



City of Birmingham
Symphony Orchestra

CENTRE STAGE

BRAHMS STRING SEXTET

CBSO Centre, Birmingham

Thursday 23 September, 11.30am

Philip Brett – Violin

Charlotte Skinner – Violin

Chris Yates – Viola

David BaMaung – Viola

Kate Setterfield – Cello

Catherine Ardagh-Walter – Cello

Brahms String Sextet No.2 in G, Op.36

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

String Sextet No.2 in G Op.36

Allegro non troppo

Scherzo: Allegro non troppo – Presto giocoso

Adagio

Poco allegro

I think I may say that from that time until the present, a golden light has been cast on my life, and that even now in my late old age, something of the radiance of that unforgettable time has remained. I loved Johannes Brahms very much, and for a short time he loved me...

We'll never know the whole story of why, in January 1859, Johannes Brahms broke off his relationship with the only woman to whom he would ever be engaged. No letters on either side survive; all we have are the memoirs, written decades later, of his unhappy former fiancée Agathe von Siebold. Agathe was the daughter of a doctor in Göttingen, and Brahms had met her at the house of the town's music director, his friend Julius Otto Grimm, in 1858. Grimm and his wife encouraged the relationship; Agathe had a thoughtful face, a good singing voice and long dark hair, parted in the centre in the fashion of the era.

And to judge from the poetry that Brahms set to music in this period, the romance was sincere: in his letters to Grimm, Brahms referred to the two couples as a "four-leafed clover". But just a few months later – around the time that Brahms' First Piano Concerto flopped catastrophically at its premiere in Leipzig – Brahms got cold feet. Agathe recounted that he tried to have it both ways: "I love you! I must see you! But I cannot be bound". But convention of the time made a broken engagement final; besides, Agathe was devastated. "His love was not as strong and deep as hers", she concluded. She would later marry a respectable doctor, but to this day, the small gold engagement ring with a single diamond that Brahms gave her remains a treasured family heirloom.

Music-lovers, meanwhile, have an equally treasurable souvenir of that brief autumn romance. Brahms' second string sextet was published by Simrock of Berlin in 1866, but Brahms' large scale works often took years to mature, and his correspondence indicates that he was working on the sextet as early as 1861. "And what is this C minor sextet?" asked Clara Schumann in a letter to Brahms on 21 February that year. She was wrong about the key, but right that Brahms was working on a sextet. He had sketched the main theme of the *Adagio* as far back as 1855; the melody that became the *Scherzo* began as a piano piece – a mock-baroque gavotte

– in 1854. But something had clearly happened to fertilise those ideas. Meanwhile he had laboured long and hard on his first sextet – and had sent the finished work for comments to Grimm, after the dust settled from the break-up, in December 1859.

And the first impression that most players and listeners take away from the second sextet, like the first, is of something like the “golden light” that Agathe described years later. Like the first sextet, its mood is lyrical and relaxed; but where the first has all the brilliance of its key, B flat major, the Second is somehow richer, more mellow and at the same time warmer. The key helps: G major lies comfortably under the hands of a string player and makes a naturally sonorous effect on a string instrument – and that sense of naturalness and relaxation often comes out in the way it is played. Brahms’ long, careful work on both his Sextets paid dividends. There are few moments in Brahms’ music more gloriously unbuttoned than the sweet, swinging waltz-melody with which the cello sings out its heart in the second group of the first movement – or the magnificent, freewheeling finale, in which racing semiquavers (Brahms knew Mendelssohn’s Octet well) burgeon into melody after gloriously lilting melody, or simply break out in whirling cascades of joyous string sound.

But if that doesn’t sound very much like a composer recovering from heartbreak, neither Brahms’ craftsmanship nor his wonderfully poetic instrumental writing can hide the melancholy heart of the two inner movements – the fierce *Presto* outbursts that upset the poise of the gavotte-like *Scherzo* (even if Brahms does head them *giocoso*) – or, above all, the *Adagio*. The way the opening E minor theme wanders over its troubled, shifting accompaniment, the increasing passion of the central episode, and then the way, as peace is restored, that the two violas sigh quietly in close harmony like distant horns: well, Brahms doesn’t give us any clues beyond what we hear and imagine.

But he does give us two crucial clues back in the first movement. In the very opening bars – where a classical master would confidently establish the cheerful key of G major – Brahms gives us a theme in sombre G minor, over a quietly rocking accompaniment. Daylight quickly breaks through, but it is enough to cast a modest shadow of uncertainty over the whole sunlit work. Brahms was a master-craftsman: like so much of his music, the Second Sextet is emotion recollected in tranquillity. But the source of that emotion? Remarkably, Brahms encoded it in an outwardly jubilant five-note phrase that he repeats, over and again at the end of the development of his first movement – and the end of movement itself. Five notes: A, G, A, D (there’s no “T” in music), H (German for B natural), E: AGATHE. The smile in the music conceals something that Brahms somehow couldn’t put into words: however much the real Agathe might have wished that he had.

Programme note © Richard Bratby

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C.P.E. Bach Trio Sonata in B Minor Wq 143 H577

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in C Major BWV 1037

G.P. Telemann Concerto di Camera TMV 43.G3

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