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[8.570827](#) - BRAHMS, J.: Viola Sonatas Nos. 1 and 2 / Violin Sonata No. 1 (arr. for viola) (Diaz, Denk)

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[English](#)

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) Sonatas for Viola and Piano

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg in 1833, the son of a double-bass player and his much older wife, a seamstress. His childhood was spent in relative poverty, and his early studies in music, for which he showed a natural aptitude, developed his talent to such an extent that there was talk of touring as a prodigy at the age of eleven. It was Eduard Marxsen who gave him a grounding in the technical basis of composition, while the boy helped his family by playing the piano to entertain guests in summer inns outside the city, a more respectable and better rewarded occupation than he was later to imply.

In 1851 Brahms met the émigré Hungarian violinist Reményi, who introduced him to Hungarian dance music that had a later influence on his work. Two years later he set out in his company on his first concert tour, their journey taking them, on the recommendation of the Hungarian violinist Joachim, to Weimar, where Franz Liszt held court and might have been expected to show particular favour to a fellow-countryman. Reményi profited from the visit, but Brahms, with a lack of tact that was later accentuated, failed to impress the Master. Later in the year, however, he met the Schumanns, through Joachim's agency. The meeting was a fruitful one.

In 1850 Schumann had taken up the offer of the position of municipal director of music in Düsseldorf, the first official appointment of his career and the last. Now in the music of Brahms he detected a promise of greatness and published his views in the journal he had once edited, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, declaring Brahms the long-awaited successor to Beethoven. In the following year Schumann, who had long suffered from intermittent periods of intense depression, attempted suicide. His final years, until his death in 1856, were to be spent in an asylum, while Brahms rallied to the support of Schumann's wife, the gifted pianist Clara Schumann, and her young family, remaining a firm friend until her death in 1896, shortly before his own in the following year.

Brahms had always hoped that sooner or later he would be able to return in triumph to a position of distinction in the musical life of Hamburg. This ambition was never fulfilled. Instead he settled in Vienna, intermittently from 1863 and definitively in 1869, establishing himself there and seeming to many to fulfil Schumann's early prophecy. In him his supporters, including, above all, the distinguished critic and writer Eduard Hanslick, saw a true successor to Beethoven and a champion of music untrammelled by extra-musical associations, of pure music, as opposed to the Music of the Future promoted by Wagner and Liszt, a path to which Joachim and Brahms both later publicly expressed their opposition.

Brahms made a significant contribution to chamber music repertoire. His first attempts were made in the early 1850s and are now lost, but in 1853 he wrote a movement for the composite violin sonata by Schumann and his pupil Albert Dietrich intended for Joachim. It was not until 1879 that he completed, to his satisfaction, his first violin sonata, here aptly transcribed for viola and piano by the Hungarian violist Csaba Erdélyi, during a summer holiday at Pörschach on the Wörthersee. It had become customary for Brahms to spend his summers in the countryside, devoting himself largely to composition. For three summers, from 1877, he stayed at Pörschach. In 1878 he completed his *Violin Concerto*, in consultation with Joachim, and started work on the *Violin Sonata in G major, Op. 78*, transcribed for viola by Erdélyi in the key of D major, the key of Brahms's own version of the sonata for cello and piano.

The first movement, in which the piano, as always in these sonatas, is at least an equal partner, allows the viola to introduce the main theme, with its gentle lilt, over piano chords. A transition soon brings those cross-rhythms that are typical of the composer. The viola moves to the second subject, joined by the piano, the first theme re-appearing with a plucked viola accompaniment, a suggested repetition of the exposition that in fact leads to a central development section. The recapitulation ends in a coda that recalls the principal elements of the main theme. The *Adagio*, opened by the piano, joined by the viola in the main theme, moves from B flat

major to the minor in solemn memory of the rhythmic figure that had started the first movement. The first theme returns in more expansive form, followed by the second, now more gently optimistic, as it leads to the final return of the principal theme. The last movement, with its immediate reference to the opening of the whole work, brings recollection of the composer's setting of the nostalgic poem *Regenlied* (Rain Song) by Klaus Groth, and of the following setting, *Nachklang* (Reminiscence). There is a return to the theme of the *Adagio*, itself a possible reference to Schumann's late *Violin Concerto*, now developed before the return of the original key and a conclusion that recalls what has passed.

Brahms wrote his two *Op. 120 Sonatas* in 1894 originally for the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, who had first served as a violinist in the Meiningen Court Orchestra before his appointment as principal clarinetist there, a position that also allowed him to serve as an assistant to the conductor Hans von Bülow in occasional rehearsals. In 1890 Mühlfeld became music director of the Court Theatre and it was during a visit by Brahms to Meiningen in the following year that von Bülow's successor Fritz Steinbach persuaded him to hear Mühlfeld's clarinet-playing. The result was Brahms's *Clarinet Trio* and *Clarinet Quintet*, written during the summer. Brahms first performed the two sonatas, which followed three years later, with Mühlfeld in Vienna in January 1895. The sonatas were published as for clarinet or viola, and later adjusted for violin and piano. They have become an essential element in viola repertoire, their autumnal nuances admirably suiting the darker tones of the instrument.

The *Sonata in F minor, Op. 120, No. 1*, is introduced briefly by the piano, after which the viola states the principal theme, before adding arpeggio figuration to the piano version of the melody. The autumnal mood continues with the introduction of further thematic material, its development and recapitulation, and an expressive coda. The full piano textures and the poignancy suggested by the viola carry into the slow movement, *Andante un poco adagio*, after the shaft of sunlight that had marked the end of the first movement. Now there is a gently descending A flat major melodic contour at the outset, the piano figuration introducing semiquaver broken chords, as the mood brightens through the mist of the season. The relative major key is continued in the delicate *Allegretto grazioso*, with its F minor trio section exploring the lower range of the viola against piano syncopation, before the return of the A flat major opening material. The piano starts the final F major *Vivace*, a rondo that includes a minor second episode, after a first episode in contrasting triplet rhythm, which returns immediately after the second episode, followed by the principal theme.

The *Sonata in E flat major, Op. 120, No. 2*, offers immediately a theme that fulfils the initial direction *Allegro amabile*, a mood that continues with the second subject material, duly developed and allowed a recapitulation in a closely woven texture of song. The movement ends gently, with a final unobtrusive recurrence of those cross-rhythms that are such a feature of Brahms's writing. There follows an *Allegro appassionato* in E flat minor, a form of scherzo typical of Brahms with its richly textured piano-writing. There is a contrasting B major trio section, marked *Sostenuto*, before the return of the opening material. The last movement, marked *Andante con moto*, is in the form of a theme and variations. After the statement of the theme the first variation breaks the rhythm of the melody in a syncopated version of the material. A second variation introduces more elaborate piano figuration in answering arpeggios, then taken up by the viola, as rôles are reversed. Rapid figuration marks the third variation and this is followed by a return to syncopation, gently leading to an *Allegro* in the tonic minor key. The more passionate feeling relaxes into a serener treatment of the material, *Più tranquillo*, with triplet accompanying viola rhythms, before the excitement returns to bring the sonata and Brahms's last contribution to chamber music to an end.

Keith Anderson

Sonata in D major, Op. 78: Arranger's note

Brahms composed the *Sonata Op. 78 in G major for Violin and Piano* in 1879. This work remained his personal favorite for the rest of his life. It was this Sonata that he chose to perform at the burial of his lifelong friend, Clara Schumann in 1896. In the same year Brahms rearranged the work in D major for Cello and Piano, making about 200 changes in restructuring the music to fit the playability and sonority of the instruments. This edition was published by Simrock in 1897 without mentioning the name of the arranger. It was a well-known habit of Brahms to prepare different instrumental versions of the same music while keeping anonymity. "I ask

that my name as arranger not be mentioned, as the mastery of the work will speak for itself." (From a letter dated 1872.) The *Handbook of Musical Literature* (Hoffmeister, Leipzig 1900) lists the Cello and Piano edition as an original Brahms work without a doubt.

When more original versions of the same music are made available by the composer, they reveal a fascinating truth: that even the first original is an inevitable arrangement of the musical thinking process. The composer has to work around and with the nature of each instrument and its limitations.

When there are original versions in existence for both Violin and Cello, the choice of the instrument in-between: the Viola, comes naturally to mind, especially to a violist wishing that great composers in the past had known inspiring viola players. Arranging the Sonata for Viola and Piano took me to hitherto unknown levels of musical involvement. There are no notes of my own, simply choices between the Violin or the Cello version all in D major in constant quest for Brahms' approval. Special thanks to Ian Hobson—a great pianist of high integrity—with whom I played the first performance, for his excellent observations.

Csaba Erdélyi

November 1991, Rice University, Houston

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