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Brahms: Clarinet Quintet

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Preface

Brahms's Clarinet Quintet was immediately recognised as a wonderful achievement on its appearance in 1891 and it has retained the ability to claim the hearts and minds of players and audiences ever since. Nowadays there is likely to be little dissent from the forthright assertion in the fifth edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* that 'for emotional intensity and beauty of tone-colour the Clarinet Quintet may well claim the top-most place in Brahms's chamber music'.¹ Indeed, this observation forms part of an adulatory tradition dating back to the years immediately following Brahms's death in 1897. As early as 1905 his biographer Florence May described it as a beautiful and now favourite work, containing the 'richest fruits of the golden harvest of the poet's activity'.² Her evocative style of writing nicely encapsulates the spirit of the Quintet, though in terms characteristic of the earlier rather than the latter part of the twentieth century:

Here 'the brooks of life are flowing as at high noon', though the tone of gentle loving regret which pervades the four movements, and holds the heart of the listener in firm grip, suggests the composer's feeling that the evening is not far away from him in which no man may work. A fulness of rich melody, a luscious charm of tone, original effects arising from the treatment of the clarinet, 'olympian' ease and mastery, distinguish every movement of this noble and attractive work, which, taking its hearers by storm on its first production, has grown more firmly rooted to the hearts of musicians and laymen with each fresh hearing. In the middle section of the second movement Brahms has written for the clarinet a number of quasi-improvisatory passages embracing the entire extent of the compass, which are supported by the strings, and which, when competently performed, are of surprisingly attractive effect.

Brahms's innovative absorption of the Hungarian folk tradition in the Adagio of the Quintet has remained a special focus of attention.

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But overall, succeeding generations have found it difficult effectively to articulate the way in which Brahms works his special magic. As Walter Frisch has recently observed, musical analysis and criticism too often fall short of communicating either a conscious intellectual admiration for Brahms's technical achievement or a less voluntary enchantment at the aesthetic experience.³ Frisch's own book fruitfully continues Schoenberg's discussion of Brahms's procedures of thematic continuity and economy – for which Schoenberg coined the term 'developing variation' – in an attempt to unveil the most compelling qualities of Brahms's music. The analytical and contextual chapters in this book will indeed attempt to discover the source of its undeniable 'magic'.

While representing a culmination of Brahms's achievement as a composer of chamber music, the Quintet also occupies a special place in the history of the clarinet. By the time it was composed, there had already been a number of remarkable collaborations between clarinetists and composers.⁴ Mozart's Clarinet Concerto bears witness to his friendship with Anton Stadler and dates from exactly a hundred years before Brahms's masterpiece. At the beginning of the nineteenth century there were fruitful partnerships between Weber and Heinrich Baermann and between Spohr and Simon Hermstedt during a period in which Weber produced a highly successful (if essentially *concert-ante*) Clarinet Quintet. Brahms's encounter with the Meiningen clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld towards the end of his life is especially remarkable because at the time he had already announced his retirement from composition. Furthermore, despite the clarinet's prominence within the Romantic orchestra, its position in chamber music had been in a state of sorry decline for a considerable period when Brahms embarked upon his Clarinet Trio and Quintet of 1891 and the two Sonatas of 1894. Notwithstanding some fine sets of character pieces with piano (notably by Schumann), there was scarcely any chamber music of the period in which the clarinet was truly integrated within an ensemble. In this respect Brahms produced a worthy successor to Mozart's Quintet K581, at the same time influencing later composers to an enormous degree. Brahms's resulting challenge to the performer was nicely characterised by Reginald Kell, one of the work's foremost interpreters: 'Clarinetists who are not fully developed musi-

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cally and are happy just playing the instrument instead of using it to music's end would be well advised to turn their attention to a less complex style'.⁵

The special attraction of the clarinet for Brahms was captured with singular objectivity by the American writer Daniel Gregory Mason:

The clarinet ... is no less romantic in expression and luscious in tone-color than the horn, while far more various in tone and flexible in articulation. It rivals indeed the violin in the variety of its tone-color in different registers (if not quite in intimate human feeling in its expression), and equals the piano in flexibility, adding a certain indescribable sort of voluble neatness peculiar to itself. It has three separate registers, each strongly characterized and each appealing potently to the musical nature of the mature Brahms. Its upper register is a clear and lyric soprano, slightly less sensitive than that of the violin but of an incomparable roundness and clarity. The middle register has a sort of mysterious hollowness, a sighing softness that Brahms uses *con amore*. Above all, the lower register, the so-called 'chalumeau', is dark, sober, even menacing at times, in a degree equalled by no other instrument ... Finally the extraordinary flexibility and smoothness of utterance peculiar to this instrument make available not only such impassioned gipsy-like recitatives as those of the *Adagio* of the Quintet, but the neat dovetailing of intricate figuration between piano and clarinet so fascinating in the finale of the E flat sonata. No wonder the clarinet opened to Brahms what is virtually a new vein in his genius.⁶

In examining Brahms's relationship with the clarinet, this Handbook investigates Brahms's orchestral treatment of the instrument prior to the collaboration with Mühlfeld, as well as the implications of the Quintet (and to a lesser degree the Trio and Sonatas) for later composers. Chapter 6 reflects some of my own current preoccupations relating to Brahms performance practice, and was written during a period when I was fortunate enough to take delivery of a pair of specially commissioned copies of the Baermann-Ottensteiner clarinets used by Mühlfeld.⁷

It is a pleasure to thank a large number of friends and relatives for their help, advice and inspiration in the preparation of this book. My love of the Brahms Clarinet Quintet developed many years ago, when

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my formative years as a clarinettist benefited from unstinting parental support and from Thea King's inspired tuition. Later immersion in period performance brought me into contact with Nicholas Shackleton, who has always been generous enough to place at my disposal his unrivalled knowledge of surviving instruments world-wide. The Cambridge maker Daniel Bangham alerted me to the expressive potential of boxwood clarinets by producing for me many fine copies from different eras of the instrument's history. In the immediate preparation of this Handbook I have been especially grateful for a period of study leave from the University of Sheffield. My research assistant Ingrid Pearson was largely responsible for compiling Chapter 2 and for innumerable other important details in the text. Further generous bibliographical advice has come from Michael Bryant, Georgina Dobrée and Jo Rees-Davies. Pamela Weston very kindly supplied previously unpublished photographs from her own unique library. My wife Hilary has been most perceptive of all in her encouragement of the project, despite the fact that its progress has coincided with intensive periods of preparation for concerts and recordings. Lastly, Penny Souster at Cambridge University Press has created a characteristic sense of urgency, whilst offering consistent and positive support.

In the following chapters, pitch registers are indicated in the following manner: middle C just below the treble staff is indicated as *c'*, with each successive octave higher shown as *c''*, *c'''*, *c''''* etc. and the octave below as *c*. Excerpts from Brahms's clarinet part are notated in A, sounding a minor third lower.