

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Streichquartett No. 2 in G Dur, Op. 111

Brahms wrote his String Quintet Op. 111 in the summer of 1890 as a companion piece to the earlier Op. 88 String Quintet, at the request of the violinist Joseph Joachim. Brahms intended this to be his last work. In December of 1890 he sent a revision of the finale to his publisher in Berlin with the instruction "With this note you can take leave of my music, as it is high time to stop". The following spring he wrote out his will and decided to concentrate his remaining years on unpublished works he felt were worthy of reexamination, and forego composing new works entirely. Fortunately, Brahms did not stick to his resolution.

The first movement opens with a soaring theme in the cello, frequently cited as a test of the player's control and projection as it fights to be heard against a powerful backdrop of oscillating chords. Joachim complained to Brahms that it would take "three cellists in one" to be heard above the other four instruments playing forte. However Brahms decided to stand by his original idea. This theme initially appeared in sketches for a possible fifth symphony and indeed the whole first movement is very symphonic, filled with soaring melodies and dramatic turns of phrase. If Brahms intended this quintet to be his final musical testament to the world, then this first movement certainly fits the bill. However, the second movement is much more transparent and chamber-like; a wistful theme and variations. The third movement evokes a Viennese waltz, and the last movement ends the work with a rousing Hungarian csárdás.

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