

Brahms

Piano Quintet in F minor - 3rd Movement

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Biography

- Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany on 7th May 1833.
- His compositional output is large and includes 4 symphonies, 2 piano concertos, a violin concerto, the German Requiem, numerous lieder and a large number of piano pieces (sonatas, ballades, intermezzi etc). As a prolific composer of chamber music, he wrote sonatas for each of violin, piano and clarinet; string quartets, quintets, sextets; piano trios, quartets and quintets.
- A perfectionist, Brahms' output would have been even larger had he not, through dissatisfaction, destroyed many of his works or left them unpublished.
- Brahms died in Vienna on 3rd April 1897.

The F minor Piano Quintet

- The F minor piano quintet was composed in 1865. He had originally written it as a string quintet (2 violins, viola, 2 cellos), then transcribed it as a sonata for two pianos. Clara Schumann persuaded him to re-work the sonata into the final version for piano and string quartet.
- Brahms is considered by many to be both a traditionalist and an innovator. A master of counterpoint, he often incorporated fugal textures into his pieces and drew upon traditional structures whilst looking forward with innovative melodic writing and use of harmony.
- This movement is the third of four movements.

Features of the Romantic Style

- The piano quintet was a popular genre of the 19th century.
- It is technically demanding with virtuosic writing for all instruments, involving wide tessituras.
- The Scherzo and Trio is a typical form for one of the middle movements of Romantic 4-movement works. It had replaced the Classical Minuet and Trio, but this Scherzo is far removed from the 'joke' the title implies.
- Functional harmony but with much use of chromatic chords.
- Generally functional tonality, with some modulations to related keys but at other times more remote and distant keys.
- Wide variety of textural writing.

Performing forces and their handling

It was said to be Schumann who established the piano quintet as a "vehicle for Romantic expression". Chamber music involving a piano and strings emerged during the Classical period, though the favoured combination was the piano trio (piano, violin and 'cello) and Mozart also 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 never to the same extent as the piano trio. Composers of this genre, in addition to Brahms, include Schumann, Dvorak, Faure, Shostakovich and Elgar.

- All instrumental parts are technically demanding.
- The piano part is especially virtuosic, featuring the densely 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 piano, 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 cover a wide range. The 'cello has repeated open string bottom Cs, the lowest note available on the instrument, at the beginning of the Scherzo and at the beginning of the Trio. At the start of the piece the cellist plays pizzicato. The Violins reach down to their lowest open string note G for example in bar 41 and the Viola has its lowest open string C note at bar 3 and elsewhere throughout.
- Notice the very high violin writing in Violin 1 in bars 154-157. Notice also that there is an error in NAM, and the octave higher indication should finish a note earlier (on E flat) in bar 157.
- The Violin 1 has pizzicato double stopping at bars 18-20.

Texture

- The piece uses a wide variety of different textures.
- At the beginning there is a pedal on the 'cello accompanying music in octaves in violin 1 and viola.
- This is followed by free imitation between the piano (also in octaves) and strings from bar 5, giving a polyphonic texture.
- Violin 1 and viola are heard in octaves without accompaniment in bars 13-18.
- The third theme (in C major), from the end of bar 22 is in homophonic/homorhythmic style with all instruments playing the same rhythm.
- The piano is frequently in octaves between the two hands, bar 29 or bar 132.
- 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.
- The fugato section 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, with countersubject 2 in piano left hand.
- Countersubject 3 appears at bar 80 in viola.
- The music builds to five part texture using stretto beginning at bar 93. The top line is strengthened by being doubled in unison by the two violins, whereas the two piano lines are frequently doubled in octaves. A stretto features entries of the theme overlapping itself more closely.
- The strings are frequently written in octaves, bar 158.
- The trio generally uses melody-dominated homophony, and also introduces pedals.

Structure

The overall form of the movement is *Scherzo and Trio* structure, using a large scale ternary form (ABA). Brahms was known for his use of conventional structures.

A Scherzo	B Trio	A Scherzo repeated
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The scherzo itself is complex in structure, introducing three main themes with a central Fugato section.

Section 1 (Bars 1-67)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme 1 – bars 1-12 – a syncopated melody 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).
Section 2 (Bars 67-100)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fugato, 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 staccato countersubject in quavers 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.
Section 3 (Bars 100-193)	<p>Themes from the opening section in a different order and in different keys:</p> <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, where it appears in extended form. • Theme 2 fortissimo (tonic key – C minor) at bar 158, closing in C major.

The Trio is in ternary form:

A (193-225)	Sweetly lyrical theme in C major (tonic major), moving to B major before it is repeated at bar 210 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 (241-261)	The first theme of the Trio returns in the tonic major, but with a new, slightly menacing bass line, which descends 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, 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.
- The tonic major key is used frequently, e.g. the 3rd main theme is in the tonic major, C major, bar 22 as well as the trio. Alternation between tonic minor and major was a common device in Romantic music.
- Related keys like the dominant, G minor, 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).
- Keys are also established by cadences, though perfect cadences are comparatively rare (see section on harmony).
- 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.

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

Harmony

The movement is essentially functional, with frequent use of chromatic harmony, a feature of Romantic music.

- 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 built up in bars 5-6 is a German augmented 6th (A flat-C-E flat-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 Diminished 7th chords e.g. bar 232 (F#-A-C-E flat). Here the chord is given additional dissonance as it is over a dominant pedal note G.
- 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, though there is a rare example at bar 224-5. 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. He even uses a type of imperfect cadence more usually associated with the Renaissance, a Phrygian cadence (IVb - V) at bars 20-21.
- 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.
- Pedals are used to reinforce the key, e.g. tonic pedal at the beginning of the scherzo and end of the trio. The latter example has the additional interest of an added 7th note in the bass line before descending mostly in semitones.
- There is a long dominant pedal from bar 225 to 233.
- There is a circle of 5th's starting in bar 213.
- In context, the conclusion with its Tierce de Picardie may seem more like dominant preparation for the start of the final movement.

Melody

There are three main themes used throughout the Scherzo.

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



The 2nd theme (bar 13) has a distinctive repeated note pattern:



- The first phrase of the 2nd theme, which, because of the semiquaver rests sounds like a dotted rhythm, contains two motifs. The first motif has four repeated notes and the second motif has a brief semiquaver turn-like idea rotating around the same note G. Both motifs are extensively used in the movement.

The 3rd theme (bar 22) is based upon motif b from the 2nd theme but in rhythmic augmentation from semiquavers to dotted crotchets and in the tonic major:



- The melodies are highly motivic, built from small cells.
- Sometimes the motif is reduced to an even smaller cell, e.g. from bar 96, where the first three notes of the turn are used and repeated. At the end of this brief section the cell is further reduced to a two note fragment (bars 99-100).
- Chromatic passages are frequent, e.g. bars 166-169, where the Violin 1 moves up chromatically from E natural to A natural.
- Sequences and repetition are used regularly throughout. An example of an ascending sequence can be seen in bar 9 and a descending sequence in bar 213. Repetition can be seen from bar 184 onwards.
- The melody of the Trio is much more sustained and lyrical, ascending in thirds before a descending sequence follows.

Rhythm and Metre

- The metre is in duple time throughout, mainly compound duple but changes to simple duple, e.g. bar 13.
- The time signature changes a number of times to accommodate the return of the 2nd theme in simple duple time.
- Syncopation is used frequently e.g. 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, and give the impression of a dotted rhythm.
- 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.