

**West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021**  
with  
**OurConcerts.live**

presents

**Bantry and Beyond**

*Classical Prelude*

**3. Cello Series (1) 'Brahms'**

Filmed at the Concertgebouw Kleine Zaal, Amsterdam

**Leonard Elschenbroich [cello]**

**Alexei Grynyuk [piano]**

**Brahms**

*Cello Sonata No.1 in E minor Op.38*

*Cello Sonata No.2 in F major Op.99*

*Four Serious Songs*

Arranged for cello

## Johannes Brahms [1833-1897]

### Sonata No.1 for Cello and Piano in E minor Op.38 [1862-5]

1. *Allegro non troppo*
2. *Allegro quasi minuetto*
3. *Allegro*

It is strange that the first duo sonata that Brahms wrote should be for cello and piano rather than the more popular combination of violin and piano, especially when he was such a close friend with the leading violinist of the age, Joseph Joachim. However many of his contemporaries had followed Beethoven's example in writing for cello and, in particular, a cello sonata in E minor by a respected Hamburg composer Bernhard Romberg seems to have been his starting point.

Most commentators feel that Brahms wrote his two magnificent string sextets as a way of escaping the prospect of writing a string quartet, just as he waited until he was forty two before writing his First Symphony. He probably found the cello sonata a less daunting challenge and he was able to repay a favour by dedicating it to the amateur cellist Josef Gansbacher. He had also just completed the Second String Sextet with its cello-rich score so he was clearly bursting with more ideas for the instrument. He solved the Beethoven problem by going back to Bach's Art of Fugue for his inspiration. The work took three years to write and on the way it lost the Adagio out of its original four movements. So the work we know today is in an oddly proportioned three-movement form: a very large moderately paced first movement followed by a dance-scherzo in the manner of a minuet concluding with a vigorous but severely worked fugue. The missing Adagio found its way into the F major Sonata twenty years later.

One of the most striking features of this work is his concentration on the lower registers of the instrument. This gives a rich brooding quality to the music, enhancing the darkness of the key of E minor. The opening melody starts down on the cello's C string to a gentle accompaniment of off-beat piano chords. This grave and dignified theme leads immediately to a more lyrical voice full of yearning. Before the second subject appears the theme is restated in C major, its darkness momentarily banished, only to be followed by the even more passionate second theme, now in B minor. The movement ends calmly with music of restrained, dark beauty. The *Allegretto* is delicate and wryly ironic with a deliciously hesitant *Trio* wreathed in a haunting romantic tracery. The Finale is a fugal homage to the spirit of Bach, where the piano is very much the dominant partner with the cello sometimes striving to make himself heard. Nevertheless the energy of this movement is irresistible as Brahms celebrates his contrapuntal command.

*Francis Humphrys*

**Cello Sonata No.2 in F major Op.99 [1886]**

1. *Allegro vivace*
2. *Adagio affetuoso*
3. *Allegro passionato*
4. *Allegro*

Brahms' Second Cello Sonata was written in the prime of his life. He was now magnificently in command of every musical form with the one exception of opera that he had left to his great rival in Bayreuth. This warm and carefree work dates from the summer of 1886 when he also wrote the Second Violin Sonata and the Third Piano Trio. Like Mahler after him, he spent every summer amongst the Swiss or Austrian mountains and lakes walking and composing. The grandeur of the mountains is in the symphonic sweep of the opening challenge, where the cello leads with a leaping extrovert theme over a thunderous *tremolando* in the piano. The full range of the cello is exploited and the balance between the instruments is perfectly judged. The *tremolando* becomes a major feature of the mysterious development, its vibrant sonority adding to the emotional excitement of the movement. *Tremolandi* in both instruments are a prominent feature of the coda creating a magical time-stopping effect before the final outburst.

The *Adagio* opens with remote piano chords above a *pizzicato* bass before the cello gradually blossoms into its heartstoppingly beautiful melody. As ever he declines the opportunity to overindulge his melodic gift and the F minor key and the tense re-emergence of the *pizzicatos* show the passion lurking beneath the surface. Nonetheless the return of the main theme is one of those moments that melts the strongest heart and leaves the sentimentally vulnerable quite helpless. The *pizzicatos* return to dramatic effect in the coda, each chord reaching that unseen place that only the cello can find, long after the concert you will still hear the echoes resounding.

From his earliest works Brahms had a special gift for turbulent, hard-driven *Scherzos* and this one shows off his mastery of bracing cross-rhythm and the interplay of motives. Brahms was of course a virtuoso pianist and for many years made his living that way, the piano part in this movement was clearly written for himself, just as the cello part was made for the special luminous tone of Robert Hausmann. The major key Trio sings in sweeter contrast, giving us an eloquently simple interlude in the midst of so much passionate ambition. The Finale is a short cheerful rondo that concludes the work with wit and grace. The last return of the main theme in the coda is both *pizzicato* and *pianissimo*, a typical flourish of Brahmsian humour.

*Francis Humphrys*

**Vier Ernste Gesänge Op.121** [1896] [transcribed for cello by Daniel Shafram]

1. *Denn es gehet dem Menschen* [Ecclesiastes 3, 19-22]
2. *Ich wandte mich und sahe an alle* [Ecclesiastes 4, 1-3]
3. *Tod, o Tod, wie bitter bist du* [Ecclesiasticus 41, 1-2]
4. *Wenn ich mit Menschen- und mit Engelszungen redete* [I Corinthians 13, 1-3, 12-13]

On 26th March 1896, Clara Schumann suffered the stroke from which she never recovered though she lingered on until 20<sup>th</sup> May. Clara's last illness was clearly the creative spur that drove Brahms to finish the extraordinary *Four Serious Songs* - note the serious not sacred songs, despite the biblical text. Dvorák had been driven to cry out in despair about Brahms' agnosticism, *such a man, such a fine soul - and he believes in nothing! He believes in nothing!* Brahms had purposely chosen texts that were undogmatic, meditations on death, on the fragility of human life, and on the transcendent power of love.

Writing about the songs to Marie Schumann six weeks after the death of her mother, Brahms described their composition. *I wrote them in the first week of May; similar texts often occupied me, I didn't think that I had to anticipate worse news of your mother - but deep inside a human being there is often something that speaks and germinates almost unbeknownst to us, and which occasionally may ring out as poetry or music. You cannot play through the songs, because the texts would affect you too deeply now. But I ask you to consider them quite literally a funeral offering to your beloved mother and to set them aside.*

Brahms had called upon the resonant prose of Luther's Bible once before when he wrote his *German Requiem* for his mother, and he returns there one last time to write his requiem for Clara. To do this he invents an entirely new form of Lied, an almost oracular use of motif and tonality to expound and interpret every line. These four songs evolve organic forms of almost symphonic scope, while the vocal lines attain a new freedom that pivots between expressive *arioso* and nobly heightened recitative. The first song is a stark and remorseless funeral march, a fitting accompaniment to the grim message that all is vanity and that men are no better than beasts. There is a slight brightening at the preacher's advice that man should be happy in his work. The second song takes an even more pessimistic view of man's lot, seeing how evil flourishes and how the oppressed suffer and how the dead are better off than the living, but best of all is never to have been born. Brahms was hardly a composer of social protest but he had no illusions about the injustice of the world, and he was terrified by the rise in Germany of populist parties fed by hatred and anti-semiticism.

The third song addresses Death directly and perversely leads to one of the most profoundly moving moments in all Brahms, indeed some of his friends were totally shattered by this music. Brahms had inherited from Robert Schumann the musical cabala that was Clara's theme and at the centrepiece of the song at the words *O Death how well you comfort the needy one* he introduces her theme in the accompaniment. The final song stands apart with its message of love and comfort and its ardent declamation of St Paul's words. For Brahms however, the death of Clara seemed to spell the end for within the year he too was gone; for Brahms love had the face of Clara Schumann and without her the rest was sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.

*Francis Humphrys*

Texts for  
*Vier ernste Gesänge (Four Serious Songs) Op. 121 [1896]*

Liturgical texts, translated by Martin Luther

Translation © Richard Stokes, author of *The Book of Lieder*, published by Faber, provided courtesy of Oxford Lieder ([www.oxfordlieder.co.uk](http://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk))

**Denn es gehet dem Menschen (For that which befalleth the sons of men)**

Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem Vieh;  
wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch;  
und haben alle einerlei Odem;  
und der Mensch hat nichts mehr denn das Vieh:  
denn es ist alles eitel.

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts;  
as the one dieth, so dieth the other;  
yea, they have all one breath;  
so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast;  
for all is vanity.

Es fährt alles an einen Ort;  
es ist alles von Staub gemacht, und wird wieder zu Staub.  
Wer weiß, ob der Geist des Menschen aufwärts fahre,  
und der Odem des Viehes unterwärts unter die Erde fahre?

All go unto one place;  
all are of dust, and all turn to dust again.  
Who knoweth the spirit of man goeth upward  
and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

Darum sahe ich, daß nichts bessers ist,  
denn daß der Mensch fröhlich sei in seiner Arbeit,  
denn das ist sein Teil.  
Denn wer will ihn dahin bringen, daß er sehe,  
was nach ihm geschehen wird?

Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better,  
than that a man should rejoice in his own works,  
or that is his portion.  
For who shall bring him to see  
what shall happen after him?

**Ich wandte mich (So I returned)**

Ich wandte mich und sahe an alle,  
die Unrecht leiden unter der Sonne;  
die Unrecht leiden unter der Sonne;  
Die Unrecht litten und hatten keinen Tröster,  
Und die ihnen Unrecht täten, waren zu mächtig,  
Daß sie keinen Tröster haben konnten.

So I returned, and considered all  
the oppressions that are done under the sun;  
and behold the tears  
of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter;  
and on the side of their oppressors there was power;  
but they had no comforter.

Da lobte ich die Toten, die schon gestorben waren  
Mehr als die Lebendigen, die noch das Leben hatten;  
Und der noch nicht ist, ist besser, als alle beide,  
Und des Bösen nicht inne wird, das unter der Sonne geschieht.

Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead  
more than the living which are yet alive.  
Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been,  
who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

**O Tod, wie bitter bist du (O death)**

O Tod, wie bitter bist du,  
 Wenn an dich gedenket ein Mensch,  
 Der gute Tage und genug hat  
 Und ohne Sorge lebet;  
 Und dem es wohl geht in allen Dingen  
 Und noch wohl essen mag!

O Tod, wie wohl tust  
 du dem Dürftigen,  
 Der da schwach und alt ist,  
 Der in allen Sorgen steckt,  
 Und nichts Bessers zu hoffen,  
 Noch zu erwarten hat!

O death, how bitter is the  
 remembrance of thee to a man  
 that liveth at rest in his possessions,  
 unto the man that hath nothing to vex him,  
 and that hath prosperity in all things;  
 yea, unto him that is yet able to receive meat!

O death, acceptable is thy sentence unto the needy  
 and unto him whose strength faileth,  
 that is now in the last age,  
 and is vexed with all things,  
 and to him that despaireth,  
 and hath lost patience!

**Wenn ich mit Menschen und mit Engelszungen redete  
 (Though I speak with the tongues of men)**

Wenn ich mit Menschen - und mit Engelszungen redete,  
 und hätte der Liebe nicht,  
 so wär ich ein tönend Erz,  
 oder eine klingende Schelle.

Und wenn ich weissagen könnte und wüßte alle Geheimnisse  
 und alle Erkenntnis,  
 und hätte allen Glauben,  
 also, daß ich Berge versetzte,  
 und hätte der Liebe nicht, so wäre ich nichts.

Und wenn ich alle meine Habe den Armen gäbe,  
 und ließe meinen Leib brennen  
 und hätte der Liebe nicht,  
 so wäre mir's nichts nütze.

Wir sehen jetzt durch einen Spiegel in einem dunklen Wort,  
 dann aber von Angesicht zu Angesichte.  
 Jetzt erkenne ich's stückweise;  
 dann aber werde ichs erkennen,  
 gleichwie ich erkannt bin.

Nun aber bleibet Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe, diese drei;  
 aber die Liebe ist die größte unter ihnen.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels,  
 and have not charity,  
 I am become as sounding brass  
 or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy,  
 and understand all mysteries,  
 and all knowledge;  
 and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains,  
 and have not charity, I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor,  
 and though I give my body to be burned,  
 and have not charity,  
 it profiteth me nothing

For now we see through glass, darkly;  
 but then face to face:  
 now I know in part,  
 but then shall I know  
 even as also I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three;  
 but the greatest of these is charity.