

Programme note by Chris Darwin. Use freely for non-commercial purposes

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Cello Sonata no.2 in F major Op.99 (1886)

Allegro vivace

Adagio affettuoso

Allegro passionato

Allegro molto

Although Brahms' virtuosity as a pianist is well known, he also played the cello. Indeed the young Brahms was already playing technically taxing cello concertos when his teacher disappeared, taking with him the cello that Brahms' somewhat impoverished parents had bought him. Although that unfortunate incident curtailed his cello playing, his love of the instrument shines through in his compositions: not only two wonderful Sonatas, and the Concerto for cello and violin but also to-die-for cello parts in his extensive chamber music. Brahms the writer of glorious melodies and the cello are natural bedfellows. Cellists do however suffer as a result of Brahms' notorious susceptibility to criticism since he transformed his 2-cello Quintet (inspired by Schubert's) into the well-known Piano Quintet leaving no trace.

His first cello sonata was started in 1862 and the last movement added three years later. It marked his arrival as a mature composer in the classical tradition. Tonight's second sonata was much later, 1886, a year after the 4th Symphony and contemporary with his Second Violin Sonata and Third Piano Trio. The sonata was written on holiday during the summer in Switzerland. Thanks to the spectacular financial success of his *German Requiem* (1868), Brahms had been able to lead a nicely organised life which included composing during the summer in congenial surroundings. Although written 20-odd years after the first cello sonata, tonight's slow movement may be derived from a now-lost movement of the earlier sonata because of various thematic links with its first movement.

Following the first performance of the sonata by Robert Hausmann, opinions were mixed. The critic Eduard Hanslick, a great supporter of Brahms, wrote:

"In the Cello Sonata, passion rules, fiery to the point of vehemence, now defiantly challenging, now painfully lamenting...How boldly the first Allegro theme begins, how stormily the Allegro flows! It is true that the passion subsides into quiet mourning in the Adagio and fades away, reconciled, in the finale. But the beating pulse of the earlier sections still reverberates, and pathos remains the determining psychological characteristic of the whole."

On the other hand the composer Hugo Wolf, a Wagner fan prone to depression, opined: *"What is music, today, what is harmony, what is melody, what is rhythm, what is form, if this tohuwabohu [total chaos] is seriously accepted as music? If, however, Herr Dr Johannes Brahms is set on mystifying his worshippers with this newest work, if he is out to have some fun with their brainless veneration, then that is something else again, and we admire in Herr Brahms the greatest charlatan of this century and of all centuries to come."*

What do you think?