

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Michael Collins & Friends: Late Brahms

Saturday 13 January 2024, 4pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music is an incredible, centuries-long story. As we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – share that story with the world today, we're creating as many ways for as many different people as possible to experience this wonderful art form.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Brahms

Sonata in F minor for clarinet & piano, Op.120 No.1 23'

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op.34 41'

Interval

Sonata in E flat for clarinet & piano, Op.120 No.2 21'

Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op.115 37'

Performers

Michael Collins *clarinet*

Michael McHale *piano**

Talich Quartet Jan Talich Jr. *violin*

Petr Štrížek *violin*

Radim Sedmidubský *viola*

Michal Kaňka *cello*

* Please note change of artist from originally advertised

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours and 35 minutes.

Johannes Brahms (1833-97)

Sonata in F minor for clarinet & piano, Op.120 No.1 (1894)

1. *Allegro appassionato*
2. *Andante un poco adagio*
3. *Allegretto grazioso*
4. *Vivace*

In December 1890, Brahms wrote to his publisher Simrock announcing his decision to retire from composition: 'With this scrap bid farewell to notes of mine – because it really is time to stop.' The 'scrap' was from the String Quintet Op.111, which he had just completed. However, in March of the following year Brahms visited Meiningen to attend an arts festival, where he heard Richard Mühlfeld, principal clarinetist of the Meiningen Court Orchestra. Brahms affectionately nicknamed him

'Fräulein Klarinette' (Miss Clarinet) in tribute to his supple and graceful playing.

Brahms found his creative juices flowing again and wrote four works inspired by Mühlfeld: the Clarinet Trio and Clarinet Quintet in 1891 and, in 1894, his last chamber works, the two Clarinet Sonatas. The First opens with a brief piano introduction before the clarinet enters, its theme a finely-wrought balance between lyricism and sinewy strength. Brahms' late music is characterised by economy; the clarinet continues the piano's train of thought rather than echoing it, and the developmental section is perfectly judged, with no extraneous indulgence. When the main ideas are reprised, we hear one of the hallmarks of Brahms' style: cross-rhythms, when he plays with different, sometimes overlapping, rhythmic groupings. In the coda, the music shifts from minor to major; an optimistic transformation, but one tinged with wistfulness.

The slow movement is one of sublime tranquillity, its surface occasionally ruffled by the clarinet's shapely melody and the piano's descending arpeggios. Nothing is wasted, despite the dreamy tone, and the return of the main theme is achieved via ingenious key relationships rather than a circuitous route. In the intermezzo, an Austrian *Ländler* (a triple-time folk dance) undergoes intricate counterpoint, and the bucolic secondary theme anticipates the unbuttoned finale, which bubbles with remarkably youthful *joie de vivre*.

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op.34 (1864)

1. *Allegro non troppo*
2. *Andante, un poco adagio*
3. *Scherzo: Allegro*
4. *Finale: Poco sostenuto. Allegro non troppo*

Brahms' F minor Piano Quintet began life as a string quintet, written for two violins, viola and two cellos, and receiving effusive compliments from Clara Schumann: 'What inner strength, what richness in the first movement, with the first subject immediately seizing hold of you! ... I can't tell you how moved I am by it, and how powerfully gripped. And what an Adagio – it sings and sounds blissful right up to the last note! I start it over and over again, and don't want to stop.'

Yet the violinist Joseph Joachim anticipated difficulties with the work's texture: '... a piece of the greatest significance, full of masculine strength and sweeping design – that much is immediately apparent to me' but: 'The quintet is difficult, and I fear that without an energetic performance it will sound a little unclear.' This was in 1862; by April 1863, Joachim had performed the work several times, and his misgivings had solidified: 'What I miss in it for unalloyed pleasure is, to pinpoint it in a single phrase, an attractive sonority... the instrumentation is not energetic enough to my ears to convey the powerful rhythmic convulsions; the sound is almost helplessly thin for the musical thought. Then again for long stretches everything lies too thickly.'

Brahms promptly destroyed the score to the string quintet, having rescored it as a sonata for two pianos, arguing that 'it is particularly attractive in this form, and it will probably be well received as an interesting work for two pianos.' This time, Clara intervened: 'The very first time I played it I had the impression of a transcribed work... please, dear Johannes, do agree just this time, and rework the piece once more.'

Brahms duly set about rearranging the piece for piano quintet. The result may be the most coherent work of his early maturity, with small-scale surface details played out at a structural level; themes recur in different contexts, exhibiting different characteristics each time. Finished at last, it was premiered in 1866 at the Leipzig Conservatoire. The conductor Hermann Levi, who had played the two-piano version with Clara Schumann, declared: 'The quintet is beautiful beyond measure; no one who didn't know it in its earlier forms – string quintet and sonata – would believe that it was conceived and written for other instruments. Not a single note gives me the impression of an arrangement... a masterpiece of chamber music.'

Sonata in E flat for clarinet & piano, Op.120 No.2 (1894)

1. *Allegro amabile*
2. *Allegro appassionato*
3. *Andante con moto; Allegro*

Brahms was 61 years old when he presented his two Clarinet Sonatas to Mühlfeld. They gave the first performance in September 1894 at a private gathering for the Duke and Duchess of Meiningen, followed by another for Clara Schumann in November. Public performances followed in 1895, with Brahms insisting on donating his fee to Mühlfeld on each occasion. He also gave Mühlfeld the performing rights to the works during his lifetime.

The Second Clarinet Sonata is gentler and shorter than the First. In the genial opening movement, a taut structure is concealed beneath flowing, interconnected ideas, which rarely exhibit real tension even in the more animated central section.

There is a virile, heroic second-movement scherzo; the last scherzo Brahms would write. Its powerful nature is contrasted with a long-breathed, elliptical theme in the trio section, which paves the way for the finale's expansive melody. This radiant tune provides ample scope for the variations and coda that follow, many of which strip the theme down to its component parts, resulting in music of exposed transparency. Only towards the end of the movement does Brahms allow a flurry of virtuosity, and even here, it is rather understated.

Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op.115 (1891)

1. *Allegro*
2. *Adagio*
3. *Andantino*
4. *Con moto*

When Brahms first heard Mühlfeld, he was the soloist in performances of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet and the Clarinet Concerto No.1 by Weber, whose Clarinet Quintet was relatively recent (completed by 1815). A clarinet quintet was a natural choice, then, to showcase Mühlfeld's gifts, and reflected Brahms' affinity both with the clarinet in an orchestral context, and with slightly larger-scale chamber forces.

Brahms' Clarinet Quintet opens with his last truly large-scale sonata movement and is more muted in tone than its famous predecessors. He makes the form his own by establishing a democratic texture in which the clarinet shares the limelight with the other protagonists. One exception to this comes in the middle of the autumnal slow movement, when the clarinet is given more virtuosic material reminiscent of the Romani music of which Brahms was so fond. A more light-hearted third movement offers another instance of Brahms' rhythmic sophistication, and the finale is a set of variations in which the essence of each of the preceding movements seems to be distilled, with the return of the opening movement's main theme bringing unity and resolution.

Programme notes © Joanna Wyld, 2023

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