Johannes Brahms sonata no.1 for cello and piano in e minor, op. 38

Composed in 1862 and 1865.

Brahms was mainly stayed in his hometown- Hamburg during the decade of 1860s, but he was usually on tour in Germany and northern Europe as a pianist and accompanist during those years. Desiring to extend his profession and career, he visited Vienna and held a concert there in 1862 and was widely acclaimed. At the end of the year, he accepted the offer of the Vienna Singakademie to become its director and regularly visited thereafter until he settled in the city in 1870.
One of the important people that Brahms first contacted in Vienna was s Dr. Josef Gänsbacher, a voice teacher at the Conservatory and an administrator of the Singakademie. Due to his influence, Brahms was appointed to the position of the organization. Gänsbacher was an excellent cellist, and for him, Brahms started writing this cello sonata in 1862. Three movements were written for the work in that year, but the Adagio was abandoned before Gänsbacher had seen it; three years later that Brahms returned to the Sonata and gave it what now stands as its finale. After the work was completed, Gänsbacher desired to try, but when he read through the piece with Brahms, he complained that he was being covered by the heavy piano part. “I can’t even hear myself,” he argued. “You’re lucky,” Brahms bellowed back. The Sonata was published in 1866, and it was the first of Brahms’s duo sonatas that he made public.
This work has an unusual architectural plan: a large sonata form structure followed by smaller movements in the style of a minuet and a fugue. “Hardly ever again did Brahms write such a movement as the first,” wrote Walter Neimann in his study of the composer, “so rich and fervent in its inspiration, both human and spiritual, or such an unalloyed record of intimate emotion.”
The cello opened the main theme in the first movement with a melancholy song that the Brahms (and Bach) scholar Karl Geiringer noted was reminiscent of the Contrapunctus III from Bach’s The Art of Fugue. The lyrical melody of the Sonata is reinforced by the subsidiary motive, a melody begun by an arpeggio that turns back upon itself before breaking into a huge silence song. A brighter feeling is before the end of the exposition, but the development returns to the introspective melancholy of the opening theme. The second theme and then the third are served as the development before a full recapitulation of the earlier subjects rounds out the form of the movement.
The second movement is a microcosm of the history of the Austrian popular dance. The sections of its three-part form (A-B-A) are marked “quasi Menuetto,” and present

the polite demeanor related to that old dance. The middle trio, however, more animated in character and more courageous in its harmonic peregrinations, is one of the tributes to the Viennese waltz that Brahms embedded in several his instrumental works, and which also inspired the set of Waltzes for Piano whose opus number (39) immediately follows that of this Cello Sonata.

The finale is a fugue inpoured the sonata form, the type of generic hybrid that also absorbed much of Beethoven's interest during his last years. The subject, a band of triplets, was probably modeled on the Contrapunctus XIII from Bach's The Art of Fugue; the countersubject (in eighth notes rather than triplets) is also used as the second theme in the sonata structure. The movement bristles with accurately worked-out counterpoint in three and four voices, an ambience requesting an abundant texture from the piano that prompted Daniel Gregory Mason to feel compassion for the cellist: "When you set a single cello to competing like this with the two hands of an able-bodied pianist, the odds are certainly on the pianist." The cello manages to assert itself in the final pages, however, and leads through rousing stretto statements of the themes to bring the Sonata to a close.