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Brahms Clarinet Quintet, opus 115

Brahms' Clarinet Quintet is one of his final works, written as part of a surprising re-emergence from retirement. In 1890, with the completion of his superb Viola Quintet in G, he declared that his creative output was at an end, and that (at age 57) he would spend his remaining days ordering his affairs and his earlier compositions, and relaxing. However, on a visit to Meiningen, he heard an amazing clarinetist, Richard Mühlfeld, and was inspired by this artist to return to composing. It is to Mühlfeld, whom Brahms affectionately named "Fräulein Klarinette", that we owe the Clarinet Trio, the Clarinet Quintet, and the two Clarinet Sonatas, and indirectly the other music from this time - the sublime piano music of opp. 116-119 and the Four Serious Songs.

Many have argued that the Clarinet Quintet is Brahms' most profound chamber work, despite a number of awe-inspiring rival claimants (the Horn Trio, the G Major Sextet and the c minor Piano Quartet spring to mind, among others). The work as a whole possesses a unique collection of affects. It is an oversimplification to describe it as melancholy and autumnal, although this is part of the truth; in fact, there is a great depth of sadness in the piece, which may not be felt in every bar but is never far from the surface. At the same time, though, the music is constantly energized by rhapsodic, wild gestures and flickering textures; our tragic hero, if there is one, is driven to wander restlessly, not stay at home. The most obvious example of this energy is the extraordinary "Gypsy" section in the middle of the slow movement, where the clarinet rhapsodizes over tremolandi in the strings; but this element is elsewhere as well -- quicksilver arpeggios in the third movement, buzzing triplet textures in the first movement -- and the agonized climax at the end of the first movement is anything but autumnal.

Another striking feature of the work is its constant sliding between major and minor modes. Even at the opening, it is not immediately clear if we will be in D major or b minor, and in fact the first entrance of the clarinet is a tantalizing, upward D major arpeggio, a gleam of light in a minor phrase. Later in the movement, before the return of the opening material, a phrase between the clarinet and cello in B major offers a brief Elysian vision before the two instruments spiral hopelessly downwards to the parallel-minor home key, and we are back where we started. The major-minor dialectic of the second movement speaks for itself, the luminous major outer section contrasted with its wild-eyed, Bohemian alter ego in minor. In the uniquely structured third movement we are treated to a major-key idea and then immediately presented with a free variation, in minor on that material. The way in which this minor

section dances its way back to its major counterpart, slipping right into the final cadence of the movement without a formal divide or sense of return, underscores Brahms' conception, in this piece, of how close the major and minor "states" are, how poignantly they symbolize different aspects of the same situation.

Perhaps most amazing of all, in spite of the freedom of gesture and emotion, in spite of the immense textural palette that is brought to bear, there is no mistaking the tightly bound quality of the work, the sense that there is no escaping fate here. The main themes from all four movements can be seen to be closely related in their basic contours - particularly the first and last movements - and the middle movements are each monothematic, as the middle sections of each are variations on the opening materials. The key structure, also, has a rigorous feel -- the movements are in b minor, B major, D major (strongly tending towards b minor) and b minor, respectively. Most dramatically, the final movement, a carefully unfolding set of variations, reverts suddenly and shockingly, at the end, to the music of the first movement; and after a recitative-like passage where a crucial question seems to be asked, ends almost exactly as the first movement ends. Thus we have no sense of having arrived at any kind of solution or victory—the usual idea in an evolving four-movement 19th-century form - but quite the opposite, of having been brought fatefully back to earth, where we started, albeit deeper and richer for the experience.

-- Misha Amory