Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) String Quintet No.1 in F, Op.88 (1882)

Allegro non troppo ma con brio
Grave ed appassionato — Allegretto vivace
Finale. Allegro energico

Although less common than the string quartet, there were many well-known precedents for Brahms of a string quintet either with added cello or with added viola. Boccherini (himself a cellist) had written 113 two-cello quintets for the Spanish court; Mozart (who loved playing viola) had written 5 mature two-viola quintets, Beethoven one, and the dying Schubert had written his two-cello quintet in 1828. In fact Brahms himself had written a two-cello quintet in 1862 (along with a string sextet), but the doubts of his friends and his own self-criticism turned it eventually into his only piano quintet and the two-cello version was lost. Twenty years later, after writing three string quartets in the 1870s, Brahms returned to writing for a larger group of strings with this two-violin quintet.

An extra viola allows Brahms to indulge his liking for rich textures, and a consequent challenge for the players is to allow the appropriate individual parts to penetrate this richness. But an extra viola can also help liberate a viola or cello from providing the harmonies, and some of the finest moments in the work are when one of these sings out.

Although written when he was nearly 50, this quintet is not in a distinctly different style from Brahms' chamber works written 20 years earlier. Brahms, unlike Beethoven, does not have distinctive early, middle and late periods. Although Brahms' late works for clarinet, inspired by the playing of Richard Mühlfeld, do have a distinctive late feel to them, for the rest we can go along with Robert Schumann's description of the young Brahms 'springing fully armed like Minerva from the head of Jove'.

Brahms was however always aware of the inheritance of Beethoven: 'You don't know', he said 'what it means to the likes of us when we hear his footsteps behind us'. But Brahms was generally happy to stick to Beethoven's classical models for the form of his works, and this quintet is no exception. The first movement is in sonata form, indeed so clearly in this form that Brahms' adored Elisabeth von Herzogenberg (née von Stockhausen) rather frankly wrote 'It is refreshing to see the framework exposed in such bald, prosaic fashion'. The second is more novel, sandwiching slow with faster tempi, as if merging a conventional slow movement with a minuet, and the third a lively fugue. The whole work is permeated by key sequences that are built on the interval of a third: F – A - C#. Brahms was pleased with his quintet, describing it to Clara Schumann as "one of my finest works" and telling his publisher Simrock, "You have never before had such a beautiful work from me."

The opening theme is broad and genial; the second violin's shadowing of the first's theme after four bars highlights the richness of this 5-instrument combination. The second theme 'baldly' slips up a third from F to A and employs one of Brahms' trade-mark rhythmic tricks:
pitting triplets against duplets. The released, animated first viola sings the triplet theme against simple quavers in the first violin (*illustrated*).

The slow movement alternates two themes and their variations: a *Grave* theme (*illustrated*) based on a *Sarabande* Brahms wrote in 1854, and an *Allegretto* theme (*illustrated*) based on a *Gavotte* that he wrote in the same year. The movement starts in C♯ major, and ends down the mediant in A major.

Finally, we have an energetic fugue started by the first viola (reminiscent of the last movement fugue of Beethoven’s last Razumovsky quartet). There are more F to A key changes, and more duplet vs triplet fun before the pace quickens to a rollicking end.