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Brahms Quartet opus 67

In the summer of 1875, the 42-year-old Brahms was summering in the beautiful German town of Ziegelhausen, and trying to avoid working on his special bugbear, the First Symphony. Instead he wrote quite a lot of other beautiful music, including his Third String Quartet, all of which he dismissed in a letter to a friend as "trifles," a way to put off the serious work that lay ahead. In the event, he didn't procrastinate for long, as the symphony was published and premiered the following year; and the Third Quartet, according to Joseph Joachim, was later to become his favorite of the three quartets.

While this quartet may have been a "trifle" to its composer, there is nothing trivial about it -- or its predecessors -- for string quartets who undertake to play it. It is common knowledge to performers of Brahms' chamber music that the sextets, and many quintets, that he wrote are kinder to their performers than the string quartets. The sound palette of Brahms' musical imagination was of a peculiar richness and depth, to the point that five or six performers provided the right natural sonority, but four would find themselves just that much more taxed, their resources that much more stretched. This difference works its way into the skin of the quartets, making them more interestingly effortful and craggy, subtly altering their essence. As one listens to this music, one senses a tension between the large sound-concept and the slightly smaller box that it has been fit into, which places its own stamp on the piece, independent of the musical content itself.

Brahms' Third Quartet truly sounds like the work of a man on his summer holiday. Especially in its outer movements there is a feeling of the countryside, of sunshine. The first movement has strong ties to the same movement of Mozart's "Hunt" Quartet. Aside from sharing its key and its meter -- fairly superficial traits -- the Brahms evokes the atmosphere of the hunt from the very opening, imitating hunting horns perhaps even more faithfully than Mozart's music. In many of its most important melodies and motifs it specifically recalls similar material from the earlier piece. And, perhaps most importantly, there seems a conscious effort at simplicity of harmony and texture in many sections, from a composer who, like Mozart, was known for music that was often sophisticated, intricate and dark. In the main melody at the opening, Brahms uses the simplest call-and-response, a quiet playful idea that is trumpeted back immediately in forte; this exchange continues, evoking a child's game of monkey see, monkey do, rare and disarming in its artlessness.

Much later we hear the other main idea of the movement, a basic skipping up and down a few steps of a major scale, again an evocation of child's play,

written intentionally to be rhythmically and harmonically as simple as possible.

This is not to say that the movement is devoid of darker or more complicated music -- there is quite a lot of shadow, as well as plenty of involved counterpoint -- but at the movement's close we are left with a recollection of sunny, carefree laughter, a conscious setting-aside of worry and convolution.

The second movement is one of the most beautiful and extraordinary slow movements Brahms ever wrote, despite a crowded field of contenders. A hushed unison opening branches out into harmony, introducing a tender and reaching aria for the first violin. Again we are struck by the simplicity of the rhythm in this melody (although the harmonic underpinnings are now richer and more chromatic, more typically Brahms); perhaps the singer is young, sweetly naïve, discovering first love. The contrasting middle section presents a fiercer, prouder idea in dotted rhythms, which alternates with a smoother, more mysterious choral response; this world is plural, the many voices in concert rather than the single, private one. From here the first violin embarks on a wandering fantasy of 16ths, meeting a partner (the second violin) with whom he conducts a difficult, searching conversation. Ultimately the music reaches an anguished climax, after which we are eased into a return of the opening song -- this time shared between the cello and first violin, an easier, more graceful exchange than the earlier one. An expressive coda returns to the arching gesture which opened the movement, exploring it more fervently, and reaches another passionate climax before closing at last with a prayerful cadence.

The third movement is a different story: troubled, elusive and restless, yet graceful too, evoking an unnameable dance. Now the viola is the hero, singing out boldly while the other instruments, muted, band together in shadowy support. The "Agitato" in the movement's title is felt rhythmically -- in the persistent, obsessive rhythms of the opening idea, in the tendency towards hemiola (grouping beats in two's against the movement's triple meter), and in moments that halt and jar ill-fittingly. But there is also a latent agitato feel in the harmony of the music, which wanders, changes key constantly, and shades towards minor even in major-key passages. The first violin often steps forward, a counterpart to the viola, sometimes agreeing with him, sometimes interrogating and confronting him, providing a kind of balance without which the music might tilt dangerously out of control. A shorter middle "Trio" section provides a lighter, more tightly structured contrast: at first the three muted instruments play a fragmented, graceful tune, then the viola enters and sings a mournful melody against its repetition. After the return of the main section, and the climax which it attains a second time, a strangely calm coda follows, bringing a disconsolate almost-peace, an uneasy conclusion to the movement.

With the finale, the mood of the piece returns to the geniality of the opening movement, though not at first matching its energy. Here we have a set of variations, which recalls the finale of Beethoven's "Harp" Quartet so strongly that it seems like an homage of sorts. As with the Beethoven, the movement is a lighter companion to three more intense preceding movements. Both the Beethoven and the Brahms feature a quite short, slightly irregular theme in two repeated sections, charmingly laconic, playing it close to the vest. The two movements also share many details: a variation where the cello plays repeated triplet notes under legato duple rhythms in the other instruments, an early variation featuring the viola, and a fantasy-like coda. However, the Brahms movement deviates from the script when, after several variations have gone by, the music from the first movement stages a kind of invasion, crashing in and assuming command of the proceedings for awhile. But the variation structure persists, despite the intrusion, and ultimately we perceive that the invading forces are subsumed in the landscape of the music, though they never disappear entirely. Late in the coda, the storyline flags, gently losing momentum and finally coming to a near-halt, before the movement is swept to a close in one joyous flourish.

Note by Misha Amory