



Johannes Brahms: Complete String Sextets

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Most likely, just ahead of this review, you will find my review of Brahms's two string quintets performed by the Chamber Players of the WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne on a downloaded Pentatone release. Comparing those performances to the ones by the Mandelring Quartet with violist Roland Glassl just two issues ago in 40:5, I came down strongly in favor of the Mandelring. Now, just two issues later, we have the Mandelring Quartet, once again with Roland Glassl playing second viola, and now joined by Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt playing second cello, in Brahms's two string sextets, making for a beautiful companion to the previous release.

Contrasts between the quintets and the sextets are interesting. For one, the two sextets—op. 18 in B \flat Major (1860), and op. 36 in G Major (1864–65)—are fairly early works in Brahms's canon; whereas the two quintets—in F Major, op. 88 (1882), and op. 111 in G Major (1890)—are fairly late works. The G-Major Quintet was, in fact, to have been Brahms's sign-off before taking early retirement, but his encounter less than a year later with clarinetist Richard M \ddot{u} hlfeld quickly put an end to his plans for holing up at that cabin on the lake.

For the most part, the quintets are sunny, companionable works that reflect the feeling of a man who has resolved his life's conflicts and who is at peace with himself. The sociable surfaces of the quintets, however, tend to mask the complex contrapuntal and rhythmic mechanics of the writing which now, after a lifetime, have become second nature to Brahms. The much earlier sextets exude feelings of contentment as well, but they're also filled with youthful ardor and a sense of impatience common to young men feeling their oats. These are not works that are necessarily relaxed or comfortable in their own skin. One has the impression of music trying to break free of its constraints. Listen, for example, to the incredible variations in the second movement of the Sextet No. 1. In the maelstrom of the third variation in particular, it sounds like the notes are being sucked up right off the page into the vortex of the whirlwind.

It's noteworthy that Brahms's first efforts at composing for strings alone were not quartets, or even quintets, but sextets. He reveled in the extra richness and depth that a second viola and second cello offered. The idea of a string sextet wasn't exactly new, but it was rather risky, for Brahms was resurrecting a type of work that, with few exceptions, hadn't been much heard since Boccherini.

The Mandelring Quartet, here with Roland Glassl and Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt, gives warm, spirited, probing, penetrating, and highly clarifying performances of

Brahms two string sextets. Much the same could be said of the Cypress Quartet's readings with Barry Shiffman and Zuill Bailey, reviewed as recently as 40:5, not to mention a number of others that have earned strong recommendations in these pages. What perhaps gives the Mandelring a bit of an edge, in addition to the excellent performances and recording, is that, as noted above, this makes a very nice companion to the ensemble's very recent and equally excellent release of Brahms's two string quintets.

