

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949)

String Sextet from Capriccio, Opus 85

This unique "piece within a piece" opens Strauss's last opera, the one-act *Capriccio* (1940-41). The Sextet is heard offstage as the opera's main characters, the composer Flamand and the poet Olivier, discuss the relative merit of words and music in opera, a favorite subject of Strauss. The Sextet he aptly called "a conversation piece." Flamand watches his employer and beloved, the Countess Madeleine, to determine her reaction to his piece. While writing about writing – and certainly composing about composing – can be deadly, in the case of *Capriccio* it somehow works. Paul Hosely, in his note accompanying the recent Philadelphia orchestra member performance of the Sextet, calls *Capriccio* "one of the composer's most intimate and effortlessly melodic theatre pieces," a statement corroborated by Strauss himself when he called it "a second *Rosenkavlier* without the longeurs." None of his opera scores, says Strauss scholar Michael Kennedy, is "more refined, more translucent, more elegant, more varied..." Thus it is with the Sextet. In the final debate over the significance of words and music in opera, it would seem that music, absolute music, wins.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

String Sextet in A Major, Opus 48

No greater compliment has been paid Dvořák than by Brahms himself when he said, "I should be glad if something occurred to me as a main idea that occurs to Dvořák only by the way." Brahms does not stand alone in his admiration of Dvořák. Janáček says of him: "You know that feeling when somebody takes the word out of your mouth before you have time to form it? That was always my experience in Dvořák's company. In him his person and his work were interchangeable. And then his melodies were as if he had taken them from my heart. Such a bond nothing on earth can sever." In a 1877 letter, Hans von Bülow called Dvořák "next to Brahms, the most God-gifted composer of the present day." Perhaps the most definitive compliment of all comes from Vítězslav Novák as quoted by the Czech scholar Ottokar Šourek in his *Antonín Dvořák: Letter and Reminiscences (1954)*:

There are composers for whom music is an instrument for the expression of their poetic or philosophical ideas or of their Titanism. On the other hand there are composers who are themselves the instruments of music and saturated with its beauty. The former express through music what touches them, the latter change to music what they touch. Among these latter are the geniuses Haydn, Mozart and Schubert and ... Dvořák.

Threading its way through all these compliments is admiration for Dvořák's freshness of musical ideas, particularly in terms of his beautiful melodies, colorful harmony, rich sonorities, and rhythmic inventiveness. Interspersed is an awareness and a respect for the strong national identity and richness he brings, in different ways, to both his symphonic and chamber music outpourings.

Concerning the latter, Šourek says: “His chamber music differs from his symphonic style as widely as a modest, deeply intimate utterance differs from a vehement and sweeping gesture.”

The A Major sextet is a fine example of Dvořák’s virtues. Rich in Slavonic blood, the work also reveals a masterful compositional style. The first movement takes a sonata form with its quiet and delicate main theme, a development with agogic or “off-beat” rhythmic patterns, and a tender return which reflects the main theme. The second movement employs Dvořák’s beloved *dumka*, an elegiac Slavonic folk ballad form allowing great freedom of expression with its fast and slow tempos. Here Dvořák uses a slow Gypsy polka alternating with a lovely and expressive Gypsy lullaby. The third movement is a not so furious *furiant* with a trio section reminiscent of his Slavonic Dances. The last movement is a set of six variations fluctuating between B minor and A major with a brighter middle section in D Major. While the harmonic development is consistent, the melodic development is exploratory. The closing is a *stretto*, a quickening of tempo, a kind of piling together that lends the music great excitement.

Its national flavor notwithstanding, a word should be said about Dvořák’s transcendence of that idiom in his music. For all his championing of the Czech folk spirit, Dvořák was not a slave to it. As the eloquent Šourek puts it, “He had no intention of employing the national tunes as they stood; he sought rather by means of his own ideas to embody their pure and delicate fragrance, their deep, though naïve emotions, and also some of their typical melodic and harmonic features.” As Michael Beckerman suggests in his fascinating essay, “The Master’s Little Joke: Antonin Dvořák and the Mask of Nation,” from *Dvořák and His World*, “...the question of national music remains a powerful and inscrutable one to this day.” Nationalism aside, Dvořák is fully revealed in the absolute music of his chamber music, notably the A Major Sextet.

JOHANNES BRAHMS

String Sextet in B flat Major, Opus 18

Walter Willson Cobbett speaks of the First String Sextet and its “pervading Olympian calm asserted in the opening and maintained throughout at a height which annihilates the distinction between ‘classical’ and ‘romantic’ and which is as far above formality as it is above more tempting foolishness.” A mouthful, indeed, yet the statement points directly to Brahms’ genius in presenting the string sextet not as a string quartet plus two or a doubling of a string trio but in a form all its own, reflecting, if anything, the serenades of Mozart and Beethoven but with an imprint singularly his own.

Form begets substance in both of Brahms’ Sextets, this one and the later Opus 36, as they reflect a certain leisureliness and luxury foreign to the stricter string quartet form Brahms wrestled with and did not bring to fruition until some ten years after the sextets. Claude Rostand, in his liner notes to the 1952 recording of the First Sextet with Pablo Casals, Isaac Stern, Alexander Schneider, Milton Katims, Milton Thomas, and Madeline Foley, refers to Brahms’ treatment of the sextet form as “constantly using its widest dimensions in a highly flexible, incessantly varied *concertante* spirit.” This spirit of which Rostand speaks refers to the brilliant display of soloistic skill demanded by its players.

The *String Sextet in B-Flat Major, Opus 18* was written between 1858 and 1860 during a particularly happy time in Brahms' life when he had accepted a brief position at the Court of Detmold deep in the Teutoburger forest. His despair over the death of Robert Schumann had abated and even his unrequited love of Clara Schumann had been abandoned. To Clara he wrote: "Passions are not natural to mankind. They are always exceptions or excrescences. The ideal, genuine man is calm in joy and calm in pain and sorrow." So it is that this First Sextet exudes a certain sunniness and ease we seldom associate with Brahms because of the profound self-criticism he attached to all his writing. Perhaps Rostand is more accurate when he says that Brahms "never surpassed the beauty of this piece, where the balance between faultless form and overflowing inspiration is the fruit of complete mastery and precocious maturity." He continued to work on the First Sextet after he left Detmold, and the work had its premiere in Hanover in 1860 by an ensemble which included Brahms' great friend and musical advisor, violinist Joseph Joachim.

The first movement is almost Schubert-like in its Viennese three-quartet waltz time except it bears Brahms affinity for the linking of melodic motifs. The second movement is in the form of a theme and, in this case, six variations. The third is a Scherzo typical of Brahms' earlier period when he so honored Beethoven. Respect for Classical style is honored again in the Rondo although the first cello's opening announcement is a new effect. As one critic put it, "The Rondo is a carefree affair, drawing its spirit from 18th century drawing rooms carpeted with 19th century designs."

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