



BRAHMS

String Quartets Nos. 1 and 2

New Zealand String Quartet

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

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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, for which he showed a natural aptitude, 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 in leisure resorts. In 1851 Brahms met the émigré Hungarian violinist Ede 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.

Brahms made a significant contribution to chamber music repertoire. His first attempts were made in the early 1850s and are now lost, but in 1853 he wrote a movement for the composite violin sonata by Schumann and his pupil Albert Dietrich intended for Joachim. After the first of his *String Sextets*, in 1860, he turned his attention to *Piano Quartets* and the *Piano Quintet*, followed in 1865 by the second *Sextet*. His first string quartet, the *String Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1*, was written between 1868 and 1873, and is more or less contemporary with *String Quartet in A minor, Op. 51, No. 2*, completed in the same year. A third quartet, the *String Quartet in B flat major, Op. 67*, followed in 1876 and in 1883 and 1890 Brahms added two *String Quintets*. His last chamber music was written for the clarinet, a quintet and two poignantly moving sonatas that were composed in 1894.

Once Brahms had settled in Vienna, he followed the custom of spending summer holidays in the country, periods when he was able to devote himself to composition with relatively little interruption. In 1873 he spent the summer at Tutzing, near Munich, and it was here that he completed the first two string quartets that he thought fit for publication, *Opus 51*, dedicating them to the distinguished surgeon and musical amateur Theodor Billroth, whom he had first met during a summer holiday near Zurich in 1866. Brahms seems to have worked on the demanding musical form for some years and it would seem that he had drafted preliminary versions of the quartets during the years immediately preceding their completion. As with the

symphony, he was very conscious of the tradition that lay behind the genre, the work of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. This awareness of the past and of the present expectations in Vienna made him take the kind of care that even Mozart had found it necessary to exercise in the quartets he dedicated to Haydn in the 1780s. Brahms's two quartets had their first performance in the year of their completion, given by the Joachim Quartet, a recent misunderstanding with Joachim over the failure to include the *German Requiem* in the Schumann Festival in Bonn that autumn now more or less forgotten.

The *String Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1*, opens with an *Allegro* in which the first violin presents the first theme over repeated notes in accompaniment from the viola and cello, imparting an immediate element of tension. The first subject continues in a remote key, before the return of the theme played in octaves by the viola and cello, now accompanied by the violins, and leading eventually to the lyrical second subject. The exposition, which is repeated, ends with a cello version of the opening figure and it is the first subject that finds an important place in the central development section, with its modulation to C sharp minor, before the original key and first subject return in the recapitulation. The cello again offers its version of the opening figure, before the coda. The A flat major second movement, with the title *Romanze*, offers an opening first violin theme over a figure suggesting a horn-call, followed by a section of secondary material. The process is repeated, with the first theme now varied, followed by a version of the secondary material in the home key. The F minor third movement is a very Brahmsian form of *scherzo*, characterized by the descending contours of its melodic line and contrasted with a trio section in F major, where the principal first violin theme is accompanied by *bariolage*, the alternation of fingered and open A, from the second violin. Both middle movements include thematic reference to the principal theme of the first movement. The same is true of the final *Allegro*, broadly in tripartite sonata form, although it lacks the clearer sectional division of the first movement, seeming to absorb the expected central development into the recapitulation. Like the rest of the

quartet, it is symphonic and orchestral in conception and characteristically dense in its textures.

It may seem in these first published string quartets that Brahms was very conscious not only of classical tradition but in particular of Beethoven's *Opus 18* and *Razumovsky Quartets*. The first movement of the *String Quartet in A minor*, the second of the pair, is in impeccable sonata-allegro form. The connection with Joseph Joachim, who had long urged Brahms to provide him with quartets, is established in the use of the cryptic motif F-A-E (*Frei aber einsam*), Joachim's motto, used twenty years before in that first composite violin sonata, with Schumann and Dietrich. Brahms adapted Joachim's motto into his own F-A-F (*Frei aber froh*) motif and this appears later in the movement. The second subject has about it some of the lyrical quality of Schubert and after the repetition of the exposition there is a relatively short development and more or less literal recapitulation, the movement ending in the composer's favourite device of cross-rhythms. The A major *Andante moderato* offers a dark-coloured principal theme, first heard over a viola and cello counterpoint. There is an excursion into the relative minor key, with violin and cello in canon, and a return to the principal theme, now in the key of F, before the cello can bring matters to rights and re-establish the tonality of A. In the third movement Brahms offers an original substitute for a *scherzo*, with an interlocking major key trio that changes pace and mode, moving from A minor to A major, now marked *Allegretto vivace*. The mood returns to one of gentle melancholy in A minor with the re-appearance of the *Tempo di minuetto*. The quartet ends with a movement that suggests more overtly the Hungarian element hinted at in the preceding *Quasi minuetto*, a compliment to the Hungarian émigré Joachim. The form is in general that of the classical sonata-allegro, its related thematic material transformed in a texture that allows indulgence in cross-rhythms with all the dramatic intensity that Brahms had at his command, and finds a place, as elsewhere in each of the movements, for the device of canon, a contrapuntal element for which Joachim too had a fondness.

Keith Anderson

New Zealand String Quartet



Painting: Dame Robin White with Ruha Fifita
Rangitahua 2011 (detail)
University of Auckland Art Collection

Left to right: Gillian Ansell, Douglas Beilman, Helene Pohl, Rolf Gjelsten
Photo: Scorpion Media

Celebrating its 29th season in 2016, the New Zealand String Quartet has established a distinguished international reputation for its engaging performances. The ensemble's discography includes all the quartets by Mendelssohn, Bartók and Berg, and they are currently engaged in recording the complete Brahms string quartets and quintets, as well as the *Clarinete Quintet*, for Naxos. Other recordings include works by Ravel, Debussy, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Dvořák, Wolf, Takemitsu, Tan Dun, and New Zealand composers including the complete chamber works for strings by Douglas Lilburn. Acclaimed débuts in London's Wigmore Hall, the Frick Collection in New York and in Washington's Library of Congress have led to regular touring in Britain, Europe and North America. The ensemble has also toured in Mexico, Japan, Korea, and China, with regular visits to Australia. The Quartet has performed concertos with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and collaborated with many internationally renowned artists, including jazz performers Mike Nock, Wayne Marshall, Jim Hall and Uri Caine, and traditional instrumentalists such as Turkey's Omar Farouk Tekbilek, New Zealand's Richard Nunns and Horomona Horo, and the Forbidden City Chamber Orchestra from China. The ensemble has been Quartet-in-Residence at the New Zealand School of Music at Victoria University since 1991, where the current members are Associate Professors. Violinist Helene Pohl and violist Gillian Ansell are co-artistic directors of the biennial Adam Chamber Music Festival in Nelson and each of the members has been awarded the MNZM honour for services to music in New Zealand.

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Brahms's two *String Quartets, Op. 51* were the first he published but, completed in his 40th year, are very much mature masterpieces. He was very conscious of the tradition that lay behind the quartet genre, and the spirits of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert ensured that he took the greatest of care when preparing his own quartets. Each perfectly proportioned movement of these works creates its own unique expressive narrative, exploring bitter-sweet tonalities and thematic treatment ranging from tender lyricism to dramatic intensity.

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String Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1	33:02
❶ I. Allegro	10:52
❷ II. Romanze: Poco adagio	7:05
❸ III. Allegretto molto moderato e comodo	9:04
❹ IV. Allegro	6:00
String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 51, No. 2	35:27
❺ I. Allegro non troppo	12:57
❻ II. Andante moderato	10:04
❼ III. Quasi minuetto, moderato	5:28
❽ IV. Finale: Allegro non assai	6:58

New Zealand String Quartet

Helene Pohl, Violin I • Douglas Beilman, Violin II
Gillian Ansell, Viola • Rolf Gjelsten, Cello

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