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Brahms Quartet, opus 51 #1

Of all the great composers of Western music, Johannes Brahms was arguably the most painstaking and self-critical. He not only withheld music he deemed unworthy of publication, but destroyed it whenever possible; one famous story has him revisiting a house he had lived in years earlier, and, to the astonishment of the tenants, ripping into a wall to extract sheets of music he had used to plug up a leak. Like many composers of his generation and after, he held Beethoven in awe, claiming to hear “the footsteps of a giant” behind him. It is in part owing to his consciousness of Beethoven’s achievement that he was forty before he published a single symphony or string quartet. In the case of the quartets, Brahms had written any number of earlier attempts – as many as twenty – before writing the two opus 51 Quartets in the summer of 1873, and the opus 67 Quartet two years later.

Two hallmarks of Brahms’ style as a composer – extreme rigor in the treatment of his material, and a proclivity for full, rich textures – are on display in all three of his string quartets, and perhaps most especially in his first one, the C minor Quartet. Brahms was thinking symphonically, in no uncertain terms, when he wrote this work. C minor had strong symphonic connotations for him, being the key of Beethoven’s most illustrious symphony, as well as that of Brahms’ own First Symphony, which was starting to take form in his mind. Moreover, he makes huge sonic demands of the string quartet in this work, so that it helps his cause to choose a key whose home pitch is C natural (the cello’s lowest string). Particularly in the outer movements there is the sense that the composer wished to achieve orchestral sonorities within a quartet’s smaller, more intimate sound-context, and this is one of the work’s most difficult aspects in performance.

The prevalent character of the quartet as a whole is restless and intense. The first movement has an underlying rapid 8th-note motion that persists almost without pause, sometimes appearing as a drum-like repeated pitch, sometimes in a leaping octave motif, sometimes shared between two instruments in an overlapping rhythm. This rhythm contributes to the questing, somewhat driven quality of the movement; the main themes, too, seem to gasp as if out of breath. Even when the narrative arrives at the relatively consoling key of E-flat major, the first violin line is unable to articulate any very reassuring idea, being swept away instead into the surrounding 8th-note activity before finally coming to an uneasy cadence. Even in the coda of the movement, where the meter is compressed and the music attains real ferocity, one senses that no lasting resolution has been attained as the dust settles on the final C major chord.

The slow second movement is the only place where true repose is hinted at, and even here not uninterrupted. The outer sections of this movement are in the rich, dark key of A-flat major, and are characterized by harmonic concord and rhythmic unity, the four parts moving perfectly together much of the time. Intervals which evoke horn calls appear again and again, adding to the bucolic mood. By contrast, the middle section (and the coda) are in minor, and recall slightly the restlessness of the first movement; the rhythms are unstable and gasping, while the harmonies search restlessly from key to key. Particularly beautiful is the way this movement ends, when somehow the restless element is grappled with, calmed, subsumed into the quieter and more lyrical element.

The third movement is ambivalent on many levels. It straddles the thin line between C minor and F minor, managing to give the impression of being in the former key for most of the movement before subsiding into the latter. It opens with a “double melody”, with the first violin and viola each offering something that is not quite a melody in itself but rather coexists uneasily with the other. Thirdly, this movement is neither fast nor slow; it is a kind of dark intermezzo that will not consent either to sing completely or dance completely. The mood is melancholy, characterized by persistently descending lines; there is a feeling that the music is always on its way down to a darker psychic level. And the perpetual motion of the first movement is back, albeit in a more somber environment: from the opening violin melody to a pulsated bassline to uneasy syncopated accompaniment, there is almost unceasing motion here, which combines with the dark mood to evoke a restless, painful cogitation. There is a trio, a middle section, which offers a sunny contrast, but which is short-lived and passes like a dream.

The finale is fiery and impetuous. The opening gesture ties the movement firmly to the first movement, being a compressed version of that movement’s opening motif; there is a feeling that we have returned to answer some lingering questions, this time with vigor. Although this is a resoundingly minor-key movement, it has a positive quality that was absent in the previous movements. The activity is highly polyphonic much of the time, with the four voices playing off each other athletically – the composer is having his own virtuoso turn. The contrasting theme, which appears first rather briefly in E-flat, and later at greater length in C major, soaring beautifully into higher registers, adds to the sense of upwardness that the movement offers. In contrast to its freedom-seeking psyche, the movement is cast in a very strict form, and caps itself with an intense coda, in which an accelerando rockets the music to its conclusion.

Note by Misha Amory

