

Piano Quintet in F minor - 3rd Movement

Brahms

Background information and performance circumstances

Brahms composed this piano quintet in 1864. He originally wrote it as a string quintet, then rearranged it as a sonata for two pianos, before finally settling on the current version for piano and string quartet.

Brahms is a central figure of 19th Century Romantic style, though he had to face criticism from supporters of the supposedly more progressive composers Wolf and Wagner, who regarded Brahms's music as too old-fashioned. Whereas some of his contemporaries concentrated on song and opera, Brahms often preferred Classical formats like the symphony, concerto and various styles of chamber music. His study of Baroque and Classical composers like Handel and Haydn, led him to use forms like sonata form and even fugue – regarded by many at the time as far too academic and unemotional a structure.

Chamber music in the Classical era and before was, as the name suggests, performed in relatively confined places – perhaps at an aristocratic residence or in a private house. Performers would sometimes have been amateur. The technical ability required for this quintet, however, is such that professional players are required. A small concert hall would have been the ideal venue for the piece.

Performing Instruments and their handling

Chamber music involving a piano and strings had been popular during the classical period, though the favoured combination was the piano trio (piano, violin and 'cello). Works for larger ensembles did exist. Mozart, for instance wrote for piano quartet. Later, in 1819, the early Romantic composer Schubert wrote the famous *Trout Quintet* for piano, violin, viola, 'cello and double bass. Piano quintets – for piano and string quartet – became increasingly popular during the 19th Century, though they never reached the popularity of the piano trio.

- The piano part is **technically demanding**, featuring the **thick textured, multi-note chords**, so typical of Brahms's piano music.
- The first *fortissimo* piano entry in bar 22 features successive **6 note chords** including a typical **octave bass line**.
- Brahms exploits the **full range** of the instrument, with a **low bass line tessitura** at e.g. bar 53. The right hand moves into the instrument's **high register**, especially where the music is building to a climax, e.g. bars 174-5.
- The string parts also use a wide range. The □cello has repeated **open string bottom Cs**, the lowest note available on the instrument, at the beginning of the Scherzo as well as at the beginning of the Trio. At the start of the piece the □cellist plays *pizzicato*.
- The first Violin has *pizzicato* **double stopping** (playing two strings at once) at bars 18-20.

- The first violin rises as high as B flat, nearly three octaves above middle C, in bar 154. Note that the 8va sign should finish a note earlier than printed in bar 157.

Texture

- The piece uses a **wide variety** of textures.
- At the beginning there is a **pedal** on the `cello accompanying music in **octaves** in Violin 1 and viola.
- There is then **free imitation** between the piano and strings from bar 5.
- The third theme (in C major), from the end of bar 22 is in **homophonic** style with all instruments playing the same rhythm.
- The central section of the scherzo, from bar 67, is in **fugal style**. This section amply demonstrates the composer's interest in earlier **contrapuntal styles**.
- It starts with the **subject** in the viola accompanied by the first of three **countersubjects** in the left hand of the piano.
- The **answer** starts in the piano right hand, bar 71.
- The music builds to **five part texture** at the **stretto** beginning at bar 93. The top line is **doubled** at the **unison** by the two violins, whereas the two piano lines are frequently doubled in **octaves**. A *stretto* features entries of the theme coming closer together.
- The main theme of the trio uses **melody-dominated homophony**.

Structure

The overall form of the movement is **Scherzo and Trio structure**, using a large scale **ternary form (ABA)**.

A Scherzo	B Trio	A Scherzo repeated
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The scherzo itself has a complex ternary structure with three main themes and a central *fugato* section.

(bars 1-67)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme 1 – bars 1-12 – a syncopated tune in C minor, beginning in triadic style, leading to a rising sequence. • Theme 2 – bars 13-21- a <i>pianissimo</i> march theme, with a distinctive repeated note pattern. • Theme 3 – bars 22-37 – <i>tutti fortissimo</i> theme in the tonic major (C), repeated down an octave in bar 30, with the piano imitating two beats later. • Theme 1 varied repeat – bars 38-56 • Theme 2 varied repeat – bars 57-67 modulating from G minor (dominant) to E flat minor (the remote, mediant key).
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<p>B (bars 67-100)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fugato – bars 67-100 – beginning in E flat minor. A fugato is a fugal section in a piece (as opposed to a fugue, which is a whole movement in itself). The subject in the viola, based on theme 2, is accompanied by a simultaneous <i>staccato</i> countersubject in the piano left hand. • When the answer appears in the right hand of the piano in bar 71, a 2nd countersubject appears in the piano left hand, while the first countersubject shifts to the viola part. • A third countersubject enters in the viola at bar 80 and we now have four-part counterpoint. It is comparatively unusual to have more than one countersubject. • A stretto section, (where the entries are closer together than before) starts at bar 92. The music builds to a climax at bar 100.
<p>A (bars 100-193)</p>	<p>Themes from the A section in a different order and different keys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme 2 <i>fortissimo</i> in E flat minor at bar 100 • Theme 3 in E flat major (relative major) at bar 109 • Theme 1, bar 125-158, moving from E flat minor to the tonic. • Theme 2 <i>fortissimo</i> (tonic key – C minor) at bar 158.

The Trio is also in ternary form:

<p>A (193-225)</p>	<p>Sweetly lyrical theme in C major (tonic major). It is repeated at bar 210, this time <i>forte</i> with a new broken chord accompaniment in the piano.</p>
<p>B (225-241)</p>	<p>A more aggressive and contrapuntal theme with constantly shifting tonality. The violins begin in octaves.</p>
<p>A (241-261)</p>	<p>The first theme of the Trio returns in the tonic major, but with a new, slightly menacing bass line, which descends chromatically from B flat to F, before sinking to the tonic note C for 8 bars of tonic pedal.</p>

The scherzo is then repeated to end the movement.

Tonality

The tonality of the piece is **wide-ranging**. In this respect, and those listed below, it is typical of the Romantic age.

- The **tonic key is C minor** (the title states F minor, but this refers to the opening movement of the work), though it rarely stays in any key for very long. The music **modulates** almost constantly.

- **Related keys** like the **dominant** are used (e.g. beginning of the *fortissimo* section at bar 57).
- **Distant keys** like **E flat minor** (found in the *fugato* and elsewhere) occur more often.
- The remote key of **B major** appears briefly in the trio (from bar 206).
- **The tonic major key** is used frequently, e.g. the third main tune, as well as the trio. Alternation between tonic minor and major was a common device in Romantic music, much favoured by Schubert.
- **Pedals** reinforce the key, e.g. tonic pedal at the beginning of the scherzo and end of the trio.
- There is a long **dominant pedal** from bar 225 to 233.
- Keys are also established by **cadences**, though perfect cadences are comparatively rare (see section on harmony).

See the section on structure for more information about the keys used.

Harmony

Chromatic harmony is a feature of Romantic music and is found everywhere in this piece.

- Soon after the beginning, the introduction of the **chromatic** F sharp in the piano part introduces harsh **dissonance** with the F natural in the Violin 1 and Viola at bar 7.
- The chord being built up in bar 5 is a **German augmented 6th** (Ab-C-Eb-F#), though we don't hear all the notes together at this point. Clearer versions of the same augmented 6th occur frequently, as at bar 39, when fragments of the first theme return.
- Other chromatic chords include **half diminished 7th** chords, as in the trio bar 223, 2nd beat, where the chord of C#-E-G-B resolves on a chord of B major.
- **Diminished 7th** chords are used, e.g. bar 232 (F#-A-C-Eb). Here the chord is given additional dissonance as it is **over** a dominant **pedal note** G. See tonality notes for further information on pedals.
- Despite the frequency of chromatic chords, there are passages of straightforward **diatonic** harmony with mainly **root position chords**, as in the 3rd theme from bar 22.
- Perfect cadences hardly exist. Instead Brahms likes to propel the music forward by having frequent **imperfect cadences**, e.g. bars 12-13. Here the **3rd** is **omitted** from the dominant chord.
- Even at the end of the main sections, Brahms prefers a **plagal cadence** (IV-I) to a perfect cadence. At bars 189-190 the plagal progression also includes a **tièrce de picardie** (raised 3rd of Chord I).

- **Off beat accents** are emphasised by ***sforzando markings*** in the 3rd theme at bars 26-8.
 - The first countersubject in the piano at bar 67 has a **continuous *staccato* quaver** pattern.
 - **Augmentation** is used at the beginning of the 3rd theme (bars 22-25), where the semiquavers of the 2nd theme are replaced by dotted crotchets.
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