

Brahms Fest

ANGELA CHENG
ZLATOMIR FUNG

TIMOTHY RIDOUT
BENJAMIN HOCHMAN

CASTALIAN STRING QUARTET

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

16 Waltzes Op. 39 for Piano 4-Hands

No. 1 in B major - Tempo giusto
No. 2 in E major
No. 3 in G-sharp minor
No. 4 in E minor - Poco sostenuto
No. 5 in E major - Grazioso
No. 6 in C-sharp major - Vivace
No. 7 in C-sharp minor - Poco più Andante
No. 8 in B-flat major
(approx. 21 minutes)

Angela Cheng, piano
Benjamin Hochman, piano

No. 9 in D minor
No. 10 in G major
No. 11 in B minor
No. 12 in E major
No. 13 in B major
No. 14 in G-sharp minor
No. 15 in A-flat major
No. 16 in C-sharp minor

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major Op. 18

Allegro non troppo
Andante ma moderato
Scherzo. Allegro molto
Rondo. Poco allegretto e grazioso
(approx. 38 minutes)

Castalian String Quartet
Timothy Ridout, viola
Zlatomir Fung, cello

Intermission

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34

Allegro non troppo
Andante un poco adagio
Scherzo. Allegro
Finale. Poco sostenuto
(approx. 42 minutes)

Castalian String Quartet
Benjamin Hochman, piano

Johannes Brahms

16 Waltzes Op. 39 for Piano 4-Hands

Brahms was no stranger to the popular music of his time. As a teenager he had contributed to the family income by performing in restaurants, at private gatherings and as an accompanist in the theatres of his native Hamburg. Then, when he was barely 20 years old, he had toured with Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi (1828–1898), performing the gypsy-flavoured repertoire of folk music much in vogue at the time.

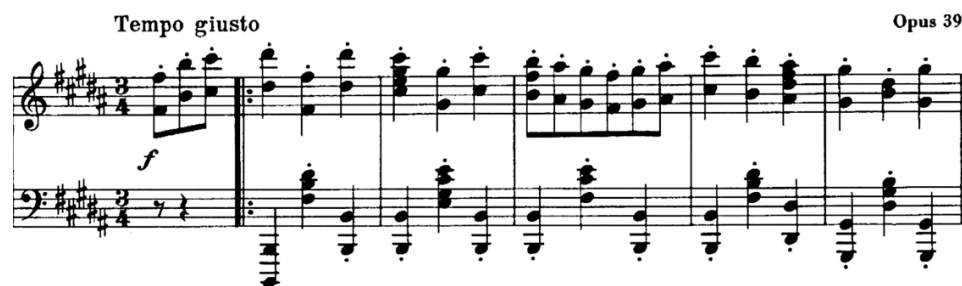
These early experiences no doubt contributed to the immediate success of his collection of 16 waltzes published in 1866, a collection so popular that it became quickly available in versions for both solo piano and piano four-hands.

Modelled in scale after the dance miniatures of Schubert, the waltzes are constructed in regular four-bar phrases and divided into two parts, with each part repeated. The first part ends on the dominant or relative major while the second part works its way harmonically back to the tonic, often recalling the opening material to create the “rounded binary” form A :||: B–A.

A wide range of waltz styles is present in the collection, from the gently lilting Viennese variety to the more energetic Ländler type inspired by village dancing. Some are even reminiscent of Brahms’ famous lullaby, drowsily pulsing with pedal tones that lull the ear into a day-dreaming state. Others are vividly alive with the improvisatory spirit of the gypsy fiddler.

While Brahms’ melodies are always simple and memorable, the elegance of his waltz settings is found in his accompaniments, which are more texturally complex than the simple “oom-pah-pah” patterns found in Schubert. Brahms’ waltz harmonies are rich with inner-voice movement, and his sense of rhythmic play at times subverts the metrical regularity of the waltz genre itself.

No. 1 in B major



The collection begins with a rousing Ländler-inspired dance full of bold leaps and stomping rhythms contrasted with scurrying scale figures. The texture is full, bass-heavy and almost orchestral in weight.

No. 2 in E major



The second waltz is a classic *valse sentimentale*. Its gentle caressing phrases, in the same lilting rhythm throughout, lavish the ear with wistful memories of Sachertorte and whipped cream in a fashionable Viennese café.

No. 3 in G-sharp minor



This *valse triste* is contemplative but not lethargic. Each bar opens with a sigh, then rushes on to the next bar to sigh again.

No. 4 in E minor



A strong gypsy element comes to the fore in the next waltz, with the gypsy violinist's rapid-fire embellishments and plangent parallel sixths creating dance music full of pathos and even defiance.

No. 5 in E major



The fifth waltz is a quasi-lullaby with many a drowsy-making pedal tone. It pulses almost statically as suspensions in the inner voices resolve across the bar line to nudge the top-line melody forward.

No. 6 in C-sharp major



Audience members with a penchant for toe-tapping will be driven cross-eyed by the ear-teasing metrical irregularities of this (apparently) triple-meter dance rife with hemiolas.

No. 7 in C-sharp minor



A similar hemiola effect plays out in the seventh dance, with two-bar triple-meter groupings in the top part juxtaposed against single-bar groupings in the accompaniment below. This inner sense of struggle and turmoil is reflected in the wide-ranging excursions of the harmony to produce a surprising amount of drama in such a small piece.

No. 8 in B-flat major



A wide-ranging melody is supported over many bars by a constant pedal point in the bass, making each change in harmony, when it does happen, a major event.

No. 9 in D minor



The D-minor waltz might well have been inspired by the same utterly simple texture and repetitive pattern of falling intervals in Chopin's G minor Nocturne, Op. 15, No. 3.



But Brahms' little "nocturne-style" waltz is hardly evocative of the stillness of the night. Its intriguing pattern of harmonies creates a mood of restless rumination and wide-awake tonal curiosity.

No. 10 in G major



The spiffy double-thirds of the coquettish tenth waltz go by so quickly that the ear hardly has time to process the quicksilver changes of harmony between major and minor that create such an iridescent effect on its sonic surface.

No. 11 in B minor

The twinkling embellishments and minor-mode seriousness of the eleventh waltz evoke the style of gypsy music,



a style confirmed by the trademark cadencing pattern of its first half.



No. 12 in E major



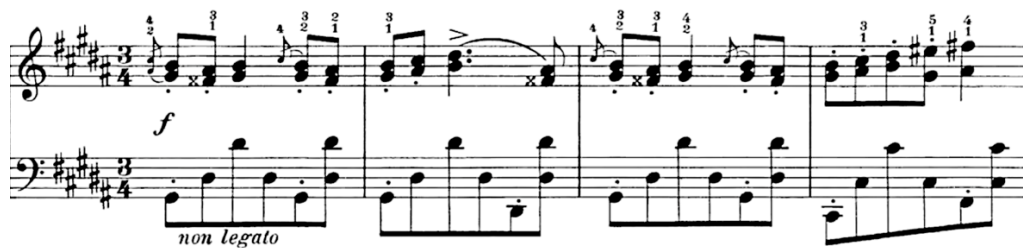
The low tonal register and cavernous bass notes of the twelfth waltz recall Brahms' late piano pieces while suspensions over the bar line give a halting quality to the melody line's slow climb up the scale to its luminous cadence.

No. 13 in B major



Bold gestures and exhilarating “run-up” ornaments mark this short piece as another gypsy-inspired waltz.

No. 14 in G-sharp minor



The gypsy feel is alive, as well, in the cross-rhythmic metrical groupings between melody and accompaniment of this “ants-in-the-pants” dance piece. With its “whoop-whoop” sense of bravado, it likely would be more at home in a village square than in a Viennese dance hall.

No. 15 in A-flat major



This most famous of Brahms' waltzes has a music-box charm reminiscent of the gentle rocking of his equally famous lullaby.

No. 16 in C-sharp minor



Brahms returns to Vienna for the final waltz of this collection, a gently paced *valse sentimentale* full of lively harmonic movement in the inner voices.

Johannes Brahms String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major Op. 18

Brahms' first sextet for strings was composed in 1860 and comprises four movements in the canonical forms of the classical sonata: a first movement in sonata form, a theme-and-variations slow movement, a scherzo much in the manner of Beethoven, and a sonata-rondo finale. It contrasts with Brahms' more "abstract" Sextet No. 2 in G major, Op. 36, in being more "songful" and lyrical, with a warmer tone overall.

This warmth of tone largely derives from the unusually prominent role given to the cellos in this work. Having two cellos to work with, Brahms could free one of them for melodic writing, knowing that the other would still be present to maintain a firm bass foundation for the harmony.

Brahms seems to have had a lifelong love affair with the baritone register, a tendency demonstrated clearly in the extraordinarily low range in which he chooses to present the first movement's opening theme, with the two cellos in counterpoint and one viola providing harmonic fill.



This hymn-like tune is then celebrated by the other instruments as the texture expands to include all of them. A second more active theme emerges, with downward leaps in a dotted rhythm to replace the steady quarter-note pace and smooth scalar motion of the first theme. This time it is the upper instruments taking the lead.



But this Theme 2 is in the "wrong" key, A major. Where is the theme in the dominant, as stipulated by "correct" sonata form?

The even more wide-ranging Theme 3 soon arrives, presented once again by Cello 1 in the baritone range. Note the two-against-three rhythms between viola and cello.



By contrast with the exposition, the development section begins in the upper voices, first chewing over bits of its first theme in echoing antiphonal responses between instruments



before putting Theme 2 through its paces in various harmonic guises.

The recapitulation arrives at the climax of a big build-up of sound and motivic intensity in an expanding passage marked *sempre crescendo*. But this time the opening theme is presented by the trio of Violas 1 and 2 plus Cello 1.

Here Brahms writes quite thickly, and his thematic instruments struggle to be heard in the middle of the texture, surrounded top and bottom by throbbing offbeats in the other instruments. A short coda in pizzicato rounds out the movement.

The second movement *Andante ma moderato* sets aside the lyrical tone of the first movement to give us a set of five variations on a bold and gritty theme in D minor, a theme that keeps struggling upward against all odds.



This theme is not presented by the cellos, as in the first movement, but by the next best thing, a solo viola, before being handed over to the other members of the ensemble for processing.

Brahms creates forward momentum by using the time-tested technique of increasing subdivisions of the beat.

First the harmonies of the theme are filled in by 16ths tossed between the instruments (led by the cellos), then triplet 16ths, and finally, in Variation 3, in great sweeping scales in 32nds — with the cellos, the stars of this sextet, taking the leading role, of course.



Things calm down considerably in the fourth variation, which switches to D major for a change of tonal colour. Here is where the violins finally get their place in the sun, singing out an assured, expressive melody supported by a faithful accompaniment of steady 8ths and quarter notes.

Brahms steps back even further in the scaled-down “music box” fifth variation, with its drone 5ths in the Viola 2 and no cellos at all in the texture.



The honour of closing out the movement in the charming coda is once again given to Cello 1, which intones the opening theme once again, restored to its original minor mode but strangely more reconciled to ending in the major.

The last few variations have been hinting at a folk origin for this theme, and the little run-up ornaments and grace notes that embellish it in this gentle coda seem to confirm that impression.

This is the most popular movement of the sextet, and Clara Schumann liked it so much that Brahms even prepared a piano version of it for her.

The third-movement **Scherzo** is a short little punchy affair, patterned after the scherzo movements of Beethoven, with a bouncy staccato theme, off-beat accents, and syncopated jostling in its forward movement.



And its Trio — usually the section of peaceful repose that contrasts with the hectic pace of the opening — is even more frenetic!



The **Finale** is a sonata-rondo, meaning that it operates according to the rondo principle of alternating a recurring refrain with contrasting episodes, but the central episode is something of a “development” section, as in a sonata.

The opening refrain tune has, in many respects, the same calm, assured mood and relaxed tone of the opening theme of the first movement. And it even has the same texture as well, with Cello 1 proclaiming the tune to the simple accompaniment of just Cello 2 and Viola 2 alone.



But equally important for the developmental aspects of this theme is how it continues in the viola and two cellos:



Brahms being Brahms, he likes to re-use the same material over again in different guises. So many of his “contrasting” episodes in this movement are not woven from entirely new material but fashioned in part by slyly recycling various motivic fragments from the opening refrain.

The rising arpeggio figure from the continuation of the refrain, for example, is used extensively in the first episode, while the repeated-note figure completely dominates the “developmental” second episode



Finally, an animated coda, still fixated on the repeated-note motive,



rounds up all the motivic stragglers and briskly whisks the movement to its bright conclusion.

Johannes Brahms

Piano Quintet in F minor Op. 34

The F-minor quintet has had many lives. It began in 1862 as a string quintet with two cellos, perhaps in homage to the great Schubert String Quintet in C, but then was recast as a work for two pianos and eventually emerged in its final form as a piano quintet. All of this shuffling between instrumental ensembles represents no fault in the work's initial conception but rather points to a central quality of Brahms' music as a whole: its unwavering commitment to the primacy of musical ideas over the appeal of any specific instrumental colouring. In this, Brahms looks back to the aesthetic ideals and compositional practices of the Baroque, and to Bach in particular.

And yet the tone of this work as a whole is entirely that of the Romantic era: moody, restless, rebellious and heroic, with an emotional undercurrent of tragedy ever present. The masterful manner in which Brahms uses the same small number of motives over and over again to create a large-scale structure cross-swept with compelling emotions is amply demonstrated in the densely argued first movement.

This movement is unusually dark in mood, with both its first and second themes set in the minor mode. It begins with a mysterious and slightly spooky bare-bones statement of its first theme with all instruments in unison, a theme that rocks back and forth around a number of common chords.



But then the piano suddenly bolts out of the gate with an impetuous round of 16ths — but not just *any* 16ths.



They perfectly reproduce the melodic outline of the opening unison theme, but in smaller note values. Deriving both contrast *and* continuity from the same musical material — that's Brahms in a nutshell.

Embedded in the opening theme is a motive that will dominate this first movement, and indeed recur throughout the quintet as a whole: the *semitone*.

The alternation of C and D-flat is what gives the opening theme its wavering emotional colouring, and the transition to the second theme, spun out by Violin 1 in plaintive semitone sighs, makes crystal clear the importance of this small interval in the musical discussion.



Not to be outdone, the second theme in the minor key of C#, the alternate spelling of D-flat, features both a melody line based on this alternating interval in duple groupings *and* a murmuring accompaniment in the bass that is comprised of little *but* semitones, in triplets.



With such a turbulent exposition behind it, the development section begins unusually hushed with a Violin 1 line that disappears up to the high register to begin a much less assertive examination of the motives of the first theme.



But this timid demeanour doesn't last for long, and a gradual build-up of sound unleashes a full-throated defence of the second theme's many virtues until the impetuous 16ths from the movement's opening page break up the proceedings to usher in the recapitulation.

Little seems to have changed, though, and the recapitulation is still as grumpy and emotionally raw as the exposition, except that we are led to believe in the coda that a "happy ending" might be in store, given the change of mode to F major and a change of mood to that of peaceful resignation.

But our hopes are dashed by one last outburst from those impetuous 16ths that interrupted the main theme on the first page of this movement. Erupting one last time, they sweep us back to the dark shadows of F minor in an almost vengeful wave of concluding anger and grim defiance.

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After the turbulent and densely argued first movement comes a slow movement in A-B-A form of audacious simplicity and seductive Viennese charm. Its opening theme, though, appears to have little to recommend it. The phrases are virtually all symmetrical four-bar units, and the mood is sleepy, almost lullaby-ish.



The piano plays in 3rds or 6ths for most of its duration, and the same "Scotch snap" figure at the beginning of the bar keeps recurring over and over again. And yet, little by little, we are drawn in to this "cozy" texture by how melody and accompaniment seem to mirror each other, especially the "Scotch snap" figure, which appears echoed, in augmentation, in the string accompaniment.

The middle section is more active, although hardly sprightly, and is significantly less “drowsy” despite the recurrence of pedal tones in the bass.

musical score for J. B. 25, featuring five staves. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The dynamics include *molto espress.*, *pizz.*, *mf*, *f*, and *f molto espress.*. The score is written in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 2/4 time signature.

J. B. 25

By the time the A section returns, we are quite ready for more “nap time” music, but we dare not drift off, for fear of missing out on the luscious buckets of Viennese whipped-cream string sonority that Brahms applies with such a generous hand to his opening material.

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The Scherzo that follows allows the ear to work off all that rich musical food in a movement that is ear-catching not only for its propulsive rhythmic drive but also because of the way that, like the first movement, it springs from a very small number of musical elements.

It begins with a suspenseful build-up of syncopations in the strings:

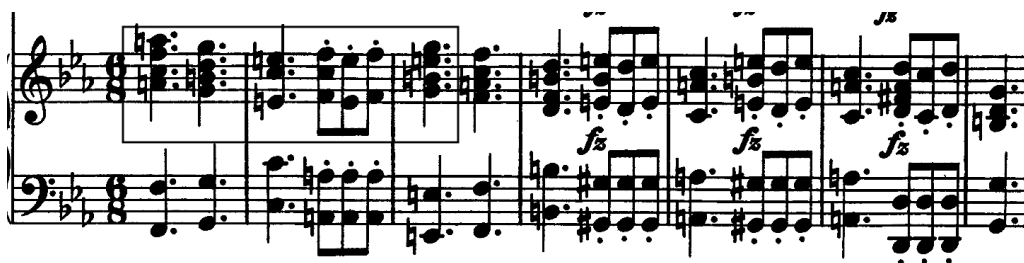
musical score for Allegro, featuring four staves. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The dynamics include *sempre pp*, *pizz.*, and *pp*. The score is written in a key with two flats (Bb, Eb) and a 3/4 time signature.

To this, the piano adds a busy little pattern of 16ths that sounds like a pesky fly circling round you that you just can't manage to swat.



Relief comes quickly, however, when a fresh new melody, a stirring anthem of hope and bright cheer, arrives to sweep away all trace of the previous material.

But is it really new? No, it's the same “pesky fly” motive, written in larger note values, and in the major mode.



And when this busy little motive returns to be treated in fugato, its “contrasting” countersubject is really just an augmented version of itself at double note values. The interlaced right-hand and left-hand *martellato* piano writing? Simple. It's an echoing hoquet created from the repeated notes at the beginning of the “pesky fly” motive.

Brahms, you see, knows how to make buns, loaves, flapjacks and crêpes, all from the same musical “flour.”

Even the Trio theme in the middle section is derived from the rhythm of the major-mode anthem, with the same triplet figure in the middle of its hymn-like, steady-paced dotted quarter notes.



And yet, even though this whole movement manages to be constructed like a house of mirrors, continually reflecting its motivic material back on itself, it never tires the ear. Its propulsive momentum, driven in large part by the hammering rhythms of the piano part, inevitably ends up making it the most memorable movement of the whole work.

So Brahms was right to re-format his original string quartet to include the piano. The riveting effect of this movement could hardly be imagined on any other instrument.

And that *semitone* motive from the first movement, the one that initiates the “pesky fly” figure in the Scherzo?

Well, Brahms makes sure you remember it by poking you in the eye with it at the end of the first section and the end of the movement as a whole.



After such a movement as the Scherzo, the risk of anticlimax is real. So Brahms begins his last movement with a tortuously slow introduction, an introduction in an imitative texture rife with this quintet's favourite interval: the semitone.



After the quite grand dramatic outpourings of this introduction, the movement's main theme, when it finally arrives, is an uncomplicated affair, a decorated rising minor scale and little more.



But this being Brahms, of course, it is hardly finished when it gets immediately repeated in inversion, coming down the scale as simply as it went up.

The episodes in this sonata-rondo finale all derive in some way from the introduction, the principal theme or any number of variations of these two.

This episode, for example, uses the semitones of the introduction, with the Violin 1 taking on the melody line of the “pesky fly” motive from the Scherzo, plus the “Scotch snap” figure from the slow movement for good measure.



The massive coda, based on an up-tempo version of the first theme but in 6/8 time, is a virtual movement all in itself.



It features a Beethovenian fugato and many a thunderous climax, settling the anticlimax question once and for all.

Donald G. Gíslason 2024