

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): The Three Violin Sonatas
Sonatensatz

Stephen Boe, violin; Christopher Harding, piano

	Sonata in G Major, Op. 78	26:32
1.	<i>Vivace ma non troppo</i>	10:41
2.	<i>Adagio</i>	7:04
3.	<i>Allegro molto moderato</i>	8:47
	Sonata in A Major, Op. 100	21:23
4.	<i>Allegro amabile</i>	8:37
5.	<i>Andante tranquillo</i>	6:51
6.	<i>Allegretto grazioso (quasi Andante)</i>	5:55
	Sonata in D Minor, Opus 108	21:30
7.	<i>Allegro</i>	8:19
8.	<i>Adagio</i>	4:22
9.	<i>Un poco presto e con sentimento</i>	2:59
10.	<i>Presto agitato</i>	5:50
	Sonatensatz in C Minor, WoO 2	5:12
11.	<i>Allegro</i>	5:12
	Total Time:	74:37

It is remarkable that much of the greatest chamber music has been composed with specific friends or performers in mind. The performing attributes of these musicians certainly influenced the composer's work, but no more than the personal history between friend and composer. This fact enables a more meaningful appreciation of the music itself, and perhaps explains why the best efforts of many composers have been poured into the intimate genre of chamber music: personal communication between a few independent and equally important performers is ideal for exploring human relationship. When engaged at this level of understanding, the greatest chamber music has the potential to teach us profound lessons, left to us by men and women who lived life fully, passionately, and thoughtfully.

The three sonatas for violin and piano left to us by Johannes Brahms are masterpieces, products in some measure of Brahms' relentless self-criticism. He destroyed as many as four earlier works for this combination, leaving only a scherzo in c minor as a slender hint as to what his earlier attempts might have sounded like. But with the sonata in G major, Op. 78 (composed during the summers of 1878-79 in the south Austrian town of Pörtlach am Wörthersee), we experience a breathtaking level of perfection in regard to compositional craft and profundity of sentiment, one surely born out of life-long and devoted friendship, and a true understanding of purest love.

Brahms' devotion to Clara Schumann and her family is well known. It is without question that the two loved one another deeply as true (and platonic) friends, and Brahms was intimately bound up with the family, especially during Robert Schumann's final illness and after his death. Brahms stood as godfather to the Schumann's youngest child Felix Schumann, whose death from tuberculosis in February 1879 at the age of twenty-five lends meaning to the musical allusions found in the G major violin sonata. Often called "Regen-sonate", this work makes substantial use of the opening musical material found in two of Brahms' songs from Op. 59, "Regenlied" (No. 3) and its "echo" "Nachklang" (No. 4), published in 1873.

This musical material is quoted almost literally in the opening measures of the last movement of Op. 78, but the fundamental dotted rhythm is also announced and developed by the violin at the very beginning of the first movement, as well as forming the basis of the funeral march which comprises the central section of the second movement. "Regenlied" speaks of the rain as a means to invoke the happy memories of childhood and earlier days; "Nachklang" invokes the rain to mirror tears of sadness. Rain falls from the trees onto the grass, which is doubly green when the sun shines again; tears fall from my eyes onto my cheeks, which will glow doubly bright when the sun returns.

It is tempting to read a programmatic reference to the death of Felix into this sonata. The first movement is truly one of the loveliest creations in all of music, certainly the evocation of the joy and peace of a remembered childhood—or happier days, at the very least. Although stormy passages appear at intervals (most notably in the development), all is sunshine and the warmth of tenderness. The second movement

opens with a profoundly peaceful and comforting statement by the piano, before the violin enters to express its grief. The aforementioned funeral march is followed by a return of the peaceful opening material, this time presented by the violin, and leading to another consideration of the funeral march, this time in a comforting major mode. The movement ends in a quiet triumph of consolation.

The last movement most obviously evokes sadness, with its rain-like accompaniment and its direct thematic quote from “Nachklänge”; but double beauty is found in the recall of the peaceful second movement material, first as a third section in this rondo form, and finally as one of the most profoundly beautiful codas in the entire literature. Clara herself, after receiving the completed manuscript, adds another layer of poetic understanding by reputedly saying that she “could not help bursting into tears of joy over it... I wish the last movement could accompany me to the next world.”

In light of these considerations, it does not seem unreasonable to interpret this sonata as a response to Felix's death, a consolation from Brahms for his dearest friend. But we should not miss the beauty of the relationship expressed in this work for those with ears and hearts to hear it. It is traditional to understand the violin and piano sonata genre as a love duet between the two instruments; this tradition is embodied in the astonishing craft displayed by Brahms in his handling of the two instruments in their interaction. The care with which the piano sets the stage for the violin (*Vivace ma non troppo, mezza voce dolce*, portato staccato dotted half-notes), the way in which melodic lines are handed so beautifully from one instrument to the other, each often “finishing the other's thoughts”, the incredibly beautiful harmonizations of simple scales; these are not only the works of a master musician, they are the works of a master friend. The entire sonata speaks to us of the substance of love: the love of friend for life-long friend, the love of a devoted heart for a beautiful heart, one extraordinary enough to inspire the devotion of both a Robert Schumann and a Johannes Brahms. Is it any stretch to imagine the tears of sadness on Clara's cheeks becoming doubly bright in the joy brought to her by the comfort of Brahms' warm and loving friendship? These ideas perhaps seem quaint or dated or suspiciously romantic in our clinical 21st century ears. But we must remember the time in which the music was born, and also the circumstances of expression: chamber music, the most intimate of communication between two fellow musicians.

The theme of friendship is explicitly continued in the A Major sonata Op. 100, composed at Lake Thun in Switzerland during the summer of 1886. If the gentle and caressing nature of the opening exchange between piano and violin were not proof enough, the character indication *Allegro amabile* for the first movement would seem to lay to rest any doubt. Standard in form, it relies on the piano to introduce material before allowing the violin to comment on or beautify the melodic themes. We can still hear the beautiful gentleness with which Brahms treats the interaction of the instruments, and the discord of conflict that is transformed and so beautifully resolved towards the end of the development, before a welcome reassertion of the friendly warmth of the recapitulation.

The second movement is highly unusual in form. Each instrument participates in opening the movement, presenting different yet melodically important material. The independence and equality of each instrument is thus asserted, but the marriage produces a rich tapestry of interaction and support, especially as ideas are exchanged between them. This dance of musical interaction finds its parallel in dance form as we move to the second part of this movement, a ländler-like *vivace* that demands much agility from both instruments. Further developments of the slower A section and a slightly varied restatement of the *vivace* B section are followed by a little wisp of a coda, allowing this movement to serve doubly as a traditional slow movement and a scherzo.

The final movement of the A major sonata again shows Brahms' penchant for culling tuneful melodic material from his song repertoire: in this case, the opening statement by the violin is taken from his lied "Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer", Op. 105 No. 2, composed contemporaneously with the sonata. Julian Haylock has also found elements of "Wie Melodien zieht es mir" (op. 105 No. 1) and "Komm bald" (op. 97 No. 5) to be important in the first movement; what all these songs have in common is the expression of unrequited or unresolved love. Despite these poetic allusions, Brahms crafts a movement of shining gladness, expressing a warmth of feeling that only passingly hints at regret or pain. Brahms leaves us with the peace and confidence of a loving friendship crafted over a lifetime.

With such a beginning, we may be perplexed by both the key and the stormy scope of the last sonata, Op. 108 in D Minor. The opening of the sonata features the violin in a sustained *rise* from an A to a D—dominant to tonic—accompanied by a syncopated piano figuration that *descends* from A to D. The instruments appear to be in the midst of conflict from the outset, but Brahms uses this intervallic gesture to create a melodic and harmonic unity of form on a large scale. The distinctive element of the brief development section of the movement is an ostinato "A" in the bass of the piano, repeated on every beat in literally every measure of the development until the recapitulatory material returns even more quietly than in its original presentation. This ostinato insistence on the dominant is balanced by the movement's coda, which is almost as insistent (although only half as long) with an ostinato "D" in the bass of the piano. Thus the overarching structure of major formal components is stated by both instruments in the very first measure of the piece.

Unsettled to begin with, the first movement nevertheless houses one of the most glorious of all of Brahms' second themes, although it too eschews serenity for a passion expressed through expressive *sforzati*. The storminess of D minor subsides in a coda that transforms the weather to a peaceful D major, the key of the *attaca* and simply beautiful second movement. These two movements together create a sort of symmetry, mirrored by the third and fourth movements: whereas the keys of the first two are related by parallel mode and their moods compliment one another, the keys of the latter two are subtly related by relative mode, and the moods, though less contrasting, are no less complimentary.

The third movement scherzo is playful in mood, but also in key: a significant arrival towards the middle of the movement finds us in F Major. This half step difference (F-sharp to F-natural) happens to be the defining difference between the parallel major and minor harmonies of D Major and D Minor, which we have already experienced in the first two movements—a fundamental difference which preoccupied Beethoven for much of his creative output in C Minor and which Schumann himself made expressive use of in works such as his *Kreisleriana*. (It may be well to remember that *Kreisleriana* was also “all about” Clara...) Brahms uses the final cadence of the third movement, in F-sharp Minor, to move by relative key signature to A Major, the opening chord of the attacca and con fuoco last movement. The move in the opening measure from A major to the D minor of the next measure parallels the very opening of the entire sonata, thus also demonstrating a concern for overall structure and organic integration of material.

The last movement rondo of Op. 108 concludes the sonata with intensely passionate and challenging material for the performers. The entire sonata is an emotional ride at higher adrenaline levels than its immediate predecessor, the A Major sonata of 1886. Although the D Minor sonata was not completed until 1888, it nevertheless had its genesis with the A Major two years earlier, and shares the same commitment to compositional craft as its companions in Brahms' output. It may be that its intensity of feeling is also born of the same friendship that produced such greatness of noble feeling in the first two sonatas, which only lends veracity to the idea. Brahms was a passionate but devoted and pure man, and Clara shared these qualities. We need all three sonatas to understand the nature of their relationship—at least from Brahms' perspective.

The Sonatensatz in C Minor, WoO 2, was written for Brahms' dear friend Joseph Joachim, the great violinist who also introduced Brahms to Robert Schumann in 1853. It formed part of a sonata project by Schumann and his pupil Albert Dietrich, who with Brahms completed a four-movement work as a present to their mutual friend based on the musical notes of his personal motto “Frei aber einsam” (“free but lonely”). The scherzo movement was Brahms' contribution, and was kept unpublished in Joachim's possession until 1906, nearly ten years after Brahms had passed away. It is traditional in form, and entirely representative of the young Brahms as he was first known to the Schumanns. It also serves to show that the fire and passion he had then was never lost, but refined and focused into even more power by the time we reach the finale of Op. 108.

-Christopher Harding



About the performers:

Violinist **Stephen Boe** received his Bachelors and Masters degrees from Indiana University School of Music, where he served as assistant to Henryk Kowalski, Josef Gingold, and Franco Gulli. Stephen subsequently joined the IU School of Music faculty as an Assistant Professor of Violin. He has also been a member of the faculty of DePauw University and Ohio University.

As a chamber musician, Mr. Boe has performed in Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center, as well as in venues throughout Europe, China, South America and the United States. In 1991, he was awarded a prize in the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition. From 1993 to 1995 Mr. Boe performed as an Artist in Residence for the He was also a founding member of the New Artists String Quartet. In chamber music collaborations, Stephen has worked with the Ying and Lark Quartets.

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He has served as concertmaster for the Joffrey Ballet, the Chicagoland Pops, the Chicago Chamber Orchestra, the Muncie Symphony Orchestra, the Evansville Philharmonic and the Indiana University Festival Orchestra. In addition to serving as concertmaster, he has appeared as soloist with several of these ensembles.

Stephen has given masterclasses at many festivals and music schools, including the Beijing Central Conservatory and the Royal College of Music in Sweden. He has been a performer at numerous music festivals including Villa Musica in Germany, Festival Filarmonico in Ecuador, Sarasota Music Festival, Brevard Music Festival, and Indiana University summer festival. Mr. Boe has been heard on National Public Radio's "Performance Today" and live broadcasts on KUNI and WFMT. He is currently on the Violin Faculty at the Music Institute of Chicago.

Mr. Boe performs on a Giovanni Battista Guadagnini made in Piacenza, c. 1747, with a bow by Dominique Peccatte

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Pianist **Christopher Harding** maintains a flourishing international performance career, generating acclaim and impressing audiences and critics alike with his substantive interpretations and pianistic mastery. He has given frequent solo, concerto, and chamber music performances in venues as far flung as the Kennedy Center and Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., Suntory Hall in Tokyo and the National Theater Concert Hall in Taipei, the Jack Singer Concert Hall in Calgary, and halls and festival appearances in Newfoundland, Israel, Romania, and China. His concerto performances have included concerts with the National Symphony and the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestras, the San Angelo and Santa Barbara Symphonies, and the Tokyo City Philharmonic, working with such conductors as Andrew Sewell,

Eric Zhou, Taijiro Iimori, Gisele Ben-Dor, Fabio Machetti, Randall Craig Fleisher, John DeMain, Ron Spiegelman, Daniel Alcott, and Daryl One, among others. His chamber music and duo collaborations have included internationally renowned artists such as clarinetist Karl Leister, flautist Andras Adorjan, and members of the St. Lawrence and Ying String Quartets, in addition to frequent projects with his distinguished faculty colleagues at the University of Michigan. He has recorded solo and chamber music CDs for the Equilibrium and Brevard Classics labels.

Harding has presented master classes and lecture recitals in universities across the United States and Asia, as well as in Israel and Canada. Other international activities include performances in Romania for the American-Romanian Music Festival and a tour of China under the auspices of the U.S. State Department. In May 2008, he completed a one-month residency at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music in Chengdu, China, as a Fulbright Senior Specialist. He has especially close ties to universities in Seoul, where he has performed and taught on numerous occasions. In Fall 2011, Professor Harding completed a second residency as a Fulbright Senior Specialist, this time as a Visiting Professor at Seoul National University. He simultaneously held a Special Chair in Piano at Ewha Womans' University.

Mr. Harding's collegiate studies were with Menahem Pressler and Nelita True. Prior to college, he worked for ten years with Milton Kidd at the American University Department of Performing Arts Preparatory Division, where he was trained in the traditions of Tobias Matthay. He has taken twenty-five first prizes in national and international competitions and in 1999 was awarded the special "Mozart Prize" at the Cleveland International Piano Competition, given for the best performance of a composition by Mozart.