

Brahms Fest

**ANGELA CHENG
ZLATOMIR FUNG**

**TIMOTHY RIDOUT
BENJAMIN HOCHMAN**

CASTALIAN STRING QUARTET

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

**Sonata No. 2 for Viola and Piano
in E-flat major Op. 120 No. 2**

Allegro amabile

Allegro appassionato

Andante con moto

Allegro

(approx. 22 minutes)

Timothy Ridout, viola

Benjamin Hochman, piano

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

**Violin Sonata in G major Op. 78
arr. for Cello and Piano**

Vivace ma non troppo

Adagio — Più andante — Adagio

Allegro molto moderato

(approx. 28 minutes)

Zlatomir Fung, cello

Angela Cheng, piano

Intermission

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

String Sextet No. 2 in G major Op. 36

Allegro non troppo

Scherzo. Allegro non troppo

Adagio

Poco allegro

(approx. 42 minutes)

Castalian String Quartet

Timothy Ridout, viola

Zlatomir Fung, cello

Johannes Brahms

Sonata No. 2 for Viola and Piano in E-flat major Op. 120 No. 2

At a time when European music was turning towards large story-telling orchestral works performed in grandiose public concerts, Brahms continued to write music created from just the basic building blocks of the tonal system, intended for private performance by small ensembles. In so doing, he established the foundations for a rich new literature of chamber works that featured hitherto neglected instruments such as the clarinet and viola in a leading role. Indeed, the duo-sonata literature for these instruments can be said to begin with Brahms.

His special interest in the clarinet came late in life when, in 1891, he encountered the playing of Richard Mühlfeld, principal clarinetist in the court orchestra of Meiningen (Thuringia), noted for his warm tone and expressive playing. Brahms' last published chamber works were two sonatas Op. 120 composed in 1894 for clarinet and piano (dedicated to Mühlfeld) and then re-issued with slight revisions by the composer in a version for viola.

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The second of these, the three-movement Sonata in E flat, Op. 120, No. 2, is remarkable for its relaxed ease of expression and its underlying tone of moderation, both in mood and in tempo. It begins with a sinuous, songlike melody with many a winding turn but nary a care in the world.



A second theme arrives, less meandering but equally carefree, that even the occasional outburst from the piano cannot perturb.



This first movement is what a happy, contented old age sounds like.

The formal contrasts that normally distinguish sections within first-movement sonata form are much attenuated in this, the last sonata movement that Brahms was ever to write. The fluidity of form is most keenly felt in the development section, where tumult is avoided in favour of civilized lyrical conversation.



Despite the odd provocation from the piano, the blood pressure rarely rises beyond a slight quickening of pulse from duplets to triplets, so that the recapitulation arrives like a welcoming hostess announcing to her guests that dinner is served. The coda, marked *Tranquillo*, nudges the movement to a conclusion with the viola playing beneath the piano for the last chord.

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The ***Allegro appassionato*** second movement is where one would expect real fire, but this is not a whip-cracking scherzo like that in the F-minor Piano Sonata, Op. 5, nor the heaven-storming scherzo of the Piano Concerto No. 2.

Although written in the dark key of E-flat minor, the passion here seems more remembered in affection than vividly experienced in the present moment.



Its headlong impetus, most persuasively argued for in the massively demanding piano part, is blunted by the relatively gentle pace, one-in-the-bar rhythmic feel and frequent use of feminine phrase endings for its flowing melody line.

Indeed, there are even tentative, halting passages where the forward momentum seems to stall noticeably.



The middle-section trio is a fervent, hymn-like elegy with a long piano introduction before the viola enters with its plaintively resigned melody.



This trio maintains the seriousness of mood, contrasting only in the stern evenness of its steady quarter-note pacing.

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In keeping with the relaxed mood of this sonata, Brahms gives us a moderately paced theme-and-variations finale marked ***Andante con moto***. The gracious theme of this movement is constructed out of little bite-sized mini-phrases, all in the same repeating rhythm of dotted notes and even notes, with each short phrase ending in a contented sigh.



For his first four variations, Brahms teases the listener to find the theme hidden in textures featuring rhythmic displacement or ornamental decoration.

The first variation staggers the viola and piano parts with rhythmic offsets, sounding almost as if preparing for a fugato.



In the second variation, the two instruments take turns enveloping the theme in a lace-like tracery of arpeggiation. The third variation intensifies the decorative detail into a constant patter of 32nd notes while the fourth slows down the pace to linger lovingly over the resolution of a constant chain of syncopations.

A set of variations in a major key usually features a *minore* variation just before the end, paced slow to provide a springboard for a brilliant and vigorous final variation. But Brahms turns the tables on this practice by giving us the movement's first real spurt of energy in the fifth variation in E-flat minor.

Allegro 71

The musical score is for the fifth variation of Brahms' Variations in E-flat minor, marked **Allegro**. It begins at measure 71. The key signature is E-flat minor (three flats). The time signature is 2/4. The score is written for piano and violin. The piano part starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a *ben marc.* (ben marcato) instruction. The violin part enters in the second measure. The piano part has a steady eighth-note bass line, while the violin part has a more complex melody with slurs and accents.

This leaves the last variation the task of building up momentum from an almost pastoral mood to one of vigorous celebration as the work ends.

Johannes Brahms

Violin Sonata in G major Op. 78 (arr. for cello and piano)

In the summer of 1879 Brahms completed his Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano, which he later also arranged for cello. In this warm and tender work, we catch a rare glimpse of the close personal relationship between the composer and his lifelong friend, the pianist and composer Clara Schumann (1819–1896).

Brahms was godfather to Felix Schumann (1854–1879), the youngest and most artistically talented of the Schumann children, who, just months before, had died of tuberculosis. Brahms' sonata contains affectionate poetic allusions and musical references woven into the score that Clara was sure to recognize. As such, it stands as a personal gesture of sympathy to a grieving mother and a fellow musician.

Chief amongst these allusions are quotations from two of Brahms' own songs that Clara was particularly fond of: *Regenlied* (Rain Song) and *Nachklang* (Reminiscence) from a collection published as the composer's Op. 59 in 1872. With texts by Brahms' friend Klaus Groth (1819–1899), they present contrasting images of rain both as a metaphor for the simple joys of childhood and as Nature's sympathetic tears for an unbearable loss.

The first stanza of *Regenlied* opens

Walle, Regen, walle nieder,	Flow, rain, flow down,
Wecke mir die Träume wieder,	Awaken in me the dreams
Die ich in der Kindheit träumte,	That I dreamt in my childhood.

while *Nachklang* begins

Regentropfen aus den Bäumen	Drops of rain from the trees
Fallen in das grüne Gras,	Fall onto the green grass,
Tränen meiner trüben Augen	Tears in my sorrowful eyes
Machen mir die Wangen nass.	Make my cheeks wet.

Both songs make use of two musical motives that Brahms incorporates into the score of his sonata. The first is that their melody lines both begin with a “motto” figure in a dotted rhythm on a single pitch. The second is an accompaniment figure in rolling 8th notes imitating the gentle drip-drip of falling raindrops, as in the opening of *Nachklang*:

Sanft bewegt

Re - gen - trop - fen aus den Bäu - men

motto

raindrops

motto

Brahms' *Regensonate* (Rain Sonata), as this work has come to be known, begins with three iterations of this same “motto” figure built into its gentle and consoling opening theme that casually lilts on the weak beats of the bar.

Johannes Brahms, Op. 78
(Veröffentlicht 1880)

Vivace ma non troppo

Noticeable right away is how Brahms' famously "hefty" piano textures are kept in check to allow the solo instrument (violin or cello) to sing out clearly, although Brahms' equally famous penchant for cross-rhythms finds employment in this picturesque imitation of falling raindrops in the piano accompaniment.

Even the economical motivic craftsman, Brahms uses the motto's same dotted rhythm, starting on the same beat of the bar, in his expansive and deep-breathing second theme, with its steady comforting pedal tone in the bass.

With such peaceful material to work with, the development section aims more for glorification of its themes than conflict between them. It engages the ear first with running 8th notes from the first theme and then ruminates at length over the motto motive's dotted rhythm as a means of slipping effortlessly into the recapitulation, which, without unnecessary drama, brings a rounded sense of closure to the movement.

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Brahms' relatively light touch in his keyboard writing in this first movement allows the solo instrument's sunny tone to sing out easily at the top of the texture. By contrast, the meditative and inward-looking *Adagio* that follows is overspread with a dark pall of rich Brahmsian piano tone emanating from the depths of the instrument's bass register.

This sombre tonal colouring is evident from the piano's opening thematic statement, with its halting, almost sobbing syncopations that struggle to find their bearings over the distant rolling thunder of the harmonies that support them down below.



When the solo instrument enters, it does so tentatively, with a series of plangent sighs, before emerging into a rhapsodic lament both wistful and comforting – a meditation, perhaps, on the passing of Felix Schumann.

This notion finds support in the movement's middle section, which, with its move from E-flat major to E-flat minor, has the stern implacable character of a funeral march.



Notice how densely Brahms has packed meaning into the motto's dotted rhythm, which in the first movement prompted misty memories of Klaus Groth's poetic imagery but here in the heart of the slow movement stares directly into the eyes of Death.

When the opening material returns, it is the solo instrument, in double stops, that now holds forth with the theme while the piano weaves a magnificent tapestry of sonorities at cross-rhythms with the syncopated melody above.



The motto's dotted rhythm makes one more appearance when, after a reprise of the funeral march in a more optimistic and comforting E-flat major, it rumbles as a pedal point in the bass in the coda to take the movement to its peaceful conclusion.



Brahms' most explicit reference to his settings of Klaus Groth's poems — and the meaning they have for Clara Schumann — comes in the finale, which opens with a literal quotation from *Nachklang*, in both its melody and its "raindrop" accompaniment.



Unusually written in the minor mode, this finale is structured as a rondo, meaning that recurrences of the opening refrain are interrupted by various episodes of a contrasting nature.

Of special interest is the second of these, in which the solo instrument presents the opening melody of the slow movement in double stops, in its original key of E-flat major.



But it becomes clear as its melodic line develops that it has lost its grave demeanour, emerging with a sweeping sense of confidence and a gentle lilt that marks its possible transformation from a dirge to a dance.

This hopeful turn of events is confirmed in the third episode, in which the key changes from G minor to G major, and this same second-movement melody is proudly intoned by the piano.



And with this, the work of this sonata is done, and in the mildest possible coda we are led by the hand to a surprisingly un-triumphant but entirely Brahmsian quiet close.

Clara Schumann, in a letter to Brahms, said that she wept while playing through the score for the first time. And Brahms, for his part, confided to a friend that he thought the work "too intimate for the concert stage."

We can only be glad that it did reach the stage, to allow us to overhear this very private musical conversation between two of the 19th century's most accomplished musicians.

Johannes Brahms

String Sextet No. 2 in G major Op. 36

Clara Schumann was not the only woman in Brahms' life, nor was she the only one to inspire hidden messages in his musical scores. In 1858 Brahms was briefly engaged to soprano Agathe von Siebold (1835–1909), the daughter of a professor from Göttingen University. Both Clara and Agathe are present — each in their own way — in Brahms' Sextet in G major, Op. 36, composed in 1864.

Clara was the inspiration for the opening melody of the slow movement, while Agathe appears as a musical cipher in the second theme of the first movement, cryptographically intoned in the notes A-G-A-H-E (the letter T being omitted and H functioning as the German name for B natural).

Romantic musical gestures notwithstanding, this is not a “lovey-dovey” work. It has none of the free expansive lyricism and clear textures of Brahms' songful Sextet No. 1, Op. 18. Its many densely contrapuntal passages reveal Brahms' mastery of compositional technique, but these displays of skill inevitably lead to creating darker, more intellectually involved textures that require the full attention of the listener's ear. And there is, moreover, an odd bittersweet quality to the overall sound of this second sextet, an underlying sense of unease pervading it that perhaps relates to the unsettled quality of Brahms' love life.

The sense of unease is immediately audible in the viola's mysterious murmur that accompanies the appearance of the opening theme in the first violin.

Johannes Brahms, Op. 36
(Veröffentlicht 1866)

The image shows the first few measures of the String Sextet No. 2 in G major, Op. 36 by Johannes Brahms. The score is written for Violin I, Violin II, and Cello/Double Bass. The tempo is marked 'Allegro non troppo' and the key signature is one sharp (F#). The Violin I part begins with a half rest, followed by a half note G4, then a half note A4, and a half note B4. The Violin II part begins with a half rest, followed by a half note G4, then a half note A4, and a half note B4. The Cello/Double Bass part begins with a half rest, followed by a half note G4, then a half note A4, and a half note B4. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'p mezza voce', 'pp', and 'p'.

This opening theme, initiated with two rising 5ths, is pursued entirely in chordal skips, with nary a stepwise melody anywhere.

When an “intervallic” theme like this appears at the opening of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, it communicates a profound sense of cosmic mystery. And a similar chordal-skip theme evokes nobility at the outset of the “Eroica” Symphony No. 3.

But Brahms' theme, with its sudden chromatic wanderings right at the start — from G major to E-flat major and soon after to B major — bespeaks in its harmonic instability a strange sense of bewilderment and uncertainty.

But fortunately, the skies clear, and more straightforward lyrical impulses characterize the movement's gently lilting second theme presented first in the first cello and then in the first violin:



Here the viola's constant murmuring serves as simple harmonic support. But it returns to its disquieting role as an eerie wavering sonority "stalking" the first theme in the development section, where this second theme is forgotten and all eyes — or rather ears — are on the motivic tug-of-war that develops between rising and falling 5ths in the upper voices.



Its passion spent, the development section ends with a dramatic two-octave chromatic descent in the first violin to initiate the recapitulation.



The extensive coda that Brahms attaches to this movement tells us which part of the second theme he really likes: it's the cryptic AGA(T)HE cipher from the exposition, repeated over and over again as if he just can't let go of it.



This first movement — at 605 bars, one of the longest that Brahms ever wrote — is impressive not just for its rhetorical weight but also for the full use that Brahms makes of all six instruments as contrapuntal protagonists in the texture.

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The *Scherzo* that follows reverses the normal A-B-A pattern of activity in such movements. Usually, it is the A section that is rhythmically rambunctious while the B section offers a respite from all the commotion.

In this movement, however, Brahms begins with a kind of moderately paced *intermezzo*, strangely mysterious with its minor-mode colouring and slightly antique-sounding mordent embellishments in the melody line.



It seems to simply pulse in place rather than move and shake as a real scherzo would do. Contributing to its slightly “nerdy” demeanour is the eyebrow-knitting fugal treatment it gives to its rolling scale figures.

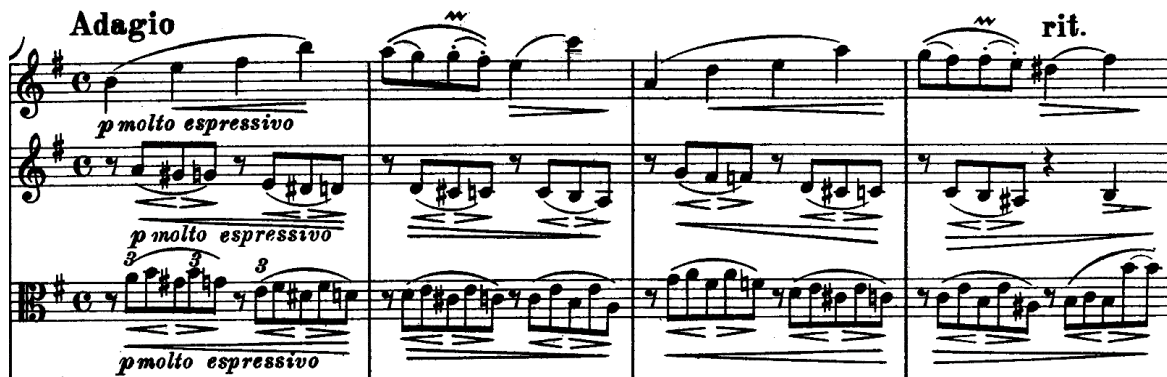
Where the real hoe-down breaks loose is in the thumping Ländler (a rural version of the big-city waltz) that counts as the movement’s Trio.



Here the mode turns to the major, the duple metre changes to triple, and even that is undermined by hefty syncopations that transform pairs of bars in hemiola back to big triplet measures, all enlivened by the heavy stomping of farmers' boots.

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The *Poco adagio* slow movement takes the form of a theme and variations, with a melody composed in the mid-1850s, almost a decade before the sextet as a whole. This melody, we understand from Brahms' correspondence, expressed the longing of the young composer for Clara Schumann, 12 years his senior. Its two rising 4ths may well have inspired the two rising 5ths of the opening movement.



Forlornly presented in E minor without any harmonic support from the bass whatsoever, it features in alternating bars a contrast between aspiring rising intervals and descending sigh motives, austere accompanied by two chromatically inflected alto voices in two-against-three cross rhythms below.

A very odd expression of love-longing indeed.

The five variations that follow seem to be rarefied abstractions of the theme rather than celebrations or expansions of its lyrical content. The first variation puts the chromatic downward slide of the alto voices into the soprano



while the second ruminates over the sigh motives in an equally spare texture. This “learned” intellectual approach, privileging motivic development over lyrical appeal, is confirmed in the full-on canonic imitation of the third variation with its upward-leaping octave gestures, developing into downward leaps as the variation progresses.

Brahms’ gradual build-up of textural complexity reaches its peak in the fourth variation, in which all six voices take part in the contrapuntal rumble of motivic ping-pong that plays out. The final variation moves to E major, and in contrast to the barren landscape of the opening, spreads harmonic honey throughout the entire range of the instruments with filled-in arpeggios, in mini-phrases that seem to proclaim:

“I’m an E-major chord, these are my notes! No, now I’m a D-major chord!”

Adagio ♩ = ♩

This seems to be Brahms’ way of finding a happy ending for what has been a very severe and difficult emotional journey.

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Whatever worries had dogged the previous movements, they are swept away by the relentless exuberance and good spirits of the finale.

The movement opens briskly with an orchestral-style tremolo in the upper instruments, soon imitated by the cellos below in the style of orchestration made famous by Mendelssohn in his scampering and mischievous scherzi.



Although appearing to be just an introductory gesture, these tremolo figures will participate fully in the deliberations of this sonata-form movement.

Their introductory function fulfilled, they give way to the elegiac and gently lilting first theme announced by the first violin, accompanied with typical Brahmsian warmth by parallel sixths in the first cello and then in the first viola.



The radiating warmth of tone produced by these parallel intervals will be a characteristic of this theme each time it is presented in this movement, giving an “orchestral” tonal resonance to the ensemble as a whole.

Brahms provides contrast to the smooth scalar motion of his first theme with his second theme comprised entirely of leaps, boldly and songfully proclaimed by the first cello.



Note how every instrument apart from the second cello at the very bottom of the texture takes part in this hopping “frog pond” of a leap-fest, with the first violin contributing the most athletically to the fun with its octave acrobatics at the top of the texture in the 16th-note motion of the movement’s opening.

These 16ths of the opening commandeer virtually the entire development section, with the second theme’s leaps vainly vying for attention amid a swarm of peppery 16ths in repeated notes echoing left and right in the listener’s ear.

Then tantalizing hints of the first theme begin to appear, beginning a short re-transition that smoothly modulates its way into the real first theme, which floats to the surface in the most gentle way to initiate the recapitulation.

Tying a nice big bow on the proceedings is a coda based, not surprisingly, on those pesky 16ths that reveal themselves as the perfect counterpoint for both the first and second themes, and just the right way to drive the movement, leaping, to its triumphantly joyous ending.

The image displays a musical score for a coda section, consisting of six staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is not explicitly shown but appears to be common time (C). The score is written in a modern, rhythmic style, featuring complex patterns of sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The first staff (treble clef) begins with a rapid sixteenth-note run. The second staff (treble clef) features a similar pattern. The third staff (treble clef) has a more melodic line. The fourth staff (treble clef) continues the melodic development. The fifth staff (bass clef) provides a harmonic foundation. The sixth staff (bass clef) concludes the section with a final chord. The overall texture is dense and rhythmic, characteristic of a modern musical style.

Donald G. Gíslason 2024