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String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat Major, Op. 67

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1883

Died: 1897

Composed: 1875

- I. Vivace
- II. Andante
- III. Agitato. Allegretto non troppo
- IV. Poco allegretto con variazioni

Brahms' final string quartet is his most original essay in that form. He completed this quartet and several other works during the summer of 1875, which he spent happily at Ziegelhausen, near Heidelberg. Throughout that relaxed summer, though, Brahms continued to work on his First Symphony, a project that had occupied (some would say obsessed) him for over twenty years. He could at least escape into the other works he wrote that summer, and typically he deprecated them as "useless trifles, to avoid facing the serious countenance of a symphony." The Quartet in B-flat Major—hardly a useless trifle—had its first performance on October 30, 1876, five days before the long-awaited premiere of the First Symphony.

Brahms's first two string quartets had been tightly argued affairs, but the Third shows a sense of play absent from his two earlier efforts, and this music flows and shimmers. Its bright surface, though, conceals many original touches, and the genial finale in particular is a compositional tour de force. Brahms gives the opening movement the unusual marking *Vivace*, more typical of a scherzo than a sonata-form first movement. It is built on two contrasted theme-groups, but in fact the real contrast in this movement is between two quite different meters. The opening—inevitably compared to hunting horn calls—is in 6/8, while the second theme is in 2/4: its slightly-square rhythms have reminded some of a polka. Brahms builds the movement around subtle contrasts between these different meters, jumping back

and forth between them and at several points experimenting with some modest polyrhythmic overlapping. The movement concludes with a cadence derived from the "hunting-horn" opening.

The ternary-form second movement opens with a long violin melody reminiscent of the music of Schumann. Brahms marks the violin part *cantabile*, but it must cut through a thick accompaniment, which is often double-stopped. The middle section, full of fierce declarations and rhythmic swirls, gradually gives way to the opening material and quiet close. The third movement is marked *Agitato*, but that is more an indication of mood than tempo, and Brahms puts the real tempo direction—*Allegretto non troppo*—in parentheses. Particularly remarkable here is the sound: Brahms mutes all instruments except the viola, which dominates this movement. Its husky, surging opening idea contrasts with the silky, rustling sound of the muted accompanying voices. The trio section likewise emphasizes the sound of the viola, followed by a *da capo* repeat and coda.

The finale—*Poco allegretto con variazioni*—is the most remarkable of the four movements, and Brahms's biographer Karl Geiringer called it "the nucleus of the whole work." As Brahms' marking suggests, it is a set of variations, based on a folk-like tune announced immediately. There follow six variations, all fairly closely derived from the opening tune, and then some remarkable things begin to happen. Into the seventh variation suddenly pops the hunting-horn tune from the quartet's very beginning, the eighth variation is based on a transition passage from the first movement, and in the closing moments Brahms puts on a real show of compositional mastery: he combines the hunting-horn tune from the very beginning with the variation melody of the finale and presents them simultaneously.

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Such a description makes this music sound terribly learned, and that might in fact be the case, were it not so much fun. We greet these themes as old friends when they appear to take up their place in the dance, and Brahms rounds off the quartet with this bright union of his opening and closing movements.

The Quartet in B-flat Major was Brahms's favorite among his quartets, but with it he appears to have exhausted his interest in the form. He would live another twenty-four years and publish more than fifty further opus numbers, but he never wrote another string quartet.

String Quartet No. 3, BB. 93 Sz. 85

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born: 1881

Died: 1945

Composed: 1927

- I. Prima parte. Moderato
- II. Seconda Parte. Allegro
- III. Ricapitolazione della prima parte
Moderato
- IV. Coda. Allegro molto

In the fall of 1927, just as he was leaving on his first concert tour of America, Bartók submitted the manuscript of his Third String Quartet to a chamber music competition sponsored by the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia. Bartók returned to Europe in March 1928 without hearing anything about the competition, and, after waiting nearly a year, he gave up and began to make arrangements to have the quartet published in Europe. And of course, at just that point the news arrived: Bartók had split first prize with the Italian composer Alfredo Casella. His share of the prize was \$3000, welcome news for a composer who was never wholly free from financial worries throughout his life. Bartók had powerful friends on the committee of six judges who awarded the prize, among them Willem Mengelberg (conductor of the New York Philharmonic), Fritz Reiner (conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony), and Frederick Stock (conductor of the Chicago

Symphony). And in passing, it should be noted that the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, which had been founded in 1820, is still active today, and Bartók's manuscript for his Third Quartet remains one of its prized possessions.

The shortest of Bartók's six quartets, the Third Quartet has proven the thorniest of that cycle—critics invariably refer to it as “anti-romantic.” The Third Quartet is marked by a fierce concentration of materials and by Bartók's refusal to use traditional melodic themes. In their place he makes use of short motives that are almost consciously athematic in their brevity. The quartet's basic thematic cell is a three-note figure, first announced by the first violin in the sixth measure: G rising to D and falling to A. That motif and a handful of others are then subjected to the most rigorous and concentrated polyphonic development: canon, fugato, inversion, simultaneous presentation of material. The structure is equally concentrated. Only fifteen minutes long and performed without pause, the Third Quartet nevertheless divides into four sections: First Part, Second Part, Recapitulation of the First Part, and Coda, which is essentially a recapitulation—or a revisiting—of the second part.

Bartók accentuates the fierce concentration of this music by enlivening it with one of the richest palettes of sound of any of his quartets. The Third Quartet opens with a sound he rarely used in his quartets—artificial harmonics—and then takes the music through a panoply of string sonorities: slithering ponticellos, martellato chords snapped off at the frog of the bow, passages tapped out with the wood of the bow rather than bowed with the hair, quick glissandos that span more than an octave, passages played entirely over the fingerboard to produce the most whispery textures. One cannot separate music and sound, of course, and the sonic phantasmagoria of this quartet is part of its unbelievable concentration of material.

The first and second parts are basically sonata-form movements without their recapitulation sections. The First Part (marked Moderato) is built on the seminal three-note figure, which will then

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recur in untold shapes. Three strident chords mark the transition to the second subject, yet here the “accompaniment” of the lower strings incorporates the basic shape of this quartet, as does the violin duet above them. At the very end of the movement, the second violin and viola have a sustained duet in which this figure is finally made to sing diatonically (and very beautifully). The Second Part (marked *Allegro*) begins with a sustained trill: moving between different instruments, this trill goes on for 39 measures and then returns throughout. This “part” is built on two ideas: the cello’s strummed pizzicato chords near the opening and the first violin’s hurtling dance tune, draped along asymmetric meters. As part of the vigorous development, Bartók treats these themes fugally and at one point even combines them. The brief concluding sections bring the missing recapitulations, but now Bartók—who never liked to repeat anything literally—shortens and concentrates his material even more stringently. In the words of Halsey Stevens, the material from the first two parts here makes “a psychological return, not a physical one.” The dance rhythms of the Second Part race ahead, and the Quartet No. 3 concludes on stinging dissonances hammered out by all four instruments.

The first performance of the Third String Quartet took place in Philadelphia on December 30, 1928. The quartet on that occasion was made up of the principal string players of Stokowski’s Philadelphia Orchestra: concertmaster Mischa Mischakoff, David Dubinsky, Samuel Lifschey, and Willem van den Burg. The Waldbauer–Kerpely Quartet gave the European premiere of the Third Quartet seven weeks later, on February 19, 1929, in Wigmore Hall in London.

String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat Major, Op. 18 JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1859–1860

- I. *Allegro ma non troppo*
- II. *Andante ma moderato*
- III. *Scherzo. Allegro molto* — Trio. *Animato*
- IV. *Rondo. Poco allegretto e grazioso*

We so automatically identify Brahms with Vienna that it is easy to forget that he did not move there until he was nearly 30. By that time he had already written a great deal of music, and some of the best of these early works were composed while he was a court musician in Detmold. About 100 miles southwest of Hamburg, Detmold was a cultured court, much devoted to music, and for three seasons (1857–59) Brahms served as a court musician there. These years were quite productive for him musically. With a chorus, orchestra, and good solo performers at his disposal, Brahms could have his music performed immediately and could test his ideas. From these years came his two serenades for orchestra, the first two piano quartets, several choral works, and the completion of his First Piano Concerto.

It was during his final year at Detmold that Brahms began his Sextet in B-flat Major, completing it in 1860. Brahms is sometimes credited with “inventing” the string sextet (two violins, two violas, two cellos), but that is not true—Boccherini and others had written for this combination of instruments earlier. But Brahms’ two examples are the first great works in the form, and they remain—with Tchaikovsky’s *Souvenir de Florence*, Dvořák’s *Sextet for Strings*, and Schoenberg’s *Verklaerte Nacht*—the core of the slim repertory for this ensemble. Many have noted that Brahms’ *Sextet in B-flat Major* shares some of the same sunny spirits as his *Serenade No. 1 in D Major*, premiered in Detmold in the same year he completed the sextet. It is worth noting that Brahms—reluctant to write for orchestra—had originally scored that serenade

for winds and a string quartet. Perhaps writing for so generously-proportioned a chamber ensemble encouraged Brahms now to write for an unusually large string ensemble. Perhaps he did not feel ready to take on the formidable challenge of the string quartet. In any case, Brahms added two more instruments to the string quartet and then took full advantage of the larger sonority and wider opportunities they made available.

Perhaps because it is an early work, critics have been quick to detect influences on the Sextet in B-flat Major. Brahms' admirable biographer Karl Geiringer hears the influence of Schubert in the first movement, of Beethoven in the scherzo, and of Haydn in the finale. But the Sextet already shows Brahms' unmistakable voice, particularly in its rich sonorities and in the way a wealth of musical ideas grows out of each theme. And in contrast to the clenched intensity of some of Brahms' later chamber music, the Sextet is (generally) full of sunlight.

From the first instant of this music Brahms fully exploits the richness of the lower sonorities a sextet makes available—there are important thematic roles here for first viola and first cello—as well as playing off combinations of instruments impossible in a string quartet. The gentle, rocking main subject of the Allegro ma non troppo, heard immediately in the first cello, is only the first in a number of thematic ideas in this sonata-form movement, but its relaxed and flowing ease sets a tone that will run throughout the Sextet. This is music that proceeds along a mellow songfulness rather than through the collision of unrelated ideas. Brahms' performance markings tell the tale here: the first theme is marked *espressivo*, the second subject—for upper strings—is marked *dolce* and *pianissimo*, while the third—a winding idea for cello—is marked *poco forte espressivo animato*. The development treats the first two thematically, but the third is developed rhythmically: Brahms derives a series of rhythmic patterns from this theme that help bind the movement together, and the theme reappears in its melodic shape only in the recapitulation. The lengthy movement

closes with a nice touch: the brief coda, played *pizzicato*, moves gracefully to the two concluding chords.

The second movement, in somber D minor, is a theme and six variations. The first viola immediately lays out the firmly-drawn theme, and the first three variations seem barely able to suppress a sort of volcanic fury that seethes beneath the surface of this music. Even in chamber music Brahms favored a heavy sonority, and at several points in these variations all six instruments are triple-stopped, creating huge chords played simultaneously on eighteen strings. A ray of sunlight falls across the music at the fourth variation, which moves to D Major, while the sonorous fifth—also in D Major—is almost entirely the province of the first viola, accompanied by the violins' wispy octaves. The dark sixth variation serves as the coda. Here the cello, playing with an almost choked sonority, returns to the D-minor darkness of the opening and leads the movement to its quiet close.

After these two massive movements, the pleasing Scherzo zips past in barely three minutes. The scherzo section itself is playful but feels a little subdued in comparison to the slashing, full-bodied trio, which suddenly races ahead (Brahms' marking is *Animato*). This rises to a sonorous climax before the return of the opening scherzo; Brahms closes with a mighty coda derived from the trio. The concluding *Poco allegretto e grazioso* is a rondo based on the first cello's amiable opening theme. Significant interludes intrude on the progress of the movement, which makes use of the same kind of rhythmic underpinning that bound the first movement together so imaginatively. The rondo theme itself undergoes variation as this movement proceeds, and Brahms rounds matters off with a coda so powerful that it feels virtually symphonic.

Program Notes written by Eric Bromberger