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Brahms Quartet, opus 51 #2

Each of Brahms' quartets might be interpreted as a sort of homage: the driven c minor confronting Beethoven, the more genial B-flat Major tipping its hat to Haydn, with shades of reference to Mozart's "Hunt" quartet as well. The Op. 51 No. 2 in a minor must have somewhere in its ancestry the Schubert quartet in the same key. A minor was a particularly evocative key for Schubert, lonely, bereft and lyrical. Loneliness also pervades the Brahms work, and in fact the main motif of the opening movement quotes the motto of Brahms' great friend and inspiration Joseph Joachim: "frei aber einsam," free but lonely. The initial letters, F-A-E, are the second through fourth pitches of the four note motif that saturates the first movement, and they reflect something of truth about the work. The piece offers up russet and amber melancholy, with excursions into restlessness. But Brahms is not Schubert, and where the earlier composer's quartet also opens with a plaintive theme and an undulatory accompaniment, there the underlying motion is a rippling stream that, in its inevitability, suggests something unalterable. For Brahms the roiling triplets underneath suggest not only unrest but possibility. And where Schubert's contrasting theme in the relative major is heartbreaking because its radiant beauty remains something unattainable, when Brahms visits the same key it is suffused with genuine pleasure even ensconced within the crepuscular cast of the whole. It is as Tony Hoagland writes in his poem *Note to Reality*: "The parade for the slain police officer / goes past the bakery / and the smell of fresh bread / makes the mourners salivate against their will." The capacity for joy remains inextinguishable.

For all the piece's voicing of wistful regret, still there is light let in between the expressions of sadness. The work is, in fact, as much air as anything else. It speaks, it breathes, it confides. Listening to recordings of some of the singers whom Brahms loved and with whom he performed helped me realize that the music in fact is written to confess not to smother, to speak earnestly rather than shout. There is lightness and drift here, even amidst great turbulence at times. Suffering is accepted, but if one pays attention, as any good Buddhist knows, there is space around the pain. Brahms, even with his rich textures, writes plenty of space into the piece, and noticing these apertures may give a key to being vulnerable to the work's manifold beauties.

Gypsy music or references to it appear in every movement. This is virile, life-affirming music (in movements 1, 2 and 4), proud and defiant in the face of

darkness or lonely yearning. It represents a kind of freedom, and often this freedom is literal, musically speaking, from the beat or from the meter. The composer draws on reserves of moral power to combat the pain. The gypsy style was often understood as a reflection of the wild, bestial side of the soul, drawing potency from its refusal to be civilized. (It should be seen as a symbol, a stereotype rather than the sort of deep sympathy later epitomized by Bela Bartok.) The last movement is a Tale of Two Cities, Budapest and Vienna. It is a synthesis of the two cultures, the two sides of the personality, the acknowledged self and the Jungian Shadow both.

In the Quasi Minuet third movement the gypsy reference is subtle, merely the presence of a drone under the main material, but this lends the movement a perfume of ageless sadness. This dance floats with a chill spectral grace. Its circular motion in three beat patterns happens simultaneously on two levels: within the measure and in the groupings of three measures in a breath, allowing the music to flow and hover at once. The movement again seems to nod in the direction of the tragic minuet of Schubert's a minor quartet; the open fifth drone also evokes the final song of that composer's *Winterreise*. The song describes a lonely organ grinder, a man who has essentially disappeared. No one hears or notices him, his fingers are numb from cold; he is offered as a representation of the soul of the singer, the winter wayfarer. This quasi minuet is a dance that has essentially disappeared, its memory haunting the present movement. But like new growth in a landscape denuded by fire a Mendelssohnian elfin trio levitates out of the mist. Its alternation in quick succession with the minuet suggests a simultaneous presence. Brahms is not a true tragedian like Schubert, he clings to hope and strength and the luminosity that seeps around the edges of shadows. Unlike his dear, free but lonely friend Joachim, Brahms seems to be lonely but free.

Note by Mark Steinberg