

Brahms, Sextet in G Major, Op. 36 (“Agathe”)

The G-major Sextet is connected to a romantic interlude in the life of Brahms. This involved Agathe von Siebold, whom he met in the summer of 1858 during a holiday in Göttingen. She was a fine soprano, and no doubt several of Brahms’s early songs were written for her. The two felt a strong mutual attraction, and Brahms made a point of returning to Göttingen as soon as possible. They secretly exchanged rings. After a friend warned him that people might be talking, Brahms became deeply concerned about compromising Agathe. Not knowing what else to do, the composer wrote her an impetuous love letter, which Agathe took the wrong way. She immediately broke off relations with him, and they did not reconcile for many years.

The G-major Sextet is often called the “Agathe Sextet,” and she figures into it in several ways, mood for one. Donald Tovey has called this “the most ethereal of all Brahms’s larger works.” More obviously, Brahms used letters from her name in the first movement to form part of the second thematic group when the first violin introduces the notes A - G - A - H - E. (H represents B-natural in German.)

This work represented a stylistic departure for Brahms with its infusion of contrapuntal technique. (This came as a result of the composer’s studies of counterpoint, which he undertook competitively with violinist Joseph Joachim.) Brahms’s contrapuntal textures are quite transparent, and we rarely hear the entire ensemble at once.

The first movement is in a genial, relaxed style reminiscent of Schubert. The Scherzo is one of Brahms's slower, intermezzo-type movements, punctuated by a *Presto giocoso* trio section.

In the *Adagio* the harmonies of the variations are often remote from those of the theme, while the phrase structures remain quite close and congruent. The finale returns to the good-natured quality of the opening movement, and its fugal development section initiates a jovial, spirited ending to the entire work.

Thoughts of Agathe must have dogged Brahms during the whole process of composing the Sextet. For, although he constantly felt a deep love for Clara Schumann, that relationship was never to develop into a romantic one. Thus, when he had completed the Sextet, Brahms wrote prophetically to a friend, "Here I have freed myself from my last love."

Schoenberg, Transfigured Night, Op. 4

Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night) was not 12-tone music (a technique introduced ca. 1924), nor was it even written in his famous "atonal" idiom (developed ca. 1908). Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) composed it in 1899, thus making it a work of his early, tonal period.

All the young musicians of Schoenberg's generation were deeply under the influence of Wagner, and the 24-year-old Schoenberg was no exception. When *Transfigured Night* was reviewed by the Vienna Tonkünstlerverein for a possible performance in 1900, one member of the jury remarked, "That sounds as if someone had smeared the score of *Tristan* while it was still wet." The performance was at first denied, but three years later it was granted. Schoenberg recalled that at the premiere a violent riot broke out due to the controversial nature

of his music. Although *Transfigured Night*, unlike much of his later music, has become easy to understand and is now probably Schoenberg's most popular work, he once remarked that since the time of its premiere "the scandal never ceased."

If *Transfigured Night* owes much of its harmonic style to Wagner, it owes nearly as much to Strauss for his mastery of programmatic representation and to Mahler for his daring musical syntax and broad formal conceptions. Nevertheless, Schoenberg himself must be credited for the novel idea of writing a programmatic work for a chamber ensemble. The original version of *Transfigured Night* was for string sextet, although the idiom of the music is largely orchestral. In 1917 Schoenberg made a string orchestra arrangement of the work, and in 1943 he prepared a second version of this, thinning some textures and revising some dynamic markings.

Transfigured Night was based on a poem by Richard Dehmel, an important turn-of-the-century Berlin poet. The following summarizes and partly quotes the source:

Two people walk through the woods in the moonlight.

A woman's voice speaks:

"I am carrying a child, and not by you,

I am walking here with you in a state of sin."

. . . .

A man's voice speaks:

"Do not let the child you have conceived

be a burden on your soul.

. . . there is the glow of inner warmth

from you in me, from me in you.

That warmth will transfigure the stranger's child."

.....

Two people walk on through the high, bright night.