

# Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

## String Sextet No.1 in B flat

Op.18

*I: Allegro ma non troppo*

*II: Andante ma moderato*

*III: Scherzo: Allegro molto*

*IV: Poco allegretto e grazioso*

Brahms wrote his first chamber work for strings, the String Sextet No.1, in 1859, in the wake of the most emotionally tumultuous years of his young life. The relationship between Brahms and Clara Schumann is well documented, and by the end of 1856 had reached a shattering conclusion: while Clara now openly loved Brahms, and was free to do so following the death of her husband Robert, Brahms made it clear that he had no intention of marrying her. Brahms attitude towards Clara would remain in this state throughout his life: idealised, imagined, but never founded in reality. It was not long after this crisis that Brahms was introduced to the voluptuous soprano Agathe von Siebold, in the summer of 1858.

The relationship between Brahms and Agathe developed quickly; and when Clara caught the pair embracing in September 1858, she fled in jealous disgust: He left me alone with words of love and devotion, and now he falls for this girl because she has a pretty voice . The friends who had introduced Brahms to Agathe hinted that her reputation was at risk unless he proposed; which he duly did, and was accepted.

However, the reception of Brahms music was to strike a fatal blow to the relationship. Performances of his Piano Concerto No.1 met with a frosty reception. Brahms had already experienced misgivings about his ability as a provider when faced with the prospect of supporting Clara and her children; now he faced a similar quandary, as he later recalled to his friend George Henschel:

At the time I should have liked to marry, my music was either hissed in the concert hall, or at least received with icy coldness. Now for myself, I could bear that quite well, because I knew its worth, and that some day the tables would be turned... But if, in such moments, I had had

to meet the anxious, questioning eyes of a wife with the words another failure I could not have borne that!

This attitude prompted the fateful note to Agathe, in which Brahms tried to camouflage his painful meaning amid passionate declarations: I love you! I must see you again! But I cannot wear fetters! Agathe wrote to Brahms ending the engagement and returning his ring. Brahms was full of remorse, telling a friend: I have played the scoundrel towards Agathe.

It was not long after this series of events that Brahms wrote his String Sextet No.1. However, while the songs of the 1860s betray much of what Brahms was feeling at this time, the first sextet cannot be interpreted as a direct reflection of external events. Nevertheless, the nature of Brahms' personality can offer an insight into his choice of genre. He was uncomfortable with comparisons between himself and those he admired – as demonstrated by his trepidation at the prospect of stepping into Robert Schumann's shoes as Clara's husband. To attempt a string quartet would, similarly, have drawn comparisons with Beethoven. The sextet was a safer choice.

The fuller sonority of the string sextet also suited Brahms' love of weaving rich contrapuntal tapestries; and the presence of a second cello allowed for the exploitation of the first cello's melodic capabilities, which Brahms clearly valued (as in the cello solo which opens the Second Piano Concerto's *Andante*). The Sextet No.1 duly begins with a cello theme, answered by first violin and first viola in octaves – a device suggested by Brahms' friend the violinist Joseph Joachim, who led the work's premiere in Hanover in October 1860. This opening movement, based upon an Austrian Ländler, unfolds with a sense of surging forward momentum, swept along on a current of imitative rhythms.

Despite the complexity of their relationship, Brahms was joined at the Sextet's premiere by Clara Schumann, for whom he made a piano arrangement of the second movement as a birthday present. This movement begins with a sombre, studied theme treated to a series of variations in which Brahms' learned, technical execution is offset by stormy Romantic gestures, the whole lightened by the fourth and fifth variations in D major, when lyricism and levity creep in.

Brahms need not have dreaded comparisons: his Scherzo has all the *joie de vivre* of Haydn's, or indeed Beethoven's, most unbuttoned quartet-writing. Joachim ventured to suggest amendments to the expansive rondo finale, requesting more contrast between the themes. But Brahms remained stubbornly true to his convictions – and didn't change a note.

# **Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)**

## ***Verklärte Nacht* ('Transfigured Night')**

Op.4 for string sextet (after a poem from *Weib und Welt* by Richard Dehmel, 1863-1920)

- I. *Sehr langsam* (Stanza 1)
- II. *Etwas bewegter* (Stanza 2)
- III. *Schwer betont* (Stanza 3)
- IV. *Sehr breit und langsam* (Stanza 4)
- V. *Sehr ruhig* (Stanza 5)

Arnold Schoenberg's name has become synonymous with the hugely innovative twelve-tone serial techniques he pioneered, and for the influence of these techniques on his most prominent students, Alban Berg and Anton Webern. Schoenberg first abandoned tonality in 1908, and by 1920 had developed serialism, which he continued to employ rigorously until the 1930s ushered in his use of more diverse stylistic methods. These developments all too frequently overshadow Schoenberg's early tonal works, some of which show the composer still feeling his way, but others, like *Verklärte Nacht*, demonstrate real depth and skill.

These early works show, in particular, the influence of Wagner and Brahms. Schoenberg orchestrated the latter's Piano Quartet in G minor, Op.25 strictly in the style of Brahms, and would champion his music throughout his teaching career, as reminiscences from his students attest. The pianist Lona Truding studied with Schoenberg at the Schwarzwald School Seminar, later recalling that: "...it was only via Schoenberg that I learned to appreciate Mozart, that I learned to appreciate Wagner, and above all, I learned to appreciate Brahms—especially the chamber music. Similarly, musicologist Erwin Ratz claimed that Schoenberg never spoke about modern music to any student who was not able to, let's say, write a string quartet in Brahms' style well. He said, 'If he can't do that, I will not talk to him about new music under any circumstances.'

Schoenberg received encouragement from Brahms via Alexander Zemlinsky, who taught Schoenberg until about 1900; it was Zemlinsky who showed the older composer two movements of Schoenberg's early Quartet in D major. Brahms was impressed. In 1933, Schoenberg wrote the intriguing essay *Brahms the Progressive* (revised in 1947), in which he hailed Brahms as the legitimizing model of history for the radical innovations of modernism, with particular emphasis on his use of irregular rhythms and phrasing. Schoenberg's last book, *Structural Functions of Harmony* (1948) also includes analysis of Brahms' enriched harmony and employment of remote tonalities.

The influences of Brahms, Wagner and Mahler are audible in what is considered Schoenberg's first significant work, the one-movement string sextet *Verklärte Nacht*, Op.4 of 1899 (which he later arranged for string orchestra). The work was inspired by a poem by Richard Dehmel, whose texts Schoenberg also set in numerous songs written during the same year. The poem, from Dehmel's collection *Weib und Welt* (Woman and World) of 1896, is a moving depiction of a woman admitting to her new lover that she is pregnant by a stranger. The man responds by embracing the unborn child as his own; thus the scene is transformed from tension to joy. Writing about the work in 1950, Schoenberg describes this resolution at the end of the sextet:

...A long coda section concludes the work. Its material consists of themes of the preceding parts, all of them modified anew, so as to glorify the miracles of nature that have changed this night of tragedy into a transfigured night.

However, while Schoenberg's music captures the poem's shifts in mood—using five sections to correspond with the poem's structure—the composer wrote in 1950 that the piece is different from other illustrative compositions, first by not being for orchestra, but for a chamber group; second, because it does not illustrate any action or drama, but was restricted to portray nature and to express human emotions. It seems that, due to this attitude, my composition has gained qualities which can satisfy even if one does not know what it illustrates; or, in other words, it can be appreciated as pure music.

The sextet's premiere was given on 18 March, 1902 by the Rosé Quartet—which had also played premieres of late Brahms quartets—with Franz Jelinek as the second viola player and Franz Schmidt on second cello. The reception was controversial—Schoenberg later said it was hissed and caused riots and fist fights—but has since proved his most popular work.

Two people are walking through the bare, cold grove;  
the moon accompanies them, they gaze at it.  
The moon courses above the high oaks;  
not a cloud obscures the light of heaven,  
into which the black treetops reach.  
A woman's voice speaks:

I am carrying a child, and not yours;  
I walk in sin beside you.  
I have deeply transgressed against myself.  
I no longer believed in happiness  
and yet had a great yearning  
for purposeful life, for the happiness  
and responsibility of motherhood; so I dared  
and, shuddering, let my body  
be embraced by a strange man,  
and have become pregnant.  
Now life has taken its revenge,  
now that I have met you.

She walks with awkward step.  
She looks up: the moon accompanies them.  
Her dark glance is inundated with light.  
A man's voice speaks:

Let the child you have conceived  
be no burden to your soul.  
O see, how brightly the universe gleams!  
There is a radiance on everything;  
you drift with me on a cold sea,  
but a special warmth flickers  
from you to me, from me to you.  
This will transfigure the other's child;  
you will bear it for me, from me;  
you have brought radiance on me,  
you have made me a child myself.

He clasps her round her strong hips.  
Their breath mingles in the breeze.  
Two people go through the high, clear night.

' Joanna Wyld, 2009

(Poem translated by Lionel Salter, 1992)

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