

THE SHANGHAI QUARTET PLAYS

BRAHMS • QUARTET NO.3, OP.67 • QUINTET

NO.1, OP.88 • ARNOLD STEINHARDT, VIOLA



DE 3198



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CHAMBER MUSIC OF Johannes Brahms

Quintet No. 1 in F Major, Op. 88 [28:24]

- 1** I. Allegro non troppo ma con brio (12:31)
- 2** II. Grave ed appassionato (10:59)
- 3** III. Allegro energico (4:55)
with Arnold Steinhardt, viola

Quartet No. 3 in B-Flat Major, Op. 67 [36:54]

- 4** I. Vivace (10:37)
- 5** II. Andante (7:26)
- 6** III. Agitato (Allegretto non troppo) (8:45)
- 7** IV. Poco Allegretto con Variazioni (10:07)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 65:26

SHANGHAI STRING QUARTET

WEIGANG LI, violin

YIWEN JIANG, violin

HONGGANG LI, viola

JAMES WILSON, cello

ARNOLD STEINHARDT, guest viola



Compared to other great composers of chamber music, Johannes Brahms came to the string quartet late and cautiously. Haydn started at 23, Mozart at 14, Beethoven at 18. Brahms stalled until he was 40, and confessed to friends that he had been experimenting with the idea for twenty years before finally creating his first publishable string quartet scores, the two works of Op. 51, completed in 1873. As if relieved that he had at last broken the ice, he waited only two years before writing the **B-Flat Quartet, Op. 67** — and then he dropped the genre altogether. He seemed to prefer chamber music with piano, understandable in a composer who was accomplished at the keyboard, but when we consider that two of his finest early chamber works were string sextets, his relative coolness toward the foursome combination seems strange. Seven years after the B flat quartet he turned to strings once again, with the F major String Quintet.

By the time Brahms came to grips with the string quartet he was permanently settled in a pattern of bachelor life that apparently suited him perfectly: winters in Vienna, where he had a comfortable two-room apartment (a picture of Bach over the bed, a bust of Beethoven and a bronze profile of Bismarck in the sitting room); summers in various country vacation spots, where he concentrated on composing; fre-

quent concert tours; devoted friends everywhere. He was famous (for the German Requiem, among other things), and often in demand as a conductor and as soloist in his First Piano Concerto. His only regular responsibility had been as director of Vienna's *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*, a post he held with distinction for three years and quit in 1875, apparently relieved to be free of it.

A description by the baritone Georg Henschel at this period is vivid:

"He was broad-chested, of somewhat short stature, with a tendency to stoutness. His face was clean-shaven, revealing a rather thick, genial underlip; the healthy and ruddy colour of his skin indicated a love of nature and a habit of being in the open air in all kinds of weather; his thick straight hair of brownish colour came nearly down to his shoulders. His clothes and boots were not exactly of the latest pattern, nor did they fit particularly well, but his linen was spotless. What, however, struck me most was the kindness of his eyes. They were of a light blue; wonderfully keen and bright, with now and then a roguish twinkle in them, and yet at times of almost childlike tenderness. Soon I was to find out that the roguish twinkle in his eyes corresponded to a quality

in his nature which would perhaps be best described as good-natured sarcasm."

It must be said that Brahms's sarcasm was not always good-natured. There are many instances of his hurting those close to him, and even his ex-pupil Elizabeth von Herzogenberg, to whom he was devoted, reproached him in a letter from Leipzig after what must have been a particularly rocky visit: "I know you don't *mean* to be cruel at such times. It is a kind of 'black dog'...on your back which prompts these speeches, so deadly in their power to wound others. If you knew how deadly, you would give them up." Brahms even had cool moments with his beloved Clara Schumann, and he quarreled seriously with the violinist Joseph Joachim, his indispensable musical sounding board.

Still, the streak of sarcasm or irony often took on a self-deprecating tone, as when he sent his first two string quartets to the publisher Simrock with the message: "Seeing that Mozart took exceptional trouble to write six beautiful quartets, so we want to use our utmost exertions to make one or two passable ones."

Brahms chose to spend the summer of 1875 at the town of Ziegelhausen, on the river Neckar, five minutes by train from Heidelberg. He did not lack for company; many visitors came by, and "my rooms and

my daily life are most agreeable," he wrote to a friend. "Tomorrow some charming lady singers from Mannheim [are arriving] — in short, life is only too gay." The sociability did not deter him from work, and among other scores to come out of that summer was the String Quartet in B-Flat, Op. 67, which he dubbed "one of the trifles to avoid facing the serious countenance of a symphony." (He faced that countenance the next year, with the completion of the Symphony No. 1, Op. 68.)

The B-Flat Quartet, noticeably lighter in spirit than the two string quartets that preceded it, reflects this buoyant mood. Some commentators maintain that its good humor was only possible to Brahms after he had proved his capacity for Beethoven-like weightiness in the earlier pair of quartets, and got rid of the shadow of his great predecessor.

This "trifle" was an immediate hit with Brahms's friends: Joachim had his hands on the score by October of that year and tried it out in Berlin; later his ensemble rehearsed it in Clara's presence, to their great mutual pleasure, and Joachim wrote to Brahms: "Even you have hardly written more beautiful chamber music than that in the D minor [second] movement and in the finale, the former full of magical romanticism, the latter full of inwardness [Innigkeit] and grace in a form rich in artistry."

Brahms dedicated the work the following

summer to a Dutch physiologist, Dr. Theodor W. Engelmann, an ardent admirer who had been his host in Utrecht and who acknowledged the dedication with the graceful comment, "I have now less reason to worry about my immortality." The Joachim Quartet gave the formal premiere on October 30, 1876 at the Berlin Singakademie, and years later Brahms told Joachim that this was his favorite string quartet of the three.

The first movement is built around three main ideas: an opening "hunting horn" figure that prances smartly in a triple beat (it will reappear in the last movement), a quieter second theme (a bouncing two-beat trot), and a gently flowing line that becomes prominent only at the beginning of the development section. Brahms followed the classic pattern of bringing back the entire first part of the movement almost unaltered after the development, and completes the picture with a coda that refers to both the first and second themes.

It takes only a few moments of the second movement to be struck by the *Innigkeit* admired by Joachim: the long song of the first violin exerts a deep sense of poignancy. Some stern and unexpected interjections introduce the central section, which has its own quiet passages but grows in intensity, leading to a return of the song — disguised at first, but emerging into clarity. The "Amen" cadence at the end seems wonderfully appropriate.

The scherzo movement, "Agitato," gives center stage to the viola, which introduces the theme while the other instruments are muted. A lyric but still restless middle section intervenes before the viola reclaims its tune, which it yields to the first violin just before the arrival of the Trio. The Trio itself continues the breathless, swaying pace of the movement as a whole, and the viola continues its important role. With no break in continuity, the Trio glides smoothly back into the scherzo, which this time is followed by a coda.

The finale is a set of variations based on a lilting melody that never entirely vanishes from sight. The first variation brings the viola to prominence once again; in the third, the violin encloses the theme in a flow of happy triplets; the fourth is notable for the dark sonority of its running line, while the sixth touches a note of wistful sweetness. The hunting-horn figure from the opening movement prances smartly at Variation 7 — and appears again in the final measures. Brahms once wrote, "I have a peculiar affection for the variation form, and consider that it offers great scope to our talents and energies." This movement is surely a case in point.

Brahms's explorations of summertime residences settled, in 1880, on Bad Ischl, an unusually fashionable spot (for him) which nevertheless became his favorite for some years despite the fact that "half Vienna dis-

ported itself" there. ("Half of Berlin or of Leipzig would probably put me to flight, but half of Vienna is quite pretty and need not be ashamed of itself.")

On his arrival there in 1882 he wasted little time in getting to work, and soon completed his "product of spring" as he called it, the **F Major String Quintet** in three movements, which he sent off to Simrock along with the Piano Trio, Op. 87, enclosing an uncharacteristic message: "I tell you, you have not ever had anything so good from me, nor perhaps published, in the last ten years!!!" He also sent a copy — "a little ditty," he called it this time — to his faithful Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, who responded with an exhaustive letter of harmonic analysis coupled with some purely emotional reactions:

"The first largo of the second movement is one of the most overwhelming things I know....What delighted me so particularly in the first movement was its transparency. How grateful one is for this lucidity of form, this unaffected loveliness, which you treat strictly according to rule, and yet as if you yourself had invented this particular form to suit it!"

Some months later came further appraisal: "I heard Joachim do the F major Quintet recently, and was again impressed by his wonderful gift of interpretation. The close of the slow movement, which forms a link with

the finale, was a revelation...."

The work received its first run-through at an informal gathering at a town not far from Ischl, on August 25, 1882. That Christmas Brahms visited Clara Schumann in Frankfurt and the piece was played as part of her Christmas Eve celebrations ("The 'festival' was made all the nicer by Brahms's friendly humor," Clara recalled). Four days later it was performed in public, and Clara noted that it was "enthusiastically received — it really is a magnificent work."

The first movement, while "lucid of form," is nevertheless concentrated and intensive in its interlocking of the five instruments, in complex rhythms. The opening theme is deceptively gentle and uncomplicated, and is followed, after some emphatic hopping about, by a subsidiary theme that becomes important in the development. The second subject, in an off-kilter three-against-two beat, is given to one of the violas. The development dissects various thematic fragments in a thickly textured mixture (hardly the "transparency" beloved of Elisabeth), and everything returns in regular order in the recapitulation.

Brahms laid out the second movement very clearly in an ABACA pattern. The opening section is a sarabande that he had actually written for piano years before as an exercise in Baroque dance forms; the B section is in a dancing beat of three (or, more

accurately, six); the C section is a fast, two-beat gavotte, also written years before.

The last movement opens with a racing fugue spearheaded by the viola; several gentler themes then emerge, the most conspicuous of them a singing line high in the violin. The middle section mixes many of these elements together, with the fugue subject making a vigorous counterline much of the time, and eventually all the subjects return in their original order. It is a striking use of a fugue combined with the classical sonata form, of which there are not many examples — probably one of the reasons that, years after writing this quartet, Brahms said he considered it one of his finest works.

Shirley Fleming

Since its New York debut at Town Hall in the spring of 1987, the **Shanghai Quartet** has been hailed by press and public alike as one of the leading quartets of its generation. It now performs annually to exceptional critical acclaim in major music centers throughout the United States and abroad.

Shortly after the Quartet was formed at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, it won a top prize at the Portsmouth International Quartet Competition. In 1987 the ensemble won the prestigious Chicago Discovery competition and embarked on an intensive touring career. It has been Ensemble-in-Residence at the

Tanglewood and Ravinia Festivals and has appeared on several occasions at Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival.

Recent seasons have brought the Quartet back to Lincoln Center on the "Great Performers" series, and have included appearances in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Detroit and Toronto, Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas, Milwaukee, Montreal, Phoenix, San Francisco, St. Louis and Vancouver. Annual appearances in New York City have included a sold-out three-concert series with pianist Ruth Laredo at the Metropolitan Museum. Among the Quartet's other distinguished collaborators are pianist Peter Frankl and Lillian Kallir, guitarist Eliot Fisk, flutist Eugenia Zukerman, violist Arnold Steinhardt and cellist Carter Brey. The ensemble has also made several tours of Europe, giving concerts throughout Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom.

After leaving China, the Shanghai Quartet was coached by the Tokyo String Quartet and the Vermeer Quartet. In addition, it was Graduate Ensemble-in-Residence at the Juilliard School, where it assisted the Juilliard String Quartet. Currently, it is Ensemble-in-Residence at the University of Richmond in Virginia, teaching and coaching students, as well as performing its own three concert series annually.

The Shanghai Quartet may be heard on several Delos compact discs. Its debut

release, featuring works of Grieg and Mendelssohn, was released in 1994 to exceptional critical acclaim. Also available are *Spirit Murmur*, a disc featuring quartet works by Alan Hovhaness and the Song of the Ch'in" by Chinese composer Zhou Long, *Music for a Sunday Morning*, featuring works for strings and flute with Eugenia Zukerman, and a recording of Mozart's last two quartets. On the lighter side, the Shanghai Quartet is featured on both *Heigh-Ho! Mozart* and *Bibbidi Bobbidi Bach*, Delos' popular collections of favorite Disney tunes in the style of great classical composers.

A native of Shanghai, **Weigang Li** began violin studies with his parents at age 5 and went on to attend the Shanghai Conservatory at age 14. He came to the United States in 1981 to study at the San Francisco Conservatory through an exchange program between the sister cities of San Francisco and Shanghai. In 1982 he appeared with the BBC Scottish Symphony in a concert that was recorded for broadcast. Mr. Li has been a soloist with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Shanghai Symphony and the Shanghai Conservatory Orchestra. Upon graduating from the Shanghai Conservatory in 1985, he was appointed Assistant Professor of Violin. Shortly thereafter he left China to continue his education at Northern Illinois University on a full scholarship, receiving his Masters Degree in 1987. For the next two years, Mr.

Li studied and taught at the Juilliard School as teaching assistant to the Juilliard Quartet. His other teachers have included Shmuel Ashkenasi, Pierre Menard, Shu-Chen Tan, Mu-Chen Li and Isadore Tinkleman. Mr. Li was featured in the film *From Mao to Mozart – Isaac Stern in China*.

Born in Beijing, **Yiwen Jiang** began his violin studies with his father at age 6. In 1981 he was accepted into the class of Professor Han Li at the Central Conservatory of Music. In 1985 he came to the United States where his teachers have included Taras Gabora, Jaime Laredo, Michael Tree, and Pinchas Zukerman. He was later sponsored by the Ken Boxley Foundation to work with Arnold Steinhardt. A prize winner at the Mae M. Whitaker and Montreal competitions, Mr. Jiang has concertized extensively worldwide both as a chamber musician and concert soloist, and has appeared at many of the world's famous festivals, collaborating with such prominent artists as Lynn Harrell, Jaime Laredo, Alexander Schneider, Arnold Steinhardt, and Michael Tree. He has also appeared with the Central Opera House Orchestra in China, the Victoria Symphony and the Montreal Symphony. Mr. Jiang has performed for NBC and PBS television specials, National Public Radio, CBC, WYNC and WQXR in New York.

Honggang Li began violin studies with his parents at the same time as his brother, Weigang. He was selected to attend the Beijing Conservatory when it reopened in 1977. After continuing his training at the Shanghai Conservatory as a student of Lina Yu, he was subsequently appointed to the faculty there in 1984. He studied with Pierre Menard and Shmuel Ashkenasi at Northern Illinois University, and also served as a teaching assistant at the Juilliard School. Mr. Li has appeared as soloist with the Shanghai Philharmonic and the Shanghai Conservatory Orchestra. In 1987 he won a 1757 DeCambel violin as a special prize given by Elisa Pegreff of the Quartetto Italiano at the Paolo Borciani competition in Italy. Mr. Li joined the Shanghai Quartet as a violinist and became its violist with the addition of Yiwen Jiang in the summer of 1994.

A native of Ann Arbor, Michigan, **James Wilson** was born into a musical family and began cello studies at age 11. He went on to graduate from the University of Michigan,

where, as a student of Jeffrey Solow, he was the recipient of the music school's highest honor. He continued his studies with Stephen Kates at the Peabody Institute of Music and was twice selected as a participant in the Piatigorsky Seminar for Cellists.

Arnold Steinhardt, first violin of the world-famous Guarneri String Quartet since its inception in 1964, was born in Los Angeles where he began his studies with Peter Meremblum and Toscha Seidel. At the Curtis Institute of Music he studied with Ivan Galamian and later under the sponsorship of George Szell with Joseph Szigeti in Switzerland. Bronze medalist of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, Mr. Steinhardt also won the Leventritt Competition in 1958. At the age of 14 he had his debut with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and has subsequently appeared with many major orchestras and in recital. Mr. Steinhardt is Professor of Violin at the University of Maryland, the Curtis Institute of Music and at Rutgers University.

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CITATION

Young People's Notes

It is anybody's bet whether, if you had met Johannes Brahms toward the end of the last century, you would have liked him or instead found him to be a difficult customer. In fact, he had two sides to his personality — a love of good company and a great faithfulness toward the people he felt close to, and also a sour streak that caused him to hurt people's feelings when he may not have meant to. He never married, and so there was no woman in his life to smooth his sharp edges. But at the same time, many women adored him — from a safe distance.

He was free to travel as he felt like it, and each summer he left

his two-room apartment in Vienna to spend awhile in the country, where he concentrated on composing. When he reached the age of about 40 he finally got around to writing several string quartets, which he had put off doing for some time. Perhaps because he was a pianist he was less enthusiastic about getting involved in quartets for strings, a demanding combination.

His third quartet, which we hear on this disc, is his happiest, and he liked it best of all. Like most quartets, it is divided into four movements. The first has three musical ideas to listen for: a prancing "hunting horn" theme, a quieter "trotting" theme, and a

flowing line that becomes important about midway through. The second movement lets the top violin sing a rather sad song, the third brings the viola (a bigger, lower type of violin) to the center of the stage, and the final movement concentrates on a single tune that is heard in a number of different ways — a theme followed by variations in which you can always hear the main melody.

Brahms waited several years before writing his next work for strings — five instruments, this time, in the Quintet recorded here (an extra viola is added to the group). He had settled for the summer in one of his favorite resorts, where a great many of his Viennese friends

also turned up, which he rather enjoyed.

The Quintet, which has only three movements, opens with a gentle melody that hardly hints at some of the complicated action to come, in which the five instruments work very hard among themselves. The second movement is in a clear pattern, easy to follow: ABACA. The last movement starts out at a fast pace, with one of the violas leading the way and the other instruments jumping in with the same theme — a kind of chase in which nobody ever quite catches up. It is fun to follow the race.

Notes by Shirley Fleming

THE SHANGHAI QUARTET PLAYS BRAHMS

WEIGANG LI, VIOLIN • YIWEN JIANG, VIOLIN • HONGGANG LI, VIOLA

JAMES WILSON, CELLO • ARNOLD STEINHARDT, GUEST VIOLA



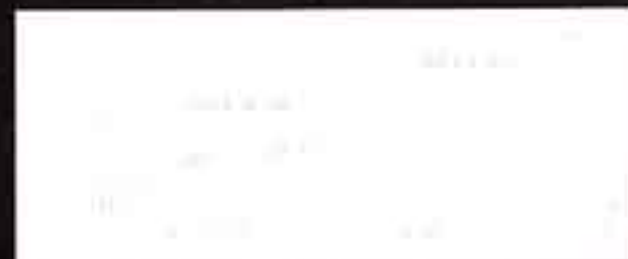
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TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 65:26



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