

18. Brahms

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34: movement III 3rd Movement (For Unit 6: Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Biography

- Brahms composed this piano quintet in 1864.
- He originally wrote it as a string quintet, and 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 in the 19th Century Romantic era, 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 draw on sonata form, variations 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, with the favoured combination being 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 eg. bar 53. The right hand moves into the instruments high register, especially where the music is building to a climax, eg. 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 1st Violin has pizzicato double stopping (playing two strings at once) at bars 18-20.
- The 1st violin rises as high as B flat, nearly three octaves above middle C, in bars 64, 65 and 154. (The octave transposition line above the staff in bar 157 should go only as far as the E flat.)

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 92. 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 is cast in three main sections, involving three themes and a central fugato section.

A (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 pianissimo march theme, with a distinctive repeated note pattern. • Theme 3 – bars 22-37 – tutti fortissimo 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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B (bars 67- 100)	<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.
A varied (bars 100- 193)	Themes from the A section in a different order and different keys: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Theme 2 fortissimo 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 fortissimo (tonic key – C minor) at bar 158.

The Trio is cast in clear ternary form:

A (193-225)	Sweetly lyrical theme in C major (tonic major). It is repeated at bar 210, this time forte with a new broken chord accompaniment in the piano.
B (225-241)	A more aggressive and contrapuntal theme with constantly shifting tonality. The violins begin in octaves.
A varied (241-261)	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.

The scherzo is then repeated to end the movement.

Tonality

The tonality of the piece is wide-ranging. In this respect, as well as 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 (eg. 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, eg. 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, eg. 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.

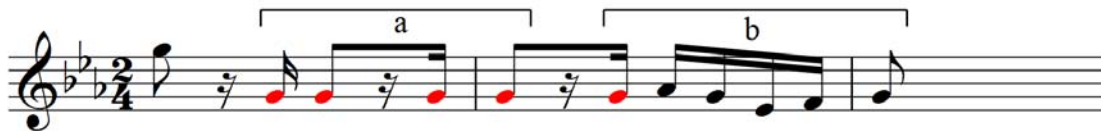
- Soon after the beginning, the introduction of the chromatic F sharp in the piano part introduces harsh dissonance with the F natural in the Violin 1 and Viola at bar 7.
- The chord being built up in bar 5 is a German augmented 6th (Ab-C-Eb-F#), though we don't hear all the notes together at this point. 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, eg. 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, eg. 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 tierce de picardie (raised 3rd of Chord I).

Melody

The 1st theme begins in broken chord style, before a phrase is repeated in rising sequence:



The second theme has a distinctive repeated note pattern:



- The melodies are highly motivic, built from small cells.
- The first phrase of the tune above contains two motifs, the first has four repeated notes, and the 2nd is a brief semiquaver turn-like idea rotating around the same note G. Both motifs are extensively used in the movement.
- Sometimes the motif is reduced to an even smaller cell, eg. from bar 96, where the first three notes are used and repeated. At the end of this brief section the cell is further reduced to a two note fragment (bars 99-100).
- The falling minor 2nd (2nd and 3rd notes of b above) is an important feature of the movement as a whole and is constantly repeated, as at the end of the scherzo (bars 190-2).
- The three notes at the beginning of motif b are altered to the major key and augmented from semiquavers to dotted crotchets at the beginning of the 3rd tune (bars 22-3).
- Chromatic passages are frequent, eg. bars 166-169, where the 1st Violin moves up chromatically from E natural to A natural.

Rhythm and Metre

- The metre is in duple time, throughout, but varies from compound duple, as at the beginning, to simple duple, eg. from bar 13.
- The time signature changes a number of times to accommodate the different tunes.
- Syncopation is immediately apparent at the first note played by the Violin 1 and Viola in bar 2, where they enter on the weak 6th quaver beat of the bar.
- There is often a distinctive march rhythm employed, particularly for the 2nd theme (from bar 13), where semiquaver rests and staccato markings add to the detached, spiky nature of the music.
- 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.

Further Reading

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2001), Vol. 4, p. 180.

M. MacDonald, Brahms (London, 1990)