

# Brahms' Piano Quartets in their Music- and Social-historical Contexts

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## I. "New paths" forged by a conservative

It is perhaps ironic that the 1853 article which established the fame of Brahms as a composer – one of the last essays Schumann wrote before he attempted suicide – was titled "New Paths,"<sup>1</sup> for Brahms has been portrayed as a conservative by many later historians and writers.<sup>2</sup> Brahms' adherence to tradition becomes obvious even if we just compare his choices of genres to those of Liszt and Wagner, representatives of the so called "New German School." Brahms composed symphonies, lieder, and chamber music, all of which were styles cultivated by the Classical Austro-Germanic masters, including Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. Neither Liszt nor Wagner ever considered these genres seriously. Seeing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as the ultimate symbol for the death of absolute, pure instrumental music,<sup>3</sup> they strived to create new musical genres – symphonic poem in the case of Liszt, and music drama in Wagner's – so that Music could *progress*, through their hands, to an all-embracing universal art for future. Given their attitude towards music, it is not surprising that Wagner's circle regarded chamber music lowly. It is said that Liszt, as Schumann's guest one evening, ridiculed the Piano Quintet of his host as "Leipziger Musik" – i.e., something provincial and academic.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the mere fact that Brahms composed chamber music (comprising a total of twenty four pieces) already shows his more conservative musical stance. His admiration of the past is reflected even more clearly in the specific musical forms he employed to structure his chamber pieces. Each of his three piano quartets, for example, is composed of four movements, similar in external layout to the string quartets of the Classical masters. And of these twelve piano-quartet movements, five of them are in sonata form (Op.25/i; Op.26/i; Op.60/i; Op.60/iii Op.60/iv), four in tertiary ABA form (Op.25/ii; Op.25/iii; Op.26/iii; Op.60/ii), and two in rondo form (Op.25/iv; Op.26/iv). Only one of them – the wonderful second movement of the A-major

quartet (Op.26) – possesses a form sufficiently different from the standard textbook models, thus defying classification. His use of traditional sectionalized forms thus shows both his knowledge and admiration of the musical past, prompting Wagner to describe him as a representative of the "Romantic-classical school."<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted, however, that Brahms exercises considerable freedom within the framework of those Classical forms. If we perform a standard formal analysis on each movement by first isolating the themes, then denoting them respectively by A, B, C, and so on, and then listing their order of appearance, we would find that only the outline of the form resembles the textbook model. Take the first movement of the G minor (Op.25) as an example. There are five well-defined themes (labeled A to E) whose order of appearance in the movement is presented schematically below (letters in italics represent the keys of the themes):

### Exposition

A-B-A – C-D-E – codetta – A → Development  
*g B<sup>b</sup> g d D D D g*

### Recapitulation

→ B-A – D-E – Coda  
*G g E<sup>b</sup> g g*

The above structure clearly represents an instance of sonata form, as suggested by the well-defined exposition and recapitulation. But the exposition ends with a literal restatement of the main theme (A) in its home key, and the recapitulation begins with a theme of subsidiary importance (B), in the movement's relative major (while in the textbook sonata form, the exposition always closes with the "second theme" in the dominant key, and the recapitulation always begins with a literal restatement of the theme in the home key). The beauty of such a design lies in the restatement of A after the codetta of the exposition: it gives us a false impression that the exposition is about to be repeated (a practice common in many Classical

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sonata-form movements). At the same time, it invites us (at least those who know the movement well) to imagine that the development is but a long transition connecting the A and B themes of the recapitulation. Brahms was thus not a blind follower of his forbears; he knew how to extract the essential from their pieces, and then to keep his tradition alive by using it, while at the same time, to imbue it with whatever inspirations he received from the Muses.

Brahms' musical language also differs from that of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. To understand their differences, we must first describe, at least briefly, some essential features of the Classical language. One defining characteristic of the Classical style is its regular, periodic, and articulated phrase structures. Perhaps as a reaction to the continuously spinning lines of the Baroque style (such as those in any suite movement of J. S. Bach), the Classical aesthetics in the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century was founded partly upon a "heightened, indeed overwhelming, sensitivity to symmetry," as Rosen<sup>6</sup> aptly described. The opening measures of Mozart's Piano Quartet in G minor (K.478) serves as a perfect example illustrating such obsession with balance and symmetry:

Ex. 1: Mozart, Piano Quartet in G minor, K. 478. First movement, mm. 1-8.

The eight measures of music cited above constitute a well-defined phrase, analogous to a complete sentence in a paragraph of words. It is divisible into two equal parts, each comprising four measures: let us call the first half the antecedent, and the second half, the consequent. Balance and symmetry within this phrase are achieved through at least five different ways:

(1) Rhythm: The antecedent and consequent have identical rhythmic patterns.

- (2) Harmony: The antecedent opens with tonic and closes with dominant; the consequent opens with dominant and closes with tonic.
- (3) Note duration: The longer notes in the first two measures (the half and dotted-quarter notes) are balanced by the shorter notes in the ensuing two measures (16<sup>th</sup> notes).
- (4) Instrumentation: In both the antecedent and consequent, tutti (i.e., piano and strings) alternates with piano solo.
- (5) Direction of line: While the opening tutti moves downward from G to D, the ensuing piano passage begins with an upward octave leap.

The elegance of this famous opening is thus supported by the most careful and logical placement of every note, so that not only do the antecedent and consequent represent symmetrical halves of a phrase, but balance is also maintained within the antecedent (and similarly, the consequent as well).

We shall see shortly that the opening of Brahms' Piano Quartet in G minor (Op.25) unfolds as logically as Mozart's, but through a very different organization. The first ten measures of the first movement, cited in Ex.2, constitute a well-defined phrase. An antecedent-consequent relationship between the two halves of the phrase is still discernable, but the two halves are not strictly symmetrical: while the antecedent comprises the first four measures, the consequent takes up the following six measures. Furthermore, the distribution of note values in this phrase seem much more homogenous than that in Mozart's example – except for the half note in m. 4, all other notes are quarter notes. Also, there is not any clear alternation pattern between instruments. Balance and symmetry seem not to be the guiding organizing principles in this example of Brahms'.

Ex. 2: Brahms, Piano Quartet in G minor, Op. 25. First movement, mm. 1-10.

Instead of maintaining balance within the phrase, Brahms here utilizes the technique of developing variation to organize his notes, and indeed, pushes this technique “to an extreme”<sup>7</sup> in this example. To understand this technique, first compare the second measure with the first measure: the second can be regarded as an inverted version of the four-note motive in the first measure. Now, m. 3 is but a transposition of m. 2; m. 4 is engendered by transposing m. 3, and then fusing the second and third notes of the four-note motive into a single half-note. This melody thus moves forward by continuously modifying the initial four-note motive in the first measure. Such unfolding of a melody by continuously modifying a preceding germ motive (often something very simple in character) is a hallmark of Brahms’ chamber music. It holds the piece together not by maintaining structural balance at different hierarchical levels of the movement, but by stressing the motivic connectivity between measures and phrases. In the words of Dahlhaus, the technique of developing variation is one possible “thematic process which gradually causes an at first inconspicuous turn of melody to become richer and richer in meaning as ever more conclusions are drawn from it.”<sup>8</sup> In this light, Brahms’ melodies can be as structured as those of the Classical masters, only through a different means of organization.

It is important to stress that the technique of motivic development described above was not invented by Brahms. Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven had all explored this technique in the development sections of their sonata-form movements. It was Brahms, however, who applied this technique of developing variation to organize entire movements of chamber music.<sup>9</sup> Brahms thus shows his innovativeness in composition by extending an older technique. Speaking even more generally, in his chamber music Brahms manages to reconcile the essence of the Classical style he learned from music of the past, and his own urge for inventiveness, by composing, within the framework of traditional forms, in a compact musical language of his own, which itself is derived from the Classical technique of motivic manipulation. The end result of such fusion of traditional and innovative elements is an

amazing sense of organicity and fluidity, apparent in every movement of Brahms’ twenty four chamber pieces.

It turns out that Schumann’s prophecy that Brahms would epitomize “new paths” of composition is not entirely incorrect. Inspired partly by Brahms “the Progressive,”<sup>10</sup> Schoenberg later extended the logic of developing variation further by abandoning tonal organization all together, inaugurating the Second Viennese School. That the origin of one of the most radical movements in music history could be traced back to a composer regarded by his contemporaries as conservative might be an intriguing example of dialectical development in music history.

## II. Brahms composing for the middle class

Brahms left his hometown Hamburg and visited Vienna for the first time in November 1862 at age 29. His closest friends, Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim, were convinced that given his talent, Brahms should not confine his pianist-composer career within the provincial Hamburg; they thought a visit to this capital of the Hapsburg Empire might help him to establish some necessary contacts. At that time, Brahms had just completed three masterpieces that would later become part of the standard concert repertoire – the G-minor and A-major Piano Quartets (Opp.25 and 26), as well as the Handel Variations for Piano (Op.24). We do not know whether Brahms composed these pieces with the Viennese audience in mind, and Brahms himself probably did not know what to expect of Vienna before this trip. He wrote to his friend Albert Dietrich before his departure, “So, on Monday I’m off to *Vienna!* I am looking forward to it like a child. How long I’ll stay, I don’t know, of course, we’ll see what happens...”<sup>11</sup>

Upon his arrival, Brahms visited the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* (Society of the Friends of Music), an important Viennese musical institution of the time. The head of violin of the Society’s Conservatoire, Joseph Hellmesberger, and the head of piano, Julius Epstein, were both very impressed by the new compositions of Brahms. They immediately arranged a performance of the G-minor Piano Quartet (Op.25) on November 16, 1862, followed by a

performance of the A-major Piano Quartet (Op.26) on November 29, 1862.

To understand the social context in which Brahms' piano quartets were created and performed, we would need to have some sense of how the Viennese musical scene was like around the time of Brahms' arrival. The English writer, Henry F. Chorley (1808-1872), recorded his impression of the mid-century Vienna in his book *Modern German Music* (1854):

There is no lover of art to whom the name of Vienna has not been a spell of power from his youth upwards. The capital that could attract and retain Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, will, by many, be exalted as the first musical shrine that should be sought by the holiday pilgrim. But the objects of pilgrimage are different. To some it will be the past – to some the future. I had long believed that Vienna must be a place with a musical past chiefly; for the musical present, which consists merely in a constant repetition of favourite works by favourite masters, ... , is, after all, only *a past* prolonged.....Great executant players – such as Liszt, Thalberg, Ernst – have of late days excited the utmost enthusiasm [in Vienna]; but the great German composers of modern times have, with the exception of Meyerbeer, visited the Austrian capital rarely, and given out nothing hence.<sup>12</sup>

If Chorley's portrayal was accurate, then the Vienna that Brahms visited in 1862 might not be as welcoming to new compositions as he would wish. It seems that by that time, the Viennese music-loving public had already been obsessed with their grand musical past; masterpieces by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert formed the core of their musical life. In a letter to his friend Adolf Schubring, Brahms himself made the observation that in 1863, "one has the sensation [in Vienna] that Schubert [died in 1828] is still alive! One keeps meeting new people who speak of him as a close acquaintance."<sup>13</sup> Such a tradition-laden Viennese musical scene is also suggested by the statistics compiled by William Weber: in 1815, about 80% of works performed by the Society of the Friends of Music in Vienna were by living composers, and 20%, by dead composers. But by 1849, this ratio was reversed: 78% by dead

composers, 18% by living composers, and 4% undetermined.<sup>14</sup>

Such a dramatic shift of popularity from works of living composers to those of the dead might be an indirect consequence of the rise of the middle class in the wake of industrialization. The early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a swelling of urban population with disposable income. Eager to show off their newly acquired economic wealth, the middle class became an ideal market for music consumption. It was also a time when pianos were beginning to be mass-produced. One obvious way to increase the sales of piano was to market the instrument as a symbol of refined taste, and also, a gateway to a wide range of musical experiences, and such marketing could be accomplished by publishing music by selected composers of the past. The *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte* (1801), compiled by the virtuoso and businessman Clementi, was one such endeavor *par excellence*. This compilation contains not only popular theater songs of the day, but also easy arrangements of arias or chamber music by Handel, Corelli, J. S. Bach, Scarlatti, and Mozart, so that the buyer would be taken through "Fifty fingered Lessons...by Composers of the first rank, Ancient and Modern," as printed on its title page.<sup>15</sup>

Many other publications similar to the *Introduction* then gradually entrenched the notion of a permanent canon of "classical" music into the consciousness of the middle class, and this canon included pieces by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Weber, and Schubert – all the "major" Classical and early Romantic composers described in history textbooks of today. The compositions of these "masters" might well possess some intrinsic quality warranting their inclusion in this permanent collection, but the fact that they have been considered as representing *the* canon must also be due to the publishers' systematic marketing of their image and compositions. And of course, by reinforcing the belief that those compositions belong to a permanent collection, their sales would be guaranteed for decades. From the business point of view, canonization is surely a brilliant strategy for maximizing profit.

It is thus not surprising that when Brahms arrived in Vienna in 1862, an average middle-class music lover might prefer hearing a piece by a well-known dead composer to Brahms' newest

compositions in a concert. In a musical environment so dominated by music of the past, a composer could gain popularity only if his or her style is sufficiently similar to those of the “masters” so that the audience could relate the new piece to their own musical experience, or if his or her piece possesses some immediately appealing quality. Brahms’ piano quartets meet both of these criteria: we have seen how Brahms composed these quartets within a traditional framework in Part I of this essay, and it is also not difficult to find many popular, immediately attractive, elements scattered in these quartets (especially in the G minor and C minor). The following line from the third movement of the G minor, for instance, could easily remind one of an aria in a popular Italian opera:

Ex. 3: Brahms, Piano Quartet in G minor, Op. 25. Third movement, mm. 207-211.



And how can the lovely cello-solo opening of the third movement of the C minor not sound attractive to anyone?

Ex. 4: Brahms, Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60. Third movement, mm. 1-8.



Of the twelve piano quartet movements of Brahms, the one that can capture the attention and interest of the audience most easily, however, is without doubt the Gypsy finale of the G minor. In fact, the audience was very excited by this movement when it was first performed in Vienna. Max Kalbeck, Brahms’ first biographer, reported that during its performance,

the most appeal and strongest applause came from the Hungarian finale of the quartet; and

the fact that during its performance the cellist knocked over and cracked the bridge of his instrument hurt nothing of its appeal; quite the contrary, every one rejoiced to hear the “smart” Csardas [a kind of rhythmic Gypsy style], whose passages the composer allowed to roll so briskly over the strings, from the beginning again.<sup>16</sup>

Apparently, this *Rondo alla Zingarese* became so popular that the Hellmesberger Quartet, the ensemble that premiered this quartet in Vienna, had to reprogramme Johann Herbeck’s String Quartet in F (Op. 9), which contains an *Allegro Zingarese* movement as well, in another concert in February 1863 as a response to the enthusiastic reception of Brahms’ Gypsy rondo performed several months earlier.<sup>17</sup>

Whether Brahms was conscious of these popular elements in his quartets we will never be sure. But it is almost certain that Brahms, when composing these piano quartets, was conscious of their place in music history. After all, Brahms would want his pieces to be included in the “classical” canon, and to justify their inclusion they have to possess sufficient distinctive musical personality while at the same time not departing from the established tradition too much.<sup>18</sup> In this light, it becomes obvious why Brahms was so severely self-critical towards his own compositions ever since he started composing, why he destroyed so many of his finished pieces that he deemed deficient in substance, and why so many of his motivic manipulations, obviously an intensification of the Classical technique, could sound dry and artificial to many critics. In fact, the A-major Piano Quartet, the one of the three that is the least immediately appealing, was not received enthusiastically by Hanslick, a well-known critic of the time. After its first performance, he wrote,

Less favorable [in the concert] was the effect of the Piano Quartet in [A major]. The shadowy aspects of his creative spirit are here more decisively in evidence. For one thing, the themes are insignificant. Brahms has a tendency to favor themes whose contrapuntal viability is far greater than their essential inner content.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the relationships between the many themes in the quartet are so complex that how

could we expect Hanslick to grasp their “essential inner content” only after one hearing? These piano quartets are undoubtedly meant to be rehearsed and reheard many times. And despite the presence of some more popular features in these pieces, Brahms primarily composed them with the educated middle-class music lovers in mind – those who knew the Austro-Germanic music tradition well enough to understand how his pieces could be related to the former masterpieces in the tradition, and to discern all the subtle motivic transformations. In other words, full comprehensibility of these chamber pieces assumes a proper *Bildung*, or education. According to Brahms’ composition student Gustav Jenner, Brahms said many times, ironically, that “one always needs to know many different things, but only in music is this not necessary.”<sup>20</sup> At times, such a connoisseur attitude could almost become snobbish. For instance, Theodor Billroth, a famous surgeon of the time who also was an enthusiastic patron of music, wrote to Brahms after hearing his First Symphony,

I wished that I could hear it all by myself, in the dark, and began to understand King Ludwig’s private concerts. All the silly, everyday people who surround you in the concert hall and of whom in the best case may [barely] have enough intellect and artistic feeling to grasp the essence of such a work at the first hearing – not to speak of understanding; all that upsets me in advance. I hope, however, that the musical masses here have enough musical instinct to understand

that something great is happening there in the orchestra.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Brahms’ chamber music, including his three piano quartets, was meant to be difficult music that could be fully enjoyed only through proper education, even though Brahms might have inadvertently included sufficient popular elements in it so that it was at least partially comprehensible to most “naïve” audience of his time.

Essentially, by composing in a new musical language within a traditional framework, and by integrating the subtleties of his language with some more immediately comprehensible elements, Brahms had succeeded in securing a place for himself in the classical canon, and in ensuring his popularity within both the educated and non-educated sectors of the middle class. His piano quartets are also fine examples illustrating such a music- and social-historical position of Brahms. In fact, not only Brahms, but many subsequent composers such as Mahler, Bartók, Stravinsky, and Hindemith also faced the same challenge of reconciling the demands of the past and present, and each of them arrived at a different solution. If we accept Burkholder’s characterization of modern music as “music of the past hundred years ... [characterized by] its air of crisis, and that crisis has to do primarily with the relationship of new music to past music, the music of the concert tradition,”<sup>22</sup> Brahms deserves to be called the first truly “modern” composer in the Western world.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Schumann, “New Paths” (1853), in *Schumann on Music*, tran. and ed. Henry Pleasants (New York, 1965), 199-200.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York, 1941), 895.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music – Vol. 3: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2005), 719.

<sup>4</sup> Taruskin, 731.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Wagner, “On the Application of Music to the Drama,” in *Religion and Art*, tran. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1994), 181.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York, 1998), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, tran. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley, 1989), 256.

<sup>8</sup> Dahlhaus, 255.

<sup>9</sup> Dahlhaus, 256.

<sup>10</sup> See Arnold Schoenberg, “Brahms the Progressive” (1947), in *Style and Idea*, tran. Leo Black, ed. Leonard Stein (London, 1984), 398-441. This article contains Schoenberg’s descriptions of the developing variation technique used in the second movement of Brahms’ String Quartet in A minor (Op. 51, No. 2).

<sup>11</sup> Johannes Brahms to Albert Dietrich, Sept. 1862, letter 152 in *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, ed. Styra Avins (Oxford, 2001), 247.

<sup>12</sup> Henry F. Chorley, *Modern German Music* [1854 ed.], vol. 2 (New York, 1973), 99-109.

<sup>13</sup> Johannes Brahms to Adolf Schubring, Vienna, 26 March 1863, letter 169 in Avins, 276.

<sup>14</sup> William Weber, "Mass Culture and the Reshaping of European Musical Taste, 1770-1870," *International Review of Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 25 (1994): 187.

<sup>15</sup> As cited in James Parakilas, "Clementi: Virtuoso and Businessman," in *Piano Roles*, ed. James Parakilas (New Haven, 2002), 68.

<sup>16</sup> Max Kalbeck, as cited in Otto Biba, "Die Kammermusik im Wien der Brahmszeit" in *Die Kammermusik von Johannes Brahms*, ed. Gernot Gruber (Laaber, 2001), 59. German original: Den meisten Anklang und den stärksten Beifall fand das ungarisierende Finale des Quartetts, und es schadete nichts, daß dem Violoncellisten dabei der Steg umschlug und zersprang, im Gegenteil, man freute sich, den 'feschen' Csardas, dessen Passagen der Komponist so hurtig über die Saiten rollen ließ, wieder von vorn zu hören.

<sup>17</sup> Biba, 58.

<sup>18</sup> J. Peter Burkholder, "Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music," *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 8 (1984): 77.

<sup>19</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *Vienna's Golden Years of Music, 1850-1900*, tran. and ed. Henry Pleasants III (New York, 1950), 83.

<sup>20</sup> Gustav Jenner, as cited in Margaret Notley, "Brahms as Liberal: Genre, Style, and Politics in Late-Nineteenth-Century Vienna," *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 17 (1993): 114. German original: Dass man in allen anderen Dingen zu lernen hat, weiss jeder, nur in der Musik es nicht nötig; das kann man, oder man kann es nicht.

<sup>21</sup> Theodor Billroth to Johannes Brahms, 10 Dec 1876, as cited in Taruskin, 730.

<sup>22</sup> Burkholder, 76.

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