

Meridian

BRAHMS

The Piano Quartets

The Primrose
Piano Quartet

2 CD Set



JOHANNES BRAHMS

The Piano Quartets

Piano Quartet No.3 in C minor Op.60

[1] Allegro non troppo	0:00
[2] Scherzo: Allegro	0:00
[3] Andante	0:00
[4] Finale: Allegro comodo	0:00

Piano Quartet No.1 in G minor Op.25

[5] Allegro	0:00
[6] Intermezzo: Allegro ma non troppo	0:00
[7] Andante con moto	0:00
[8] Rondo alla Zingarese: Presto	0:00

Piano Quartet No.2 in A major Op.26

[9] Allegro non troppo	0:00
[10] Poco adagio	0:00
[11] Scherzo: Poco allegro	0:00
[12] Finale: Allegro	0:00

THE PRIMROSE PIANO QUARTET

SUSANNE STANZELEIT violin DOROTHEA VOGEL viola
ANDREW FULLER cello JOHN THWAITES piano

The three piano quartets all originated in the period 1855-62. During his visit in the autumn of 1862 it was with the Op.25 and Op.26 quartets that Brahms introduced himself to the Viennese public. Hanslick and other contemporary critics viewed Brahms's earliest compositions as constituting his "Sturm und Drang" period. Given his life circumstances in 1855 at the time of the earliest drafts of the Op.60 quartet this could hardly be more apt. Goethe's partly autobiographical novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) was a masterpiece born of that earlier "Sturm und Drang" whose musical outpourings included great minor key symphonies by Haydn, Mozart and others. Now Brahms felt that his own life had parallels with these iconic fictional characters. Werther had put a gun to his head as respite from an unrequited passion for Lotte, who was happily married to his friend Albert. Brahms was living with, and overflowing with admiration for Clara Schumann and her children whilst the man who had done so much to support and champion him, Robert, languished in an asylum.

Showing the reworked first movement to Hermann Dieters in 1868, Brahms said: "Now, imagine a man who is going to shoot himself, for there is nothing else to do." And when finally publishing the revised work in 1875 he wrote to Simrock: "On the cover you must have a picture, namely a head with a pistol to it. Now you can form some conception of the music! I'll send you my photograph for the purpose. You can use blue coat, yellow breeches and top-boots, since you seem to like colour printing" (a reference to Werther's attire, sometimes imitated by youths suffering "Werther

Fever"). Is the stark opening piano octave a pistol shot, a tolling bell? The response hangs heavy with the shadowy portents of death. As Malcolm McDonald put it: "The strings gasp out a two-note phrase, that seems to catch the intonations of speech. One has the distinct impression that the violin's E flat-D semitone speaks the name "Clara"- an idea rendered less fanciful by the immediate unwinding of a transposed version of Schumann's "Clara-motif". (C(L)A(R)A becomes C B A G sharp A. Even allowing that a cypher loses potency through transposition, the symbolic borrowing seems clear. This same transposition is quoted to open the Op.25's Intermezzo - E flat, D, C, B natural, C.

Most editions follow Simrock, leaving the sustaining pedal marking for the piano's opening octaves open-ended, with performers raising the pedal as the strings enter (including Olive Bloom in the splendid first ever complete recording of Op.60 with the Spencer Dyke Quartet for the National Gramophonic Society in 1927). We, in common with some Historically Informed Performance Practice proponents, follow the Breitkopf and Härtel edition of 1926-7, edited by Hans Gal and based on local sources in Vienna, where the pedal release is clearly indicated 2 and then 4 bars into the string entries. Arguably this makes more sense of the notated diminuendo as well as binding the instrumental group together in their shared fate.

Fate was clearly on Brahms's mind. The Scherzo has an obsessive's single-mindedness, the Finale a Regenlied nostalgia (the revision contemporary with the Regenlied Op.59 No.3 of 1873) into which



he gently introduces in the first bar of the piano's left hand the Fate Motif from Beethoven's C minor Fifth Symphony, used also in Brahms's FAE Sonatensatz, Op.5 Piano Sonata and First Symphony.

Contrasting with largely stepwise melodic movement elsewhere, Op.60's first movement's second subject, introduced by solo piano in E flat "like an angel from heaven" (Kalbeck), is formed from descending fourths and thirds with a stepwise tag, clearly relating to the main cello theme that opens the E major slow movement. Among tonal theorists, for Schubert E flat was "the key of love, of devotion", C minor "the laments of unhappy love - all languishing, longing and sighing of the love-sick soul lies in this key" (for Gathy, "grandiose grief"). For Mattheson, E major held "a desperate or wholly fatal sadness: it is most suited to extremes of helpless and hopeless love". Ivor Keys wondered "whether the key of E major itself had an intrinsic quality for Brahms - perhaps of quietude at some remove from the everyday?" (E major is also the key of Op.26's slow movement, which has exactly this character before the piano's catastrophic B minor "Sturm und Drang" interruption). If Kalbeck saw the Op.60's slow movement as a secret declaration of love for Clara, then is it perhaps the fantasist's idealised love, so heavenly, apparently so tantalisingly close, that in its ultimate frustration becomes so hard to bear? And should we also consider Brahms's use of E major in his Op.121 where in the third song Death comes so serenely as a "welcome guest" to those who have suffered.

Two centuries after Goethe, Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* is another brilliant portrait of a man so driven by a splendid, idiotic, mad obsessive love that he kidnaps another man's wife. Charles says of Hartley: "I gave her the meaning of my life long ago, I gave it to her and she still has it". At the time of young Felix Schumann's terminal illness Brahms wrote to Clara: "I love you more than myself and anyone or anything in the world". There is a happier genesis for the A major Op.26, dedicated to Frau Dr. Elisabeth Rösing, in whose house in the suburbs of Hamburg, and next door to the Völckers girls from his Women's Choir, Brahms took rooms from the summer of 1861. As he wrote to Albert Dietrich: "It is beautiful out here at Hamm: the sun shines so brightly in my room that, if I did not see the bare trees through the windows, I should believe it was summer" and later "Everything is in blossom now, and out here at Hamm it is simply a treat to listen to the nightingales singing amongst the budding trees". Op.26 is clearly inspired by the "heavenly length" and lyricism of Schubert. It is formally comfortable in its own shoes, and pastoral elements are clear in rustic drones and the horn fifths of the third movement. This Trio is also full of triplets that should be rhythmically assimilated to form melodic duples (as should passages in the first movement) in the manner familiar from Schumann (e.g. his Op.73). We play the A major's Finale "alla Hongroise" in the Viennese sense, but of course the true Gypsy Finale is that to the G minor Op.25, where the full fruits of Brahms's early performing partnership with the Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi (who had fled to Hamburg after the 1848/9 uprisings) let rip. The Streicher used on this recording has a warm, gentle sound. In the first

movement it facilitates a revision of the modern balance between piano and strings, and in the second it allows us to honour Brahms's original intention that all three string instruments should be muted. Most exciting of all is the sound world possible in the Rondo alla Zingarese, where this piano can truly imitate the sound of a cimbalom, allowing us all to embrace a café band aesthetic (and listen, for example, to the "cimbalom cadenza", T8, 6.38). Where the Henle edition predictably offers an editorial *Meno Presto* at the obvious place (bar 255), we prefer those blank editions that can inspire the mildly contrarian-pushing headlong ahead with a steady 6 bars later. On other textural matters we were fortunate to be able to contact Robert Pascall, for example about the F, viola part, bar 206 1st beat, Scherzo Op.60, where Henle follow Simrock, but the note should be A flat by analogy with bar 52, as Gál has it for Breitkopf.

Players in the early NGS recording use a lot more string portamenti than do we, our intention being an unashamedly modern players' perspective on the refined portamenti of Arnold Rosé, concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic from 1881 (and rumoured to be an earlier owner of Susanne Stanzeleit's Guadagnini violin). Pianist Olive Bloom hardly arpeggiates (a controversial subject when we speculate about pianism before the age of recordings), but her occasional subtle and unselfconscious asynchronicity is a perfect representation of the expressive freedom we seek in the opening of Op.26's second movement and elsewhere. Max Fielder's conducting of Brahms's Fourth Symphony offers a clear model for extreme tempo flexibility which informs, for example, our

handling of the opening movement of Op.25. Our approach is at an intersection of modern and period life, embracing rhythmic inequality and rubato and caring less for a clinical ensemble than for the spontaneous and free. We question everything, but enjoy the ongoing dialogue between academic enquiry and performing musicians.

If one thing is clear, it is that to generalise too much about the Performance Practice of Brahms's day is to miss one of the most essential characteristics of that time - its plurality and variety. This applies also to the pianos of that time. Many Streichers are powerful and brilliant in a Lisztian style, and yet the one we use is mellow. Although also straight strung, the Blüthner has a much clearer, purer singing sound, and allows for visceral brilliance and power when required. In fact, the Streicher sounds more like the later cross strung Ehrbar - an extraordinarily warm instrument which inspires lyric phrasing, but can handle the rhapsodic vehemence of op.60's "Storm and Stress" first movement coda. We travelled to Vienna in 2018 as Brahms had in 1862 - to perform Op.25 and Op.26 - but the particular pleasure in taking an Ehrbar piano back home to the Ehrbar Hall, to a venue Brahms used in the 1870s and 1880s and with a piano from that time, was nonetheless with the piece whose whole meaning lay back in the 1850s.

John Thwaites



Historically Informed Performance Practice Symposium, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, 19th-22nd February 2018.

As a culmination of many years of research and in preparation for our recording of the Brahms piano quartets using period pianos and gut strings, we convened a four day Symposium in Birmingham to workshop, debate and discuss the latest thinking in the field with Dr. Anna Scott, Claire Holden, Dr. Kate Bennett Wadsworth, Professor Ronald Woodley, Jung Yoon Cho and Job Ter Haar.

Pianist Dr. Anna Scott made a compelling case for allowing the evidence of how members of the Schumann-Brahms circle played in early recordings to "romanticise" our very conception of Brahms. Stretching and compressing pulse within an overall tempo, and free expressive use of asynchronicity, arpeggiation, rhythmic alteration, agogically inflected dynamic shapes, and rubato, give her own performances a rich expressivity. She is also the living proof that such playing can work on the modern piano, although most keyboard players find it easier and more natural to adopt period practice on period pianos. During the Symposium the Primrose used an 1850's Wilhelm Wieck piano, having previously enjoyed access to an 1890's Blüthner in Hampshire that was factory selected by Brahms for a student, as well as to an exceptional Erard in the former Fincocks collection.

If pianists generally embrace the sheer beauty of early pianos, modern string players have issues with gut strings that include instability of tuning and lack of power. Fortunately, these problems are

mitigated by the recording process and the use of smaller pianos. Different types of gut offer an opportunity to characterise different strings with different colours (just as an early piano makes no apology for having different colours in different registers). String players in the Primrose regularly use gut, and have been taught, like so many in our generation, by teachers with close and direct links back to Brahms. Discussion and experimentation with expressive slides (*portamento*), extreme (to modern ears) time taking and speeding up, varying colours with varied vibrato, bow speed, and bow pressure was informed by Claire Holden's work on early recordings of the Vienna Philharmonic, which also revealed that orchestra's ability to come in and out of pure ensemble in order to make part playing more transparent, and lines freer and more expressive where appropriate. We also heard from Dr Kate Bennett Wadsworth about her preparations for her recording of the Brahms cello sonatas, using the Bärenreiter edition that she prepared with Professor Clive Brown, considering how the fingerings and bowings of contemporary 'cellists had interpretational implications. This informed our own work on editions, aided by observations from friends and students when we undertook additional workshops.

In this company we were inspired to let our hair down and give a performance of Op 26 that felt like something new. Recording in Vienna was equally inspiring. And the search for "How to Perform Brahms in the Twenty-First Century" (to borrow Professor Clive Brown's phrase) is only in its second decade!

Primrose Piano Quartet

The Pianos used in this Recording
(Gert Hecher Collection, Vienna)

Julius Blüthner founded his piano workshop in 1853, however we know from contemporary accounts that he only started building the first instruments in the spring of 1854. The serial number of the Blüthner piano used in this recording - 926 - points towards it being one of the few surviving instruments from the company's early period. Shortly after this time the workshop grew into a busy factory and production went through the roof: 1920 saw the 100,000th piano being built.

The piano No.926 measures 215cm in length with rosewood veneer. It is straight-strung and contains the unique Blüthner action patented by Julius Blüthner immediately after the firm's foundation. This is an English double action with a simple but very effective escapement. The touch is light and fast and the sound clear and lyrical. It is no accident that Blüthner quickly became accepted as one of the best piano manufacturers.



The pianos of Johann Streicher are a true legend. In 1867 Streicher was the only continental European piano manufacturer to be awarded the gold medal at the World Exhibition. His workshop was one of the very best in Vienna. It survived for a period of about 100 years, from 1794 to 1896. Famous exponents of Streicher pianos include Beethoven, Weber, Hummel, Clara Schumann, Hiller, Liszt, Brahms and many more. The piano used in this recording was built in 1870 and bears the serial number 7084. It measures 240 cm in length with rosewood veneer. It is also straight strung and contains a patent action but this time Streicher's own - also not a Viennese but an English double action. Roughly a quarter of Streicher's pianos were built with this action, and this piano is identical to the instrument given to Brahms for his indefinite use by Streicher in 1868. Sadly most of Brahms's piano was destroyed in the chaos of the final years of the Second World War and only a few parts survived. Streicher's pianos are renowned for their particularly colourful sound rich in overtones with a wide dynamic range.



Friedrich Ehrbar grew up in Hildesheim, Germany, and came to Vienna in 1848 together with Heinrich Engelhart Steinweg. They both found employment in the workshop of the eminent piano manufacturer, Eduard Seuffert. While Steinweg only remained in Vienna for a few months before emigrating to America where he modified his name and founded the world famous Steinway & Sons factory, Ehrbar stayed on and quickly rose to the position of workshop foreman. Seuffert died in 1857 and Ehrbar, in keeping with tradition in those days, went on to marry Seuffert's widow and take over the company. Ehrbar became one of the most innovative piano manufacturers in Vienna. His friendship with the Steinways continued throughout his life, and this is reflected in his instruments. Ehrbar was the first person in the rather conservative Viennese environment to introduce American inventions such as cross-stringing, single cast frame and the duplex scale. In addition it was Ehrbar, not Steinway who invented the Sostenuato pedal - although Steinways copied his idea soon thereafter in slightly altered form.

The grand piano with serial number 7311 dates from 1878. This was the most modern piano available in Vienna at the time; it measures 260cm in length, is cross-strung and equipped with modern double repetition action. It also features a rather attractive black case in the style of the Wiener Ringstrasse. Ehrbar's pianos are renowned for their round and rich bass and a particularly ringing and soft descent.



Brahms, who mainly earned his living as a concert pianist, was extremely familiar with the instruments of all three manufacturers. His favourite pianos were those made by Streicher, which he would always recommend to others. Indeed, the piano he chose for his only recording was a Streicher. When performing in Germany he would usually choose a Blüthner piano to play on, as he did for first performance of the Piano Concerto No.1 - infamous for the disastrous reviews the concert received. Brahms's connection to Ehrbar is equally fascinating: a few weeks before the official première of his Fourth Symphony he performed his own version for two pianos with Ignaz Brüll to an audience of friends in the company's own concert hall - the Ehrbar Hall used for the recording of this disc. In a pun typical of his sense of humour he called the performance "eine ehrbare Annäherung", which translates as "a respectable approximation". All three instruments used in this recording are therefore particularly relevant to Brahms's output as composer and performing musician, and they perfectly convey the sound world in which he moved.

Gert Hecher
(Trans. Susanne Stanzeleit)



The Primrose Piano Quartet is named after the great Scottish violist, William Primrose. Widely regarded as one of the UK's leading chamber ensembles, the quartet enjoy a busy performing schedule throughout the UK and abroad, with regular appearances at London's Kings Place, Wigmore and Conway Halls.

Several of the UK's leading composers including Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Anthony Payne have written for the group, and to date they have released seven critically acclaimed discs on the Meridian label. Their own festival in West Meon, Hampshire is now in its ninth year.





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