



J. Brahms: Trio op. 8 in B major

The creation of Johannes Brahms' Op. 8 Trio has an unusual history. Already shortly after it was taken on in 1854 by the publisher, Breitkopf & Härtel, Brahms, at that point a mere 20-years old, expressed his doubts about this massive, at times unwieldy new composition: "I would have liked to hold on to this trio, as I would have changed it later." Clara Schumann also shared his doubts, wishing for the piece "nothing more ... than another first movement." 17 years later, at the Vienna premiere, Brahms insisted upon a shortened version for the performance. In 1888, another 17 years later, Fritz Simrock bought the rights to all of Brahms' published works from Breitkopf & Härtel for the purpose of publishing them in a new edition. Brahms took this opportunity to look over the Op.8 Trio again, and in the summer of 1889, on his holiday in Bad Ischl, became so immersed in this work that the result was not simply a corrected version, but a version that would most accurately be described as an entirely new composition.

Brahms himself premiered this new version in Vienna in February 1890 with A. Rosé and R. Hummer. Afterwards, he wrote to Clara Schumann, "I had already sent this piece to the grave and had no interest to play it anymore ... Now I enjoy the fact that I did play it, and it was a very pleasurable day.", and to his childhood friend, J.O. Grimm, he wrote, "Do you still remember the B major Trio from our early days, and wouldn't you be curious to hear it now, as I have (instead of placing a wig on it -!) taken the hair and combed and ordered it a bit...?" What Brahms humorously describes here are in reality profound changes in the piece, only the beginnings to each movement remaining more or less the same. The first movement is shortened by about half the original length, the second and third movements by a third. In the first and last movements, Brahms completely replaced the original second themes with new ones, in the first movement he took out a long fugue, in the Adagio he erased an Allegro middle section, and in the Finale he left out quotes of Beethoven

and Schubert Lieder. The result is a work with noticeable interweaving of thematic and motivic ideas, held together with great structural rigor.

It is noticeable that each movement begins in piano or pianissimo. In the first and last movements, the quiet openings are succeeded by long build-ups and stormy outbursts of untrammelled passion, possible remnants of the youthful exuberance from the time of the original composition. However, the only movement to remain fully unaltered from the original version – with the exception of changed instrumentation and a new coda – is the Scherzo movement, whose main body distinctly evokes the sound-world of a Mendelssohnian Scherzo. The Adagio movement is composed of a transcendent dialogue between hushed, choral-like intonements from the piano and long-stretching phrases played by the strings in piano and pianissimo framing a more earthy, passionate middle section. The Finale movement begins in a mood of nervous excitement, only to build up over the course of the movement to an ever-more tumultuous and tragic minor-key ending.

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