CD Reviews

Brahms

Piano Quintet in F minor op. 34
String Quartet in A minor op. 51, no. 2
Takács Quartet

Stephen Hough *pf*

Hyperion CDA67551 (73 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

The Takács Quartet's recording of Brahms's Piano Quintet in F minor op. 34 – with pianist Stephen Hough – and String Quartet in A minor op. 51, no. 2 points out effectively a contrast between two phases in Brahms's career and two different approaches to the sonata cycle. The quintet, composed and re-composed between 1862 and 1865, represents what is sometimes called his 'first maturity', while the quartet, likely begun at about the time of the quintet's publication but not published itself until 1873, shows him in a period of sophisticated musical reflection.

To demonstrate the distinction in style between the two works, and the periods that they represent, we may begin by contrasting their first movements. The quintet's opening sonata form possesses a grandly symphonic and public quality, and employs a dramatic tone and design. Its themes contrast strikingly, and each bears a distinct character. The sections enter as clearly differentiated episodes. Certain moments come across as unashamedly theatrical, especially in the development. The reprise emerges (rather than arrives) as sufficiently heroic, and the action of the denouement settles down nicely into recapitulatory stability. The coda tapers to a quiet end, followed by a bold envoi that reminds the listener that the drama has been a heroic one.

The quartet's first movement, on the other hand, treats sonata form as a framework not for high drama but for logical discourse, even while its ideas are imbued with reflective Romanticism. None of the themes manifests a heroic character. The entire structure proceeds more through thoughtful continuity than episodic division. The music sounds sometimes musing and sometimes rhetorically charged, but it concentrates on discursive and not dramatic direction.

The Takács/Hough performance succeeds in expressing this distinction. In the quintet, the bold first theme is set up dramatically by the brief lead-in, which introduces first the sombre melodic contour (bars 1–4) and then the aggressive impulse (bars 5–11) of the opening character, which combine to form the principal theme itself (bars 12ff.). The episodic effect is illustrated by the move into the transition theme, where a brief stretching of the rhythm in bar 22 prepares the entrance of the new character. The theme associated with the secondary key (C♯ minor, sufficiently distant from F minor but set up by an earlier emphasis on D♭) seems properly hesitant at first, then finds itself; this works because the

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performers treat the quavers, which Brahms articulates at first as staccatos under a single bow and later makes legato, as initially tentative, then more decisive, so that the legato, when it arrives, represents a new sense of self-assurance. (The recapitulation reconfigures these detached quavers as driving and impatient.) The development's rising intensity does not depend on constant activity but on repressed energy that builds to a couple of peaks, and the performance heightens tension by holding back the soft passages and then allowing the fortes to thrust through the restraining bonds. The coda's devolution into relaxed aimlessness comes across convincingly, as does the powerful peroration.

By contrast, the interpretation of the A-minor quartet's first movement succeeds just as well in its own way. The principal theme muses melodically and meditatively. The secondary theme (in the expected C major – no adventurous relationship here) comes across as pleasant and companionable; the word *gemütlich*, sometimes applied to this theme, describes it well. The brief crescendos and relapses to *piano* towards the end of the exposition suggest rising passion quickly quelled. The whole progress of the sonata structure, integrated through two simple motifs introduced in bars 3–4, a dotted rhythm and a three-note anacrusic gesture, unfolds thoughtfully rather than histrionically. The dialogue within the development becomes more a matter of intelligent discussion of motivic ideas than of active conflict.

Returning now to the remainder of the F-minor quintet, the Andante, un poco Adagio in A♭ that serves as the slow movement features a tender and intimate main idea, in which the ensemble's approach to the offbeat accompaniment sounds charmingly nonchalant. To my hearing, the contrasting section in E major (there's that chromatically raised fifth degree again, but not prepared here as was the C♯ minor in the first movement) seems forced and poorly motivated, but the blame for this falls on Brahms and not on Hough and the Takács Quartet, who play the music well enough and especially manage the transitions to and from E neatly.

The quintet's Scherzo, on the other hand, is masterful. Its three musical components – the mysterious and anticipatory lead-in, the energetic galloping theme and the celebratory hymn – preserve their separate characters in the C-minor scherzo proper. The C-major Trio fuses these into new material, an effect that the performance renders very clearly. The fugato on the galloping motif gives the strings and the piano a chance to show off their handling of counterpoint.

To open the Finale of the quintet, Brahms starts with something that at first evokes Beethoven's late quartets (especially that in A minor, op. 132) and then becomes narratively scene-setting. The performers give a convincing march-like character to the main rondo theme and plenty of excitement to its dramatic developments. The more sober episodes balance this with constrained interiority. The coda forms a massive conclusion, clearly intended not just for the last movement but for the quintet as a whole. Hough and the Takács players slam shut the door on this work with stern authority rather than energetic humour.

As for the more reflective A-minor quartet, its Andante moderato opens in a song-like style, playing through its theme in two variants, interpreted in beautifully restrained fashion by the Takács strings. Its middle section brings in strikingly contrasting and aggressively declamatory material, which serves as a foil to highlight the lyrical expression that it rudely interrupts. Despite the sharper contrast between ideas than in the quintet's slow movement, the result here is to make the movement rhetorical rather than dramatic. Cellist András

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Fejér's elegant singing of the final return of the theme, in the alto register in which violinist Edward Dusinberre first presented it, now deferentially supported by the other strings, comes as a satisfying fulfilment.

The third movement, which Brahms marked 'Quasi Minuetto', engages the tradition of minuets and scherzos in several ways. The beginning should be in the tempo of an eighteenth-century minuet, but the odd, three-measure phrasing immediately undermines the *perruqué* effect. The first two phrases are symmetrical (linked by an instance of the three-note anacrusis heard in the first movement's main theme), but then there comes a peculiarly Brahmsian interruption (bars 7–9) before a neat, four-bar close that, however, then staggers forward by two additional bars. The return of the opening at the rounding of the binary form undergoes a more animated variation. The Trio, in 2/4 metre, adopts the style of a Mendelssohnian elfin scherzo with perpetual-motion semiquavers. It thus supersedes temporarily the elegance of the minuet's antiquarianism, but then minuet material interrupts in its turn, and the movement closes with a straightforward reprise of the minuet, altered only to provide an extended close. This historical look back to different movement types demands that the quartet players demonstrate three styles – those of classic minuet, early Romantic scherzo and Brahmsian reflectiveness – with the challenge of making each one always convincing.

Pursuing the manner of closely argued discourse, the Finale's rondo theme picks up gestures anticipated in earlier movements. Its phrases begin with the three-note anacrusis derived from the principal material of the first movement, and they continue as three-bar units with melodic and rhythmic contours carried over from the minuet. Brahms's characteristic hemiolas are everywhere in the principal theme and much of the rest of the movement, too. The first episode begins with a lyrical melody and then builds energy as it works back to the rondo theme. The second episode's stretto gives a moment of contrapuntal intensity, which is extended into the third statement of the rondo theme, a contrapuntally accompanied variant. The cello gets another opportunity to be featured in a lyrical alto solo, as in the second movement (bars 238ff.). At the coda the rondo theme is varied (bars 334ff.) in similar fashion to that of the minuet (cf. movement 3, bars 25ff.). The rondo movement thus stands as a sort of synoptic re-engagement of these different kinds of ideas from its predecessors.

The quartet determinedly forgoes the strong characters and lively action of the piano quintet. Instead, it pursues a continuous reflection on musical issues: motifs, styles and forms. By juxtaposing these two works – rather than, for example, putting the quintet together with one of Brahms's slightly earlier piano quartets (op. 24 or op. 25), or pairing the A-minor string quartet with its companion in C minor (op. 51) – the Takács Quartet and Stephen Hough highlight a notable shift in Brahms's approach to chamber music. And their playing demonstrates a firm grasp of these two sides of Brahms.

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