

Piano Quartet No 3 in C minor, Op 60.
Allegro ma non troppo
Scherzo
Andante
Finale: Allegro

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

In 1855 the young Brahms was living in the Schumann household in Düsseldorf. Robert was in a sanatorium at his own request following a suicide attempt; his wife Clara had recently had her seventh child and was also trying to maintain her brilliant international career as a pianist (often in concert with Joachim). Brahms was acting as head of the household, dealing with bills and tradesmen, and had fallen in love with Clara who reciprocated, as she told her diary:

“It is not his youth that attracts me...No, it is the fresh mind, the gloriously gifted nature, the noble heart, that I love in him.”

Brahms started work on a piano quartet in C# minor. In April of the following year the work was sufficiently completed for Brahms and Joachim to try it out. It consisted of three movements with a central Andante and a passionate Finale. But Brahms at that time struggled with large-scale works, and the piano quartet was not a popular form. In October Clara saw a “wonderful Andante” perhaps replacing the Adagio. Another run through with Joachim, and then nothing for 12 years when he showed it to the critic Hermann Dieters with the words: “Now imagine a man who is just going to shoot himself, for there is nothing else to do.” Another 5 years later in 1873 he returned to it, fundamentally rethinking it and lowering the key a semitone to C minor. The first movement remained and the original last movement may have been transformed into the present Scherzo, which interestingly has no formal Trio. The new Andante and Finale both start with long solos, on cello and violin respectively, and may have come from unfinished solo sonatas. Brahms described the work as a curiosity, having something of his youth and something of his more mature self. But it lacks for nothing in passion and still echoes the emotional turmoil of his Düsseldorf days. When he sent the finished work to Simrock his publisher, Brahms repeated (with his tongue partly in his cheek) the allusion to Goethe’s suicidal hero Werther:

“You might display a picture on the title page. Namely a head – with a pistol pointing at it. Now you can form an idea of the music! I will send you my photograph for this purpose! You could also give it a blue frockcoat, yellow trousers, and riding boots, since you appear to like colour printing.”

The first movement, reworked from the original quartet, “pitches us into a whirlpool of romantic tribulation” as the strings’ initial pair of falling semitones perhaps “speaks the name Clara” followed by a version of the 5-note Clara motif used by Schumann in his Fourth Symphony (MacDonald, p 226). After a development of “wrathfully strenuous variations” the “bitter, strife torn coda sinks as if in exhaustion”. Youthful, obsessive love indeed. So too with the youthfully dynamic Scherzo whose coda ends in angry despair. But the wonderful new Andante is anything but suicidal. It is set in E major producing a breathtakingly optimistic major third rise in key from the previous C minor. The cello and violin ecstatically wrap themselves round each other. Brahms presented this movement to another of the women in his life, Elisabet von Herzogenberg whom he had recently met again.

The last movement's long opening violin theme reappears slightly changed in Brahms' G major violin sonata and in the song *Regenlied* (Song of the Rain), with its mood of anxiety and regret. The movement also combines chorale like episodes with an irascible triplet figure. Towards the end the music quietly descends, perhaps exhausted, until the final two shot-like chords.