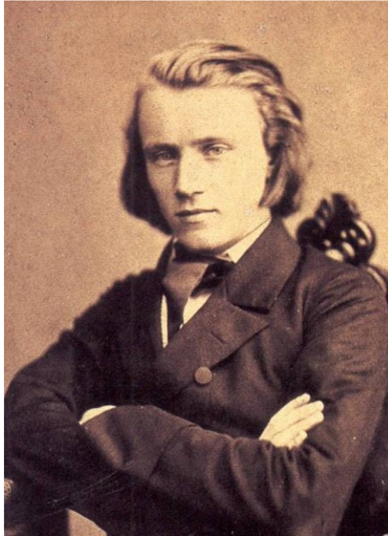
Brahms: Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34 (1864)


A young Brahms in 1853 – Wikimedia commons

Johannes Brahms composed the first version of the F Minor Quintet over the summer of 1864, though it was in the guise of a string quintet, with only two violins, two cellos, and a viola – no piano in sight. The work was initially dedicated to HRH Princess Anna of Hesse, though Brahms found no satisfaction in the quintet as it stood. Not long after he wrote the string quintet version, his erstwhile friend and virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim wrote to Brahms, stating that while the quintet was a work of immense power and force, it lacked in equal amounts subtlety and "charm." Furthermore, Brahms the pianist was still in the early stages of his career as a composer, and his writing for string instruments left quite a bit to be desired – with clunky and awkward melodic lines punctuated by difficult passages that did no justice to the affordances of the violin family instruments.

Therefore, after Joachim's prodding, Brahms decided to nix the string instruments altogether and arrange the work for two pianos, calling it instead a "sonata for two pianos." In this form, he gave the work a premiere in collaboration with the Polish pianist Carl Tausig. However upon hearing the work and seeing it in piano reduction, Brahms's musical confidante, the inimitable Clara Schumann née Wieck, wrote to Brahms, saying that she found the work's musical development to be hindered by the instrumentation. In fact, (though she was a virtuoso pianist of the highest caliber herself), she said that the ideas did not sit well on the piano – it seemed like an *arrangement* for the piano, rather than a *work* for it. Instead, she contended that the work "required an orchestra for its interpretation."

Clara Wieck Schumann in 1853 – Wikimedia commons

Thereafter, Brahms set to work on the third and final version of what would come to be his piano quintet. He deferred to Clara's advice, but instead of adapting the work for a full orchestra, he decided to meld both versions and score it for the most minimalist orchestra possible: the piano quintet. With only one string player to a part, the piano quintet retains the intimacy of the string quartet while adding the power and dignity of the piano to the mix. The result is an ensemble

which is simultaneously powerful enough to fill a large concert hall and yet intimate enough to retain the complexity of texture that defined Brahms's counterpoint.

Following in the Lisztian tradition of piano-playing, Brahms knew how to exploit the versatility of the piano to the highest possible degree. Though piano-playing sometimes requires a divorce between the left and right hands, Liszt was a pioneer in the art of splitting the musical roles down to the level of the fingers. One hand can thus simultaneously play harmony and melody, lyrical theme and rhythmic accompaniment. This split allows the pianist to constantly shift gears and play in duet with any of the other four instruments, weaving the piano ever the more closely into the fabric of the quartet of strings.

One gets the sense that Brahms had some lingering anxiety over the affective excess this work would instill in players, as he writes admonitions in nearly every movement: "Allegro, *non troppo*" (happily, *not too much*), "Andante, *un poco adagio"* (At a walking pace, *a little easy*), or even "Presto, *non troppo*" (Rushed, *not too much*)! Brahms's quintet is indeed a work of emotional excess, a spillover of the most Romantic sentiments into a musical form; later in his life, Brahms would paradoxically contend that the music could *itself* hold absolute affective capacity – and that it needed no picturesque program to accompany it – but rather that formal elements of composition were enough to move a listener to tears.

The first movement, *Allegro, non troppo*, begins with the primary theme introduced in hushed unison between cello, first violin, and piano. At face value, Brahms's music expands in every direction with seemingly little economy of musical material. Closer examination reveals just the opposite to be true – rhythmic variation and hemiola turn the simple theme into countless variations which are different enough to be considered almost new musical material. The piano undergirds the entire movement, but the few moments when it drops out, the reduction in texture to the string quartet is jarring. It is almost as if the ground drops out beneath us, demonstrating just how tightly the piano is knitted into the fabric of the ensemble. It is not nearly the same effect when the second violin is *tacet* through a large part of the second movement. And the pianist embodies not just one voice, but two (and often more) as each hand (or section of it) is tasked to play an entirely different role in the ensemble.

The second movement, *Andante, un poco adagio*, is an intermezzo of sorts – a melodious interplay between piano and strings, where the piano takes center stage and the strings meld into one entity rather than an ensemble of four separate instruments. As the piano states the opening melody, the first violin and viola form a harmonic team and the cello picks up the bass line through pizzicato. The second violin is much more sparsely used across the whole movement, often reducing the texture to something resembling a piano quartet. The lyricism of the movement is matched only by the painstaking beauty of the *Dumka* movement in Dvořák's piano quintet, where the viola is the primary melodic instrument.

The third movement, *Scherzo: Allegro*, is a romping fast movement, rivaling the scherzo from Schubert's Cello Quintet in its nearly orchestral scope. The rhythmic impetus is kept up either by the piano, the cello pizzicato, or the violins all throughout the movement, giving it march-like quality that only dissolves once the viola introduces the theme in an almost fugal variation near

the end. Though the first violin joins in imitative counterpoint, it never develops into a fugue between all five instruments, stopping the joke just short of fully devolving into full-blown musical archaism.

The final movement, *Finale: Poco sostenuto – Allegro non troppo – Presto non troppo* is a case in point of Brahms applying tempering measures to a piece of music that is already so full of Romantic excess. The opening rhapsodic material in the strings is defined by a steady upward semitone progression, stripped away of the vertical harmonic material that would allow us to define it as an "omnibus progression" lifted from Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* or Beethoven's Second Symphony. It exists basically as a stripped-down semitone movement upwards across all the voices, with only a few chords fully voiced across the progression. The painstakingly slow quotation to Brahms's renowned predecessors was yet another way for Brahms to fully concretize his hold on Vienna as a master of his art. The opening leads into folk-y dance themes led by the cellist. One can see in the remainder of this movement a great influence from Brahms's interest in Hungarian ethnography and the dance forms of the Romani people. As the music winds down, we are led to believe the quintet is nearing its end, but a coda of orchestral proportions jolts us into appreciating the power and vigor of the piano quintet ensemble – straddling the line between intimate chamber music and bombastic symphonies.

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Dvořák: Piano Quintet No. 2 in A Major, Op. 81 (1887)

One often sees the piano quintets of Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, and Antonin Dvořák placed into a trajectory of sorts, with each one an expansion of musical ideas and techniques of the form and ensemble explored in its predecessor(s). Antonin Dvořák's second piano quintet can certainly be classified as such and one could while away the evening comparing the compositional techniques of Dvořák and Brahms. But to do so risks valuing the magnificent oeuvre of Dvořák only in relation to its dialogues with his predecessors. Dvořák certainly engaged in this trajectory and conversation through his piano quintet, but that does not define the work as a whole, and to explain the work as a the result of everything that came before it does severe injustice to Dvořák's idiosyncratic style which permeates every fiber of this piece.

Dvořák's second piano quintet is best characterized by its multiple layers of texture, with free rhythmic and harmonic interchange across all five instruments and a dynamism that is unmatched by any of his predecessors. The one comparison I will draw between Schumann, Brahms, and Dvořák is on the usage of the piano versus the strings. Whereas Schumann considered the piano a wholly different entity from the strings and wrote with the two instrument types in constant dialogue, Brahms attempted to melt this division somewhat in his own quintet. However, there were clear moments when the piano was left to its own devices for long stretches of time and the strings simply providing an accompanying veneer over the top. Dvořák, on the other hand, took the weaving of piano and strings even further, putting all five on an equal pedestal to an unprecedented degree. The result is a work where the piano feels integrally part of the texture and not just an added ornament or the soloist under which the strings provide accompaniment together.

Dvořák's lyrical writing is at its finest here, in a work taking the listener on a journey across mountain and sea, through clouds and underwater – a journey across every musical terrain imaginable. Heavily influenced as Dvořák was by the ethnography of those peoples considered "other" to mainstream Western European traditions (such as the Romani living in Hungary or the Native Americans), the work of Dvořák leans into his exuberance for folk dances. There is a certain rhythmic intensity and regularity to Dvořák's quintet that lends itself well to the art of dance. Furthermore, as is characteristic of Dvořák, a violist himself, the viola is often given a role of special prominence, particularly in moment of great affective lyricism, such as the second movement. Across it all, Dvořák takes great pains to give

Antonin Dvořák in 1882
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each instrument an equally voiced role, so that even the second violin takes the lead through much of the final movement – a tendency which had been largely effaced by the first-violin centric chamber music of early Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

The first movement, *Allegro, ma non tanto*, opens with the cello and piano plainly stating the first theme. Smoothly passing from one musical idea to the next, the viola introduces the second theme, and the rest of the movement is a slow unfolding of all the thematic material finessed into ever-more complex and delicate forms by Dvořák. Once the movement begins, there is no pause – musical ideas overflow from one moment to the next in Dvořák's suave counterpoint. We see Dvořák's tendency for ornamentation playing out in the piano right hand and violins, with little flutters of musical flourishes filling in the spaces between the articulation of each note.

The second movement is the most special of the quintet, labeled as *Dumka: Andante con moto*. The word *Dumka* may sound unfamiliar, but it is really a Ukrainian vernacular word for ballad or epic poem. Although the overall trajectory of the *Dumka* may be a lament, it is never wholly characterized by one mood, and it is dependent on the mixture of vivacious dances within the rhapsodic melodic material presented. A slow movement of truly epic proportions, this *Dumka* encompasses so much variation in effect, though we are never quite lifted out of the elegiac mood presented from the viola's first melody. Dvořák the violist knew through and through the special power of the viola, in its nasal voice and acoustic imperfection, to present a truly heart-wrenching melody to the listener, despite its underuse in such a role by composers before him. The whole movement is stitched together by an overarching story told by the violist, with the dual poles of lament and dance playing against each other.

In nearly every appropriation of the *Dumka* form in Western classical music, the ballad movement is followed by a particular kind of dance known as the *Furiant*. Dvořák's quintet is no exception, and the third movement, entitled *Scherzo (Furiant): Molto vivace*, holds largely true to the Bohemian dance which inspired its name. A galloping dance in a mixed dual and triple meter, the *Furiant* is a boundless fountain of mirth, and here the viola takes on an exceptionally different role, singing out soaring melodies over the ensemble, leaving behind its lamentation in the *Dumka*.

The *Finale: Allegro* movement is often read as an amalgam of all the compositional techniques explored by nineteenth-century German romantics: equivocation between major and minor modalities, an ending chorale, fugue-like imitative counterpoint, and an overall *Sturm und Drang* passionate mood across the whole. One can obviously accept that Dvořák, coming at the end of the nineteenth century, was greatly influenced by his predecessors and the musical styles in vogue. But to focus on these aspects robs Dvořák of his rightful due as the composer of this beautiful quintet. What makes Dvořák unique is his glittering use of piano in the high registers, the adherence to the structural aspects of non-mainstream musical forms, and his exploration of instrument colors and timbres which largely went underappreciated by nineteenth-century composers. One can certainly not isolate Dvořák from the music of his time nor his mentors, but one should also appreciate the highly individual style of his compositions and the outsized influence he would later come to have on American schools of music.

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