

*Allegro**Intermezzo: Allegro**Andante con moto**Rondo alla Zingarese: Presto*

The nineteenth century German conductor Hans von Bülow, a great supporter of Brahms, once did him the great disservice of bracketing him with Bach and Beethoven as a triumvirate of Greatest Composers. Granted that this was before the twentieth century rediscovery of Mozart it still seems a very silly thing to have written, and Brahms' detractors have used it as a stick to beat him with ever since. We now, one hopes, have a more balanced view of the later composer and can stop worrying about whether he was as good as Beethoven (which he certainly didn't think he was) and enjoy the sublime best of his chamber music, of which this is one of the choicest examples.

Brahms composed it in 1861, when he was 28 and still living in Hamburg, although a year later he would visit, and then settle in, Vienna. Here he had the warm recommendations of Clara Schumann, by then a much respected concert pianist, and was himself in demand as a performer of his own works, especially the G minor quartet. There is slight confusion in the reference books/websites as to whether Clara or Brahms himself gave the first performance, but there was always great rapport between them.

The G minor quartet and its stablemate, op.26 in A, were certainly innovative. Both last getting on for three quarters of an hour, but op.26 has the more lyrical sound that we subconsciously expect of major keys, at any rate in its opening movement. In the G minor quartet Brahms starts in sombre mood, with a wistful theme that develops with more angst as it goes along. After a while the key changes to D major and with it comes more ebullience, but then the mood darkens again and we are back in the minor. This time the mood is more heroic, though, and this alternates with the plaintive one until the latter brings the movement to its close.

The *intermezzo*, originally entitled *scherzo*, is in triple time: the cello sets the pace with an insistent nine-to-the-bar which is maintained throughout. There is a brief trio section and an even briefer coda, which are both more flowing. The third movement is the nearest we get to a slow one: it is marked *andante con moto* but *con moto* are the operative words. There is an urgency about both piano and string parts that becomes ever more intense, and rises to a climax before Brahms suddenly becomes almost skittish, in C major, for a couple of dozen bars—but the movement then recovers its serious demeanour, which it maintains, beautifully, to the end.

The last movement plays to the Viennese taste for gypsy-ish rhythms, famously exploited by Haydn in his Gypsy Rondo. It builds up its excitement in short sections, most of them repeated, working up to a whirling finale. The last pages are marked *molto presto*, which is pretty much off the scale, tempo-wise.