

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

*String Sextet in G, Op 36.*

*Allegro non troppo*

*Scherzo: Allegro non troppo, Presto giocoso*

*Poco Adagio*

*Poco Allegro*

This second of Brahms's two string sextets was written in 1864/5 as his career revived after the disheartening setbacks of the late 1850s. Schumann's death in 1856 and the subsequent separation from his adored Clara affected Brahms deeply. His first piano concerto was hissed at its 1859 premier, and a manifesto that Brahms had written was leaked and parodied before it had gathered the planned support. The article argued against the claim that all "musicians of more serious endeavour" upheld the ideals of the New German School (as exemplified by Wagner and Liszt) and led to the so-called War of the Romantics. Brahms, together with Joachim, Reinecke, Hiller, the critic Hanslick and others, championed music that developed its own logic along classical forms rather than the looser structures used in the more pictorial, literature-oriented music of Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner. Brahms was denigrated as a conservative.

These setbacks affected Brahms' attachment to Agathe von Siebold whom he had met in Göttingen in 1858. She had a voluptuous figure, wonderful long hair, a lovely singing voice and a great sense of fun. They became engaged and were expecting to marry. Brahms later wrote that the thought of having to share failure and public derision with a partner terrified him and, to Agathe's despair, he called off the engagement. Brahms recognised that he had "played the scoundrel" to Agathe.

The second sextet was written shortly after he had heard that Agathe had left Germany to become a governess in Ireland. It refers explicitly to both Agathe and Clara: Agathe in a motif in the first movement, and Clara in the second movement's opening theme which also moulds that of the first movement. The piece opens with two bars of a ruminating semitone oscillation on the first viola – followed by a tender soaring *mezzo voce* theme on the violin starting with two rising fifths separated by a semitone. These two ideas are worked through before the cello unveils one of Brahms's great melodic ideas; it is taken up enthusiastically by the violin to a climax which introduces the Agathe motif (B natural is H in German notation) first on the violin and then echoed on the cello. In the development the nagging semitones darken the opening theme even more, before it is transformed into an unsettling sequence of rising diminished fifths and a long descending

A G A H E



semitone scale on the first violin which leads into the recapitulation. After a quiet, slower *poco sostenuto* section, the music gets louder and faster up to the cathartic end.

The stately but still brooding *Scherzo* is based on a Gavotte that Brahms had written ten years earlier, and is contrasted by the boisterous *Presto giocoso* Trio section.

The slow movement is a set of variations on a melody that the yearning Brahms had sent to Clara Schumann in 1855. Here the rising fifths of the first movement are replaced by fourths separated by a tone. A jolly, dotted *animato* variation leads to a beautiful *Adagio* in E major where the first viola and first violin rapturously entwine.

The last movement is altogether more light-hearted and optimistic. The ruminating semitone introduction of the first movement is replaced by light, tremolo-like semiquavers that open the curtains on yet another glorious Brahms theme, happily *tranquillo*. The semiquavers are tossed about and all is carefree, the pace quickens, the theme becomes even freer and we can all go home happy! As Wagner himself said of Brahms "it is amazing to see what one can still do with the Classical form, if one knows how to treat it!".