

Program Notes: Mastery

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

JOHANNES BRAHMS

(Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg; died April 3, 1897, Vienna)

String Quintet no. 1 in F Major, op. 88

Composed: 1882

Published: 1882

First performance: December 29, 1882, Frankfurt

Other works from this period: Piano Concerto no. 2 in B-flat Major, op. 83 (1881); Piano Trio no. 2 in C Major, op. 87 (1880–1882); Symphony no. 3 in F Major, op. 90 (1883); Six Songs and Romances for Chorus, op. 93a (1883)

Approximate duration: 28 minutes

Though it remains curiously under recognized relative to much of the rest of his chamber music, Brahms's String Quintet in F Major, op. 88, was, in the composer's estimation, "one of my finest works," as he proudly attested to Clara Schumann. And to his publisher, Fritz Simrock, Brahms promised, "You have never had such a beautiful work from me."

The quintet is the first of two such works Brahms produced, adding a second viola to the standard string quartet. Mozart had pioneered the genre, but Brahms's viola quintets—the present work and the Quintet in G Major, op. 111, composed eight years later—are unmistakably his own. Biographer Jan Swafford writes, "As in the 1860s, Brahms, enjoying his liberation from the onus of genres the past had perfected, wrote two string sextets with great freedom and success, so in his maturity he produced two string quintets undaunted by Mozart's great ones."

Brahms completed the quintet in the spring of 1882, which he spent in the Austrian resort town of Bad Isch; the work's character seems indeed to reflect his idyllic environs, beginning with its key—F major, typically associated with pastoral settings (cf. Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony). The first movement's tempo marking is similarly telling: *Allegro non troppo, ma con brio*—"fast, not too much, but with vigor." The work begins with a bucolic first theme, as beguiling for its melodic charm (redolent perhaps of Schubert) as for the lush texture produced by the addition of a second viola. The first viola offers a splendid countermelody to the first violin, which carries the tune, while the second viola and cello provide a sturdy foundation.

The first viola comes to the fore to present the second theme—in the mediant key of A major, rather than the dominant (C major), as would be expected. (In the movement's recapitulation, this theme resurfaces in D major, *down* a third from the home key. This harmonic structure represents perhaps another nod to Schubert, whose magnificent Cello Quintet follows a similar plan.) The viola's leisurely triplets, set against flowing eighth notes in the first violin, conjure the relaxed, worry-free air of a lazy Sunday afternoon.

A richly sonorous development section follows, furnished likewise by lush ensemble textures and the second theme's four-against-three rhythmic profile. The movement arrives at its grandest sonority at the recapitulation's glorious arrival:

After a thorough reprise of its primary materials, the movement melts into a pleasantly languorous coda, punctuated by an exuberant final cadence.

An equally rich sonority marks the quintet's second movement. In its opening section, marked *Grave ed appassionato*, each voice moves fluidly between background and foreground, creating a dynamically fibrous texture. The affecting theme comes from Brahms's own *Sarabande* in b minor for Solo Piano, composed in 1855. This music recurs three times in alternation with two quick interludes, also based on an early keyboard work, Brahms's *Gavotte* in A Major. It is noteworthy that Brahms summons two *Baroque* forms. His avant-garde contemporaries of the so-called New German School heeded Franz Liszt's declaration that "new wine demands new bottles"—that traditional forms were insufficient for such bold new ideas as theirs; Brahms, whose scholarship and reverence for tradition matched his compositional ingenuity, here offers compelling evidence to the contrary.

This movement's mere form further demonstrates Brahms's innovation. The quintet comprises three movements rather than the usual four; by alternating these slow and fast sections, Brahms essentially combines slow movement and scherzo into one coherent unit. The serenity of the first movement moreover echoes throughout the second. The slow sections are content, rather than sentimental or distressed; the interludes are bright and optimistic but eschew the high-octane energy of a true scherzo. Time seems to stop in the movement's breathtaking close: the ensemble whispers a pianissimo series of chords, set in each instrument's lowest register, before the first violin traces a delicate upward arc to the feather-weight final bar.

Western music has known no more consummate craftsman or more notorious perfectionist than Brahms, who famously set fire to many a manuscript that he deemed unsatisfactory. (One surmises that the whole of discarded Brahms might well have outclassed the entire published oeuvres of composers of lesser skill.) The Opus 88 Quintet's finale puts Brahms's technical prowess on audacious display. The movement combines two strict musical forms: it is a sonata-form movement whose first theme is a fugue. (Again, Brahms appropriates a Baroque convention in the service of innovation.) As if to deliberately highlight the ensemble's distinct sonority, the fugue subject is introduced by the first viola. The fugue subject continues as accompanimental material as the first violin issues the movement's soaring second theme (in A major, echoing the first movement's harmonic contour).

A development section as richly layered as it is joyfully rambunctious follows, permeated throughout by fragments of the first theme's fugal subject. A *Presto coda*, played *pianissimo e leggero*, serves as a giddy windup to the quintet's fortissimo conclusion.

*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 90.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

(Born April 11/23, 1891, Sontsovka, Ukraine; died March 5, 1953, Moscow)

Sonata in D Major for Flute and Piano, op. 94

Composed: 1943

Published: 1944

First performance: December 7, 1943, by Nikolay Kharkovsky and Sviatoslav Richter

Other works from this period: Sonata no. 1 in f minor for Violin and Piano, op. 80 (1938–1946); *Cinderella*, op. 87 (ballet) (1940–1944); *War and Peace*, op. 91 (opera) (1941–1943); Symphony no. 5 in B-flat Major, op. 100 (1944); *Ivan the Terrible*, op. 116 (film score) (1942–1945)

Approximate duration: 24 minutes

A generation after Franz Liszt derided Brahms's traditionalist leanings, a number of early twentieth-century modernist voices expressly espoused Classical values as a means of giving voice to a contemporary perspective. Neoclassicism's chief exponents included Stravinsky, Satie, and Prokofiev. In such works as Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* and *The Rake's Progress* and Prokofiev's *Classical* Symphony, these composers turned to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forms, as well as that period's penchant for thematic clarity, in reaction to what they saw as the excesses of late Romanticism.

Prokofiev's Flute Sonata in D Major, op. 94, offers a prime example of the composer's **neoclassical** period. The work is cast in four movements and illustrates the thematic and textural clarity valued by the new aesthetic. But equally importantly—and as is the case with Stravinsky's and others' finest neoclassical essays—the sonata's embrace of Classical qualities does nothing to obscure the freshness of its composer's voice. On the contrary, the distillation of its features brings Prokofiev's musical identity into razor-sharp focus.

The *Moderato* first movement begins with a mellifluous theme decorated with florid turns; this genial music flares up suddenly with a circus-like glee. In this juxtaposition of seemingly disparate humors, the opening theme reflects characteristic elements of Prokofiev's language: his keen ear for melody and texture, combined with his sardonic wit. The second theme restores the first theme's limpid grace but seems to wear a wry smirk: dotted rhythms and sly chromatic winks trace the music's mischievous modulations from one harmonic area to the next.

The start of the development section, with its quick repeated triplets, again suggests carnival entertainment. This rhythmic élan animates the first theme on its reappearance, complicating its expressive character. After a standard recapitulation, the piano takes an unexpectedly menacing turn in the movement's final measures.

The scherzo brings further mischief, here of a rhythmic sort rather than harmonic. Prokofiev willfully obscures the beat, setting the pianist's right and left hands in a jarring hocket as the flute dances playfully up and down the staff. Obsessive repetition of an unnerving motoric gesture in the piano injects a dystopian feeling into this good-natured frolic.

Prokofiev has another trick up his sleeve in the central trio section: the music seems to get slower as the piano's steady quarter notes yield to a sustained chord; but though the rhythmic profile becomes static, the tempo pacing the flute melody is actually *poco più mosso*. The character of the music adds to the feeling of something deliciously off-kilter.

The *Andante* third movement appears, on the surface, naïve and sentimental, but its chromaticism suggests there is more than meets the

ear. Winding triplets vaguely conjure Baroque ornamentation. The sonata's rondo finale answers with a **refrain** of spirited high jinks. This recurs in alternation with episodes of varying characters but is unified by an unrelenting vivacity until the work's final measure.

One year following its completion, Prokofiev adapted the Flute Sonata in a version for violin and piano at the urging of David Oistrakh. While the work is equally popular (and perhaps even more frequently performed) in its incarnation as a violin sonata, Prokofiev's expert approach to the flute has installed it as essential to that instrument's repertoire.

SERGEI TANEYEV

(Born November 13/25, 1856, Vladimir-na-Klyaz'me; died June 6/19, 1915, Dyud'kovo, near Moscow)

Piano Quintet in g minor, op. 30

Composed: 1910–1911

Published: 1912

Dedication: Georgy Catoire

Other works from this period: *Suite de concert* for Violin and Orchestra, op. 28 (1908–1909); Prelude and Fugue in g-sharp minor for Solo Piano, op. 29 (1910); Trio in E-flat Major for Violin, Viola, and Tenor Viola, op. 31 (1910–1911); Four Songs, op. 32 (1911)

Approximate duration: 45 minutes

The development of Russian music's classical tradition was catalyzed, in the nineteenth century, by the dialectic between nationalist autodidacticism and Western-influenced professionalization. In the former camp, Glinka, Russian classical music's progenitor, prepared the way for Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov—composers, collectively known as “the Five,” who set out to create a distinctly Russian musical language. Opposite these were the Rubinstein brothers—Nikolai and Anton, founders of the St. Petersburg and Moscow Conservatories, respectively—whose quest to elevate Russian music to elite professional standards entailed embracing the German Classical-Romantic tradition.

Sergei Taneyev, in the last quarter of the century, emerged as the exemplar of the academic camp. His association with the Moscow Conservatory began in September 1866, when he matriculated at that institution two months shy of his tenth birthday; three years later, he entered Tchaikovsky's composition class and subsequently became a piano student of Nikolai Rubinstein's. The promise of his youthful precocity was fulfilled in his public debut in 1875, when, at eighteen years old, he appeared as soloist in Brahms's herculean d minor Piano Concerto. Later that year, he performed in the Moscow premiere of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto, and thereafter he gave the Russian premieres of all of Tchaikovsky's music for piano and orchestra. Taneyev was moreover one of a select few (and certainly alone among Tchaikovsky's students) whose criticism of that hallowed composer's work was tolerated, even invited. (The pupil notoriously suggested to the master a stronger working out of the fugal variation in his Opus 50 Piano Trio.)

Also in 1875, Taneyev became the first to graduate from the Moscow Conservatory with a gold medal in both performance and composition. Three years later, he was appointed to Tchaikovsky's faculty position, upon the latter composer's resignation. In 1881, upon the death of Nikolai Rubinstein, Taneyev took over Rubinstein's piano class. Finally, from 1885 to 1889, he served as the conservatory's Director. His students included Scriabin, Rachmaninov, and others.

Taneyev's intellectual pursuits were fervent and broad. Russian critic Boris Asaf'yev surmised that Taneyev, “like no other Russian composer, lived and worked immersed in the world of ideas, in the development of abstract concepts.” Taneyev was fascinated with Bach's counterpoint, as well as with the great Renaissance contrapuntalists—Ockeghem, Josquin, Lassus—and wrote an influential counterpoint treatise of his own. His wide-ranging interests also included ancient Greece, which prompted his

most ambitious work, an opera on *The Oresteia*. He studied Esperanto and composed a number of vocal settings of texts in that language.

The Russian nationalist composers, by and large, focused on opera, orchestral music, and songs—apt vehicles for nationalist expression. Chamber music was more specifically the purview of the Rubinsteins, Tchaikovsky, and their ilk. Taneyev's chamber output includes six string quartets, two string quintets, and the grand Piano Quintet in g minor, op. 30, among other works. The rigorous approach to form, impeccable counterpoint, exhaustive investigation of thematic developmental possibilities, and attention to detail found in these works—the Piano Quintet, in particular—call to mind the uncompromising craftsmanship of Brahms. The two composers also had in common formidable intellect and unsparing self-criticism. Taneyev has more than once been referred to as “the Russian Brahms”—somewhat ironic, considering his indifference to Brahms's music. No matter. Taneyev's dedication to his craft places him squarely in league with the German Romantic master; musicologist David Brown has credited Taneyev with “a compositional skill unsurpassed by any Russian composer of his period.”

The Piano Quintet offers a powerful demonstration of Taneyev's compositional mastery. The work is equally notable for its daunting piano part, which Taneyev perhaps was equal to, but few other pianists are. The athleticism required is surely the only thing that has kept the quintet from becoming a repertoire fixture.

The quintet's mighty first movement begins with a slow introduction, marked *Adagio mesto*. An ominous figure in the piano, stated in stark pianissimo octaves, snakes downward to the bottom of the instrument's range. The strings respond in kind, but with a lush, full-blooded texture to foil the piano's wan opening statement. This music builds with exquisite slowness; each gesture points organically towards the next (resembling, indeed, Brahms's technique of developing variation).

The piano presents the theme at the exposition proper, derived from the *Introduzione* but now transformed into a forceful fortissimo statement. As the full ensemble works over the theme, Taneyev's contrapuntal prowess comes to the fore. After a sudden silence and a series of tentative chords, voiced *piano e dolce*, Taneyev introduces the tender second theme, driven by opulent piano writing and highlighted by equally luxurious string textures. A vigorous surge of orchestral brawn hurtles the music into the cauldron of the development section. Here, Taneyev's gift of invention, deft counterpoint, and ear for instrumental color are on full display.

The ravishing sound of the development section's volcanic climax further illustrates Taneyev's facility with the forces at his disposal. The recapitulation has further invention in store, as when a lyrical cello solo, set in the instrument's tenor register, launches an interlude fit for a Hollywood romance. The canvas tautly stretched, the movement ends with an electrifying *più mosso* coda.

As a balm following the no-holds-barred first movement, Taneyev writes a fleet and bright second-movement scherzo. At the outset, the strings play *ricochet à la pointe*—bouncing the tip of the bow—to create a chipper march. This music's transparent texture contrasts the first movement's pseudo-orchestral dimensions. The scherzo subsequently contains much textural contrast, but even at its heartiest, the music remains radiant and light on its feet, never feeling weighted. The trio section, marked *Moderato teneramente*, is rich with heartwarming melody. The scherzo's *Prestissimo* coda includes two notable features: a two-measure parenthetical reference to the tender trio section, ephemeral but devastating, and, just before the movement's conclusion, the artful insertion of a descending scalar motif in the left hand of the piano—

—which, reimagined *fortissimo*, *largamente*, becomes the foundation of the expertly wrought **Largo**, a stately **passacaglia**:

Following the movement's initial declaration, the cello continues the opening theme as the upper strings weave a rhapsodic tapestry. The piano responds with sublime, dream-like music. From here, a thoughtful exchange unfolds between piano and strings; as the movement proceeds, a simultaneous dialogue develops between regal *largamente* and more introspective *dolce* statements. At moments, the *Largo* evokes Baroque splendor; at its apex, it reaches dazzling heights.

The quintet's macho *Allegro vivace* finale starts with a frenzy and never quite gets settled. Instead, Taneyev conjures a swirling, *Sturm-und-Drang* maelstrom with relish. The movement's unrelenting energy owes in large part to Taneyev's take-no-prisoners piano writing. (Nor does he allow the strings any reprieve.)

The attentive ear will catch an allusion to the quintet's opening, reprising the first movement's lyrical second theme, now in a triumphant, **maestoso** style. This soon dissolves into a new romantic musical idea that builds to a transcendent climax. But Taneyev saves his amplest firepower for the work's fortississimo conclusion. At the work's victorious denouement, Taneyev marks the piano *Quasi campane* (“like bells”), emphasizing the resounding joy with which the quintet reaches its final measure.