

## **BRAHMS**

### ***String Sextet No. 2 in G Major, Op.36***

Allegro non troppo

Scherzo: Allegro non troppo – Presto giocoso

Adagio

Poco allegro

### ***String Sextet No. 2 in G Major, Op.36***

#### **Johannes Brahms**

(b. Hamburg, 1833 / d. Vienna, 1897)

Many composers' careers are described in trimester periods ascribed as early, middle, and late. But for few of those composers are those distinctions as clear and important as they are for Johannes Brahms. His *String Sextet No. 2* belongs very much to the beginning of his middle period, and thus the stylistic and formative changes Brahms underwent between his first attempt at such a work and his second is crucial.

The somewhat unusual musical grouping of pairs of violins, violas, and cellos was first attempted by Brahms in 1860. While it was only four years later that he began composing his second such work, the intervening period had seen him compose the two serenades for orchestra and his massive *First Piano Concerto*. He was now a composer sure of his craft, and moreover one willing to take some daring musical steps. "To outline (the sextet) is comparatively simple," writes Jan Sawfford in his biography of Brahms. "The expressive implications are not."

A personal message figures into the first movement of the work. At the climax of the exposition, a motif arises using the notes A, G, A, H (in German musical notation, "H" was the key of B; "B" indicated B-flat), and E. It was most of the name of a lost love, "Agathe," with the T of her name assigned to the note D, which also tied to a second motif with the notes A, D, E ("Ade" is German for "farewell"). So, in this music, Brahms put a conclusionary note on his unrequited love.

The opening movement manages to sound both warm and somewhat mysterious at the same time, using a semitone oscillating idea to create a sense of living in two disparate key signatures, yet the effect is anything but coldly musical; on the contrary, it is haunting and heartening both. The second movement is the work's "Scherzo," but its opening is a serious

affair, and in the unusual, but urgently rhythmic metre of 2/4. Its main idea comes from a Baroque-ish melody Brahms had sketched out some 10 years earlier. The central section of the movement is a whirling, triple-time Presto giocoso – a rustic dance set to a pace much more in keeping with the idea of Scherzo, but still in a sober and intense mood.

The third movement is a heartfelt, tender set of variations on a melody again from Brahms' past. There is a much more intensely emotional fugal statement of the theme in the middle of the movement, but the overall tone is one of sadness. The final movement begins with a glint of brightness before settling into a gentle D minor dance. It contrasts with the sequence heard at the movement's opening – an alternating between vivacity and resignation, not at all inappropriate when moving on from a lost love.

Program notes © 2021 by D.T. Baker