

BRAHMS: THE CELLO SONATAS

Paul Christopher, cello • Robert Sacks, piano

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

The nineteenth century was a productive time in the history of the cello repertoire. There were in this age several significant performers and pedagogues of cello who not only created their own works for this instrument but also for whom the leading composers were eager to write. The French cellist Jean-Louis Duport was one such figure, and, for him, Ludwig van Beethoven composed his first two cello sonatas in 1796. Written at a time when the sonata for violin and piano was finally reaching its mature form, these two cello sonatas by Beethoven represent the first important works in this related genre. Apart from these, the pedagogical duets for two cellos of Jacques Offenbach are forgotten gems which, indeed, Paul Christopher himself has restored to some prominence. Meanwhile, in Germany, Bernhard Romberg and his pupil Friedrich Dotzauer were among the more prominent cellists while, later in the century, Italian Alfredo Piatti and Czech-born David Popper would gain tremendous acclaim, through their playing as well as through their compositions. The major composers would also give considerable attention to the cello. As far as chamber music, Beethoven would complete a total of five cello sonatas; Felix Mendelssohn, two; Frédéric Chopin, one; and **Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)**, the two which we hear this evening. In orchestral music, this century would see the creation of the cello concerti of Robert Schumann and Antonín Dvořák; the *Rococo Variations* of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky; and the impressive “Double Concerto” of Brahms for violin and cello. Surely, all of these works rank among the greatest ever created for the cello.

The cello, however, presents some challenges for those seeking to pair it with piano. Especially in its lower register, the cello is easily overpowered by the piano, and its melodic line can become entangled with the piano’s lower pitches, if not balanced carefully. Brahms, nevertheless, had at his disposal several potential models in Beethoven’s cello sonatas and the rest; additionally, he had learned cello as a boy and regarded it as *his* instrument, although professionally he was known as a pianist. It should not come as a surprise then, knowing his personal history with

the cello, that, for his first largescale concert piece for solo melody instrument and piano, he would choose to write for the cello. When in 1862 he began composing his Cello Sonata No. 1 in E minor, Op. 38, his first violin sonata was still some sixteen years away. His earlier chamber music—pieces like the First Piano Trio, Op. 8 and First String Sextet, Op. 18—already reveal Brahms’s fondness for the cello in the special attention they give the instrument. Later Brahms would quite famously give the cello an unusually important solo role in the *Andante* movement of his Second Piano Concerto, Op. 83, so that the principal cellist becomes a soloist almost on par with the solo pianist.

As of 1862, Brahms was still a relatively young man, just attaining his first maturity as a composer. He had already received the endorsement of Robert Schumann and befriended both he and his wife, Clara, but he had also come into conflict with Franz Liszt who, in the 1850s, was revered as the leading progressive composer active in Germany. The series of chamber works which Brahms produced in the early 1860s not only distinguished him from Liszt’s camp, but also showed Brahms defining his own idiom, in which modern chromatic harmonies are melded with a gradually evolving approach to tonal form reminiscent of Beethoven and Viennese Classicism. The First Cello Sonata was part of this series which also included the two string sextets, the piano quintet and two quartets, the horn trio, and several solo piano works. Significantly, these pieces are for chamber ensembles at a time when Liszt and his followers were propounding the supremacy of orchestral music; they were also examples of absolute music—music without programs—whereas Liszt busily advocated of the necessity that new music have reference to literature. In this way, these chamber works are again more like those of Beethoven: while their musical content can have tremendous personal meaning for the composer, their formal logic is not shaped by an extramusical narrative, such as the popular Faust legend or another literary motivator as was increasingly the case in the wake of Liszt’s symphonic poems.

It was while Brahms was on summer holiday with Clara Schumann that he began work on the First Cello Sonata. At Bad Münster, near Hamburg, in summer 1862, he wrote the first two movements and possibly an *Adagio* which was not included in the final version. The fate of this movement and the possibility it never existed in the first place has been the subject of debate by Brahms scholars for more than a century now. Only in 1865 did Brahms find the inspiration, after his mother's death and while his mind was again on the *German Requiem*, Op. 45 to compose the final movement, *Allegro*, and complete the sonata. Indeed, the somber, serious character of the cello became for Brahms the ideal voice for reflecting his own emotional despair surrounding his mother's passing. Brahms dedicated the sonata to Josef Gänsbacher, a lawyer and amateur cellist, who together, with Brahms on the piano, did a run-through of the piece for friends before its publication by Simrock in 1866. A more polished, private performance was given on May 3, 1866 by cellist Ferdinand Thieriot and pianist Theodor Billroth, a surgeon by trade, and public performances followed in 1867; the eminent conductors, Hans von Bülow and Carl Reinecke, were among its performers that year.

The first movement, marked *Allegro non troppo*, is in sonata form with a clear exposition, development, and recapitulation, although its division of themes is less clear. Instead, the themes seem to grow out of one another, according to a feature in Brahms's music which Arnold Schoenberg would later term, "developing variation." The mood is initially wrought with despair and passes through several transformations, reaching an absolute low immediately before finding renewed hope toward the close of the exposition. The emotional climax, however, comes in the development with forceful block chords in the piano and strong reiterated gestures in the cello. The recapitulation crosses into E major in its final measures, but, even in the major mode, the theme remains tinged with a certain sadness. The second movement, *Allegretto quasi Menuetto*, is in A minor and follows the ternary minuet-and-trio pattern common to middle movements of symphonies and string quartets. The A section adopts the minuet's triple meter as well as its nimble dance feel. The ensuing B-section trio is smoother in texture with its running eighth notes.

The final movement, marked *Allegro*, possesses a fugal structure unusual for Brahms even as concerned as this composer was with the musical past. Scholars suspect that Brahms might have modelled his fugue's first subject on a theme from Johann Sebastian Bach's *Art of Fugue*, but it is

also worth noting that Beethoven ended his Fifth Cello Sonata with a fugue. Indeed, Brahms demonstrated several times throughout his career that he was not opposed to picking-up where these two forerunners had left-off. The first fugal entry is in the left hand of the piano, followed in sequence by the cello a fourth lower and then the right hand of the piano an octave higher than the original. The movement is quick and propulsive, angry in mood compared to the despaired first movement and sinister minuet of the second movement. Although there are times when the music becomes more hopeful, the fierce competition between these happier thoughts and darker emotions persists—intensifies even—until the sonata ends aggressively in one final fury.

The Cello Sonata No. 2 in F major, Op. 99, composed two decades later, differs substantially from its predecessor in both its form and emotional content; yet it is very much the work of the same composer, someone dedicated to chamber music and the ideal of absolute music. It was at the request of the cellist Robert Hausmann, who had joined Joseph Joachim's quartet in 1879, that Brahms set to work on the Second Cello Sonata. Hausmann, like Joachim himself, had become a close friend and professional ally to Brahms, and it was Hausmann who had revived Brahms's First Cello Sonata after some years of neglect; additionally, Hausmann and Joachim together would be the soloists of Brahms's "Double Concerto." It was during the summer of 1886 while Brahms was staying at the lakeside village of Thun in Switzerland that he completed his Second Cello Sonata. The mid-1880s, like the early 1860s, saw the creation of several chamber works by Brahms, including, during that very same summer at Thun, the Second Violin Sonata, Op. 100 and Third Piano Trio, Op. 101. His friends had mixed reactions to the new cello sonata when he shared it with them. Elisabeth von Herzogenberg described it as "lovely" and "charming" and praised the first movement in particular; Theodor Billroth, who had premiered the First Sonata, instead, expressed reservations about the thematic material of the first movement and, anyways, found too much boldness in the harmonies. Undeterred, Brahms joined Hausmann for the premiere on November 14, 1886 at the small hall of the *Musikverein* in Vienna. They played from manuscripts, however, and, afterwards, Brahms took the opportunity to make a few edits before sending it to Simrock for publication the following January.

The Second Cello Sonata is set in four movements. The first movement, marked *Allegro vivace*, is eminently lyrical but lacks melody in the sense that line is replaced by

fragmentary gestures; this was likely Billroth's concern, though later commentators have, in agreement with Herzogenberg, found it highly successful. The exposition in F major is cheerful and exuberant in its playful exchanges between cello and piano. The development, however, becomes more dramatic and the two soloists seem to grow weary of their partnership. The onset of the recapitulation restores their friendship and, concurrently, it returns to F major. The second movement, *Adagio affettuoso*, shifts to the remote key of F-sharp major. The music is gentle and endearing, and the cello sometimes seems to sing above a piano part which is reduced to mere accompaniment. At other times, the piano takes the role of leader while the cello contributes only the delicate plucks of *pizzicati*. The movement's rhapsodic nature and smooth transitions mask its ternary form, so that it becomes at once the emotional core of the sonata as well as an unassuming interlude between the more commanding first and third movements.

The third movement, marked *Allegro passionato*, has the character of a scherzo with its ternary structure, dance-like rhythms, and furious volley of notes. The piano part is especially demanding in the first, A section with its quick runs, large leaps, and exacting harmonies. This A section is in F minor, the parallel minor to the work's overall key of F major to which it returns in the contrasting B section. There are, however, hints here of F-sharp major—the distant key to which the second movement had ventured. The fourth and final movement, *Allegro molto*, is set in rondo form and is back in the F major tonality of the first movement. Its recurring theme is evidently based on a popular tune of the day which Brahms had already employed in his *Academic Festival Overture*, Op. 80. In quick succession, the cello gives this melody first over simple piano accompaniment, followed by the piano as melody-bearer, and then the two present it together. The contrasting sections are more exploratory, the first suggesting Brahms's interest in eastern European folk music while the second offers another instance of the cello's more expressive side. The sonata ends resoundingly with a final triumphant reiteration of the principal theme.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his Master of Music in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 following the completion of his thesis, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho." He has shared this

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