



## **J. Brahms: Trio op. 87 in C major**

It could have been a different one.

When in 1880 Brahms sent two possible drafts of a new piano trio's first movement, both Clara Schumann and his dear friend Theodor Billroth preferred the version in E flat major to the one in C major. However, Brahms, despite the high esteem in which he held these two people, decided against their advice, recognizing the potential folded within the C major movement. The period in which Brahms composed this work proved a turning point in his musical philosophy, motivic development becoming a matter of the highest priority. This first movement, in particular, displays this new quality in a particularly organic fashion. As the renowned Brahms musicologist Karl Geiringer writes "This movement develops in such a natural manner that one could almost believe that Brahms had nothing more to do, after working out the first few bars, than to complete the movement in accordance with the inner laws of its themes".

The second movement is a set of six variations over a proud and sincere theme in Hungarian style. The choice of melody might have been influenced by Brahms' two visits to Hungary in 1881, the year before this trio's composition. In this movement, Brahms merges two different forms into a cohesive unit: the Theme and Variations serve as a type of a Rondo, whereby the main melody is outlined clearly every second variation (variations 1,3,5), and obscured in the other variations (2,4). The result is a wonderfully rich, varied movement, so rich that Brahms himself is quoted as joking that it justified an extra fee!

The third movement is a haunting Scherzo in C minor, a dark version of a typical Mendelssohnian Scherzo. Its middle section is a bright hymn in contrasting C major. The movement is soft and eerie throughout, allowing for only a few episodes of explosive outbursts.

The fourth movement seems clearly inspired by the journey Brahms took to Italy in 1881. Its lighthearted manner, transparent texture, and jubilant atmosphere links it also to the Op.88 String Quintet, one of Brahms's brightest and most carefree pieces, written also during this same year. This movement's main theme makes a delightful excursion to the Lydian mode, one which might have inspired Danny Elfman in the composition of the strangely similarly-sounding theme song to the Simpson's show!

The success that this trio gained after its completion can best be appreciated by Clara Schumann's change of heart: she who originally preferred the version in E flat major and now glorified the one in C major:

"A trio like yours was a real musical tonic... Here is indeed another magnificent work".

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