. The first movement is a glorious example of what Arnold Schoenberg (in his book *Style and Idea*) characterised as Brahms's "developing variation". All the main material appears within the first twenty bars, but is subject to the most imaginative motivic reinvention.

The cello's opening melody, elegiac and brooding in its lowest register, sets the tone for all but the second subject group's final idea, where the major mode offers brief solace and a lilting lullaby figure is shared between the cello and piano left hand. After a particularly stormy development and then recapitulation the texture gently floods with Horn Fifths (associated with farewell since Beethoven's *Les Adieux* sonata) and a coda of exquisite beauty beckons us heavenward. In the year of the Horn Trio's *Adagio Mesto* and work on the *Requiem*, one wonders if this movement too has the most profound of meanings. *Es ist Vollbracht (It is finished)* from Bach's *St. John Passion* (performed in Vienna in 1864) is supposed to have shaped the first movement development of the opening theme to Beethoven's great Cello Sonata in A Op. 69. Beethoven's opening, like Brahms's, highlights the

sixth degree of the scale. Brahms's "lullaby" theme follows the outline of this Bach aria, as indeed of the Passion Chorale.

We are likely to hear this E major coda as consoling. Brahms also uses E major at the conclusion of the third of the *Four Serious Songs* when setting, from the Lutheran Bible, the sentiment that death can be welcome for those who are ready: "*Oh Death, how well you serve!*". But Rita Steblin (*A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries* p. 3) quotes Johann Mattheson's view of E major as "most suited for the extremes of helpless and hopeless love" or "the fatal separation of body and soul" and Rudolf Wustmann in his belief that it was this reading of the key that Bach understood in the Cantata *Liebster Gott, wann werd ich sterben?* (*Dear God, when will I die?*).

If the E minor is troubled, then the Sonata in F, written over twenty years later, is supremely life-affirming. 1886 was Brahms's first summer in the Swiss resort of Hofstetten near Thun, where he hired a villa with a good view of the lake, and wrote in rapid succession this Op. 99, the A major Violin Sonata Op. 100 and the C minor Piano Trio Op. 101. Op. 99 was written for cellist Robert Hausmann, and Brahms's biographer Kalbeck (*Johannes Brahms* Vol IV, p. 31) recounted how earlier Hausmann had "brought the Brahms Op. 38 cello sonata for the first time the honour it deserved, which all of the earlier Viennese concertising virtuosi failed to give it when they concerned themselves at all with this profound early work of the master. Either they didn't have a big enough sound, or they lacked the intense, compelling musical sensibility, without which the sonata, especially in its outer movements, can't survive. It seemed to have been waiting for none other than Robert Hausmann". Perhaps the F major could only have been written for such a player. The piano opens with enormous energy (ennobling the tremolandi of orchestral transcriptions), the cello soaring above with heroic

horn calls. By contrast, both the development and coda are more *tranquillo*. If the first movement's material revels in aspiring and athletic leaps, the second (in the Neapolitan key of F sharp major) and the third (a passionate and fiery Scherzo that makes full use of hemiola and cross-rhythms, as does the last) exploit the stepwise second, often chromatically. Accompanied by cello *pizzicato* the piano first states a spacious *Adagio* theme that becomes extended when taken up by the cello, the expressive twists of major and minor seconds heightened by a threefold ascending repetition, the increasing intensity crowned with a rhythmic augmentation of the final group. A darker central section in F minor relates to a B flat minor passage of great anguish within the Finale, which is in other respects the perfect enigmatic, folk-like foil to the high drama of the Scherzo that precedes it.

After Clara Schumann suffered a stroke on 26th March 1896 Brahms began to write his *Four Serious Songs*, using texts from the Old and New Testaments, and finishing them in May, the month of her death, and at a time when the liver cancer that he was to die from in April of 1897 was already making its presence felt. If Brahms's life can be interpreted as one of service to music, and his own music as sublimation, a philanthropic generosity and warmth of spirit towards us all, then it is particularly moving to hear the extravagant way in which he sets the word "liebe" (love) throughout the final song, and most particularly in its closing line.

These extraordinary songs are identified with some of the greatest Baritones and Contraltos of last century, but have also been arranged for various instruments. Daniil Shafran popularised performances on the cello and recorded them with Anton Ginzburg in 1985 for an LP of transcriptions. Alexander Baillie builds on this tradition.

John Thwaites © 2016

Four Serious Songs, Op.121 (1896)

as set by Brahms to texts from the Bible

1. *Ecclesiastes 3:19*

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth? Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for this is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

2. *Ecclesiastes 4:1*

So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

3. *Ecclesiastes 41:1*

O death, how bitter is the remembrance of thee to a man that liveth at rest in his possessions, unto the man that hath nothing to vex him, and that hath prosperity in all things: yea, unto him that is yet able to receive meat! O death, acceptable is thy sentence unto the needy, and unto him whose strength faileth, that is now in the last age, and is vexed with all things, and to him that despaieth, and hath lost patience!

4. *Corinthians 13*

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity (love).

This recording was made with the support of research funding from Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University.

Performing and Recording Brahms

Alexander Baillie and I were privileged to record in Vienna on original period pianos that are not only true to the Brahms timeline but also have great intrinsic beauty. Brahms loved the most powerful of modern Bechsteins and American Steinways, but for himself he had first a straight-strung Graf from the Schumanns, and then (from 1871 when his Viennese lodgings became more permanent until his death) an 1868 straight-strung Streicher that was a present from the firm. Since Brahms was still moving freely between Germany and Austria in the early 1860s we were happy to choose, as the only straight-strung piano on the disc, a German Rönisch for Op. 38. We attempted above all else to challenge Brahms playing that is thick, heavy, square and academic. A straight-strung piano has a purity of singing tone which means that Brahms's warm textures never become cluttered, and the lighter sound encourages movement.

However, to mitigate against any thinness or percussive quality, one can be tempted to asynchronicity (a dislocation of the hands that Brahms himself used in his cylinder recording of the Hungarian Dance No. 1) and it is clear that a certain school within the Schumann/Brahms circle, exemplified in the recordings of Adelina de Lara and Ilona Eibenschütz (recently analysed by Anna Scott and Ronald Woodley) allowed extravagant free arpeggiation and dislocation. This playing also typically will move forward (rush) with crescendi, back with diminuendi, cut long note values and rests and be extraordinarily free, all of which you can find on this disc. Others who were close to the tradition such as Carl Friedberg and Artur Schnabel are closer to modern habits. I found that for myself it was only on the Rönisch that dislocation was completely natural – you can hear this in the codetta and coda of the first movement. Where we believe Brahms is alluding to distant horns (towards the end of the first movement) we used an unusual amount of sustaining pedal mixed with many overtones but not too much vibrato from the cello.

We know that Brahms visited the Ehrbar salon on several occasions in the 1870s and '80s to try through symphonies and the second piano concerto with four hands. The Ehrbar we used had a warmth of tone that seemed perfect for Op. 99, and although the Viennese action was the heaviest I have ever known, somehow it suited the muscular writing of the first movement, and the bouncing figures of the Scherzo. The late Streicher instrument has similar warmth but a lighter sound and action. It seemed to link Brahms's domestic world with the more modern pianos of his day and to suit one of his very last compositions.

The Op. 38 first movement, like the first movements of the B major Piano Trio Op.8 and the Violin Sonata in G Op.78, is a movement which has enjoyed very different approaches with respect to tempo. The Trio, revised in 1891, has

similar basic material to the original version of 1854, which unusually carries a metronome mark by Brahms himself of *minim* 72. Without repeat and up to the coda *Tranquillo* this would predicate a performance time of 7.08. Given flexibility for the second subject, the time of 7.51 from Schnabel, Szigeti and Fournier live at the Edinburgh Festival in 1947 can be seen as authentic. There is another similar performance of the exposition alone by Carl Friedberg, Daniel Karpilovsky and Felix Salmond for American radio in 1939 – the exposition is only ten seconds slower than Schnabel’s. But most performances average 9 minutes, with Myra Hess, Isaac Stern and Pablo Casals at 10 minutes. They do repeat, so their first movement as a whole takes a capacious 16 minutes. Bernard Sherman, in *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style* (Ed. Musgrave/Sherman, 2003) makes the broader point that performances of outer movements do not generally seem quick enough to honour Brahms’s intentions.

If we look at Op. 38, I think we can now say that, gorgeous though it is in many ways, the recording of Du Pré and Barenboim, which, had they made the repeat, would be over 16 minutes long, is simply too slow. Ma and Ax head in a similar direction. But Rostropovich and Richter, live from Aldeburgh in 1964 at 13.02 including repeat, and Gutman and Eschenbach live from the Pushkin Museum in Moscow in 1989 at 12.33 including repeat, make an unanswerable case for a proper *Allegro non troppo* tempo (as does Feuermann with Theo van der Pas in 1934). We are a little slower because we slacken the coda, which goes to the question of tempo flexibility. And if we also now understand that slow movements have often been played too slowly, it is interesting to observe that we have the quickest currently available Op. 99 slow movement, the closest alternative being the 2014 Perenyi/Kocsis recording chosen in 2015 by Katy Hamilton for BBC Radio 3’s *Building a Library* (6.31 compares with our 6.30 – Yo-Yo Ma takes 8.53).

Sometimes quicker tempi can facilitate a more telling freedom with material. With respect to tempo flexibility, in addition to the recorded history or the implications of Schnabel’s multiple internal metronome marks in the Peters editions of Brahms that he prepared, Clive Brown has assembled compelling evidence in the Bärenreiter *Performance Practices in Johannes Brahms’s Chamber Music* (2015). Brahms writing to Henschel: “For I myself have never believed that my blood and a mechanical instrument go well together. The so-called elastic tempo is not a new discovery, after all”. Fanny Davies recalled that Brahms “would linger not on one note, but on a whole idea, as if unable to tear himself away from its beauty”. Kalbeck recalled chamber music rehearsals where colleagues “were so confused by Brahms and the inspired freedom of his playing” and Brahms wrote to Joachim of the problems rehearsing a symphony for the first time: “In that case I often cannot do enough pushing forward and holding back, in order to produce more or less the passionate or calm expression I want”. We have understood to give agogic inflection to dynamic hairpins and that they often indicate moments of great expressive warmth. With respect to the historical evidence that strict ensemble was less important than the requirements of each line, and indeed that players might play off each other with a dislocation not dissimilar to that of the pianist’s two hands, we have been conservative, although early in the third Serious Song the cello line moves freely against a stricter quaver piano accompaniment. An example of rhythmic assimilation occurs in the *tranquillo* of the Op. 38 Finale, in order to produce an even duple melodic line in the right hand.

Alexander Baillie used a 1670 Cassini cello but with metal strings, agreeing with David Milsom, Director of the Huddersfield University Centre for Performance Research, that most performers will decide on a pragmatic basis exactly which elements of historically informed performance practice to adopt, and that for

some the technical security and reliability of metal strings can better facilitate freely creative playing. He does make free use of portamento, but broadly within the modern taste. Vibrato is highly varied, including occasional non-vibrato. There seems little doubt that the “tomato ketchup” approach to vibrato of some modern players (splashing plenty on every note) would be anathema to the Brahms circle, and yet David Popper, who played the sonatas and piano trios with Brahms, was known for his continuous vibrato. Given that the type of strings used also affects vibrato, perhaps it is reasonable to hope that an intelligent and varied use of vibrato would have met with the great man’s approval.

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THE GRAND PIANOS

Rönisch



Ehrbar



Streicher



Rönisch

Rönisch was regarded as one of the best and most renowned German piano manufacturers of the latter half of the 19th century, alongside Blüthner, Bechstein, Schiedmayer, Grotrian-Steinweg and Ibach. Founded in 1845 it expanded rapidly and even opened a branch in St Petersburg, which had to be closed down after the October revolution. In 1918 the company was sold at a loss to Hupfeld of Leipzig. It survived throughout the upheaval of the Second World War, the difficulties that came with life under the DDR regime and a new start following the reunification, and to this day the firm produces grand and upright pianos.



Rönisch are recognised as the first German maker to have been using the modern American cast-iron plate since the 1860s. The instrument used in this recording is the "Concert-Modell" built around 1860. It measures 240 cm in length and is equipped with simple English action ("Stosszungenmechanik"). This straight-strung grand piano is obviously built with the French sound in mind, striving for great clarity, a string, full bass and a silvery, bright descant.

Ehrbar

Friedrich Ehrbar arrived in Vienna in 1848 and found employment in the renowned workshop of Eduard Seuffert.



He quickly rose to the position of factory manager, and following Seuffert's death in 1856 he took over the running of the business. The firm subsequently developed into one of the biggest and most important piano makers in Vienna. In common with Rönisch they were the first factory in Vienna to adopt the recent American advances in piano manufacture but over a decade after the German makers did, from 1875. The piano played on this recording was built around 1877/78, is already cross-strung and has a cast-iron frame. Measuring 256cm in length, this is the largest model with Viennese action ever to be built. Ehrbar's grand pianos are usually characterised by a soft, sensuous sound with a very resonant bass.

Streicher

The concert grand piano of Streicher is an extremely rare instrument. Streicher was known throughout the 19th century as the most important and most innovative piano maker in Vienna. Determined to better his competitors in terms of quantity as well as quality, one of his aims was to offer his customers a large selection of different models. This led to the development of a grand piano in 1841 of "entirely English construction", which meant it followed the Western European example. This model was subsequently enriched with the advances achieved in American piano building. The instrument used here dates from 1878, measures 260cm in length, is cross-strung and features simple English action. The sound is large, dignified, profound and colourful, which is typical for all of Streicher's instruments.



Alexander Baillie

Alexander Baillie is internationally recognised as one of the finest cellists of his generation. He began playing at the comparatively late age of twelve having been directly inspired by the late Jacqueline du Pré. He went on to study at London's Royal College of Music with Joan Dickson and Anna Shuttleworth and with



André Navarra in Vienna. He has performed with many of the top orchestras and conductors, appearing regularly as cello soloist in concertos, recitals, masterclasses and festivals throughout the world, including several appearances at the BBC Proms. Together with pianist James Lisney he has been promoting their Beethoven Project in England and Germany. Notable first performances of contemporary works, often written for him, have included Penderecki, Hans Werner Henze, Takemitsu, Colin Matthews and H.K.Gruber. Recordings include the Tippett Triple Concerto with the composer conducting, and the Shostakovich first Concerto with the Boston Philharmonic under Benjamin Zander. His recording of the Britten Cello Suites achieved the highest acclaim in the New York press, and of the performance of the Dutilleux Cello Concerto with the Boston Philharmonic, the composer was heard to say that it was the finest performance of his work that he had ever heard. A passionate and motivational teacher, Alexander continues to be in demand as Professor of Cello at the Hochschule für Künste, Bremen in Germany and as visiting Professor at the Birmingham Conservatoire. He is founder member of the 'Gathering of the Clans' Cello School.

John Thwaites

John Thwaites is best known for his collaborative work with strings and as a founder member of the Primrose Piano Quartet. Having a special affinity with the cello, he has worked over decades with cellists Alexander Baillie and Johannes Goritzki, and appeared with Pierre Doumenge, Louise Hopkins, Natalie Clein, Alexander Ivashkin, David Cohen, Oleg Kogan, Li Wei and others. John performs regularly in the major festivals across Europe, broadcasts for radio, and has issued a string of critically acclaimed recordings. With the Primrose Piano Quartet he commissioned a major new work by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (premiered at Cheltenham), inspired a set of variations on a Burns Air (premiered at London's King's Place), commissioned a further Piano Quartet from Anthony Payne, and has issued many recordings for Meridian including a 'Five Star' Choice for Classic FM Magazine, of Bridge and Howells. His recording of Lyapunov with the Dante Quartet for Dutton Digital was a BBC Music Magazine 'Recording of the Month'.



Whilst Head of Keyboard at Christ's Hospital, he programmed the complete Chamber Music of Brahms, taking all 17 piano parts – an abiding passion increasingly informed by historic performance study. John's more recent teaching career includes posts at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He is Course Director of the Cadenza International Summer Music School, a piano and strings festival resident at the Purcell School in July, and Head of Keyboard Studies at Birmingham Conservatoire.