

Gather (2021) Disc 4.

- 1–4 **Quintet in F minor, op. 34** (1864)
JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)
Allegro non troppo 15:27
Andante, un poco adagio 8:11
Scherzo: Allegro 8:05
Finale: Poco sostenuto – Allegro non troppo 10:57

GILBERT KALISH, *piano*; ANGELA WEE,
 ARNAUD SUSSMANN, *violins*;
 TIEN-HSIN CINDY WU, *viola*; AUDREY CHEN, *cello*

- 5–8 **String Sextet no. 1 in B-flat major, op. 18**
 (1859–1860)
JOHANNES BRAHMS
Allegro, ma non troppo 14:33
Andante, ma moderato 9:24
Scherzo: Allegro molto 3:15
Rondo: Poco allegretto e grazioso 9:57

JAMES THOMPSON, ANGELA WEE, *violins*; MATTHEW
 LIPMAN, TIEN-HSIN CINDY WU, *violas*; AUDREY CHEN,
 STERLING ELLIOTT, *cellos*

The 2021 edition of Music@Menlo *LIVE*, titled *Gather*, celebrates the joy of coming together around a shared love of live music, after an immensely challenging year for the arts when concert halls largely fell silent. Each disc explores pinnacles of the chamber music art form, including both masterworks and tantalizing discoveries. This collection of recordings also celebrates the opening of the Spieker Center for the Arts, Music@Menlo's new home.

Disc 4 contrasts two of the richest genres in chamber music, the piano quintet and the string sextet, and celebrates one of Western classical music's most hallowed masters: Johannes Brahms, whose Piano Quintet reveals him at the height of his powers. The quintet prefaces another revered work by Brahms, his youthfully vibrant String Sextet in B-flat, his first triumph of chamber music solely for strings. Composed at age twenty-seven, the sextet rings with a grand sonority, affirming what Robert Schumann heard in the young Brahms's chamber music writing as "veiled symphonies."

Liner notes by Patrick Castillo © 2021

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897) Scherzo in C minor, from *F-A-E Sonata* (1853)

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897) Piano Quintet in F minor, op. 34 (1864)

Johannes Brahms's Piano Quintet underwent a curious genesis. The work began as a string quintet for two violins, viola, and two cellos. Completed in 1862, the quintet in this original version was deemed imperfect by both Brahms and the violinist Joseph Joachim, the composer's trusted confidante. Brahms rearranged the piece into a sonata for two pianos, which he premiered with the pianist Karl Tausig in 1864. Later that year, the work evolved toward its final incarnation for piano and string quartet.

The obsessive perfectionism illustrated by the work's gestation is equally in evidence in its musical content. An oft-noted defining quality of Brahms's music is its airtight craftsmanship: each note is meticulously vetted, counterpoint between all voices is unassailable, and every motivic idea is essential to the work's structure. This last quality is particularly discernible in the quintet's first movement, which begins with a four-measure introduction, stated in octaves, *mezzo forte*, by first violin, cello, and piano.

The image shows the first four measures of the introduction of the Piano Quintet in F minor, op. 34. It features three staves: Violin I (top), Viola (middle), and Piano (bottom). The tempo is marked 'Allegro non troppo' and the dynamic is 'mf'. The music is in 3/4 time and F minor. The first measure is a four-measure introduction where the first violin, cello, and piano play in octaves. The second measure continues this pattern. The third and fourth measures show the first violin and piano playing a sixteenth-note figure, while the viola and cello play a rhythmic accompaniment.

What sounds like an innocuous prologue in fact contains not only the first theme but a germinal motif, from which springs the whole of the proceeding movement. Following an expectant fermata, the piano transforms these introductory measures into a propulsive sixteenth-note figure.

The image shows a close-up of a sixteenth-note figure from the Piano Quintet in F minor, op. 34. It is written for the piano part in a single staff. The tempo is 'Allegro non troppo' and the dynamic is 'mf'. The music is in 3/4 time and F minor. The figure consists of a series of sixteenth notes, starting with a quarter rest, followed by a sixteenth note, and then a series of eighth notes.

Above this, the strings exclaim a sequence of chords built on a two-note descending figure—a gesture likewise embedded in the four-measure introduction.



As the music gathers steam, the piano develops these descending two notes, while the strings take up the propulsive sixteenth notes. Ensuing musical ideas likewise derive from the two-note descending motif, including a keening melody, *piano, espressivo*, presented by the first violin.



Soon thereafter, a martial two-against-three passage ensues.



This leads into an ardent strain in the viola and cello, *piano, sotto voce*.



As this newly formulated theme develops, the piano accompanies with the sixteenth-note pattern derived from the quintet's opening. Brahms continues in this manner, constructing a majestic movement with breathtaking mastery and elegance from the simplest materials.

The second movement, marked *Andante, un poco adagio*, transfigures the two-note motif—the fuel for so much turmoil in the first movement—into a sweetly lilting lullaby. The piano sings the tune, *piano, espressivo, sotto voce*, to

a gentle accompaniment in the strings. The key changes from warm A-flat major to radiant E major for the rhapsodic subsidiary theme crooned by the second violin and viola. An initial stepwise descent expands into a series of cascading triplets. The lullaby returns to bring the movement to a tranquil close.

The *Scherzo* comprises three distinct musical ideas, heard in quick succession at the outset, building an irrepressible momentum from one to the next. The apprehensive opening, in 6/8 time, sets an offbeat, rising arpeggio in the first violin and viola above persistent pizzicati in the cello and laconic piano commentary. This melody's fluid motion is abruptly halted by the second musical idea, a clipped, staccato march in 2/4 time. The third theme transmutes the march's inexorable rhythmic energy into a full-throated anthem. (All three musical ideas, naturally, abound with the germinal descending two-note cell.) Brahms goes on to develop these themes with a restlessness quite exceeding a typical scherzo—demonstrating a technique later identified by Arnold Schoenberg as “developing variation.” In his essay “Brahms the Progressive,” Schoenberg described Brahms's facility at “variation of the features of a basic unit produc[ing] all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic, and unity, on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand—thus elaborating the idea of the piece.” Witness the *Scherzo's* climax, which brings together elements of all three ideas: the strings reprise the march, while the piano restates the offbeat opening, now with the anthem's robust chordal texture. The movement features a noble *Trio* section before reprising the *Scherzo*.

The quintet's *Finale* begins with a lugubrious introduction, searching melodic lines in the strings buoyed by a tide of triplet chords in the piano. After a pregnant silence, the movement launches into its main *Allegro* section, driven by a dance-like tune redolent of the Gypsy music that so captivated Brahms throughout his life. A secondary theme contrasts this animated music with a mournful song yet retains something of its folk character, as does the exposition's closing theme, a variation of the Gypsy dance. After a duly realized development and recapitulation, the mighty quintet finishes with a blazing *Presto* coda.

JOHANNES BRAHMS String Sextet no. 1 in B-flat major, op. 18 (1859–1860)

Ever conscious of Ludwig van Beethoven's imposing shadow, Johannes Brahms famously delayed composing his First Symphony until his midforties. “You have no idea,” he remarked, “how it feels to hear behind you the footsteps of a giant like Beethoven.” Likewise, Brahms did not publish his First String Quartet until 1873. During the

period of his first maturity, as Brahms biographer Jan Swafford wrote, “[The] string sextet was a characteristic choice of medium...partly because it sidestepped his apprehensions...[I]n the 1860s Brahms concentrated on fresher, acoustically richer, more nearly orchestral chamber mediums that happened to be less thunderous with the tramp of giants.” Indeed, the B-flat Sextet rings with a grand sonority, affirming what Robert Schumann heard in the young Brahms’s chamber writing as “veiled symphonies.”

Perhaps owing to the idyllic setting of Detmold, the quiet forest town in Germany where Brahms was working when he began the sextet, a sense of stillness permeates the music. In a letter to Clara Schumann written around this time, Brahms declared, “Passions are not natural to mankind. They are always exceptions or excrescences. The ideal, genuine man is calm in joy and calm in pain and sorrow.” The composer’s temperament is audible in the first movement’s opening theme, intoned by the first cello in its rich tenor register. Even when Brahms writes a waltz into the first movement, it is less in the spirit of salon gaiety than pastoral serenity.

The second movement is a set of variations on *La Follia*, a traditional melody that has been adapted by numerous composers (Antonio Vivaldi’s Trio Sonata no. 12 in D minor, op. 1, is a notable example). Brahms sets the first elegiac statement of the theme in the viola. Over the first

three variations, he creates the illusion of a steadily quickening pace by setting the accompaniment in rhythmic groupings of four-, six-, and eight-note figures, though the tempo in fact remains constant throughout. The sweet fifth variation imitates a music box, with the first viola taking the lead once again. Following the fleeting *Scherzo*, the concluding *Rondo* returns to the rich orchestration and pastoral serenity of the first movement.

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