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Producer-engineer: Michael Ponder

Edited by Anssi Karttunen

Mastered by Adaq Khan (www.adaqkhan.com)

Booklet text: Malcolm MacDonald

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Design and layout: Paul Brooks, Design and Print, Oxford

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

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String Quintet

Allegro non troppo

Johannes Brahms op. 34
transcribed by Anssi Karttunen

TOCCATA CLASSICS

BRAHMS

by Arrangement Volume One

String Quintet in F minor

original version of the Piano Quintet, Op. 34
reconstructed by Anssi Karttunen

String Quintet in B minor

two-violin version of the Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115
by the composer

Zebra String Trio
with
Krycia Osostowicz, violin II
James Boyd, viola II
Richard Lester, cello II

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BRAHMS: String Quintet in F minor (original version of Piano Quintet, Op. 34)

String Quintet in B minor, Op. 115 (alternative version of Clarinet Quintet)

by Malcolm MacDonald

In the Classical era the string quintet seemed to have a future almost as assured as its cousin, the string quartet – whether as a species of chamber music in its own right or a quartet augmented by an additional instrument (usually a second viola or cello). The 125 quintets of Boccherini were a fertile soil that soon produced brilliant bloom. Mozart's six quintets with extra viola, acknowledged as among his greatest works, established the aptness of the form for spaciousness and grandeur, qualities reflected in Beethoven's serene C major quintet of 1801 (also with viola) and toweringly confirmed by Schubert's monumental and tragic quintet of 1828, also in C (but with second cello), probably the single most important utterance in the entire string-quintet repertoire.

After Schubert, the quintet seemed to mark time for several decades. One should not neglect the substantial achievement of the French composer Georges Onslow (1784–1852) who cultivated the form in no less than 36 quintets (with second cello, alternatively to be taken by a double-bass), some of which – for example, the late, powerful C minor Quintet, Op. 67, of 1843 – are of surprising merit. A good proportion of Onslow's quintets pre-date Schubert's C major, and Schubert probably knew some of them. Later, Onslow's works won high praise from Schumann, through whom the young Brahms probably came to know them also. Brahms could also have known – and might well have been more interested in – the sole and fascinating String Quintet (1837) by Cherubini, a composer for whom he had lifelong admiration. Cherubini, like Onslow and Schubert, calls for a second cello.

But there is no question that the 'cello quintet' which Brahms overwhelmingly admired was the Schubert: in one sense this was also the most 'modern' example of the genre, since, though

Vellinger String Quartet. In 2001 he formed the London Haydn Quartet which has been acclaimed for its highly individual stylistic approach, making a particular speciality of the works of Haydn. Their recording of the Opp. 9, 17 and 20 quartets has been released on Hyperion to loud acclaim. James has appeared as a regular guest with many ensembles including the Endellion and Wihan Quartets, the Barbican and Florestan Piano Trios, and mixed ensembles such as the Nash Ensemble, Spectrum Ensemble Berlin and the London Sinfonietta. *Gramophone* described his CD of the viola music of York Bowen, with the pianist Bengt Forsberg, as 'a gem of a disc!' He teaches chamber music at the University of Cambridge, Royal Northern College of Music, Domaine Forget in Quebec, and has co-founded MusicWorks, a chamber-music course for young string-players. Recently he has appeared as soloist and conductor of the Irish Chamber Orchestra, in concerts of Beethoven string trios with Peter Cropper and Paul Watkins. James also writes occasional articles for *The Strad*.

Leading chamber-musician, solo cellist and for sixteen years a member of the award-winning Florestan Trio, **Richard Lester** appears regularly at the world's foremost concert venues and festivals. Equally at home on both period and 'modern' instruments, he was for many years principal with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and has been principal cello with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe since 1989.

In 2009 he joined the London Haydn Quartet. Playing on gut strings and with classical bows they have received invitations to many of the most important concert series in the UK, USA, Canada, The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and Hungary. They have embarked on a project recording Haydn's quartets for Hyperion; the latest disc, the Haydn Op. 20 quartets, was released in late 2011.

Recent highlights include a tour of the UK and USA as concerto soloist with the OAE and Sir Roger Norrington, including performances at the South Bank in London, in Boston and at the Lincoln Center in New York. He has also appeared as a director/soloist with the OAE, the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, and in Montreal and Quebec with Les Violons du Roy.

He has made over thirty recordings, twice winning the *Gramophone* award for best chamber-music disc. His recordings of the complete works of Mendelssohn for cello and piano with Susan Tomes and a disc of Boccherini sonatas on period instruments are available on Hyperion.

Richard Lester teaches at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London.



instruments) and twentieth-century works for solo cello to concerti with the London Sinfonietta and the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Esa-Pekka Salonen. He is a founding member of www.petals.org, a non-profit organisation for the production and sale of CDs on the Internet. He appeared on the first contemporary music CD-ROM: *Prisma*, on the music of Kaija Saariaho. Deutsche Grammophon issued a DVD of his performance of Tan Dun's *The Map* for cello, orchestra and video, and Sony Classical released his recordings of the cello concerti by Lindberg, Saariaho and Salonen on CD.

Anssi Karttunen was born in 1960. His teachers included Erkki Rautio, William Pleeth, Jacqueline du Pré and Tibor de Machula. Between 1994 and 1998, he was artistic director of the Avanti! Chamber Orchestra. He was also artistic director of the 1995 Helsinki Biennale and the Suvisoitto-Festival in Porvoo, Finland, from 1994 to 1997. From 1999 to 2005 he was principal cellist of the London Sinfonietta. He has also appeared as conductor. Anssi Karttunen plays a cello by Francesco Ruggeri, circa 1680.

Krysia Osostowicz, violin, is known both as a soloist and chamber musician. In 1995 she founded the Dante String Quartet, which is now recognised as one of Britain's finest ensembles, winning a Royal Philharmonic Society Award in 2007 and a *BBC Music Magazine* Award in 2009. The Quartet appears at major festivals and concert series in the UK, and has played in Holland, Germany, France, Spain, Switzerland, Poland and Finland. It is quartet-in-residence at King's College, Cambridge, and also runs the Dante Summer Festival in the Tamar Valley (www.dantefestival.org).

Born in London of Polish descent, Krysia studied at the Yehudi Menuhin School, at Cambridge University and in Salzburg with Sandor Vegh. She has given concerto and recital performances throughout Europe and made many solo and chamber-music recordings, winning awards in the UK, France and Germany. Before founding the Dante Quartet, Krysia played with the pioneering piano quartet Domus, which toured the world with its own portable concert hall, a geodesic dome. Krysia's latest Hyperion CD includes Ravel's Violin Sonata No. 2 together with the string quartets of Debussy and Ravel, and the Dante Quartet is soon to record Kodály's quartets, also for Hyperion. She has taught for many years at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and is also principal violinist of the Endymion Ensemble.

James Boyd, viola, is widely recognised as one of Britain's finest chamber musicians. He has been a member of some of the country's foremost ensembles and is in demand as a guest artist with many others. He was a member of the Raphael Ensemble for five years and a founder member of the

composed in 1828, it was not performed until 1850 and not published until 1853. The 1850s and '60s were a period in which many of Schubert's greatest chamber, orchestral and instrumental compositions were entering the repertoire, and the general consciousness of musicians, for the first time, and Brahms was intensely involved in the discovery of this potent body of work – climaxing in his first visit to Vienna in 1862, when he was able to study many previously unknown Schubert works, in some cases from the composer's autograph manuscripts.

String Quintet in F minor, Op. 34

Shortly before he set off for Vienna, at the beginning of September 1862, Brahms completed a String Quintet of his own, in F minor, with two cellos. Not only the choice of ensemble, but also many details of the melodic formation and tonal scheme of the work, strongly suggest that he had been inspired to emulate Schubert's C major Quintet. Brahms had played the Schubert as a piano duet with Clara Schumann when he visited her in June at her holiday retreat in Münster am Stein. On that occasion he showed her a draft of what was to become the first movement of his C minor Symphony, a work which would not reach fruition until 1876. But it seems he made no mention of his own String Quintet, although he is believed to have begun composing it in 1861,¹ so it was probably not yet complete. Nevertheless, it must have been complete by some time in August, when Brahms sent the manuscript to Clara – but almost immediately (and bad-temperedly) asked her to return it.² He was perhaps concerned to make sure he had it with him when he went to Vienna, but he also seems to have been unusually defensive about the new work, perhaps unsure that it was yet fully perfected.

Indeed, the Quintet's first steps into the world were not encouraging. Brahms took the score with him to Vienna in September, but very soon posted it off to Joseph Joachim in Hanover, asking his friend to give an honest opinion on it. He had done the like with many other works, but this one unexpectedly produced an unfortunate contretemps. Joachim had spent the summer in England, and decided to prolong his stay into the winter – but, unknown to him, his mail was not being forwarded to him. So he did not receive the score – nor a series of increasingly urgent and bad-tempered letters from Brahms, who was anxious to know Joachim's opinion of the work, and to get

¹ Cf. Clara Schumann's letter of 1 July 1862 to Joachim in *Letters to and from Joseph Joachim*, selected and translated by Nora Bickley, Macmillan, London, 1914, p. 254.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 283–84.

his score back so it had some chance of performance in Vienna, if Joachim approved of it – until November, when all he could do was send it straight back to the irate Brahms.

The Quintet seems to have been played over at the house of the violinist Joseph Hellmesberger Sr (1828–93) by the end of November. (The composer Carl Goldmark, whom Brahms had recently met and who was to become a good friend, was the violist in this try-out). Brahms then sent it to Clara for the second time in December, and she then conveyed the manuscript to Joachim, who now had leisure to try the piece over and gave as his considered opinion that despite its manifold beauties the work was both too difficult and not sufficiently effective on strings alone. After a second try-out he urged Brahms not to have it performed without some revision, because there were passages in it ‘of great roughness.’³

Swayed by Joachim’s judgement, in 1863–64 Brahms (seemingly with a little help from study of a two-piano sonata by Wilhelm Friedemann Bach) recomposed the Quintet as a Sonata for Two Pianos, for him to perform together with Liszt’s favourite pupil Carl Tausig, who had recently become a close friend. Clara Schumann, after hearing Brahms and Tausig play the Sonata, performed it herself in Baden-Baden in July 1864 with both Anton Rubinstein and Hermann Levi, and with Brahms himself in August in a private concert for Princess Anna of Hesse. Knowing both the Sonata and its String Quintet original, Clara’s verdict that the former was no more than an arrangement of the latter had considerable authority, and she encouraged him to try again – perhaps to turn the Quintet into an orchestral work.⁴ Accordingly, Brahms made a third attempt – and, just as with his First Piano Concerto (which in 1854 started life as a sonata for two pianos that mutated into the torso of a symphony), found at last that his ideas were best expressed in the contrast and opposition of percussive piano sonority against a smoother massed ensemble. The result was the Piano Quintet, completed before the end of 1864, and one of the pinnacles of his chamber-music output. Having achieved this final solution, Brahms destroyed his original String Quintet,⁵ but he continued to consider the Two-Piano Sonata as a viable alternative; it was eventually published in 1871 (and

³ Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, p. 273n.

⁴ Florence May, *The Life of Johannes Brahms*, Edward Arnold, London, 1905, Vol. II, p. 360.

⁵ Some authorities (Sebastian Brown, for one) believe that he destroyed the score and parts of the string quintet after completing the Two-Piano Sonata but before writing the Piano Quintet. Even if he did so, one can assume that he retained a detailed memory of the writing in the string-quintet avatar – after all, the whole process of composition, recomposition and re-recomposition occupied only about two years.

Schumann with the Smithsonian Chamber Players, as well as the complete Haydn baryton trios.

Many composers have written works for Steven, including Alexina Louie, Peter Lieberson, R. Murray Shafer, Frederick Schipitsky and Christos Hatzis. Recently, he has performed concerti by Peter Lieberson, Giya Kancheli, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Alexina Louie, Christos Hatzis and Mark-Anthony Turnage.

Steven Dann is a regular guest at many international festivals including the National Arts Centre’s Young Artist Program, the Domaine Forget in Quebec and the Banff School of Fine Arts. He teaches viola and chamber music at the Glenn Gould School in Toronto’s Royal Conservatory of Music. He lives in Toronto and plays a viola made by Joseph Gagliano from 1780.

The Finnish cellist **Anssi Karttunen** is one of the most renowned and versatile musicians in the classical-music world today and enjoys a busy career as a soloist and chamber-music player. He performs on modern cello, Classical and Baroque cellos and on violoncello piccolo. Anssi Karttunen performs all the standard cello works, but has also discovered many forgotten masterpieces and arranged a number of pieces for the instrument.

He is a passionate advocate of contemporary music and has given over 130 world premieres, among them Magnus Lindberg’s Cello Concerto with the Orchestre de Paris, Esa-Pekka Salonen’s *Mania* with Avanti!, Martin Matalon’s Cello Concerto with the Orchestre National de France and Luca Francesconi’s Cello Concerto with RAI Torino. The Boston Symphony Orchestra commissioned a concerto from Kaija Saariaho for him, *Notes on Light*, which had its first performance in February 2007, since when he has performed it close to fifty times.

The orchestras with which Anssi Karttunen has worked include the Philadelphia, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philharmonia, BBC Symphony, London Sinfonietta, NHK Orchestra, Tokyo Philharmonic, Tokyo Metropolitan, Orchestre de Paris, Orchestre National de France, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, SWR Symphony Orchestra, Munich Philharmonic, Ensemble Modern, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Residentie Orchestra, Dutch Radio Philharmonic, Dutch Radio Chamber Orchestra, Barcelona Opera Orchestra, Barcelona Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Radio Orchestra, Danish Radio Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, RAI Torino, Luxembourg Philharmonic, Finnish Radio Orchestra, Helsinki Philharmonic, Avanti! and many others. He performs at major festivals in Europe including Edinburgh, Salzburg, Lockenhaus, Spoleto, Berlin, Venice, Montpellier, Strasbourg and Helsinki.

His discography ranges from the complete Beethoven works for cello and fortepiano (on period



Asia, Australia, Africa and the Americas. As both a violinist and chamber musician, he has been invited to play at festivals in Vienna, Berlin, Salzburg and Edinburgh, and at the London Proms.

He also regularly conducts chamber orchestras, both with and without his violin. From 1996 until 1998 he was the artistic director of the Vienna Chamber Orchestra. Ensembles with which he regularly works include the Scottish, Irish, English, Norwegian, St Paul's and Stuttgarter Chamber Orchestras, the Northern and Britten Sinfonias and the Cameratas Roman and Salzburg as well as Klangforum Wien, Ensemble Modern, BIT20 Ensemble and the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie. He is currently the artistic director of the Leopoldinum Chamber Orchestra in Wrocław, Poland, with whom he made his first recording for Toccata Classics, a CD of music for chamber orchestra by Ernst Krenek (TOCC 0125). He plays a Guadagnini violin from 1754.

Steven Dann's career covers the gamut of violistic possibilities. He has been principal viola of some of the world's leading orchestras, is a veteran of the string-quartet and chamber-music world, has worked extensively as a soloist and recitalist and is a dedicated teacher. He was born in Vancouver in 1953. His foremost teacher was Lorand Fenyves. In addition he studied with William Primrose, Robert Pikler and Bruno Giuranna. He also spent six summers studying the string-quartet repertoire with Zoltán Székely and members of the Hungarian String Quartet.

Upon graduation he was named Principal Viola of the National Arts Centre Orchestra in Ottawa, a position he also held with the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam and the Vancouver and Toronto Symphony Orchestras. He has also been a guest principal of the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Seiji Ozawa, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under Simon Rattle and, in both performance and recordings, with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe under Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Paavo Berglund and Pierre Boulez. Other conductors with whom he has collaborated as a soloist include Sir Andrew Davis, Rudolf Barshai, Jiří Bělohlávek, Sir John Elliott Gardiner, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Oliver Knussen. Since 1990 he has been a member of the Smithsonian Chamber Players in Washington DC and was a founding member of the Axelrod String Quartet.

Solo recordings include *A Portrait of the Viola*, *Winter Music* for viola and orchestra by Alexina Louie, *Mega4 Meta4* by Christos Hatzis and the *Sequenza 6* of Luciano Berio. He released a CD of the viola music of Brahms in June 2006. A second recording from ATMA Classique of French viola repertoire (with sonatas by Koechlin, de Bréville and Tournemire) will be released this coming October and the second disc in a series of the complete piano chamber music of Brahms and

remains one of the masterworks of its genre). Both versions – the Sonata and Piano Quintet – were dedicated to Princess Anna of Hesse, in thanks for her enthusiastic appreciation of the Sonata.

Although Op. 34 has ever since held an unchallenged position in the repertoire in both its piano quintet and two-piano forms, there has always been speculation as to how it must have sounded in its original recension as a two-cello quintet; and in the absence of Brahms' original score some musicians have made attempts to resurrect this form by transcriptions based on the score of the Piano Quintet. Of course, to do this, they have had to assume that the musical substance of the work remained identical in all its incarnations. Certainly that is true of the music of the Sonata for Two Pianos and the Piano Quintet, but it can be only speculation that Brahms introduced no compositional changes between the String Quintet and the Sonata. A 'conjectural restoration' of the String Quintet on this basis by Sebastian Brown was published in 1947 and has achieved some limited currency. This disc presents the first recording of a new restoration by the Finnish cellist Anssi Karttunen (b. 1960), completed in 2006 and first performed at Domaine Forget in Quebec in May 2006.

Karttunen has written⁶ that he became fascinated by the idea of finding out how the original string quintet might have sounded and, as he could not obtain a copy of the Sebastian Brown version, he went ahead and made his own version:

One had to re-distribute all the parts to keep the writing in style with Brahms's string writing. In the end, all the parts undergo major changes and the new second cello part is a combination of the old cello, piano left hand and sometimes viola parts. It becomes the new bass line of the piece.

After he had completed his version in draft, he was finally able to compare it with the Sebastian Brown, and discovered that

there is hardly a measure where we found exactly the same solution. Already for the very opening we had chosen a quite different approach. There are countless occasions where one can't possibly be certain what Brahms's own first idea would have been. I tried to keep the texture as light as possible and follow what to me seemed Brahms's way of writing for a string ensemble but, naturally, I could never pretend that this is how the original would have been.

⁶Johannes Brahms: String Quintet op. 34: How did it originally sound? at www.karttunen.org.



In view of the almost continuous points of difference between the two versions it would be pointless to make any exhaustive comparison of the Brown and Karttunen realisations.⁷ Nevertheless there are, inevitably, places in which their solutions are closely similar, as in the passage from the first-movement development starting at bar 117, with the five-part *stretto* that arrives at bar 122; or the arrival of the E major melody in the second movement, given by Brahms to violin and viola in unison in the Piano Quintet, but to the first cello by both Brown and Karttunen. A ‘given’ of any attempt to reconstruct the string-quintet original is that the second cello partly takes over the role of the piano bass in the Piano Quintet, thus freeing up the first cello for melodic statements of this kind.

A ‘bigger brother’ to the piano trios and quartets he had written in the previous decade, and a more ambitious continuation of the impulse that had produced his B flat String Sextet, the F minor Quintet brings Brahms’ attempt to unify the dynamic tonal language of Beethoven with a Schubertian lyrical melodic impulse to its most intense expression so far. The key of F minor in itself, with its four flats, presents a difficulty for string players without a piano to provide harmonic stability, but one suspects this added element of risk may have been desirable for Brahms. In whatever form it is heard, the result is – like his C minor String Quartet completed a decade later – a work full of tension and shadowed by minor-key conflict, magnificent in utterance but often sombre or thunderous in its moods.

One of the principal forces behind that tension – and a fine example of Brahms’ increasing ability to compose a large-scale unity outward from the smallest motivic elements of his design – is the extent to which the very varied materials of the Quintet are dominated by the interval of a semitone; this localised relationship in turn penetrates the large-scale tonal design, which lays unusual emphasis on keys that have a semitonal (or ‘Neapolitan’) link to the tonic or dominant of the principal tonality (for example, F sharp minor and C sharp minor/D flat major in relation to the main key, F minor). Here again Brahms was almost certainly developing tendencies he had observed in Schubert’s C major Quintet.

The sinuous idea announced by three strings at the outset [1] not only contains this semitonal seed, but establishes a melodic shape that is varied throughout the entire work; indeed, the variation process begins at once with a dramatic interruption on the other two strings which proves to be

⁷ Sebastian Brown’s version was recorded in 2007 by the Divertimenti Ensemble on Cello Classics cc 1017

finale and also, on the other, the most ethereal of Brahms’ scherzos. The finale [8] opens with a lyrical, slightly depressive theme which is then developed in a series of five variations, the mood still predominantly gentle and nostalgic. The last variation is an impassioned waltz in 3/8 time: its six-semiquaver patterns recall the figure with which the first movement opened, and the opening theme of the entire quintet now reappears, mingled with fragments of the waltz, in a suddenly hesitant and faltering coda. The circle is closed by the final cadence, which virtually reproduces the ending of the first movement, but in more sombre colouring.

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Malcolm MacDonald is the author of the volume on Brahms in the ‘Master Musicians’ series (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002). He has also written The Symphonies of Havergal Brian (three vols., Kahn & Averill, London, 1974, 1978 and 1983) and edited the first two volumes of Havergal Brian on Music (Toccata Press, London, 1985 and 2009); further volumes are in preparation. His other writings include books on John Foulds, Schoenberg, Ronald Stevenson and Edgard Varèse.

The Zebra String Trio: Ernst Kovacic, violin; Steven Dann, viola; Anssi Karttunen, cello

Ernst Kovacic, Steven Dann and Anssi Karttunen have each enjoyed close working relationships with major composers of our time and with the formation of the Zebra String Trio they wish to share their passion for contemporary music by combining new and unknown works with the pillars of the repertoire.

Vienna, with its fruitful tension between tradition and innovation, informs the musical language of the Austrian violinist **Ernst Kovacic**. His interpretations of Bach’s solo works and Mozart’s violin concerti, as well as his dedication to contemporary music, secured him a place as one of his the leading soloists of his generation early in his career. Over the years many composers have written works for him, including Krenek, Holloway, Osborne, Gruber, Schwertsik, Eröd, Bischof, Haas and Essl. He has performed the world premieres of violin concerti by Beat Furrer and Django Bates with the Vienna Philharmonic and London Sinfonietta, and Friedrich Cerha’s Violin Concerto with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra.

He performs often as a soloist with prominent orchestras under conductors such as Franz Welsler-Möst, Roger Norrington, Simon Rattle, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Michael Gielen in Europe,



atmospheric and renders the play of light and shade that is already part of the expressive essence of these works yet more subtle.

The Quintet is in fact the last really expansive piece that Brahms wrote. Where his remaining chamber and instrumental works are of ferocious, sometimes elliptical concentration, this piece explores, at its leisure, a prevailing atmosphere of elegy and nostalgia – though it has to be said that modern performances have tended to magnify the passive and reflective aspects of the piece, ironing out some of the contrasts and slowing down the tempi as compared with early recorded version by musicians – such as Reginald Kell and the Busch Quartet – who were in closer contact with the early performing tradition of the work. The intense beauty of its main ideas combine with an underlying sense of profound melancholy to produce a mood of autumnal resignation; and yet there are elements of dark fantasy which hint at a wintry bleakness within the lyric warmth. Without the distinctive clarinet timbre, stretches of passage-work vanish into the homogenised string texture, and the smoothness and liquidity of the clarinet line is lost. But the viola invests its melodic lines with an altogether darker, huskier quality that completely nullifies the risk of sentimentality usually ever-present in this work.

Though the first movement [5] is a sonata design, there is no violent opposition between the first and second subjects, which are both gentle and unassertive; the only vigorous contrast and strong rhythms occur in a comparatively short transition theme. The *viola prima* is seldom highlighted as a *prima donna* soloist, but always thoroughly integrated into the closely woven textures: this is real, organic chamber music.

The magnificent *Adagio* [6] is less at peace with itself. The sighing principal theme, the first viola recumbent against a chiaroscuro of muted strings, is the *ne plus ultra* of Brahms' Romanticism, evoking a mood of profound nature-mysticism. But out of this initial gambit arises a desolately beautiful series of florid arabesques and runs that spiral and swoop over a rustling, wind-stirred string texture. Apparently a wild, spontaneous improvisation, this passage sublimates the free, fantastic Hungarian gypsy style that had fascinated Brahms all his adult life. In its rhapsodic musings the *viola prima* becomes the idealised incarnation of the gypsy fiddler that Brahms surely had in mind when composing that uniquely florid part. Played on the viola rather than clarinet, this music discloses more clearly its origins in the *verbunkos* style of gypsy fiddling.

The brief third movement [7] is gentle, ambling, serenade-like music, with a fleeter central section. It is, on the one hand, a true intermezzo restoring the emotional equilibrium before the

the second half of the theme and prepares a grand unison statement in which the main movement gets under way. The transition to the second subject produces further dramatic semitonal stresses, and the anxious second subject itself is beset by them too: the sinister bass oscillation in the second cello, for example. The movement is both concentrated and redolent of *Sturm und Drang*, ending in a mood that suggests grim determination to outlast sorrow, with one wonderfully tranquil passage in F major, *poco sostenuto*, before the sinewy severity of the coda. In the Piano Quintet this passage, starting at bar 261, is one of the few places where the piano falls silent, and has long been suspected to preserve the original sound of the String Quintet. Here Karttunen preserves Brahms' string-writing from the Piano Quintet, only sharing the single cello part between the two cellos.

Some of that tranquillity persists into the slow movement [2], a calm ternary structure in A flat the main theme of which brings to mind the character of a Schubert song. At the opening Karttunen's viola and second cello take over the piano theme in thirds from the Piano Quintet. The second theme, in E major, given by Karttunen to cello I (as noted above), is more dramatic in conception, and the first theme is gradually dissolved in the reprise, though it leads to an ending of peaceful beauty.

The fiery third movement [3] is one of Brahms' greatest scherzos, a classic example of the virile, dynamic 6/8 vein he had cultivated since his earliest works. In C minor, it discloses a kinship to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in the same key in its demonic, obsessive rhythmic figures, and even the broad, singing tune of the Trio – which is easy to imagine on strings alone – is taken at the same inexorable pace. One of the challenges to a 'reconstructor' here is how to accommodate the insistent rhythmic figures that Brahms gives to the piano in the Piano Quintet. Karttunen's solutions, generally involving violin II and one or other of the cellos, are ingenious and effective. The grim fusillade of accented falling semitones, D flat–C, in the final bars of the scherzo is almost certainly a homage to the similar ending of Schubert's Quintet.

The finale [4] opens with a slow introduction of a kind Brahms was later to use in his First Symphony. Karttunen maintains that, like the Trio of the Scherzo, this is a place 'in which one can be fairly confident about the sound the original version would have had [...] the piano automatically transforms the music into something else'.⁸ Numb, ghostly string figures grope their way into perhaps the most emotionally afflicted music the work has yet encompassed, before the

⁸ *Loc. cit.*



main movement arrives with a sturdy cello tune of Classical cut and Haydn-like aplomb. The second subject, though, is more Romantic, with a kind of fevered lyric pathos. Its first appearance is another place in the Piano Quintet where the presence of the piano seems hardly motivated, and the string-quintet texture is easy to recover. It is this darker strain which eventually prevails, and the tragic mood is confirmed in the final headlong rush of the *Presto* coda, where Karttunen conjures a satisfying weight of tone from the five instruments without requiring piano support.

String Quintet in B minor, Op. 115



Brahms did not revisit the string-quintet form for another twenty years: his first ‘official’ String Quintet, in F major, Op. 88, was composed in 1862–63; this time Brahms wrote it for the ‘Mozartian’ ensemble of two violins, two violas and cello. That is also the case with the String Quintet in G major, Op. 111, which followed in 1890 and which Brahms, for a while, thought of as his final work. But he soon went on to write a third and last quintet with viola, even though audiences have become familiar with it only as a work for clarinet and string quartet. For, in fact, Brahms’ most important contributions to the viola repertoire came about as a by-product of his most important contributions to the repertoire of the clarinet. In the same way that the world owes Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto, Trio and Quintet to the virtuosity of Anton Stadler, so the creation of Brahms’ last four chamber works was sparked by the artistry of Richard Mühlfeld (1856–1907), the principal clarinetist of the Meiningen Orchestra. Brahms had established a particularly close relationship with this orchestra since their then conductor, Hans von Bülow, had offered him the chance to try out his orchestral works before their official premieres. In March 1891 Brahms visited Meiningen to hear the orchestra under its new conductor Fritz Steinbach, and was particularly struck by the polish and almost feminine sensitivity of Mühlfeld’s playing. His admiration for such artistry suddenly re-awakened the creative urge.

Having heard Mühlfeld play Weber’s Clarinet Concertino, Brahms asked him to play his entire repertoire for him and asked many questions about his instrument and its technique. Thus fired, he started composing again. Not only do the four works he wrote for Mühlfeld – the Clarinet Quintet and Trio of 1891 and the two Sonatas of 1894 – rank among the supreme masterpieces of the wind repertoire, but they represent the purest distillation of Brahms’ thought in the chamber-music medium. They also reflect, in their innate expressive character, something of the personal isolation he was beginning to feel as many of his closest friends died off, in an increasingly frequent



punctuation of his last years. When sheer beauty is evoked in them, it is as a consolation; nostalgia and melancholy often seem to underlie the most rhythmically assertive ideas. These works, in short, have established themselves as repertoire cornerstones not merely through their magnificent craftsmanship and powers of invention, but because they convey a particularly potent and complex nexus of feeling.

The Trio, Op. 114, and the Quintet, Op. 115, were both composed, in that order, at the resort of Bad Ischl that summer. Though the composer’s manuscript in both cases stipulates clarinet, he immediately set about supplying a viola alternative to the clarinet part. Both works received their first performances in Meiningen on 24 November 1891, in the clarinet form, played by Mühlfeld. In the Quintet Joseph Joachim was the first violin, with members of the Court Orchestra. In the Trio Mühlfeld was joined by Robert Haussmann, the cellist of the Joachim String Quartet, and Brahms himself took the piano part. The Quintet was much the better received of the two works. In 1894 Brahms again bestowed a pair of works on Mühlfeld, the two Sonatas for clarinet and piano, Op. 120. As is well known, he also arranged these Sonatas for viola and piano, in which form they have become the virtual cornerstones of the viola chamber-music repertoire. But the viola versions of the Trio and Quintet have remained virtually unknown. Such substitutions were not uncommon in the music of the time, though they may seem surprising today. Performances of the Trio with viola have remained infrequent,⁹ and the Quintet is almost never heard in this form.¹⁰

Yet there is no doubt that Brahms – who, as mentioned, had within the past decade composed his two ‘two-violin’ Quintets, Opp. 88 and 111 – considered performing Op. 115 with a second viola as a viable option. As with the versions of Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet, K581, with viola instead of clarinet, which were published in the nineteenth century (versions which, as far as is known, Mozart had not himself authorised as Brahms did with Op. 115),¹¹ the all-string sonority creates a closer effect of integration than the original. The viola seems less a natural leader in ensemble chamber music than the clarinet: its darker, huskier timbre does not stand out in such high relief from the other string instruments, but it imparts a deeper intimacy which renders some passages more

⁹ It will be released, along with Anssi Karttunen’s arrangement for string trio of the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel*, Op. 24, on the second CD of *Brahms by Arrangement*, Toccata Classics TOCC 0135.

¹⁰ The Russian violist Yuri Bashmet has made and recorded his own arrangement of the work for viola and string orchestra.

¹¹ The earliest such arrangement appeared in 1803 from Johann André of Offenbach-am-Main, who had published several of Mozart’s works during the composer’s lifetime.