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THE BRAHMS PIANO TRIOS

Brahms' three piano trios figure curiously in his career. He wrote the first of them at age 20, when he had flowing locks and cheeks so rosy that it was said that "a maiden might kiss them without blushing." And then—strangely—Brahms forgot about writing piano trios for almost three decades. He came back to the form when he was in his late fifties and quickly wrote two more. By then he had become rotund and had grown a long white beard above which his piercing blue eyes took in the world.

And so we might think that the three works on this program are the work of the very young Brahms and of the more sophisticated older composer he became. But it's more complicated than that. In 1889, three years after completing his "final" piano trio, Brahms went back to the trio he had written as a boy and completely revised it. There may appear to be a thirty-year gap between the first work on this program and the final two, but in fact all three of Brahms' piano trios show the hand of an experienced master.

Piano Trio in C Major, Op. 87

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1880-1882

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Scherzo: Presto
- IV. Finale: Allegro giocoso

Brahms was normally the most self-deprecating of composers, anxious to heap scorn on each new work he wrote. And so it comes as a pleasant surprise to read his description of the *Trio in C Major* to his publisher: "You have not so far had such a beautiful trio from me and very probably have not published one to match it in the last ten years." It is very doubtful the Brahms' publisher—or any other publisher—has ever published another trio as beautiful as this one. It came from the apex of Brahms' career: he began it in March 1880, when he was almost 47, but completed only the first

movement. Returning to the score two years later, he wrote the final three movements at his favorite summer retreat, Bad Ischl, high in the Austrian Alps. The first performance took place on December 29, 1882.

The opening instant of the first movement establishes a characteristic pattern. Here (and throughout the trio) Brahms treats the piano and the two string instruments as two separate voices. The violin and cello so often play in octaves that the notion of a trio—of music featuring three separate voices—seems to become instead a duo: a sort of massive sonata for piano and a huge, eight-stringed instrument. The *Allegro* is built on three theme-groups: the strings' athletic opening theme (violin and cello are in octaves), a chordal second melody introduced by piano, and a lilting idea in triplets played by the strings, once again in octaves. The development is extended (Brahms stretches the opening theme into a waltz and builds much of the development on this idea), and the movement drives to a powerful close on the opening theme.

The *Andante con moto* is an ingenious set of variations. Violin and cello (now two octaves apart) immediately announce the main theme, and its Lombard rhythms (dotted rhythm with the short note coming first to produce a rhythmic snap) have led many to assume that this theme must have its origins in the Hungarian folk music Brahms loved so much. This theme, however, appears to be entirely the creation of Brahms. There are five variations; the odd-numbered ones treat this theme, while the two even-numbered are variations of the piano accompaniment to the original theme. Brahms thus creates a double set of variations on what appears to be only one theme.

The *Scherzo* is one of Brahms' most effective (and one of his shortest) movements. The crisp C-minor mutterings of the opening section give way to a C-Major trio, built on one of the most glowing themes Brahms ever wrote. Beginning quietly, the violin soars to the top of its range as this radiant idea unfolds and sings. The return to the ghostly opening section sounds even darker by contrast, and Brahms offers an almost literal repeat of the opening, varying only the conclusion.

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The marking to the last movement—*Allegro giocoso*—is crucial, for this is genuinely a happy finale. The movement is in sonata form, but its wealth of ideas has led many to compare it to a rondo. Once again, violin and cello are in octaves as they announce the main idea. Brahms marks this *mezzo voce* (middle voice), and this theme will gradually grow more powerful as the movement progresses. A lengthy coda leads to a powerful close on a huge variant of this opening theme.

Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 101

Composed: 1886

- I. Allegro energico
- II. Presto non assai
- III. Andante grazioso
- IV. Allegro molto

Brahms wrote this trio—his last for violin, cello, and piano—during the summer of 1886, which he spent at Hofstetten on Lake Thun in Switzerland. From the windows of his room, Brahms could look out over the lake to the immense glaciers of the Bernese Oberland, and some have felt that the elemental power of that craggy vista made itself felt in the music Brahms composed there. Certainly the *Piano Trio in C minor* communicates tension from its opening instant. A description of an early performance of this trio, with Brahms at the piano, suggests the composer's own intensity in this music: "A simple room, a small upright pianino, the three giants, and Clara Schumann turning over the leaves ... I can see [Brahms] now looking eagerly with those penetrating, clear, grey-blue eyes, at Joachim and Hausmann for the start, then lifting both of his energetic little arms high up and descending 'plump' on that first C minor chord ... as much as to say: 'I mean THAT.'" For all its power, though, the *Trio in C minor* is probably Brahms' most concise work: despite being in four movements, it is almost the shortest of his twenty-four pieces of chamber music.

The opening of the *Allegro energico* explodes off the page, driving forward on the triplet rhythm that will energize much of the movement. A warmer second subject, marked *cantando* and scored for the strings in octaves, brings some relief, but this

movement remains taut throughout: Brahms omits the exposition repeat and keeps both development and recapitulation quite short. The opening theme returns only in the closing moments and drives the movement to an unrelenting close.

The *Presto non assai*, also in C minor, is more restrained. Brahms mutes the strings and marks the beginning *semplice* ("simple"); the music skims along fluidly in the piano, with the strings following and echoing. The middle section, with arpeggiated pizzicato chords riding above the staccato piano, is particularly effective.

Much has been made of the rhythmic complexity of the *Andante grazioso*. Brahms originally thought the movement should be set in the unusual meter 7/4 but later changed this to one measure of 3/4 followed by two measures of 2/4; the middle section, marked *quasi animato*, continues the rhythmic complexities, switching between 9/8 and 6/8. Brahms alternates sonorities throughout this movement, the melodic line flowing back and forth between the piano and the combined strings.

The *Allegro molto* finale returns to the mood and the C-minor tonality of the first movement. There is nothing of the cheerful rondo-finale here (the movement is in modified sonata form): the flickering half-lights of the subdued opening quickly give way to the same craggy outbursts that marked the opening movement, and only in its final moments does Brahms relent and let the music break free to end in the tonic major. Rarely has C Major sounded so fierce.

Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8

Composed: 1854 (rev. 1889)

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Scherzo: Allegro molto
- III. Adagio
- IV. Finale: Allegro

The *Trio in B Major* had a curious genesis: Brahms composed it twice. He wrote the first version in 1853-54, when he was only twenty, and the trio was played in that form for many years. Then in 1889, when the 56-year-old composer was at the

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height of his creative powers, Brahms returned to this work of his youth and subjected it to a revision so thorough that it amounted to a virtual re-composition. With characteristic understatement, Brahms said that his revision “did not provide it with a wig, but just combed and arranged its hair a little,” but a comparison of the two versions (both versions have been published and recorded) shows how greatly Brahms had refined his compositional techniques across the course of his career.

It was the development sections of the early version that bothered the mature Brahms most, and when he revised the trio, he kept the opening section of each movement virtually intact but wrote new second subjects for the first, third, and fourth movements. The development sections, which had been episodic and unfocused in the first version, became concise and economic in the second. Brahms had grown more adept not just at developing his material but also at creating themes capable of growth and change, and—as revised—the *Trio in B Major* combines some of the best features of early and late Brahms: his youthful impetuosity is wed to an enormously refined technique. Brahms joked that perhaps he should change the opus number from 8 to 108 but finally decided to let the original number stand, and that is misleading—far from being an early work, the later version offers some of his most mature and sophisticated music.

Not everyone was happy with the revision. Some felt that in the process of refining and focusing his early work, the older Brahms had edited out a great deal of youthful impetuosity—and beautiful music as well—and they missed that. Upon receiving a copy of the revised version, Brahms' good friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg wrote to him: “you had no right to impress your masterly touch on this lovable, if sometimes vague, product of your youth ... because no one is the same after all that time.” But performers have invariably preferred the revised version, and Brahms' original version is seldom performed today. This concert offers the revised version.

The *Trio in B Major* has a wonderful beginning. Piano alone suggests the shape of the first theme, and then the cello sings that theme in its full span. This is one of those melodies of that characteristic

Brahmsian nobility—his individual voice was clear right from the start. The piano introduces the singing second subject (a new theme that Brahms created as part of the revision), and the development focuses mostly on this theme. But in a magical touch Brahms brings back the opening melody—now marked *Tranquillo*—and embellishes it softly as the movement gradually gathers strength drives toward its firm concluding chords.

The scherzo was the one movement that Brahms kept almost intact, only substituting a new coda for the original. Brahms moves to B minor here, and the staccato opening has a spooky, muttering quality. This sets up the middle section beautifully, giving way to another one of those that great Brahms themes that flows along nobly. The opening material returns, and Brahms concludes with the new coda.

The *Adagio* has a solemn, chorale-like beginning, as piano and strings exchange phrases, but the real glory of this movement comes with its lovely second subject, sung by the cello. This theme was composed by the mature Brahms during the revision, and it is of such expressive autumnal lyricism that it transforms the original movement from the effort of a tentative beginner to the work of a master.

The finale pulses darkly forward on dotted rhythms. Its second subject, also added during the revision, is a firmly-striding idea that Brahms marks *pesante* (heavy). The movement drives implacably to its powerful close, and—in a surprising touch—Brahms ends not in the expected home key of B Major, but in B minor.

In its original form, the *Trio in B Major* was performed quickly and widely: the premiere took place in Danzig on October 13, 1855, and the first performance in America took place the following month, on November 27, 1855, in New York City. The violinist on that occasion was the twenty-year-old Theodore Thomas, who later moved to a raw town in the West and founded the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The premiere of the revised version took place in Budapest on January 10, 1890.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger