

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) String Quartet Op.51 No.1 in C minor (1873)

Allegro

Romanze. Poco Adagio

Allegretto molto moderato e comodo

Allegro

Brahms' friend Max Kalbeck claimed that Brahms had destroyed over 20 quartets before the Op 51 pair appeared. That claim is unconfirmed but we do know that Brahms wrote to his publisher in 1869 saying that as Mozart had taken "extreme care" over the six Quartets he dedicated to Haydn, Brahms intended to do the same with his. He had already been working on the two quartets for several years, but it was a further four years before they finally appeared, in 1873, after he had arranged a secret performance of them and made yet further revisions. By then, it was eight years since he had published any chamber music.

Brahms' chamber music spans 40 years of his career (1854-1894), and, for many, is the form that best captures his basic creative personality. His first period of chamber music composition included the first version of the B major Piano Trio in 1854, two string Sextets, two Piano Quartets, a Piano Quintet (initially composed as a now lost 2-cello string quintet) and the Trio for french horn, violin and piano (1865). So he was no stranger to chamber music, but composing for the string quartet raises particular problems, both technical and, especially for the classicist Brahms, historical. The quartet is a sparse medium, sparser than the string sextet and the piano trio, quartets and quintet that he had already written. Here above all Brahms found that *"It is not hard to compose, but what is fabulously hard is to leave the superfluous notes under the table."* Brahms' floor must have been littered with notes, for in these quartets he achieves a new formal compactness and great economy of thematic material within a sound world that is uniquely Brahms' and which has much in common with his first symphony, which appeared three years later in 1876 after another mammoth gestation period of 21 years.

To give some idea of the thematic unity of the C minor quartet, here are the opening phrases of the each of the movements. The first movement has a rising minor scale-based figure followed by a threatening falling seventh.



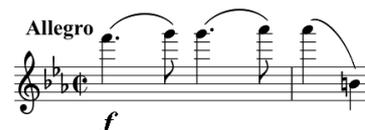
The second, calmer, gentler movement has again a rising figure, but no seventh:



In the third movement the scale is inverted, and the repeated now falling scale ends in a rising seventh (*):



Finally in the fourth movement, the rising figure returns and again ends with the threatening falling seventh:



Such extraordinary economy of thematic material does not inhibit Brahms' ability to create a wealth of lyrical wonders in his own rich and varied sound world. One significant component of this sound world comes from Brahms' famed rhythmic complexities which lie in wait to trap the unwary player. For example, in the first movement the music cascades down in a dotted rhythm like a triumphant peal of bells with one pair of instruments staying a beat ahead of the other pair.



Brahms' signature rhythmic device is to oppose triplets and duplets in complex ways, often with a bit of syncopation thrown in. In today's C minor quartet, towards the end of the second movement the first violin has 6 duplet quavers to the 9 triplets of the other instruments, with no initial down beat to help pull things together. Such complex rhythms help create a richly dynamic texture of sound within the necessarily economical resources of the string quartet.

