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the
FINE ARTS
QUARTET

BRAHMS

Quartet in C Minor, opus 51, no. 1

Quartet in A Minor, opus 51, no. 2





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THE FINE ARTS QUARTET

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BRAHMS

Quartet in C Minor, opus 51, no. 1

Quartet in A Minor, opus 51, no. 2

SIDE ONE

BRAHMS: QUARTET IN C MINOR, OP. 51, No. 1

1. ALLEGRO
2. ROMANZE: POCO ADAGIO
3. ALLEGRETTO MOLTO MODERATO E COMODO;
UN POCO PIU ANIMATO
4. ALLEGRO

SIDE TWO

BRAHMS: QUARTET IN A MINOR, OP. 51, No. 2

1. ALLEGRO NON TROPPO
2. ANDANTE MODERATO
- *3. QUASI MENUETTO, MODERATO; ALLEGRETTO VIVACE
4. FINALE: ALLEGRO NON ASSAI

It was during his summer vacation in 1873, spent at Tutzing on the Starnberger Sea just outside of Munich, that Brahms put the finishing touches on what the world now knows as his first two string quartets, Opus 51, Nos. 1 and 2, in C minor and A minor respectively. He was then forty years old, and had already written many songs, the *German Requiem*, the *Liebeslieder* Waltzes, the Hungarian Dances, the Handel and Paganini Variations for Piano, as well as three sonatas, eight large chamber works for various combinations, two orchestral serenades, and the D minor Piano Concerto. 1873 itself was also the year of the great Haydn Variations. But Brahms had not yet tackled the two most awesome compositional responsibilities in the world of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century composer, for the string quartet and the symphony were still missing from his large and varied catalogue. It took another three years before Brahms could make up his mind to commit his first symphony to paper, and the story of those long hesitations and self-doubts is well-known — indeed, the rather forced tone of some of the music tells its own story.

We know that as early as 1853, that critical year in which he met Schumann, Brahms had a String Quartet in B minor all ready, and that, with the older man's encouragement, he thought seriously of making this work his official Opus 1. The decision to destroy it seems to have been made even before anything like serious conversations with publishers were begun. Beyond that, we know only that Brahms once told his old friend Alwin Cranz that he had destroyed twenty quartets before arriving at something with which he could feel satisfied, i.e. the two works of Opus 51. Brahms was most particular in his choice of works to survive these periodic holocausts. He was generous to his fireplace, and to surmise that the surviving chamber music represents little more than a fourth of what was written is by no means an exaggerated estimate. The situation becomes especially tantalizing since we know that on several occasions his friends, including musicians like Joseph Joachim and Clara Schumann, were not always of the same mind as the composer that the best had been saved and the poorest destroyed. Again, the intricacies of Brahmsian psychology are such that it is not out of the question that some of our losses are greater than some of our gains.

Opus 51 was "work in progress" for a long time. Joachim at one time entertained the hope of being able to perform it at a concert in Hamburg on January 18, 1866! Clara Schumann saw two movements in June, 1869, and praised them highly. But Brahms was still not satisfied, and a letter of June 24, 1869 to his publisher, Simrock, contains a highly characteristic passage in reply to urgings that he produce some new works, especially quartets: "Unfortunately, I must ask for still more patience from you . . . incidentally, Mozart took a great deal of trouble to compose six beautiful quartets, so we will do our best to turn out a couple that will be at least passable. You will get them. But if I were a publisher today, I should not urge quite so much." A little later that summer, Brahms could hear them tried out for the first time, and the polishing that was done off and on during the next years was almost always the result of further opportunities to hear the quartets in actual sound. On September 15, 1873, the music was finally ready for delivery to Simrock — even then, the covering letter betrays a little anxiety about letting it go — and it was published at the end of that year. Both pieces are dedicated to the celebrated Viennese surgeon, Dr. Theodor Billroth. The A minor work was performed by the Joachim Quartet the next month, the one in C minor, in December by the Hellmesberger Quartet of Vienna.

Against pulsating eighth-notes in viola and cello, the first violin states a theme consisting of an upward arpeggio on the tonic chord of C minor and a downward fall of a diminished seventh. It is a good classical formula — cf. Mozart's piano sonata in the same key. The second violin delicately underlines the salient points of the melody, a fine example of the composer's mastery of color as an aid to clarifying shape. The unusual 3/2 meter of this *Allegro* gives the unmistakably Brahmsian flavor of urgency mixed with a certain ponderousness. The movement, in sonata form, is rich in subject matter, all of it closely and organically related. Such matters as the two slashed chords in the seventh measures that are echoed and become a bridge to the next event, are clearly the product of something other than casual planning. The explorations of the development go far harmonically, so much so that Brahms twice considers it worth while to change his key signature. The moment of recapitulation is most beautifully managed: the home key is approached from C

sharp minor (!), and after a couple of hesitations the first theme is stated in augmentation — a wonderful anticipation of the famous moment in the Fourth Symphony's first movement. In addition, the theme itself is lit somewhat obliquely, for its G's have become A flats. From there on, the whole recapitulation is a dense succession of sensitively imagined detail, of which a glorious example can be heard in what happens to those huge chords from measure 7 when they arrive after the reprise. The coda increases the sense of motion by its change from 3/2 to 2/2, and the movement ends in C major.

The second movement is marked *Romanze: Poco Adagio*. In A flat, it is a simple ABA structure, full of interesting details of rhythm and texture. Again, some of the most fascinating invention is found in the return to the main idea. The *Cavatina* of Beethoven's Opus 130 is in this movement's family tree.

The third movement, *Allegretto molto moderato e comodo*, is in F minor, and its 4/8 motion is distinctly leisurely. The trio is "*un poco piu animato*," and differs from the main movement in key and meter, being in F major and 3/4. The breathing rate is slow enough that one could easily hear 6/4 instead. The instrumentation is most colorful.

The final *Allegro* at once begins its task of synthesizing the experiences of the whole quartet by an abrupt two-measure phrase that is made up of melodic and rhythmic elements of the second and first movements, and suggests the key of the third! There are many themes, all worked into a highly condensed unit, and it all ends with the most explicit reference to the opening of the whole work.

The A minor quartet is not so dark in mood and thick in sound as its companion work. It has been claimed that the first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, makes deliberate reference to Joachim's F-A-E motto, "*frei aber einsam*," "free, but lonely" — neither the internal nor the external evidence convinces. Brahms must have much enjoyed the compositional *tour de force* involved in planning a whole movement in A minor, whose first root position A minor chord occurs two measures from the end. The listener will not fail to enjoy the uncommon breadth of stride that results.

In contrast to the large over-all plan of the C minor quartet's harmonies, the A minor work keeps all its movements centered about A. The second movement, *Andante moderato*, is in A major, and the design once more is ABA.

Then comes a *moderato* movement in A minor marked *Quasi Minuetto*, a curious designation Brahms had used earlier in the A major Serenade. The piece clearly owes something to the Minuet in Schubert's A minor Quartet, but its odd three-bar phrases and its forlornly sinking cadences give it a flavor of nostalgia and regret that is quite its own. Contrast is provided by an *Allegretto vivace* in A major, 2/4 in constantly running sixteenths. Suddenly, the Minuet itself returns briefly in C sharp minor, set canonically for second violin and cello; across it, the first violin and viola weave a garland of the *Allegretto* theme, transformed in meter and tempo so as to fit the minuet context, and also set in canon. The *allegretto* proper returns, is interrupted once more by a combination and transformation of both themes, this time in A minor, which in turn leads to the Minuet's real *da capo*. This is a profoundly Brahmsian movement in the way it clings fast to the traditional precedent of Minuet and Trio form, yet at the same time achieves a unique integration of widely diverse musical worlds.

The finale, *Allegro non assai*, is a rondo in gipsy style, very lively, with some fine Haydnesque silences, and some wholly Brahmsian rhythmic transformations of themes.

MICHAEL STEINBERG

*This movement is one of those played and discussed by The Fine Arts Quartet in Four Score, the series of eight videotape programs produced by The Fine Arts Quartet for the National Educational Television and Radio Center, and premiered on the NET network in Autumn of 1961.