Johannes Brahms: *Zwei Gesänge, Op. 91* (1884)

Johannes Brahms (1833—1897) left a lasting impression on the musical world, not just for posterity but during his own life as well. His circle of friends ranged from the Schumann family to some of the most influential musical pedagogues of the nineteenth century. This concert's program follows Brahms through his musical heritage, social circles, and sources of inspiration.

We begin with a set of two songs composed by Brahms for his friend, the renowned violinist Joseph Joachim and his wife, the contralto Amalie Marie Joachim. On the occasion of their marriage in 1863, Brahms composed a musical setting for a *Geistliches Wiegenlied* ('Sacred Lullaby'). The text was composed by Emanuel von Geibel, paraphrasing the Spanish poet Lope de Vega's *Cantarcillo de la Virgen* ('Short Canticle of the Virgin'). Brahms then revised the song and presented the new version the following year for the birth of the Joachim's first son, Johannes Joachim. This song cycle would then lie dormant for nearly two decades, at which point Brahms added a second song, the *Gestillte Sehnsucht* ('Satisfied Nostalgia') and published both songs in 1884.

Gestillte Sehnsucht: This song with a paradoxical title takes its text from a poem by Friedrich Rückert. But how could nostalgia be satisfied, for is it not always a yearning for something that no longer exists? C.S. Lewis offers us some musings on what the term *Sehnsucht* meant to him: "That unnamable something, desire for which pierces us like a rapier at the smell of bonfire, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of *The Well at the World's End*, the opening lines of *Kubla Khan*, the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves" (Lewis: Pilgrim's Regress, 1943). Brahms offers us the song in which we might yearn for the love of our youth. He sent the complete song cycle to his friends the Joachims, hoping that his musical musing on the joys of the past might offer them a way to rekindle their own love, twenty years into their marriage.

In its published version, the songs' order is flipped, and the *Gestillte Sehnsucht* comes first. This song begins with the viola's arpeggiated melodic line, foreshadowing the alto's lines in both form and contour. She sings, "*In goldnen Abendschein getauchet"* ('Steeped in a golden evening glow'), perfectly setting the nostalgic mood for Brahms's *Sehnsucht*. Each two-bar phrase works its way down and back up the arpeggiated notes of a chord, the alto beginning and the viola coming in with its own two-bar countermelody halfway through, such that each poetic line sits on two and a half bars of music. The alto begins but the viola finishes each line. The piano holds this obbligato-solo ensemble together with an idyllic backdrop, going from gently rolling arpeggios to short virtuosic figures sprinkled in between the two melodic lines. Brahms, a talented pianist himself, never shied away from giving the piano an expansive role to play in his chamber music.

The second stanza suddenly changes the mood, thrusting us into the minor mode as the alto pivots on a common tone to the new key. The once gentle waves beneath our boat start to roil and froth as the viola and piano trade impassioned arpeggiated figures while the alto sings of

unrequited desires stirring within her heart. Drawing on the Baroque form of the *Da capo* aria, the third stanza is a musical recapitulation of the first, repeating exactly the melody and rhythms of the first stanza but now with new text.

The second song, *Geistliches Wiegenlied* ('Sacred Lullaby') is exactly what the name implies. Told from the perspective of the Virgin Mary, it is a song in which she repeatedly asks the angels hovering in the sky around her sweet child to help her quiet the noises of the world around her, such that he might continue his sleep undisturbed. Written below the viola's opening melody, we have the words "*Joseph, liber Joseph mein, hilf mir wiegen mein Kindlein fein*" ('Joseph, my dear Joseph, help me rock my fine little child'). Not only is this a wink to the song's dedicatee, Joseph Joachim, but these lyrics identify the Christmas Carol which the viola is paraphrasing in these opening moments. The piano adds a joyful touch to the viola's simple tune with gently rollicking figures that go up and down the arpeggiated harmonies. After this sweet introduction, the alto enters with the Virgin Mary's maternal supplication to the angels, *ye who hover in the sky, holy angels, please help me silence the ills of the world, such that my child might slumber in peace*.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Joseph Joachim and his wife, Amalie Joachim

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Johannes Brahms: *Trio in E-flat Major, Op. 40* (1865)

Continuing with the theme of *Sehnsucht* ('nostalgia'), the *Horn Trio in E-flat Major* was constructed around a central nostalgia of Brahms's childhood, the horn. In February of 1865, Brahms's mother, Christiane, passed away; she was a formative element in his childhood musical education, and one of the first instruments he learned was the natural horn. An endearing tribute to the impact of his mother to his own musical legacy, Brahms composed the *Horn Trio* in her honor and it was premiered in November of 1865 and published in 1866. This unique configuration of instruments in a chamber ensemble (horn, piano, violin) came to be closely associated with Brahms's own musical legacy and later composers including György Ligeti, Joseph Holbrooke, Lennox Berkeley, and Don Banks all presented their own iterations on the ensemble throughout the twentieth century. Brahms himself recognized that it would be performed more often if scored for a more traditional ensemble and provided cello and viola transcriptions of the horn part in later years (as he tended to do with some of his more esoteric instrument combinations).

However this unusual instrument combination was itself an exercise in contrapuntal imagination. Although the valved horn had by the mid-nineteenth century become a common feature of orchestras, Brahms explicitly specified that he preferred the part be performed on a natural horn despite the limits this older instrument has in regard to both pitch range and technical complexity. What attracted Brahms to the natural horn—apart from his childhood memories of the instrument—was its timbre. Throughout the trio, the resonance throughout the harmonic series made possible on the natural horn gives the whole ensemble an ethereal, warm, and full sound. It also bridges some of the differences between the three very distinct instruments at play. The natural horn also reminded him of the *Schwarzwald's* wild expanses, where he had often spent a good deal of time with the Schumanns and their friends. In moments where the horn and another instrument play in unison or octaves, the timbral effect creates stunning resonances across the harmonic series.

The first movement, *Andante*, manages to blend the violin, piano, and horn into a seamless whole. Though the horn avoids most of the quicker note values of the piano and violin, it often takes either the primary melodic role, a harmonic pedal tone, or resounding interjections into the musical texture. A particularly striking moment is the *Poco più animato*, where the piano goes through a series of increasingly frenetic harmonic progressions, upon which the violin and horn are layered in conversation. Then as suddenly as it began, it all melts away into an introspective mood, the piano continuing its ceaseless movement through harmonic progressions. A hallmark of Brahms's compositional style, even in the calmest melodic moments, the piano will continue to play an active, even virtuosic, role as the pianist must navigate across the breadth of the keyboard without betraying the difficulty of the passage.

In the second movement, *Scherzo: Allegro*, the horn gets its chance to shine as a virtuosic instrument, though it never plays a note shorter than an eighth note (for good reason). It often

takes the spotlight away from the violin and piano, which are both juggling extremely boisterous parts. The trio transforms into a rhapsody for the horn and violin set atop an ostinato piano accompaniment. After this brief interlude into the darker reaches of Brahms's grieving mind, we return to the lightheartedness of the opening.

Movement three: *Allegro mesto*, begins with dramatic rolled chords in the piano. The horn and violin then enter with a haunting melody. The melodic lines of the two instruments interlock in an exquisite show of Brahms's contrapuntal genius. In this movement, Brahms takes us back to his childhood home, the slow story of a growing child, the nostalgia for the simplicity of life we all once enjoyed. Through it all, the horn with its expansive timbres embraces us like a warm hug from our dear mother. The violin is the small child in her arms and the piano is our narrative engine. This movement is Brahms's most fervent musical elegy to Christiane, thanking her for the love she gave him and praying for her eternal rest.

Finale: Allegro con brio. All three instruments gather for an energetic Rondo, full of life's energy and the excitement of a child following his mother around the house. Brahms here reminds us that although the passing of a cherished one might be full of grief, our final memories of them should be full of the raucous joy of life. The horn, violin, and piano are all pushed to the limits of virtuosity on their instruments, making this sendoff a true release of our pent-up emotions during times of grief.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Christiane Brahms

Source: Theory of Music

Franz Schubert: *Auf dem Strom D. 943* (1828)

Though Brahms never met Schubert (he was born five years after Schubert passed away), he always looked to him alongside Beethoven as some of the most important figures in his musical heritage. Composed in the final year of Franz Schubert's tragically short life, the song *Auf dem Strom*, for voice, horn, and piano was premiered at the first (and only) concert during Schubert's lifetime devoted entirely to his own music. The leaflet advertising the program for this commemorative concert (marking 1 year since Beethoven's death) on March 26, 1828, notes a wide variety of Schubert's works which were performed together. The concert began with a movement from a new string quartet (likely his final quartet, number 15), followed by a series of songs performed by the baritone Herr Vogl, *Ständchen* performed by Fraulein Josefine Fröhlich, Schubert's virtuosic *Piano Trio in E-flat, D 929*, the song *Auf dem Strom* performed by Ludwig Tietze and Josef Rudolf Lewy, *Die Allmacht* again performed by Vogl, and finally *Schlachtgesang* performed by a double choir for male voices.

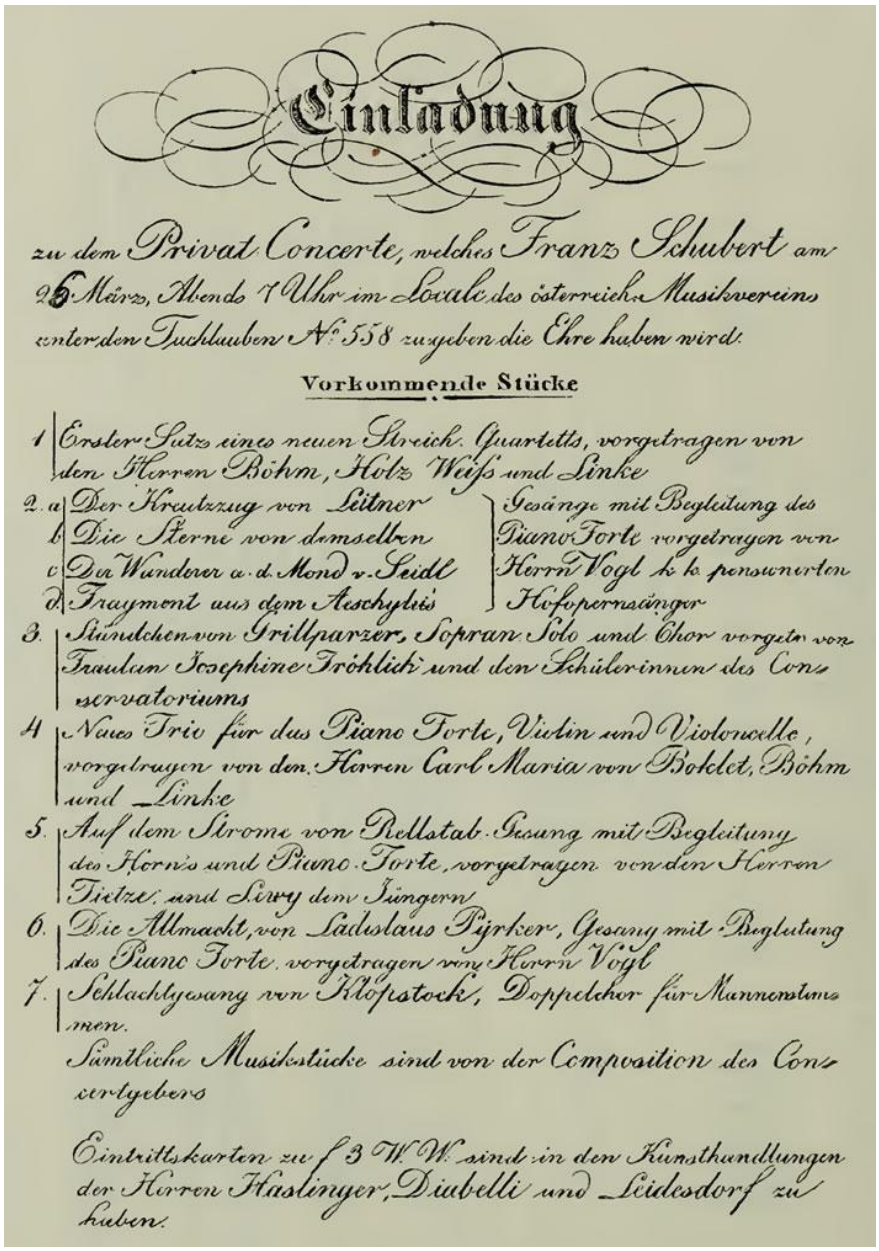
Auf dem Strom was the only piece specifically composed for the March 1828 concert. Like Brahms, Schubert was deeply invested in his musical heritage and the right to be known as a successor to Beethoven, who by the end of his life had achieved a musical apotheosis across Europe. In this concert, a year after Beethoven's death, he pays tribute to Beethoven and bids farewell to him by composing *Auf dem Strom* as an elegy to the late composer. Although *Auf dem Strom* is by all appearances a dedication to Beethoven, it carried with it the implicit suggestion that Schubert should be the flagbearer of his musical legacy. Unfortunately, Schubert lived only eight months after this concert and too soon joined Beethoven on his final earthly journey.

The combination of obbligato horn, solo voice, and piano was rare even for Schubert's musical milieu, yet it had a striking effect of bringing the orchestral grandeur of Beethoven's symphonic works into the chamber recital. *Auf dem Strom* ('On the River') sets a poem by Ludwig Rellstab on parting and farewell to an equally haunting melody in the horn and voice. Though the song speaks of parted lovers, who may only find each other again in the embrace of the stars, Schubert expertly transposes this poetic narrative onto an elegiac mode, placing Beethoven as the departed lover setting forth on his final journey into the heavens. We once again find ourselves picking up the thread of longing and nostalgia that we have been weaving through this concert in the final line of the first stanza: *Doch den thränendunklen/ Blick Zieht die Sehnsucht stets zurück!* ('Yet my tear-dimmed gaze/ keeps being tugged back by longing!') Longing, nostalgia, *Sehnsucht*. Schubert is as affected by his connection to the past as Brahms would find himself forty years later.

Another striking moment of this song is in the first two lines of the second and fourth stanzas. In the second stanza, the text reads: *Und so trägt mich denn die Welle/ Fort mit unerflehter Schnelle.* ('And so the waves bear me forward/ with unsympathetic speed.) As the waves bear the lover forward, away from the shores of his beloved, he sings out with a melody that seems far more familiar than anything that came before. Schubert has expertly woven the opening melodic

line of the oboe in the *Marcia funebre* ('Funeral March') from Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 'Eroica' into the tenor line. We might not notice it at first, but to all familiar with Beethoven's work, it rings out like a call to the past, a song we as the bereaved lovers all know yet remains a secret between us. For Schubert, the *Sehnsucht* plays out in real time as we sing of our nostalgia in our homage. The fourth stanza's lines are equally poignant: "Ah, before that dark wasteland/ far from every smiling coast," leading us to think of things dearest to us as we approach the darkest expanses before us. Beethoven's elegy is woven into Schubert's elegy without having spoken a word to that effect. It is thus that Schubert presented himself as the next great Viennese composer of the nineteenth century. Alas, he only enjoyed this position for a few more months before himself embarking on his own *Marcia funebre.*

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Einladung

zu dem Privat Concerte, welches Franz Schubert am 26 März, Abends 7 Uhr im Locale des österreich. Musikvereins unter den Tuchlauben N°. 558 zu geben die Ehre haben wird.

Vorkommende Stücke

1 | Erster Satz eines neuen Streich. Quartetts, vorgetragen von den Herren Böhm, Holz Weiss und Linke

2. a | Der Kreutzzug von Leitner | Gesänge mit Begleitung des
b | Die Sterne von demselben | Piano Forte vorgetragen von
c | Der Wanderer a. d. Mond v. Seidl | Herrn Vogl k. k. pensionirten
d | Fragment aus dem Aeschylus | Hofopernsänger

3. | Ständchen von Grillparzer, Sopran Solo und Chor vorgetr. von Fraulein Josephine Fröhlich und den Schülerinnen des Conservatoriums

4 | Neues Trio für das Piano Forte, Violin und Violoncelle, vorgetragen von den Herren Carl Maria von Bocklet, Böhm und Linke

5. | Auf dem Strome von Rellstab. Gesang mit Begleitung des Horns und Piano Forte, vorgetragen von den Herren Tietze, und Lewy dem Jüngern

6. | Die Allmacht, von Ladislaus Pyrker, Gesang mit Begleitung des Piano Forte, vorgetragen vom Herrn Vogl

7. | Schlachtgesang von Klopstock, Doppelchor für Männerstimmen.

Sämtliche Musikstücke sind von der Composition des Concertgebers

Eintrittskarten zu f 3 W. W. sind in den Kunsthandlungen der Herren Haslinger, Diabelli und Leidesdorf zu haben.

Program leaflet for March 1828 concert

Source: Figures of Speech, Richard Law

Franz Schubert: *Des Fischers Liebesglück D. 933* (1827)

In his later years, Schubert took immense pleasure in setting poetry to music, and the sheer volume of *lieder* he composed is unmatched by any of his contemporaries. Some of his more famous compositions include *Winterreise* (1827), *Die Forelle* (1817), and *Erlkönig* (1815). This song, *Des Fischers Liebesglück* ('The Fisherman's Happiness in Love') was written by Carl Gottfried von Leitner and remains one of Schubert's most magical *lieder*.

In *Des Fischers Liebesglück*, Schubert makes no attempt to show off the singer's or the pianist's technical virtuosity, as he does in *Erlkönig*. Instead, the Fisherman's Happiness in Love is simple to understand. Four times we hear the same musical material as we cycle through the verses of the poem in this strophic song setting. Set in A minor, the first two thirds of each musical strophe are haunting as the singer shifts between chest and head voice, all while maintaining a subtle and clear tone bereft of affectation. In the final third of each repetition, we shift to A major, giving the whole song a steady trajectory upwards. Each musical repetition is subtly looped back in to the opening notes, such that we might never even notice the formal simplicity of the song.

The Fisherman's Happiness in Love presents yet another shade of *Sehnsucht*, but here the longing is not for someone long gone from our lives, it is rather for our beloved who lives in a little cottage by the water's edge. The fisherman's *Sehnsucht* is not unattainable, nor is it hovering at the edge of his consciousness. It is present and carnal. It is full of the heady smell of lilacs in bloom, damp from the nighttime mist. Yet it is also clandestine, a lover's tryst held in the middle of a lake in the dead of night, where no human might intrude upon their *Unschuldigen Scherz* ('innocent game'). Only the skies are privy to their love, the stars gazing down with their all-seeing eyes as the couple experiences the euphoria of love. Like the angels protecting the Virgin Mary's newborn son, *So schweben wir Selig* ('So they hover in bliss'), uplifted by the purity of their love.

From one stanza to the next the fire of the Fisherman's Happiness intensifies, going from mere recollections of his beloved to a serene tryst with her in his boat on the lake. Although the music never changes from one verse to the next, our experience of its sensuous relationship to the text develops with each iteration. Let yourself be enveloped by this musical repetition, your senses following the unfolding of the Fisherman's Happiness as you imagine yourself experiencing this happy couple's joy. *Und weinen, und lächeln, und meinen, enthoben der Erde, schon oben, schon drüben zu sein* ('And we cry, and smile, and imagine ourselves, lifted up above the earth, already high up, already in the beyond').

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Robert Schumann: *Märchenbilder ('Fairy Tale Pictures'), Op. 113* (1851)

In a concert revolving around *Sehnsucht*, it is only appropriate that we end with Robert Schumann's musical exploration of a quintessential element of childhood: fairy tales. Robert was also one of Brahms's first mentors, welcoming the young composer into his home as his protégé and the next musical "genius" in 1853. Schumann's *Märchenbilder,* or 'Fairy Tale Pictures' is a four-movement work for solo viola and piano. Composed in 1851, it was a gift to the violinist Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski, whom Schumann had hired from Leipzig to be the concertmaster of the orchestra at Düsseldorf which Schumann conducted. Despite its vivid title, Schumann left no clear program notes for which fairy tale was meant to be evoked in each movement. Even his notebooks leave no clues as to what he had in mind. This has led people to assign various storybook characters to the movements, from Schumann's cherished Eusebian and Florestan to various tales written by the Brothers Grimm. However each of these movements, or character pieces, presents a blank slate, a fertile field in which the performer might select and develop their own interpretation of the musical fairy tale. What follows is my own interpretation of the fairy tale Schumann recounts, but you can also imagine your own.

The first movement begins *Nicht schnell* ('Not fast') with the viola dropping us *in medias res* of the plot. Outlining a D minor arpeggio, the viola sets an idyllic tone, the lushness of its register coinciding with the green pastures surrounding us in the opening pages of this storybook. The viola and piano trade arpeggiated figures back and forth, the piano always pushing us forward through meadow and field. Both pepper their melodies with delicate turns and trills, lending a frolicking undertone to the whole movement, allowing us to imagine the happiness of our fairytale's protagonist(s) as they scampered through fields of flowers. Something dark seems to loom on the horizon, but for now let us enjoy the sun-dappled beauty around us.

The next movement, *Lebhaft* ('Lively') takes us to the key of F major, where we are met with a knight in shining armor. The viola's militaristic rhythm cuts an impressive figure of a knight riding to the rescue of his beloved princess, riding across the uneven landscape leading to her captor's fortress, his horse helping him evade the dangers on the journey. The piano and viola even engage in a short chase, the viola riding forward at each encroachment of the piano until our knight finally arrives at the gates of his enemy's castle. He dismounts, now let the battle begin!

It is in the third movement, *Rasch* ('Quick') that the battle between the forces of good and evil play out. An intense *moto perpetuo* in the viola is supported by a narrative melody in the piano. The two then trade places as the viola plays out the heroic blows dealt by our knight savior to his beloved princess's captor. She watches from a high window and worries for his safety. *Will my dearest be able to vanquish this evil?* The battle resumes and the viola's doublestops indicate an ever the more heroic attempt to finish off his enemy. With a final thrust of his sword, the enemy has been felled… but at what cost?

Langsam, mit melancolischem Ausdruck (Slowly, with melancholic expression): The princess rushes down to meet her savior, only to discover that he has suffered grievous wounds in the scuffle. With her eyes full of tears, she gathers his head in her arms and holds him close, whispering that all will be well. The viola plays out as her voice, soothing the injured knight. He feebly asks after Milady, *Are you safe and sound?* With a gruff doublestop, she shushes him, saying *Yes, my dearest. I am well, thanks to your valiant efforts*. In her heart of hearts, she knows that he cannot be saved for the wound is too deep. Her heart cries out in the viola's high registers, but she continues to soothe her dying savior with sweet nothings. She thanks him for his courage, and as the viola drifts off into the ether, she bids his soul farewell with a final *pizzicato*. Her *Sehnsucht* remains forever unrequited.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

A young Robert Schumann (c. 1826)

Source: Wikimedia Commons