

String Sextet in B-flat major, op. 18

Johannes Brahms

*Born in Hamburg, May 7, 1833; died in Vienna, April 3, 1897*

Brahms began the B-flat Sextet in 1859 in Detmold, where he had secured his first official position. For four-month periods in 1857, 1858, and 1859, his duties at the Detmold court included teaching the princess piano, directing the choir, and performing in court concerts, but this left ample time for composition. He had entered a new phase of his life in which he could distance himself somewhat from the turbulent emotions of the past few years—those associated with the 1856 death of his friend and advocate Robert Schumann and his unfulfilled love for Clara Schumann. The Sextet displays the same relaxed, good-natured atmosphere of Brahms's previous Detmold works, the Serenades in D major (1857–58) and A major (1858–59).

The young composer seems to have felt uncomfortable with the string quartet medium, perhaps because of the monumental tradition of his Classical predecessors. He is said to have destroyed as many as twenty early quartets before, at age forty, he allowed his first masterpiece in that genre to be published (1873). In 1859 he felt more comfortable with a larger string ensemble—pairs of violins, violas, and cellos. Brahms reveled in a full, rich sound and he used all six instruments to advantage—his texture never sounds like a padded string quartet. The opening, for example, could not have been possible in traditional string quartet texture. With two cellos Brahms was able to assign one the bass line and have the other play the melody in a rich, warm register, with viola adding accompaniment. Brahms had originally begun the first movement with the fuller, five-instrument presentation of the theme (now bar 11), but modified it at the suggestion of his friend, the great violinist Joseph Joachim, who felt that the piece began too abruptly.

Whether Brahms felt relieved of the pressure to sound like Beethoven or relaxed because of life circumstances, the Sextet shows him, as commentator Kurt Oppens noted, “as the beautifully gifted lyricist he essentially was.” The sonata-form first movement contains at least three different themes—the main idea, mentioned above, a slow waltzlike theme in the distant key of A major, and a gorgeous theme, again for the cello with undulating accompaniment, which appears in the dominant, the key for the second subject in Classic sonata form. The development is primarily concerned with the first two themes and, after a fairly regular recapitulation that encompasses all three themes, the third is further developed in the coda where its transformation produces a delicate close.

Brahms chose a theme-and-variations form for his slow movement, which, in its treatment of the noble theme and in its use of D minor, suggests the influence of Bach's famous Chaconne from the D minor Partita for unaccompanied violin, a piece that Brahms loved. Brahms steadily intensifies the rhythmic activity in the first three variations by speeding up the note values of the accompaniment from eighths to sixteenths to thirty-seconds. The fourth, a lovely F major variation, brings a complete contrast, and the fifth gives the effect of a musette or bagpipe with its open-fifth drone. The closing variation (or coda, or return to the theme, depending on one's point of view) sounds like a reminiscence, with the theme returned to the cello, but in a more subdued setting. Brahms made a piano transcription of this movement for Clara Schumann at her request.

A straightforward Scherzo of Brahms's youthful, exuberant type reminds us of the close proximity of this work to his two serenades. Its fiery trio hurtles along at a much faster tempo and returns for a coda. The finale is a charming, unhurried rondo, to which Brahms attached a coda with the directions to speed up and get louder little by little. Thus he achieved a whirlwind ending.

Brahms completed the work in September 1860 and sent it to Joachim saying, "Send it back if the piece does not appeal you." It appealed greatly and, with minor alterations, some suggested by the violinist, it was premiered by Joachim and his colleagues in Hanover on October 20, 1860, with Brahms and Clara present. It was played again at Joachim's home to the great enjoyment of His Excellency von Stockhausen, Hanoverian ambassador to Vienna and father of Elisabet von Herzogenberg who was to become one of Brahms's greatest friends. And on November 27, as Clara's diary reports, "Johannes's Sextet was exquisitely played by Joachim at the [Leipzig] Conservatoire, and aroused decided enthusiasm."

—©Jane Vial Jaffe