

MUSICMAP NOTES

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Brahms' Sextet for Strings in G Major, Op. 36 – 1866

It is interesting to learn that this sextet actually received its world premiere in Boston at a concert given by the Mendelssohn Quintet Club in October of 1866, over a month before the European premiere in Zurich.

“...noteworthy is [Brahms'] choice of the sextet as the vehicle for his first published essays in writing for strings alone. The richness obtainable from six instruments suited his style. Not till later was he able to refine his thought to suit the more austere demands of the quartet. Besides, Beethoven had written no sextets; in adopting this form Brahms avoided the danger of a direct comparison.” (Peter Latham)

“Brahms' Second String Sextet ushers us into the not very happy domain of his love life. With the benefit of history we know that he would live and die a bachelor, although many have also speculated that his abiding friendship with Clara Schumann, during her husband's decline into insanity and following his death, may have reached a level that involved the physical. But it was not Clara who was on Brahms' mind when he composed this sextet. While on vacation in Baden-Baden during the summer of 1864, he was overcome with nostalgia connected to a love affair he had enjoyed six years earlier in Göttingen. The girl he had courted then was named Agathe von Siebold, a twenty-three-year-old soprano, daughter of a professor at the University of Göttingen, long of hair and full of figure, a student of musical composition, no less, working under the aegis of Brahms' old Düsseldorf friend Julius Otto Grimm, who had settled in Göttingen as director of two women's choirs there.

At the end of the summer Brahms left Göttingen for Detmold, where he was then living; but the infatuation continued to be expressed through the mail, and Brahms arranged to spend the first week of January in Göttingen with Agathe. That's when the two exchanged engagement rings, and before he had left, Johannes had his photograph taken with the ring proudly displayed on his finger. The bliss would be short-lived. Within weeks his D-minor Piano Concerto received its Leipzig premiere - a total failure - and Brahms reassessed the state of his life. Although he didn't doubt his talent, he had no reason to believe that it would ensure him much professional stability let alone the dependable base from which he might support a family. Many years later he reported to his friend George Henschel: 'At the time I should have liked to marry, my music was either hissed in the concert hall, or at least received with icy coldness....If, in such moments, I had had to meet the anxious, questioning eyes of a wife with the words 'another failure' - I could not have borne that!...If she had wanted to comfort me - a wife to pity her husband for his lack of success - *ach!* I can't stand to think what a hell that would have been.'

And so Brahms and Agathe parted ways, apparently with Brahms not acting gallantly in

the situation (even to the extent that his friend Grimm stopped having anything to do with him). The breakup is not well documented, but late in her life Agathe wrote a novel based on their love affair, and from this we can surmise something of the desperate unhappiness that surrounded the situation. During his summer vacation in 1864 Brahms was suddenly beset with memories of what might have been. He wrote to his former friend Grimm, who responded with the information that in the ensuing five years Agathe's father had died and, consumed by woe, she had moved to Ireland to work as a governess to 'get away from the shadowed pages of her life.' Thus learning that there was no chance of his running into Agathe, Brahms hurried off to Göttingen to revisit the site of his earlier dreams and to work through his lingering apprehensions. Shortly after returning to Baden-Baden he set to work on his G-major sextet.

Agathe is literally present in this composition. Brahms was bound to notice that her name translated nicely into musical notation, so long as he replaced the 'T' with a 'D,' which is phonetically close. ('H,' in German, refers to the note English-speakers call 'B.')

Right at the climax of the first movement's exposition we find a theme consisting of the notes A-G-A-D-H(=B)-E (with the D and H overlapping in harmony). Some also read another line working in counterpoint: A-D-E, with 'Ade' being German for 'adieu.' It may be a stretch to accept that Brahms managed to translate an entire sentence into musical notation - 'Agathe, adieu!' - but, then again, we shouldn't underestimate our composer. Brahms was known to be fond of this sort of musical gamesmanship early in his career, with one famous result being the Scherzo he contributed to the corporately composed 'F.A.E. Sonata,' built on notes signifying the personal motto of his violinist friend Joseph Joachim, 'Frei aber einsam' ('Free but lonely'). There is no question that the G-major Sextet represented a process of psychological liberation for Brahms. To his friend Joseph Gänsbacher he wrote, 'By this work I have freed myself of my last love.' In a musical sense, the wide-eyed passion and youthful vigor of Brahms' First String Sextet matures here into a subtler and wiser work born of a more finished experience of adulthood.

We may make much of Brahms' inclusion of the Agathe theme, but as important as it obviously was for him in personal terms it is not allowed to stick out as an obvious statement. That, in the end, is one of Brahms' great achievements in this piece - that his private message is made to operate entirely within the musical logic of the composition. It is certainly not necessary to know about the encoding to grasp the wonder of this work as a strictly musical achievement, although it is also unlikely that Brahms would have written the piece just as it is but for the whole Agathe affair.

In general this sextet tends toward moderation: the tempos of the first two movements are both tempered by the qualifier *non troppo* ('not too much'), and the last two by *poco* ('a little bit'). A current of nervous instability runs beneath the usually sunny surface of the opening movement. Sometimes this is obviously born of the murmuring figuration of the inner lines (as heard at the opening and very often throughout the movement), but the sensation also springs from the general harmonic and rhythmic patterns of the piece, rich in poignantly charged suspensions and harmonic sleights-of-hand." (James M. Keller)

"From the symphonic massiveness which annihilated op. 34 as a string quintet [it eventually became the celebrated Piano Quintet], this sextet shows a delightful reaction. The first sextet was sonorous like an organ, or better, like Mozart's serenade for thirteen wind instruments. The G major sextet is the most ethereal of all Brahms's larger works, and is penetrated by sunshine

which the shadow of the unearthly pathos of the slow movement eclipses only to reveal the corona and the stars.” (Donald F. Tovey)

“The B flat Sextet has been compared to its successor, the G major, as a sketch to a finished work. Although this remark is misleading in denying the very distinct aesthetic quality of the earlier work, its point is undeniable in terms of the greater subtlety and compositional sophistication of the latter, which lives in another world: one of a much more intense and personal as well as vibrant Romanticism. It is surely the greatest successor to the Schubert String Quintet in the nineteenth century... Contrapuntal thought still permeates the whole, but only rarely is a thematic origin revealed, as in the Bachian figures of the slow movement, again cast in variation form. The most striking quality of the work, however, is its lyricism, which enables, for instance, the remarkably strict mirror imitations of the first movement’s development to sound utterly natural and uncontrived.” (Michael Musgrave)

Movement I – Sonata form, Allegro non troppo (fast, but not overly so), 3/4, G major

“...despite the contrapuntal skill, it is perhaps the sense of colour which most strikes the listener, the mixture of pizzicato and arco [bowed] writing creating a kind of colour counterpoint.” (Musgrave)

Exposition:

Main theme: This theme seems to be organized as a ternary design (*a-b-a'*).

Part I (*a*) – The very first thing we hear is a single viola playing 2 bars of what amounts to a slowed-down 8th-note trill, focused on the tonic G. With remarkable persistence, the viola will continue this, unbroken through the remaining 30 bars of Part I, its droning monotone seeming to evoke some sound of nature. This oscillation effect will have a profound influence on the entire movement - it is always an essential component of the main theme’s *a*-material, and Brahms will do fascinating things with it.

Statement – 14 bars. Softly, the first violin launches a wide-ranging melody with a serene, rather impersonal beauty (12 bars - 4+8). The opening, containing two leaps of a perfect 5th, rises in long notes, enhanced by a concluding rhythmic fillip. The first leap is G to D, from the tonic to the dominant (nothing unusual there), but then a chromatic slip of a half-step makes the second 5th E-flat to B-flat, sounding intriguingly foreign at the start of a piece in G major.

Harmonically, we’ve gone abruptly from I (tonic) to flat-VI (flat submediant). It’s one of those relationships, beloved of the Romantics, based on the distance of a 3rd. (Musgrave adds “...the subtle harmonic coloring of the opening, semitonal inflections suggesting bitonality with E flat and endowing G major with new potential, seems strikingly akin to the opening of the [Schubert] Quintet, a work symbolic of Romanticism in the chamber sphere...”) The overall shape is of a relatively rapid and linear rise, followed by a disjunct line of ups and downs with a distinctive swinging gait. The last 2 bars find the violin taking a short break as the melody is extended downward through lower instruments. This extension also sets up a nice parallel with the viola’s opening 2-bar solo, and now prepares the...

Counter-statement – 16 bars. The 1st violin has the lead again and starts out the same, but this time the melody is subtly altered in rhythm and contour, climbing to a higher peak, incorporating some new syncopation and expanding in length. Throughout *a*, the scoring for the strings has

been spare and restrained, featuring long-held notes, discreet imitations, and perhaps the most notable element - cello pizzicati counting out many of the downbeats.

Part II (*b*) – 20 bars (8+12). The antecedent projects an austere gravity and extreme simplicity of texture, mostly in just two parts, doubled in octaves and split between the 1st and 2nd of each instrument type. The active melody undulates up and down with some subtle syncopation and moving mostly in quarter-notes. The consequent features a shift in sound to something warmer and richer as five of the instruments harmonize in rhythmic sync over cello pizzicati. The level of sound is still hushed, but there are new hints of passion conveyed by subtle dynamic fluctuations. Also, during the last 3 bars the trilling 8th-note idea has returned, this time in the violins, to effect the transition to...

Part III (*a'*) – Statement has the familiar melody unchanged, but played two octaves lower by the 1st cello as the violins foreground their take on the murmuring 8th-notes, now treated with considerable freedom and no longer limited to the original two pitches. The counter-statement treats its version of the melody to the same new scoring, but towards the end the cello spins out a repetitive extension before yielding its lead to the upper strings. Now, as the cellos trade the 8th-note figures, the violins and violas embark on a much longer extension, stormy and syncopated, with a powerful crescendo up to *f*.

Bridge: Part I – Here we encounter a dramatically new texture that sets this off from the preceding as the ensemble engages in loud and exciting bursts of imitative counterpoint. The main elements at play are furiously chattering, repeated-note 8ths against a syncopated subject starting with a long note followed mostly by quarters. The phrase structure is quite regular with an opening 8-bar paragraph that is then repeated, sequenced to new pitches. Yet another 8 bars follow, but here the material is compressed to yield a 4+4 feeling.

Part II – Anticipation and arrival. For this last 16 bars of the bridge, the contrapuntal gestures cease, and the dynamic level drops suddenly to *p*. This reduction in volume enables a gradual crescendo that creates a tremendous sense of suspense and excitement to usher in the...

Subordinate theme: Part I – D major (the expected dominant). This loud, impulsive, and exuberant theme sounds refreshingly human after the more abstract character of the main theme group. It unfolds as a vocal-style duet with the 1st cello and 1st violin trading ardent phrases. The cello leads off high in its tenor register, singing an 8-bar solo that catches our ear immediately with a romantic leap of a 6th. The cello then repeats the entire melody, but this time focus shifts to our soprano, the violin, doubling an octave higher and including a graceful new turn near the start. The effect of these 16 bars is considerably enhanced by a lively accompaniment including 8th-note oscillations (shades of main theme *a*), imitative harmony parts, and a pizzicato bass. The next 12 bars continue the material more freely with a shorter cello/violin interchange, followed by a crescendo during which the entire ensemble participates more equally.

Part II – The previous build-up now seamlessly climaxes with a ringing new five-note motive (four neighboring tones and a drop of a 5th) - the infamous “Agathe” motto. After this has been emphatically proclaimed three times, the passage continues more freely, and the motive is treated with a good deal of ingenious close imitation to provide much of the material for the balance of the exposition.

Closing material: Part I – This is signaled primarily by a drop down to *p*, but the substance is still concerned with stretto-like treatment of the five-note motive, the persistence of which tends to blur the distinction between sub-theme and closing material. The passage starts with an 8-bar phrase that is then repeated with new scoring and extended to 14 bars.

Part II – We now get a very explicit anticipation of main theme Part I as the second violin starts the familiar 8th-note trill (now on D, the dominant), and the first few notes of the melody are teasingly imitated from instrument to instrument. After the viola moves the trill motive to its proper position on the tonic, the exposition receives its conventional literal repeat. However, this time after only 4 bars of closing material Part II, there is a second ending that transitions seamlessly into the start of the...

Development:

“...like that of the A major quartet and many of Brahms’s later first movements, [the development] concentrates itself around a single remote new key instead of rapidly modulating. Here it does not go to this distant key (C-sharp minor) until it has opened in D minor with one of the most brilliant contrapuntal *tours de force* extant, which, like all the counterpoint Brahms admitted into his mature works, presents not a note that does not strike the ear as the best possible melodic step in the best possible harmony.” (Tovey)

Focused as it is entirely on the main theme’s *a*-material, this section has a very unified and organic feeling, and it is a bit difficult to be too definitive when breaking it down into parts...

Part I is a fluid and beautifully calibrated progression from soft mystery to passionate intensity. At first, the imitative treatment suggested by the end of the closing material is continued, but now using longer stretches of the melody and enabling different instruments to put their stamp on it. It is here that we encounter the strict inversions of the theme’s opening rise. As the trilling 8th-note motive drops out, a crescendo starts, revealing the fiery potential latent in this previously serene theme. Syncopation and bold counterpoint do much to enhance this climax.

Part II is roughly as long as Part I, but this time the dynamics stay quiet throughout. As we expect now for main theme *a*, the beginning consists of the 8th-note oscillations, but here treated with new harmonic freedom. When the melody enters, it is down in the cello, which will enjoy the spotlight throughout most of the passage. Instead of an imitative presentation, we are treated to the entire melodic phrase and with a beautiful translation to the minor mode. The cello is reluctant to let go of the tune and spins out a caressing extension in dialogue with the 2nd cello.

Part III is another long and gradual progression starting with a *fz* and an exciting new imitative treatment of the 8th-note motive, further enlivened by cello pizzicati outlining a fragment from the *a*-melody. Just past the halfway point, another portion of the melody enters into the mix, loudly asserted by various instruments and building to a powerful and stirring climax.

Part IV: Retransition. Just as the previous part reaches a peak of intensity, a striking harmonic shift precipitates this last leg of the development, which will eventually wind things down and deliver us safely back to the tonic G major. After some more reiteration of the jagged motive, we hear a pair of vertiginous, chromatic descents combined with a decrescendo. The texture now has a new rhythmic complexity thanks to 16th-note tremolos contrasted against 8th-note

triplet tremolos. Gradually the familiar 8th-note pulse is reasserted and then moves to viola for the start of the...

Recapitulation:

Main theme: Part I (*a*) – This is a faithful presentation of the original material, except that it is enhanced by more prominent and lively pizzicati presented as an exchange between the 2nd violin and 2nd cello.

Part II (*b*) – Unchanged.

Part III (*a'*), Statement – The main difference here is that the 1st viola sings the melody, an octave higher than the cello did previously, while the 1st cello preserves a sense of the recapitulation's enhanced pizzicati.

Counter-statement – Still viola lead, but here the melody is notably altered with new syncopations after just a few bars.

Extension – These 12 bars revert to an exact repeat of the exposition version.

Bridge: Part I – The first 8 bars are a literal repeat of the original, but then Brahms abbreviates by omitting the 8 bars that sequenced the phrase, jumping instead to the last 8 bars that compressed the material and using this to now redirect the harmony.

Part II – Anticipation and arrival. Aside from the expected new key, the most notable novelty comes at the very end where the suspense is further protracted by an additional 2 bars featuring a little violin cadenza.

Sub-theme: Part I – In order to transpose this to the tonic G major, Brahms chooses to use the upper octave, which means that we hear the melody a 4th higher than before and assigned to the viola rather than the cello. The busy texture becomes even more vibrant with a high violin variant of the 8th-note oscillations, combined with unison cello 8ths sustaining a dominant pedal. The 1st violin is still the other participant in the duet presentation of the theme, but this time it sings low in its compass, reproducing the melody in the same octave that we just heard it, and thus the original contrast from cello to violin is notably lessened. A more obvious choice would've been to use the brilliant upper register of the violin, but this way we hear the subtle timbral juxtaposition of viola and low violin, and emphasis is shifted to the antiphonal quality of the exchanges (especially in a live performance).

Aside from adjustments arising from the material's transposition, sub-theme Part II and the first part of the closing material are essentially unchanged.

Coda:

In effect, this takes the place of the closing material Part II and starts in the same way, but then evolves into a coda that finds interesting and new things to say about main theme *a*. An initial slowing of the tempo sets the stage for a gradual crescendo, and acceleration as the familiar theme is transformed into something more effusively lyrical and tempestuously Romantic. With satisfying symmetry, our attention is strongly drawn at the end to the viola's same 8th-note oscillation that originally set the entire movement in motion.

Movement II – Scherzo & Trio design, Allegro non troppo (unusually, the same as movement I), 2/4, G minor (parallel minor)

“...strikingly new in conception, a gentle dance in 2/4 time which anticipates the corresponding movement of the First Symphony...” (Musgrave)

“...quietly plaintive in an elfin way... Altogether a study of childhood worthy of Haydn, Wordsworth, or even of life itself.” (Tovey)

Scherzo:

Modified binary form (Part II not repeated).

Part I (phrase *a*): Within seconds, Brahms conjures a magical atmosphere, suggestive of Eastern Europe and its exotic folk dances. The use of the minor mode seems to paint a nighttime scene, perhaps with a campfire and graceful bodies swaying in the flickering shadows.

Phrase *a*, sub-phrase 1 – The opening of this seems like an 8-bar (4+4) contrasting period, but instead of cadencing after 4 bars, the consequent smoothly continues a whole additional 8 bars with a sighing and delicately-syncopated extension. Brahms’ deft scoring neatly divides the sextet with the three upper instruments (both violins and 1st viola) harmonizing the melody while the lower instruments (2nd viola and cellos) contribute the accompaniment. This captivating undercurrent is all pizzicati and consists of 8th-notes in a lilting rhythm characterized by a rest on every downbeat. Above this, the antecedent starts with 3 bars of regular quarter-notes, enhanced by a mordent on the weak second beats, followed by a switch to dotted rhythm in the 4th bar. Aside from an initial half-step rise, the direction is one of gentle descent, essentially spanning an octave from dominant to dominant (D). The mildly contrasting consequent transitions to a flowing 8th-note rhythm and a more meandering motion. “[This theme] was drawn from an earlier work, a Gavotte in A minor for piano...penned in the 1850s...” (Keller)

Sub-phrase 2 – A mini *fugato* of 17 bars (4+4+4+5-bar extension/transition). The first 4 bars offer a marked contrast with a radically simplified sonority, as the 1st violin and 1st viola sing a sinuous subject (marked *tranquillo*) of flowing triplets in octave unison. As the two instruments then continue with a syncopated counter-subject (actually a sly inversion of the start of sub-phrase 1), the 1st cello enters with the triplet idea sequenced down a 4th (normal fugal practice). The third entry moves the subject back up, but this time it is the turn of the 2nd violin and 2nd viola, joining in what has become a richly contrapuntal texture. The concluding 5 bars extend this briefly before shifting into more fragmentary transitional gestures. Part I is then repeated literally.

Part II: Phrase *b* – After Part I’s tendency towards 4 and 8-bar units, this contrasting phrase has a structure with a pleasingly organic irregularity that divides unevenly into three sub-phrases. Sub-phrase 1 begins with a long (17 bars), rather troubled-sounding development based on the end of Part I and featuring a crescendo up to the movement’s first *f* dynamics. Then the 5 bars of sub-phrase 2 are marked off by a drop back down to *p* and an imitative treatment of the start of the triplet *fugato* subject, now inverted. Finally, sub-phrase 3 stretches 13 additional bars consisting of a fairly extended anticipation of *a*’s sub-phrase 1, illuminated by a striking excursion into major. This is years before Brahms’ future friend and protégé Dvorak would

arrive on the musical scene, but still there are moments such as here when the Czech composer's distinctive spirit seems to hover over these pages.

Phrase *a'*, sub-phrase 1 – The familiar 8-bar opening of *a* is unchanged, but then the seamless continuation is rewritten and compressed so that it is 2 bars shorter and ends at a new harmonic destination.

Sub-phrase 2 – Brahms presents the *fugato* in a new key and with the parts redistributed so that the subject now enters first in the two violins, then in the 1st viola, and finally in the 2nd viola. After this, the original extension is recast so that what was 5 bars now stretches to 14 and ends quite differently in preparation for the new...

Codetta – A beautiful and fresh-sounding 12 bars based on a gently imitative treatment of the start of phrase *a*...the important difference being that now the signature melody has been recast mostly in flowing 8th-notes. (Recall that, contrary to the normal procedure for rounded binary form, Part II is not repeated.)

Trio: Presto giocoso (very fast and merry), 3/4, G major

With its change in tempo and meter, as well as mode, the effect here is of an unusually striking contrast; the scene has suddenly changed to bright sunshine and perhaps some sort of harvest festival with dancers leaping and vigorously kicking their legs. Instead of rounded binary form, the trio is freely structured using two basic contrasting ideas: phrases *c* and *d*.

Part I: Phrase *c* (16 bars [8+8]) launches ***f*** and makes much of a boldly syncopated and insistently repeated rhythm - "...a galumphing bass like a *Ländler* exceeding the speed limit." (Ivor Keys) Phrase *c* is then repeated with only some minor scoring adjustments toward the end.

Part II switches to the contrasting *d* idea, still ***f*** and juxtaposing descending 8th-note runs with a distinctive new rhythm in the rest of the ensemble.

Part III (16 bars [8+8]) provides a ***p*** respite from the loud dynamics so far and consists of a cleverly smoothed-out variation of the original *c* material.

Part IV: Back to phrase *d* but now with a crescendo from ***p*** to ***f*** and the 8th-note runs inverted.

Part V is a mostly literal reprise of *c* as heard in Part I, but this time it is not repeated.

Part VI seems to act as an extension/development of the *c* material just heard, at first treating it to rapid dynamic shifts and then spinning it out even more freely.

Part VII: Transition. Winding things down, this serves as an evocative means of bridging the gulf between the rousing mood we've just experienced and the minor-key mystery of the scherzo. The organizing principle is a rapid alternation between staccato quarter-notes and the legato version of *c*, eventually culminating in a delightful pizzicato passage, followed by a brief anticipation of the scherzo's opening motive.

Scherzo: Tempo primo.

This is essentially a literal *da capo* repeat, even though it is all printed over again in the score. Of course, this means that Part I is now only played once. At the end of Part II, the original codetta is omitted, and there is instead a tempo change that initiates the...

Coda: *Animato*. This is clearly based on a sped-up version of the earlier codetta, but the energetic intensity and new rhythmic punch, based on triplets, also suggest a nod to the Trio.

Movement III – Theme with 5 variations & coda, Poco adagio, Common-time, E minor (relative minor)

“The variations are approached in free style, yielding a sense of rhapsodic outpouring and musical evolution that foreshadows a characteristic that would become a hallmark of the composer’s late works. The theme is not so much a strongly etched melody as a vague meandering of notes; but its contour bears a good deal of similarity to the theme of the first movement’s opening.” (Keller)

Theme:

12 bars (4+4+4) with a ternary phrase structure of *aba'*. Brahms had evidently been mulling over this melody for a considerable period of time, as he quoted it in an 1855 letter to Clara Schumann, placing it at least several years before the whole Agathe business. (Being so closely related to the theme in the first movement, it’s possible then that the idea served as the genesis for much of that movement as well.) This serious and even tragically-inflected theme is presented by just the upper voices - the two violins and 1st viola for most of its course - until the 2nd viola joins in discretely near the close. The light scoring for string trio gives the expressive melody a certain tremulous and high-keening character.

Phrase *a* (2+2): Two-thirds of this theme are constructed from one essential motive which, since it forms the basis of phrase *a*, we will call motive *a*. This idea is 2 bars long and consists of rising intervals in quarter-notes at the start and finish, connected by conjunct 8th-notes (one decorated with a mordent). The initial unbroken rise is of particular interest because of its clear similarity to the ascending line that starts the main theme of movement I. Whereas the earlier motive presented a series of long notes in even rhythm (basically) with two perfect 5^{ths} connected by a minor 2nd, in this case we still have long notes in even rhythm (given the slow tempo) but changed to two perfect 4^{ths} connected by a major 2nd. Also, here all the notes stay within the tonic scale without any suggestion of bitonality. Continuing then with the second measure, after half a bar of 8th-note rhythm, the concluding quarter-note rise consists of only two notes but is the largest and most expressive interval yet, a minor 6th. Once we’ve heard the motive, it is immediately repeated, sequenced down a step and reshaped so that its final rise now spans only a minor 3rd. As the 1st violin sings this melody, the accompaniment complicates and enriches the rhythmic effect in a typically Brahmsian way. Both of the lower voices move somewhat in tandem with a murmur of gently undulating, chromatic sighing figures, but while the 2nd violin’s are made up of 8th-notes and syncopated, the viola plays in triplets. A brief *ritard* marks the end of the phrase, before the theme continues into...

Phrase *b*: This is set off with a clear contrast both thematically and texturally, as the violins harmonize a new melodic idea in 3rds, while the viola soon diverges from its original triplet underpinning. Within moments it is the melody itself that features triplets, but then the second 2 bars of *b* turn into a climax with passionate 16th-notes from the 1st violin above an

accompaniment featuring new rhythmic subtleties. This outburst dies away almost immediately as longer note-values prepare the arrival of...

Phrase *a'*: While this offers a sense of return, it also makes creative new use of motive *a*. In the first bar, we get the familiar rising figure, though with the two middle pitches cleverly altered. What follows is still more surprising as the motive then starts over and is now heard in its entirety but played in inversion, after which the final bar broadens into a peaceful ending enhanced by a *ritard*. As for the scoring, the texture begins as before, yet after 1 bar the till-now silent 2nd viola contributes a subtle fourth voice.

One important feature not yet addressed is the telling use of dynamics over the course of this theme, with carefully calculated crescendos and diminuendos. Phrase *a* is *p*, but with subtle fluctuations. Phrase *b* swells to a *f* peak at its climactic moment, while on the other hand, phrase *a'* starts *p* and then almost immediately crescendos to *f* (the start of the inversion), followed by a gradual diminuendo. Touching briefly on harmony, Musgrave points out that "...the bass appears only in a linear, decorative melodic role initially, employing inversions rather than roots of the harmony in its course, full harmony only appearing in variation 3."

Variation 1:

Hushed and calm, but with a certain eerie and funereal cast. The first thing we hear is the cello all alone, particularly striking after its long absence. Throughout the variation, this instrument will play a persistent bass-line consisting of repeated-note figures derived from triplets but employed to create a dotted-rhythm feel. The effect is suggestive of a muffled drum accompanying a death march. Turning to the melody, motive *a* is now smoothed out and radically recast as a chromatic quarter-note descent, harmonized by 1st violin and 1st viola. Only the rising 6th at the end is retained. As before, the entire motive is then sequenced downward to make up the balance of phrase *a*. (Brahms actually bases most of this new shape on a slowed-down version of the theme's original bass-line.)

Phrase *b* is less contrasting than before as it retains the falling chromatic motion, but this time it is treated more freely and sequenced more rapidly. Then *a'* is set off by a drop to *pp* and a shifting of the violin an octave higher, exploiting its spectral upper range. The 2nd violin has been silent through most of this variation, but now in *a'* it joins the 2nd viola in imitating the cello's drumbeats. It remains to mention the third distinctive scoring element - a steady interplay of pizzicato 8th-note rising figures between viola and cello that serves to leaven the otherwise rather static atmosphere. In another example of Brahms' cunning, the first of these is a sped-up version of motive *a*'s 4-note opening, and the remaining dialogue grows from that inspiration. (Before leaving this variation, it ought to be noted that in long-established musical iconography, a slowly-descending chromatic line - usually in the bass - is understood to represent death.)

Variation 2:

The quiet and rather gloomy mood continues, but we now encounter a restless, fluid texture that seems to pit the 2nd cello in the bass against the rest of the ensemble. Once again, we hear the cello first, and its line is closely imitated by the other five instruments, all harmonizing together while moving in rhythmic sync. Everything is based on 8th-note motion, but given a distinctive, repetitive, sighing pattern through the use of rests. During phrase *b*, the texture becomes more fragmented and the effect of contrast is heightened by the introduction of a new triplet motive. Phrase *a'* reverts to the original concept but makes more use of the upper register. A *ritard* during the last bar provides enhanced contrast to the launch of the energetic...

Variation 3: Più animato (more animated).

After two soft and relatively subdued variations, this comes as quite a shot in the arm, with not only the switch to a faster tempo, but also the introduction of *f* dynamics. Curiously, this variation also initiates a change in phrase structure to rounded binary form with literal repeats. Part I (phrase *a*): Maintaining its prominent role, the 2nd cello introduces a bold *fugato* subject that is imitated in rapid succession as all the other voices enter in turn. The idea that forms the basis of this stretto-like passage is derived from variation 1's 'drum tattoo' rhythm, newly galvanized by an octave leap and a succession of bustling triplets.

Part II: Phrase *b* – This contrasting phrase offers temporary relief from *a*'s hectic contrapuntal procedures. While the characteristic rhythm persists, traded between the two cellos, a flowing new rising and falling 8th-note motive is harmonized in 3rds, either by violins alone or reinforced by violas.

Phrase *a'* effectively varies the original treatment by first harmonizing the entries of the impetuous subject and then allowing the entire texture to thicken into a mass of triplets, with only the bass cello preserving the 'tattoo' rhythm.

Before moving on to the next variation, this would be a good place to consider why Brahms has switched to rounded binary form with its literal repeats. What was a 12-bar theme has now grown to 24 bars, but because of the faster tempo, it still takes about the same time in performance as the theme and each of the first two variations. In this way, it avoids forfeiting any of its claim to appropriate weight and also allows the listener more of an opportunity to comprehend its rapid complexities. The same considerations will hold true for...

Variation 4:

...which is closely paired with #3. Once again the music is contrapuntal in style and based on the insistent drumbeat rhythm. A fresh effect is obtained by inverting the familiar motive so that now it has an octave drop instead of a rise. Also, instead of triplets, this time the rhythmic opening is followed by 16th-note motion, and each entrance of this refashioned subject is paired with a new staccato 8th-note idea. Over the course of the first 2 bars we hear this pairing three times in rapid succession, scored in a way that creates a regular expansion from the middle range to the upper and lower extremes. In other words, first we get the two violas together, then 2nd violin and 1st cello, and finally 1st violin and 2nd cello. Following the familiar pattern for phrase *a*, the second 2 bars offer a free sequencing of the same material.

Phrase *b* drops to hushed dynamics and introduces a beautifully harmonized pattern of *dolce* 2-note descending sighs, while the violas alone steadfastly cling to the 'tattoo' rhythm. Towards the end of *b*, a crescendo prepares the renewed onslaught of phrase *a'*. As usual, Brahms gives us the expected sense of return, while still offering a fresh take on *a*'s material. The effect this time is more grand and continuously evolving, with a thicker texture anchored by new pizzicato quarter-notes in the bass.

Transition: 5 bars. Instead of going straight to the final variation, this passage serves as a short extension. Based on the prevailing rhythmic motive and anticipating a return to a slow tempo, it also sets up a change in mode to the parallel major. Particularly striking at the end is a poignant quotation of the rising figure from the theme's original motive *a*.

Variation 5: Adagio (thus even slower than the earlier *poco adagio*), E major, *p molto dolce*. Note that even though we have slowed down again, Brahms still retains rounded binary form and its literal repeats here, giving a particularly expansive character to this final transmutation of his theme. Any sense of tragedy is left behind as we bask in a warm glow of tender lyricism.

“...this last variation arches itself over the whole like a sky in which all clouds are resting on the horizon and dazzlingly white.” (Tovey)

Part I: Phrase *a* – The sextet creates a luminous web of intertwining polyphony, led by the 1st violin over violas harmonizing in tandem. At the same time, the cellos contribute shorter echoing gestures and a leaven of pizzicati (reinforced by 2nd violin). The overall texture grows from the graceful unfolding of undulating strands of melody, based largely on 16th-note motion. “The final variation...includes a device common in Brahms’s calm ‘all-passion-spent’ mood: the use of pairs of instruments, in this case mainly the violas, to play imitation horn-calls up and down whilst the harmony stands still for the purpose.” (Keys)

Part II: Phrase *b* continues the general 16th-note rhythm, but offers the violin lead a more passionate and soloistic line. Additional focus is shifted to the top by thinning the rest of the texture, especially through limiting the cellos to just pizzicati here. Phrase *a'* reverts to most of the original conception of *a* but with changed harmonies and the intensifying effect of some multi-stop pizzicati. After Part II is played for the second time, a new ending effects a seamless transition into the...

Coda:

10 bars. Marked *molto espressivo*, this is an exquisite extension and amplification of the discourse of variation 5. It is marked by some new syncopation and a slow crescendo up to *f*, at which point the music starts to subside. Through both a diminuendo and a gradual deceleration, the movement closes with great delicacy and a near-suspension of time. In a perfect example of reconciliation and resolution, the final bars have effortlessly combined variation 5’s 16th-note shapes with repetitions of motive *a*’s seminal rising figure.

This final long, major-key amalgamation of variation and coda has taken up a considerable portion (nearly half in our reference recording) of the entire movement and effectively counterbalances its earlier darkness. If Brahms has been exploring some of the pain of his relationship with Agathe, he demonstrates that he is clearly not stuck there.

Movement IV – Sonata form, Poco allegro, 9/8, G major

After the two middle movements, this finale returns to sonata form and, in so doing, shares some notable similarities with the opening movement. In each case, a relatively restrained main theme in ternary structure is contrasted with a passionately effusive subordinate theme. Also, the following closing material is closely related to the sub-theme. As to the particular character of this movement, the use of compound meter allies it with the Classical tradition of dance-like finales, as well as a specifically bucolic cast in this instance.

“The movement is not less brilliant than subtle, one of the very few which Brahms opens by precluding in harmonies that lie obliquely across the key, and misleading rather from the fearless simplicity of its first cantabile theme (another sublime study in childhood)...” (Tovey)

“In spite of the busy fugued writing in the development and, *animato*, in the coda, the movement is decidedly of the relaxing type, with little unexpected in structure. ...here indeed the 9/8 key signature, by subdividing the three main beats into three, gives us the ultimate in ‘triplicity’ and a correspondingly suave and relaxed utterance.” (Keys)

Exposition:

Main theme: Intro – 6 bars. This cheerful opening bustle provides an effective foil to the leisurely ambling tune that follows. Scurrying 16th-note lines accumulate in all voices, preparing an eventual arrival at the tonic. The emphasis is on flurries of repeated notes and rapid dynamic shifts. This snippet of Mendelssohnian ‘fairy-music’ will play a more important role throughout the movement than we might at first imagine, occurring at the end of the bridge to usher in the other principal theme and then providing much of the material for the development and coda. During the last 2 bars of this introduction, the contrapuntal texture smoothly gives way to a solidly vamping, long-short-long-short accompaniment pattern on a rustic-sounding open 5th.

Part I (*a*) – 8 bars, *p tranquillo*. The first violin sings lead throughout, strikingly low in its register, so that it regularly touches on the open G string that is its lowest possible note. This lyrical tune, characterized by a loose, loping gait and mellow throatiness, seems straightforward but is actually quite resistant to parsing into constituent phrases. While the bounding rhythm of the accompaniment continues resolutely, first cello and then viola harmonize with the violin to enhance the melody’s dark and sonorous timbre.

Part II (*b*) – Also 8 bars. Shifts to a touch of Hungarian atmosphere, with a new characteristic rhythm harmonized in alternation by violins with violas and violas with cellos. Growing from this, a more song-like line in the violins (with cello imitation) effects the transition to...

Part III (*a'*) – In addition to rounding off the main theme’s ternary structure, this also works as the beginning of the paragraph that constitutes the modulating...

Bridge: (Part I) – 6 bars. This time it is the viola and cello that sing the familiar *a* tune, while first one and then both violins introduce a soaring new descant. Meanwhile the cellos anchor everything with the characteristic rhythmic pattern, now providing a full 4 bars of tonic pedal. As the original melody soon deviates from its previous course, the violins in octaves seem to assume the lead, accelerating to 8th-note rhythm in conjunction with a crescendo that builds to the start of...

Part II – With a sudden drop to *p*, a 4-bar reminder of the scherzando main theme introduction material leads to the final harmonic preparation for the...

Subordinate theme: D major, the expected dominant key.

Statement – Introductory bar, then 4 bars (2+2). A full measure of *f* vamping accompaniment by the 1st violin, turning a dominant A pedal into an ecstatic frenzy of octave leaps, precedes the actual tune. This virtuosic excitement, extending the prevailing 16th-note rhythm, will continue in the violin through the duration of the statement. With almost panting ardor, the high 1st cello embarks on a melody that launches with an octave leap, followed by a descending sequence of falling 5^{ths} and rising 4^{ths}. (Recall that in movement I, the cello also had pride of place at the equivalent point.) The remaining 2 bars proceed to sequence the material up a step. Throughout, the prevailing mood is yet further enlivened by viola pizzicati riffing on the cello’s line.

Counter-statement – 6 bars (2+4). This is considerably altered in character, with a drop to *p dolce* and reassignment of the melody to the 2nd violin in the upper octave. The 1st violin’s

barrage of 16ths persists, but now much more gently in the form of descending legato runs. While the first 2 bars preserve the original tune, the continuation then shifts to new pitches and free extension, culminating in a powerful final descent. This comes to rest on a surprising unison C that marks the beginning of the...

Quasi-closing material: Structurally, this has the feeling of a brief stretch of closing material, but thematically it is essentially a further prolongation of the sub-theme. After a brief 2-bar interlude, we get a rescored repetition of the extension just heard, again ending on that unison C, which now serves as the basis of a first ending segueing us into the exposition repeat.

Development:

It is here that Brahms starts to reveal more of the true potential of the main theme intro-material. Part I: 9 bars. He starts by giving it a delicate *fugato* treatment, with a new voice entering every two measures - first 2nd violin, then 1st violin, and finally viola reinforced by cello pizzicati. The remaining 3 bars extend the contrapuntal interplay through a crescendo up to *f* and provide a smooth continuation into...

Part II: 5 bars, *f* throughout. Still based on the same thematic material, this is a loud, exuberant *tutti* suggesting some celebratory peasant dance. After the gentle filigree of Part I, we now revel in the sonorous potential of the full sextet.

Part III: 4 more bars that offer yet another contrasting treatment of the 'fairy' 16ths. The dynamic level suddenly drops as, in a moment of special enchantment, shifting pairs of instruments harmonize the basic motive while engaging in a hushed antiphonal dialogue.

Part IV: Retransition - 10 bars. This passage is like the transitory pain we might feel as we emerge from a delightful dream before the sober pleasure of waking life reasserts itself. In another surprising shift, the first part of the main theme's *a* melody suddenly puts in an appearance. Sounding tentative and troubled in the minor mode, this fragment is sequenced by violin harmonizing with viola and intermixed with oscillating octave reminders of 'fairyland.' Though our path may sound doubtful, the harmony does eventually lead us back home to an elegantly subtle arrival for the start of the...

Recapitulation:

This commences immediately with the just-anticipated main theme Part I, without allotting any time to the original introduction... a very effective touch as that scherzando material has just been explored at such length. The vamping bar of open-5th accompaniment is also dispensed with, allowing the melody to slip in even more discreetly. Once underway, the main theme is presented as a faithful repeat through the *a'* material that served as the first part of the bridge. Brahms then dispenses entirely with Part II of the bridge, another temporary suppression of the 'fairy' music. This affords an accelerated arrival at the subordinate theme, transposed to the tonic G major.

Statement – Shifting the melody to high viola gives a new timbre this time, while still preserving the sense of straining eagerness. Meanwhile the rest of the scoring is shifted down rather than up, and the use of pizzicato is escalated.

The counter-statement starts with a more radical change as the 2nd violin's take on the melody is now transformed into a pizzicato variant. However, the following consequent/extension and its associated closing material revert to more orthodox recapitulation, except for redistributed scoring.

Coda:

This is longer and grander than we might anticipate from the dimensions of the rest of the movement. In this way, Brahms seems to be deliberately elevating the coda to serve as an impressive capstone to the entire sextet.

Part I continues seamlessly with a sequential extension of the descending run motive, followed by a brief development of the gentle idea that started the closing material. After this, the same process is given a varied repeat, but this time the forceful descent is heard only once, while the contrasting continuation is given a warmly expansive treatment that rises to a climax of overflowing lyricism.

Part II: The tempo suddenly accelerates to *animato* with a return of the 'fairy' material, which has not been heard since the development. In fact, for quite a while what Brahms gives us is an expanded, varied, and sped-up version of the development, with this part corresponding to the *fugato* treatment that made up its Part I. Aside from being in a different key, the passage is lengthened from 10 to 12 bars and treated with considerable freedom after the first two subject entries.

Part III: The way this loud, sonorous section follows on the heels of a more delicate texture is analogous to the arrival of Part II in the development. In addition to lasting 6 bars instead of 4, the main difference here is that all instruments are participating in the 16th-note commotion with only hints of the previous thumping dance rhythm.

Part IV: Brahms is still closely tracking the progress of the development with the recurrence here of the magical antiphonal dialogue that made up Part III. At 4 bars, this is a particularly explicit evocation of the original, though it also incorporates just a touch of the octave oscillations that emerged in the retransition.

Part V: Just as the development's retransition represented a combination of the 'fairy' music with the main theme's *a*-melody, that is sort of what happens again but now with a fresh approach that creates a radically different expressive effect. This time the 1st viola launches a furious new configuration of the running 16ths and then is joined by a richly harmonized recasting of the lyrical opening phrase of *a*. Soon we are treated to a second and more magnificent traversal of the same juxtaposition, an apotheosis of the two dominant and contrasting strands of the entire movement.

Part VI: With this loud, exuberant wrap-up, the 'fairy' music enjoys the last word, providing a playful and mercurial close to Brahms' entire imposing edifice. With nice symmetry, these 8 bars start with an evocation of the movement's opening, albeit *ff*, leading to a lightning summation of the various ways this fertile material has been manipulated.