

Programme Note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

## Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Trio in A minor Op 114 (1891)

*Allegro*

*Adagio*

*Andantino grazioso*

*Allegro*

By March 1891 Brahms' creative impetus appeared to have faded away. He had composed nothing for more than a year; he had completed his will. But then, visiting Meiningen, the conductor of the court orchestra drew Brahms' attention to the playing of their erstwhile violinist, now director of the court theatre and principal clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld (1856-1907), who performed privately for Brahms. As the clarinettist Anton Stadler had previously inspired Mozart, so now Mühlfeld inspired Brahms. There rapidly followed four wonderful chamber pieces: tonight's Trio, a Quintet for clarinet and strings Op 115, and two clarinet and piano Sonatas Op 120 (also loved by viola players). Brahms himself was at the piano and Hausmann on cello for the first performance of the Trio in Berlin on 12 December 1891.

The music scholar Eusebius Mandyczewski wrote of the Trio to his friend Brahms: "It is as though the instruments were in love with each other." Indeed, and it is the love of maturity, in contrast to the densely-scored intensity of the earlier piano with strings chamber works. In this later work the piano generally has a lighter touch. The more transparent piano textures supporting the distinctive timbres of the clarinet and the cello perhaps gave sufficient clarity to the composer's ageing hearing.

The cello opens the work with a slowly arching theme – a rising A minor arpeggio and gentle descent - setting a languid mood which colours the first three movements. The piano introduces some agitation with triplet arpeggios and then semiquaver scales build the first climax, out of which the cello introduces the second theme which descends gently in thirds; these falling thirds recur in various guises throughout the piece. The development contrasts brief agitated sections with the more relaxed main themes. Finally the once agitated scales return at a slower pace and pianissimo as the music quietly evaporates. The second movement's again languid opening theme on clarinet



echoes the falling thirds of the opening movement's second subject. The cello enthusiastically repeats it, caressed by the clarinet's falling semiquavers, which provide the rhythmic base for the still tranquil second theme introduced by the piano. These themes are seamlessly developed by the intertwining instruments. The mood is barely disturbed by the start of the third movement, a slow waltz intermezzo, although the clarinet's arpeggios encourage the others to a slightly more energetic trio before relaxing back to a short return to the movement's opening material. Everyone wakes up for the short energetic gypsy-flavoured last movement with a typical Brahms interweaving of 2/4 and 6/8, with just an occasional 9/8 thrown in.