JOHANNES BRAHMS
(1833-1897)

1	**Scherzo from F.A.E. Sonata** (Viola transcription by Barbara Westphal)	(5:36)
	Sonata in f minor Op. 120, No. 1	(23:52)
2	**I** Allegro appassionato	(8:16)
3	**II** Andante un poco Adagio	(5:23)
4	**III** Allegretto grazioso	(4:40)
5	**IV** Vivace	(5:26)
	Sonata in E-flat Op. 120, No. 2	(21:48)
6	**I** Allegro amabile	(8:40)
7	**II** Allegro appassionato	(5:26)
8	**III** Andante con moto – Allegro	(7:34)

Barbara Westphal, viola   Ursula Oppens, piano

Total Time: 51:27

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NOTES

by David Brodbeck

On 30 September 1853, on the encouragement of his friend Joseph Joachim, the then-unknown Brahms paid a visit to the Düsseldorf home of Robert Schumann. The older composer was deeply impressed by the art and personality of the young visitor and immediately took him into his circle. Before long Schumann had invited Brahms and another young composer, Albert Dietrich, to join him in composing a Violin Sonata in honor of Joachim, who was due to arrive in Düsseldorf at the end of October. Dietrich wrote the opening Allegro, Schumann provided both the Intermezzo and Finale, and Brahms contributed the Scherzo. This collaborative work is known as the F-A-E Sonata, after Joachim's personal motto, *Frei aber einsam* (Free but lonely). Brahms's contribution stands curiously apart from the rest, both in its failure to allude directly to the three notes of the motto (which can be heard more easily in the movements by Dietrich and Schumann), and in its choice of the key of C minor (the outer movements being in D minor; the Intermezzo, in A minor). Indeed, the clearest reference is not to Joachim's motto but to that of no less imposing a work than Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, whose famous beginning Brahms plainly echoes from the outset. At the same time, maintaining great rhythmic drive throughout, the movement anticipates certain of Brahms's later efforts in the key of C minor, including the scherzi of the Piano Quintet, op. 34, and Piano Quartet, op. 60, and the opening Allegro of the First Symphony. The work thus stands as compelling testimony of the early age at which the composer acquired an assured sense both of his own style and of the tradition in which he aspired to take part. If this scherzo suggests a young man's early promise, the Viola Sonatas reveal the technical and expressive essence of a master's late style.

In December 1890, in a letter to his publisher Fritz Simrock, the fifty-seven-year-old Johannes Brahms announced his intention to retire from composing: "With this scrap you can bid farewell to notes of mine—because it really is time to stop." The "scrap" in question was a part of the String Quintet in G major, op. 111, which the composer had completed during the previous summer. In February 1891, this magnificent work appeared in print, together with a thorough revision of the early Piano Trio in B major, op. 8, whose original version dated from 1854. The composer thus planned to make his valediction with two major chamber compositions that, like polished bookends, embraced the whole of his long and productive career.

Yet within only a few months Brahms was hard at work once more in the realm of chamber music. In the summer of 1891, inspired by the skillful playing of Richard Mühlfeld, the principal clarinetist of the Meiningen Court Orchestra, he produced both the Trio in A major for Piano, Clarinet, and Violoncello, op. 114, and the Quintet in B minor for Clarinet and Strings, op. 115. Then, three years later, came a new pair of compositions featuring Mühlfeld's instrument—the two Sonatas for Clarinet and Piano, in F minor and E-flat major, op. 120. Brahms published all four of these works simultaneously in versions for clarinet and viola, and, in the case of the two sonatas, he subsequently released more far-reaching adaptations for violin. Not surprisingly, the composer himself preferred his originally conceived instrumentation with clarinet. Once, when referring to the sonatas in the presence of Clara Schumann's grandson, he remarked that the tone of the wind instrument was better suited than that of strings to the tone of the piano; and, in a letter to Joachim, he described the arrangements of the sonatas for viola as "clumsy and unsatisfying." Yet these doubts may be gainsaid, for there is no questions that the sonatas "work"–and work well–when played, as recorded here, on the viola. It is not only that Brahms was able to take advantage of the harmonic possibilities of the string instrument by occasionally calling for double stops (and in one such instance extending the solo part by three measures); more important, he was able to turn the necessity at times of transposing the register downward into something of a virtue. Indeed, many

listeners have come to prefer Brahms's arrangements, finding the viola, with its sturdier, more somber tone, better suited than the clarinet to the works' elusive moods.

Like other compositions that appeared together or in close succession–the first two piano quartets (published in 1861 and 1877)–the sonatas offer a study in contrasts. The first is turbulent and intense; the second, more relaxed and expansive. The F-minor sonata opens with an *Allegro appassionato*, in sonata form, which recalls the passionate, rhetorical expression that Brahms had explored in earlier efforts in that key (the Piano Sonata, op. 5, and the Piano Quintet, op. 34). Two gentler movements follow–an *Andante un poco adagio* and a Ländler-like *Allegretto grazioso*–and the whole is concluded with a lively rondo (*Vivace*). The Sonata in E-flat unfolds a rather less orthodox succession of movements, as it proceeds from an unusually relaxed, effusively lyrical sonata form (marked *Allegro amabile*), through an imposing scherzo (*Allegro appassionato*), to the unusual set of variations that serves as the finale (*Andante con moto; Allegro*).

For all their contrasts, however, the compositional hallmark of both works is the same. Each shows Brahms's utmost mastery of the technique that Schoenberg termed "developing variation," whereby a collection of only a few motives, continually reworked, is sufficient to sustain long stretches of music, even entire movements. Indeed, the works are "ripe and wise in their incredible compactness," to borrow the description of Brahms's friend Heinrich von Herzogenberg of the slightly earlier Violin Sonata in A major, op. 100, and Piano Trio in C minor, op. 101. To illustrate, in the opening movement of the F-minor Sonata, the melody played by the piano in the first four measures serves, successively, as a stark, unison introduction, a consequent element in the primary-theme group, the first theme of the secondary group, and, again, as an introduction, this time to a new theme that comes towards the end of the exposition–and all this within fifty measures. Here, and throughout the two sonatas, Brahms never fails to meet Schoenberg's dictum that "a stricter style of composition. . . demands that nothing be repeated without promoting the development of the music."

Composed in an age that saw the appearance of Gustav Mahler's sprawling symphonies and Richard Strauss's tone poems, these works clearly look backward, from an impressive vantage point at the very end of the great Classic-Romantic tradition. Yet they look forward as well. As implied above, the typically economical language that Brahms so artfully deploys here proved influential on the thematic writing of Schoenberg and other modernist composers. Moreover, through the media he chose Brahms virtually established two new genres: constituting the first important sonatas for either clarinet or viola, the works have ever since stood as cornerstones in the repertoires of both instruments.

Barbara Westphal, violist, a native of West Germany, won the only prize at the 1983 Munich International Viola Competition and was awarded the prestigious Busch Prize the same year. From 1978 to 1985 she was the violist of the Delos String Quartet, first prize winner at the 1981 International String Quartet Competition in Colmar, France. Ms. Westphal has played with orchestras throughout Europe and the United States, in concert and on radio. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* found her to be a musician of "exceptional artistry, one of the finest violists anywhere." She has been a guest at many international festivals, including the Sarasota, Marlboro, and Santa Fe Music Festivals, and the Korsholm Festival in Finland. Ms. Westphal has recorded for Smithsonian Collection, FSM, FONO, JPC, Wergo, and Spectrum. She recently accepted the Viola Professorship at the Musikhochschule Lübeck, Germany.

Ursula Oppens, pianist, devotes her energies to the performance of contemporary music as well as masterworks of the Classical and Romantic eras. Ms. Oppens studied piano with her mother, Edith Oppens, as well as with Leonard Shure and Guido Agosti, and at the Juilliard School with Felix Galimir and Rosina Lhevinne. In 1969 Ursula Oppens took first prize in the Busoni International Piano Competition, and was awarded an Avery Fisher Prize in 1976. Engagements this season include the Stravinsky Concerto with the San Francisco Symphony; Ligeti's Piano Concerto with l'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande; and the Beethoven "Emperor" with the Orchester der Beethovenhalle Bonn. Ms. Oppens's extensive discography includes the Grammy-nominated recording of Fredric Rzewski's "The People United Will Never Be Defeated" and Elliott Carter's Piano Concerto with Michael Gielen and the Cincinnati Symphony.

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