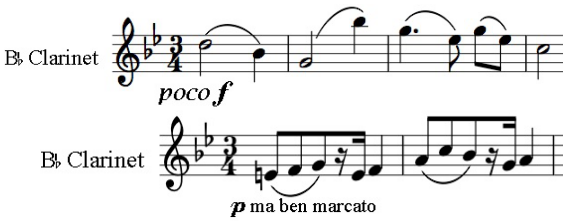
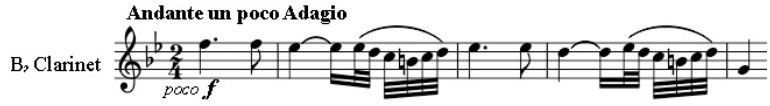
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Clarinet Sonata in F minor Op 120 No 1 (1894)
Allegro appassionato
Andante, un poco Adagio
Allegretto grazioso
Vivace

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, when Brahms was visiting Meiningen, the conductor of the court orchestra drew his 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: a Trio Op 114 and a Quintet Op 115 for clarinet and strings, and two clarinet and piano Sonatas Op 120 (also loved by viola players).

In the hundred years since Mozart wrote his clarinet quintet, the instrument had evolved into something akin to the modern “Boehm” clarinet. Its larger number of keys, and consequently simpler fingering, made rapid chromatic playing easier than was possible on the much simpler clarinets used, albeit to great effect, by Stadler. Brahms is said to have particularly enjoyed the sound of clarinet with piano and in the two Op 120 sonatas he produces a wonderful richness of sound from the combination of the two instruments. Although the first movement is marked *appassionata*, and Brahms' earlier use of F minor had been turbulent (as in the Piano Quintet Op 34), the mood here is more lyrical and wistful, occasionally ‘smouldering rather than explosive' (Ivor Keys). The piano's introductory four-bar descending phrase and clarinet's opening theme set the mood and provide much of the material for the first movement, contrasted with a more spiky, *ben marcato,* rising motif.



The slow movement is one of Brahms' most beautiful: a contented dream. Again it is based on a descending theme. The third *Allegretto* movement is an amiable waltz, with a descending motif contrasting with its rising inversion. The piano gets us onto our feet with three forte chords at the start of the *Vivace* last movement, and the clarinet joins in a tripping theme which though derived from the falling figures of the previous movements has a forward drive. In a *Rondo* structure, this theme returns a couple of times, contrasting with calmer episodes.