

Program Notes

Emanuel Ax, piano

January 5, 2014

Brahms: Piano Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, Op. 2

Despite having begun his career at the piano, Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897) only composed three sonatas for the instrument. All are from very early in his career, when he was not quite twenty and his opus numbers were still in single digits. The second of these sonatas, composed in 1852, spans nearly half an hour with four full movements conforming to the general tempos, moods, and structures that would have been expected at the time in a symphony. This sonata is so symphonic in conception that Robert Schumann, then not only a significant composer but also an influential music journalist, lauded it as a “disguised” symphony. Upon publication, this sonata was dedicated to Schumann’s wife Clara, one of the most acclaimed pianists of the day. She and Robert were making an active point of promoting the young German’s music.

The first movement is brisk, dark, and dramatic with torrents of hurried lines and descending figures. Less determinedly energetic passages appear from time to time, though the emphasis is upon stormy moods. By contrast, the second movement is gently sorrowful, with only occasional stronger statements, as if for a moment the mourner can no longer contain his sobs. Taken together, these two movements already offer impressive diversity of atmosphere, but more is yet to come.

The third movement Scherzo balances restless, mysterious moods with quietly cheerful ones. The latter of those ideas offers the most optimistic music of the entire sonata. With the former, rhythmic fragments often move from one of the player’s hands to the other. For his finale, Brahms offers a slow introduction ornamented with runs and trills before leaping into the main body of the movement, afire with splashes of counterpoint and strong driving chords before a startlingly gentle coda to end the work in a state of bliss. Schumann had praised Brahms as “a man of destiny.” This powerful sonata supports that assessment.

Tonight marks the first performance of this work on our series.

Brahms: Klavierstücke, Op. 118 (selections)

Brahms’s Klavierstücke, Op. 118 are not components of a six-movement piano sonata. Rather, they are six individual movements composed and premiered separately, though for the sake of convenience published together in 1893 under a single opus number. This was very late in the composer’s career. Although he would have four more years ahead of him, the only compositions that stand later in his catalog would be a very few solo piano pieces and the *Four Serious Songs*. As he had begun his career with piano music and songs, so he would end it.

Three pieces from the Opus 118 will be offered on tonight’s program. Each individual piece has its own descriptive title that is sufficiently non-specific as to leave the composer room to express what he will. The first is assertive and dramatic with cascading downward runs. By contrast, the second – like the first, labeled an “intermezzo” – is sweet and gentle, offering a completely different perspective on keyboard expression. The fifth movement Romance is, as its title suggests, a softly poetic nocturnal mood, though its middle pages flow more quickly. This one will be heard after intermission.

Giving the set a broadly generic title, and giving to the individual movements equally generic names, Brahms freed himself to do as he wished with the music. To call it a “sonata” would have been to invite expectations as to how the different pieces related to one another. Here, late in his career, the composer was more interested in crafting focused musical statements that could stand on their own. They contrast well and offer a variety of moods and keys. Beyond that, Brahms gave himself thorough freedom of expression.

Tonight marks the first performance of this work on our series.

Brahms: Klavierstücke, Op. 119

Like the Klavierstücke, Op. 118 that immediately precedes it in Brahms’s catalog of works, the Klavierstücke, Op. 119 dates from late in his career and represents four separate and unrelated pieces that all happen to be for solo piano. Both

sets were published in 1893. The opus 119 collection is shorter than its predecessor, and in determining the order in which they were to appear in the set Brahms chose to place all the minor key pieces first and all the major key pieces last, rather than repeatedly alternating between those colors. That decision gives this set a stronger sense of a happy ending as the somber moods gradually become a distant memory.

The first three pieces are all labeled “intermezzo.” The first of these offers tentatively melancholy ideas, with only the brief appearances of stronger statements. The second is more restless in mood, with small rhythmic fragments that reappear again. Now finished with minor keys, Brahms offers the third of these intermezzi, a short but sunny and playful C major frolic. As is his habit, the last of the pieces is the longest, and at last he sets aside the term “intermezzo” in favor of “rhapsody.” Rhapsody is still a word with no specific expectation of construction, so Brahms can do as he pleases. What he pleases is to prove that, even with only a single keyboard at hand and no orchestra whatsoever, the key of E-flat major can still be bold and heroic. Occasional quieter passages appear for contrast, although the exuberant passages predominate. In less than twenty minutes, and with only a single pair of hands at his disposal, Brahms has managed to craft music of surprising variety.

Last performed on our series: October 24, 2007 (Marcus Groh, piano)

Brahms: Intermezzo in B-flat minor, Op. 117, no. 2

The Three Intermezzi, Op. 117 were published in 1892, five years before Brahms's death. Only four more of Brahms's works (two of them also sets of piano pieces) would be published in those remaining years. Often a piano sonata would comprise three movements, as here, but Brahms wisely doesn't call this set of solo piano pieces a sonata. By instead choosing the term “intermezzo” for the individual pieces, Brahms freed himself from critics who might expect these pieces to unfold the way a sonata does. Thus, he was able to follow his own flights of imagination wherever they might lead. By this time he had been composing for four decades and there must have been some relief in feeling that now he could do whatever he wanted.

The Intermezzi are three separate pieces in three different keys: No. 1 in E-flat major, No. 2 in B-flat minor, No. 3 in C-sharp minor. The second of these, featured on tonight's program, begins with gentle and wistful moods and a tendency toward downward flowing lines. Its middle pages are more forthright and more optimistic, though the tearful ideas return for the conclusion. In this short work Brahms has deftly juxtaposed two dramatically different emotions to impressive effect.

Last performed on our series: January 14, 1998 (Helene Grimaud, piano)

Brahms: Romance in F major, Op. 118, no. 5

This short work is a single movement from the Klavierstücke, Op. 118, two pieces of which were featured on the first half of Mr. Ax's recital. The work is profiled above.

Brahms: Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, op. 24

The Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel was published in Brahms's native Hamburg in December 1861 and dedicated to his friend and colleague Clara Schumann. Its elegant opening theme, much ornamented with trills, comes from the Baroque composer's Harpsichord Suite No. 1 of 1733. As a master of the form himself, Handel would have found much to admire in Brahms's approach, in which everything from Baroque canons to Hungarian rhapsodies serve as flavoring for new distillations, as Brahms ultimately crafts over two-dozen variations upon that unpretentious theme. Some variation are stormy, others cheery. The last is boldly determined, setting the stage skillfully for the appearance of a concluding fugue. Brahms allows about one-fifth of the nearly half-hour long work for his fugue, built upon a four-note motif borrowed from the original theme. Attentive ears will find that melodic fragment reappearing in various ranges of the keyboard, ever accompanied by something new and imaginative in other lines of the music. Just because the fugue was no longer the quintessential challenge to the day's composers didn't mean that Brahms couldn't write one – and a masterful one – if he was in the mood.

Tonight marks the first performance of this work on our series.