



BRAHMS

Sonatas for Cello & Piano, Opp. 38 & 99

SCHUMANN

Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Op. 102

ROBIN MICHAEL

Cello

DANIEL TONG

Piano

Brahms & Schumann

Works for Cello & Piano

Robin Michael *cello*

Daniel Tong *piano*

Cello by Stephan von Baehr (Paris, 2010), after Matteo Goffriller (1695)

Bow by Noel Burke (Ireland, 2012), after François Xavier Tourte (1820)

Blüthner Boudoir Grand Piano thought to have been played and selected by Brahms, Serial No. 45615 (1897)

About Robin Michael:

'Michael played with fervour, graceful finesse and great sensitivity'

The Strad

About Daniel Tong:

'[...] it's always a blessed relief to hear an artist with Daniel Tong's self-evident love and understanding of the instrument'

BBC Music Magazine

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Sonata No. 1 for Cello and Piano in E minor, Op. 38

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Allegro non troppo | [13:26] |
| 2. Allegretto quasi menuetto | [5:37] |
| 3. Allegro | [6:23] |

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Op. 102

(Five Pieces in Folk Style)

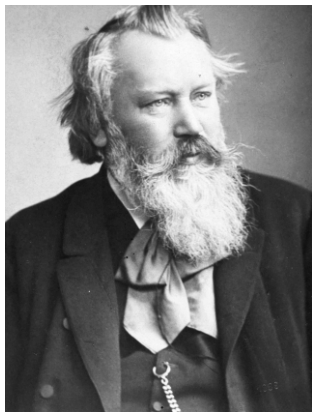
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|---|--------|
| 4. Vanitas vanitatum | [2:57] |
| 5. Langsam | [3:24] |
| 6. Nicht schnell, mit viel Ton zu spielen | [3:56] |
| 7. Nicht zu rasch | [1:54] |
| 8. Stark und markiert | [3:08] |

Johannes Brahms

Sonata No. 2 for Cello and Piano in F major, Op. 99

- | | |
|------------------------|--------|
| 9. Allegro vivace | [8:51] |
| 10. Adagio affettuoso | [6:21] |
| 11. Allegro passionato | [6:51] |
| 12. Allegro molto | [4:41] |

Total playing time [67:35]



Johannes Brahms



Robert Schumann

Brahms & Schumann: Works for Cello & Piano

Brahms started work on his **Cello Sonata No. 1, Op. 38** in the summer of 1862 during a stay at the spa town of Bad Münster am Stein, in the valley the River Nahe in south-west Germany (the artist J.M.W. Turner visited the area two decades earlier, and painted several watercolours there). Here Brahms wrote three movements for the work, two of which survived. The finale was not written for another three years: it was completed at Lichtenthal bei Baden-Baden in 1865. In Brahms's own catalogue of his works the composer noted the following details: 'I. II. III. 1862/IV. June 1865 (published 1866).' By the time he sent it to Simrock for publication in the autumn of 1865, one of the movements written in Bad Münster (probably a slow movement) had been discarded. The first known performance of the work was given in Zurich on 3 May 1866, before it was published. It was played by the cellist Ferdinand Thieriot, accompanied by Theodor Billroth – the pioneering surgeon who was a talented amateur musician and close friend of Brahms. Billroth (who had been given a copy of the proofs by Brahms) wrote to the composer the day after the concert: 'I played your new cello sonata with Thieriot. The work is a little gem both in its

inventiveness and in its firm but delicately detailed structure.' The first copies of the published sonata appeared in August 1866, and the earliest known public performance was given in Basel a few months later, on 12 February 1867 by the cellist Moritz Kahnt with Hans von Bülow at the piano.

The first movement opens with the main theme in the lowest part of the cello's register, accompanied by off-beat chords on the piano. This brooding melody takes on a more plaintive character when the roles are reversed and it appears in the upper register of the piano, with a new countermelody in the cello. The music erupts into a more dramatic passage and this gives way to a new theme in which the cello and piano follow each other in close imitation. The exposition ends with a serene coda (its material ultimately derived from the cello's counter-melody, now transformed). The development includes turbulent new treatments of both main themes, eventually subsiding into a recapitulation where Brahms enhances the piano accompaniment of the main theme with a new idea in falling eighth-notes. The movement ends in E major. The second movement was memorably described by Karl Geiringer as a 'valse triste', its outer sections, in A minor, tinged with melancholy, while the central Trio section (in F sharp minor) begins hesitantly, before

flourishing into an almost constant stream of nostalgic invention. The finale is fugal in character, and its theme is based on Contrapunctus XIII of J.S. Bach's *Art of Fugue*. The result is a brilliant combination of Baroque technique with an ardent spirit that is unmistakably Romantic. The energy is remorseless in this movement, bringing the work to a dramatic and ultimately tragic close.

The E minor sonata is dedicated to Josef Gänsbacher (1829–1911), a cellist, pianist and singing teacher who had played an important role in securing Brahms's appointment as director of the Vienna Singakademie in 1863. At about the same time, Gänsbacher obtained the autograph manuscript of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasie* for Brahms's collection. Brahms's biographer Max Kalbeck claims that the dedication of the Op. 38 sonata was a thank you for the Schubert manuscript, but it could equally have been on account of Gänsbacher's part in getting Brahms the job with the Singakademie. Brahms wrote to Gänsbacher in September 1865: 'Don't panic and please don't take it amiss if I put your name on the violoncello sonata that I shall be dispatching shortly.' The friendship between the two was certainly warm, but it was tempered by Brahms's gruff humour: when Gänsbacher played through the sonata

privately with Brahms, the cellist complained that he couldn't hear himself over the piano; Brahms is said to have replied: 'You're a lucky man!'

The **Cello Sonata No. 2, Op. 99** was completed in the summer of 1886 during Brahms's stay in the Swiss resort of Thun. Brahms wrote to his friend Theodor Billroth about his congenial surroundings on 22 July 1886:

I am very glad to have come here. For me the decision was hard, but I simply wanted to go to Switzerland again. You have no conception of how beautiful and comfortable it is here in every respect. You can picture for yourself what's involved – delightful lodgings, lovely walks and rides, good taverns, pleasant people from Bern who see to excellent reading material.

In short, this was everything Brahms needed for the perfect holiday, spent in magnificent lakeside scenery. Despite the good taverns and plenty of books to read, Brahms was astonishingly productive during his three months in Thun: not only did he compose the F major Cello Sonata but also two violin sonatas (the A major, often called the 'Thun' Sonata, Op. 100 and most of the D minor Sonata Op. 108), and the Piano Trio in C minor Op. 101. By 8 August he was able to send Billroth some manuscripts of recent pieces, including the first movement of the new cello sonata. As with the E minor sonata a quarter of a century earlier, Billroth was

the first of Brahms's friends to see any of the new work. The whole sonata was completed by the end of his stay, and Brahms returned to Vienna at the start of October 1886, having arranged for all the movements to be copied by Wilhelm Kupfer. Billroth was surprised by the fiery and fearless music at the start of the sonata. He wrote to Brahms in mid-October 1886:

The beginning of the Cello Sonata is almost dangerous, *à la* [Anton] Rubinstein. But the danger is not great with you. You know in what follows how to captivate by calm beauty, rather than by the passionate excitement of the opening. I admit that the first movement initially seemed somewhat questionable in that as I asked myself: how is this to continue? But you always know how to find the right path to what is purely musical; the jovial last movement calms one in the face of the excitement of the passionate youth who in the first movement reveals all his passionate love to the sympathetic listener.

In October 1886, Brahms sounded out his friend Robert Hausmann – the cellist in Joseph Joachim's quartet – to ask if he had any plans for concerts in Vienna and, if so, whether he would like to try out a new sonata. Hausmann had no immediate plans, but went at once to Vienna to play through the work with the composer and to perform it privately for friends. A month later, with Brahms again at the piano, Hausmann gave the first public performance in the small hall of the Musikverein in Vienna on 24 November

1886 (a month later, Brahms played the work in Budapest with the cellist David Popper). Hausmann became a devoted advocate of the sonata and was struck by it from the start: Brahms's aristocratic friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg reported from Berlin on 26 October 1886 (a month before the premiere) that 'Hausmann, dear fellow, came back from Vienna [...] You must have shown him some beautiful things. He raves most about the whole of the new cello sonata.' A few weeks later Herzogenberg – a very fine pianist – was able to play through the work herself with Hausmann. She wrote to Brahms in December full of admiration for the work and providing an interesting commentary giving her first reactions to each movement:

Thank you for the beautiful, lovely sonata; my fondest wish is to get to know it better, because ploughing through it twice with Hausmann is not at all enough. You get so excited by your first acquaintance that you can't hear for all the loud sounds. [...] So far, I find the first movement the most gripping. The piece is so greatly compressed; how it surges forward! The concise development is so exciting, and the augmented return of the first theme is such a surprise! Needless to say, we revelled in the beautiful warm sounds of the Adagio, and especially at the magnificent moment when we find ourselves again in F sharp major, which sounds so marvellous. I'd like to hear you yourself play the Scherzo, with its driving power and energy (I can imagine you constantly snorting and grunting in it!) No one else would succeed in playing it as I

imagine it: agitated without rushing, legato and yet inwardly restless and propulsive. I'd like to be able to practice it that way, and also to come to an understanding of the last movement, with its sort of lyrical theme. I had the feeling that its mood contrasts too much with the grand style of the other movements, but, as I said, I'd like to hear it more and learn how to play it.

The surging, swashbuckling theme that opens the first movement has something of the heroic quality of the start of the Third Symphony, in the same key, while the 'Adagio affetuoso', in the startlingly remote key of F sharp major, is notable for the unusual texture at its opening: the cello playing a pizzicato bass line that suggests an echo of Handel or Corelli, while the long-breathed main theme is heard above it on the piano. The 'Scherzo' third movement opens with a theme that sounds almost like a compound-time variation of the main theme in the finale of Third Symphony, and it is also in the brooding key of F minor. Conversely the rhythm of the genial theme at the start of the sonata's finale mirrors the contours (if not the mood or the key) of the same music from the Third Symphony. But in no sense does Brahms sound as if he's repeating himself – the inspiration in the sonata remains fresh and vibrant from beginning to end. Johannes Behr, in his preface to the Henle edition of the work, notes that 'In the ensuing years, Brahms performed his Second Cello Sonata several

times in private and in public, with various partners, most often Hugo Becker and Robert Hausmann.'

Thanks to these two cellists, we have some useful reports on Brahms's choice of tempi in this work (as was his custom, Brahms provided no metronome markings). Hausmann commented in detail on the flexibility of Brahms's tempo in the slow movement, especially the passage (bars 38–44) immediately before the return of the main theme: 'Brahms increased the tempo in bars 38 and 39, took bars 40 and 41 meno adagio and, along with the diminuendo, held back bars 42 and 43 so that the reprise from bar 44 onwards returned to the opening tempo of the movement.' The tempo marking of the finale is 'Allegro molto' and Hugo Becker emphasized that Brahms meant what he said with this marking: 'Brahms took this movement – two-in-a-bar – very quickly, in contrast to the preceding movement, which he took in a more moderate tempo despite its appassionato marking.'

The first performance of the F major Sonata attracted a famously vituperative review by Hugo Wolf published in the Wiener Salonblatt on 28 November 1886: 'What is music today, what is harmony, what is melody, what is rhythm, what is form – if this tohuwabohu [chaos] is seriously accepted as music? If



however, Herr Dr Johannes Brahms is set on mystifying his worshippers with this newest work, if he is out to have some fun with their brainless veneration, then that is something else again, and we admire in Herr Brahms the greatest charlatan of this century and of all centuries to come.' This extraordinary outburst is a reminder of how controversial figure Brahms was in Vienna even at the height of his power – and also how gloriously wrong one great composer can be about the music of another.

Schumann produced several sets of instrumental duos in 1849, including the famous *Fantasiestücke* Op. 73 and the *Adagio* and *Allegro* Op. 70, both written in February. In April he completed the **Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Op. 102** [Five pieces in folk style] for cello and piano. Clara played through them a few days later and noted in her diary that she was 'absolutely beguiled by their freshness and originality'. At Schumann's fortieth birthday party on 8 June 1850, Clara performed them with Johann Andreas Grabau, a cellist in the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra to whom Schumann dedicated these pieces. Their mood was well described by Emmanuel Klitzsch in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1851: 'They are certainly not intended for unthinking players. The humour, the boldness and the audacity strike us at once

in the first bars of No. 1. Nos. 2 and 3 express inwardness and gentle melancholy with simple but urgent music, while Nos. 4 and 5 display a striking show of power and forcefulness.'

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One of the essential tenets of the period instrument movement for me, has always been to try approach the music as if it were contemporary to oneself. Not necessarily to be transported back in time, but to see the work as a culmination of all the influences feeding into the composer's creative melting pot of ideas. In doing so, it is hoped to avoid being a slave to performance practice habits that have evolved since the work's creation – traditions that grow over time like Chinese whispers serving to distort the original intentions and sound world of the composer.

How could this have happened to Brahms? Surely, we are not so far removed to know exactly what he would have wanted? Shouldn't his own teaching, instructions to players who worked with him, not to mention his own meticulous facsimiles, ensure that it isn't possible to misinterpret his intentions? Yes, there is plenty of correspondence, first-hand accounts of interpretations, and we even have a recording of Joseph Joachim, violinist, friend and dedicatee of works by Brahms. And yet...



When I was a student there were buzzwords, phrases that were always trotted out when Brahms was discussed. 'Germanic tradition', 'Brahmsian sound', for example, 'More vibrato, more money' was even one particularly insightful comment from an eminent cellist of the day! But there was little emphasis placed on where his music and language had drawn its inspiration, apart from the rather nebulous aforementioned 'Germanic tradition' (it's shining apotheosis, the fifth symphony of Beethoven, a work that we now know to have been inspired by French revolutionary peasant songs proving the nonsense of such generalised tags).

It wasn't until I played the symphonies and choral works of Brahms with John Eliot Gardiner, the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique and the Monteverdi Choir ten years ago that I finally found the context and the sound world that I had been searching for with this music. In each programme, we would juxtapose works by the three composers central to Brahms's own working life, (not only as a composer but as a choral conductor) namely, Bach, Schütz and Schubert, with Brahms's orchestral and choral music. The link between Bach, Schütz and Brahms was thrown into focus with how the choir inflected the text, say, of Bach's cantata BWV 150 (which inspired the last movement of Brahms's fourth

symphony) and how this could relate to the use of the bow for a melody such as the second subject of the second symphony, which took on a much more 'spoken' and rhetorical aspect. The link with Schubert was to do with the musical language itself, in particular, for me, *l'esprit* that the two composers seemed to have in common. Is it a coincidence that the first three chords of the Schubert string quintet, a sequence of chords so quintessentially Schubertian is exactly how Brahms begins his third symphony?

Then of course there are the instruments themselves. Why play Brahms's sonatas, let alone symphonies, on period instruments when we have superior 'modern' counterparts to fill a large modern concert hall? To quote Anner Bylisma, 'I like the idea of the modern piano, in terms of something that can perhaps hold its pitch easier, but why is it so loud?'

The difference in power between a piano of Brahms's time and today is considerably more than that of the cello between these epochs. This leads to inevitable compromises with the score in terms of balance, realising Brahms's dynamics, the intentions behind them, and what you might lose in the drama. Either the pianist tempers their gestures or *modus operandi*, or the cellist has to strain

every sinew to be heard, losing inflection along the way, and with it many of the subtleties that make this music so rich in invention.

It was very apparent the first time that Dan and I played these pieces with the period piano on this recording, that all the normal problems of balance were simply not an issue. Allied to this, the gut strings on the cello, a mixture of uncovered and covered gut, seemed to blend naturally, straight away with the piano, in a way that has to be manufactured with modern instruments. A great starting point!

Another important starting point and influence were the scores of Fritz Steinbach, a conductor that Brahms was fond of and worked with closely. These scores carry all the markings that Steinbach made during the hours he spent with Brahms working on the symphonies together. It was an important reference point during the Brahms cycle with Gardiner, and looking afresh at these annotations was almost like looking at Leopold Mozart's treatise for violin playing 100 years on – with things that are now regarded as *de rigueur* with playing Bach, Haydn or Mozart, i.e. hierarchy from the beginning of slurs, using vibrato as an expressive device (never as a default setting!), following the tessitura of the line

and 'speaking' with the bow.

In other words, a classical approach to his music. And maybe it was this that got lost over the last century. Just like Debussy instructed his first 'Melisande', Scottish soprano Mary Garden, to interpret his music like she would that of Rameau, i.e. missing out the Wagnerian shadow of the late-nineteenth century, maybe that was what Brahms was asking Steinbach to do but in the direction of Bach, Schütz and Schubert ... his own Germanic tradition?

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Penny Clive for her huge generosity in supporting this project and for loaning us her unique instrument. Many thanks also to all those at St John the Evangelist Church, West Meon.



Robin Michael (cello)

Born in 1976 Robin Michael studied at the Royal Academy of Music with David Strange and Colin Carr and later with Ferenc Rados. He is principal cellist in the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique and solo cellist with Orchestre Les Siècles (Paris). He also regularly guests as principal cellist with orchestras such as the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Royal Northern Sinfonia, Irish Chamber Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, RTE Concert Orchestra, English Baroque Soloists, English National Opera and Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment.

Robin was the cellist in the Fidelio Trio for over ten years with whom he toured Europe, North America, Asia and South Africa, recording and commissioning extensively. He has also appeared in collaboration with the Dante and Eroica quartets.

Highlights in his discography include the world premier recording of Joe Cutler's cello concerto with the BBC Concert Orchestra (NMC), Vivaldi concertos with Barocksolisten München (Hänssler Classics), the first recording of the original version of Mendelssohn's Octet on period instruments (Resonus)

and Fidelio Trio recordings on Naxos, NMC, Métier and Delphian records.

Recent concert highlights include complete Bach and Britten suite cycles in France and London, the South Korean premier of Jonathan Harvey's *Advaya* for cello and electronics, the UK premier of Steve Reich's cello counterpoint, both Haydn concertos at the Spier festival in South Africa as well as festival appearances in Buenos Aires, Library of Congress in Washington, and European festivals including Cheltenham, Aldeburgh and St Magnus.

Robin is founder and co-artistic director alongside Daniel Tong of the Kinnordy Chamber Music Festival in Scotland which takes place every April and was recently elected an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music (ARAM).

www.robinmichael.co.uk



Daniel Tong (piano)

Daniel Tong was born in Cornwall and studied in London. His musical life is spent performing as soloist and chamber musician, as well as directing two chamber music festivals, teaching and occasionally writing. He released his first solo recording of works by Schubert for the Quartz label in 2012. He also recorded short solo works by Frank Bridge for Dutton as part of a London Bridge Ensemble disc and broadcast Janáček's Piano Sonata live on BBC Radio 3.

He has appeared at many of the foremost British venues and festivals – Wigmore Hall, Southbank Centre, St George's Bristol, Birmingham Town Hall, Queen's Hall, Edinburgh as well as the Cheltenham, Aldeburgh and Edinburgh Festivals. He has also performed in many other parts of Europe including festivals in St Mere, Ponte de Lima, La Loingtaine, Resonances and Cucagnan, as well as concert venues in Paris, Brussels, Stockholm, Antwerp and Lyon. He is frequently heard on BBC Radio and his performances have been broadcast throughout Europe and beyond. His project 'Music Discovery Live', in collaboration with musicologist Richard Wigmore, has seen a series of lecture-recital weekends on Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann piano works. In autumn 2012 he was

invited to curate an Elgar festival at Kings Place in London and he also curated a Dvořák programme there in 2014. He has also presented lecture-recitals on Beethoven piano sonatas at St George's, Bristol.

Daniel has collaborated with the Elias, Navarra, Callino, Barbirolli, Allegri and Heath quartets. He has a regular duo with baritone Ivan Ludlow. Each year Daniel plays with an array of wonderful individual artists, often at his own chamber festivals, in Winchester and also in the Wye Valley.

In 2015 'Beethoven Plus' commissioned ten new works to partner the ten Beethoven sonatas for violin and piano. Daniel premiered the cycle at Kings Place in London with Krysia Osostowicz and their duo has since performed this fascinating and inspiring set around the country. They record the cycle throughout 2017 for SOMM records.

Daniel's passion for song accompaniment has led to work with Ivan Ludlow, Mary Bevan, Stephan Loges, Clare Presland and others. Daniel is Head of Piano in Chamber Music at the Birmingham Conservatoire as well as chamber music coach at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

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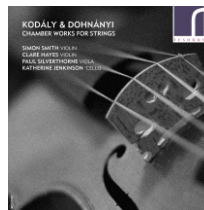


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Recorded in St John the Evangelist Church, West Meon, Hampshire on 19-21 May 2016

Producer, engineer & editor: Adam Binks

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