

Johannes Brahms Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, Op.120, No.2

Johannes Brahms, in his 60s, was close to retiring when he composed his set of two Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, Op.120. The composition was largely inspired by German Clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, whom Brahms himself called the “greatest wind player in the world”. The second sonata of the two in Eb demands extraordinary musical artistry from the performer, and is considered to be one of the canons of the clarinet repertoires.

The overall tone of this sonata has a sweet and joyful character that reflects the lyrical quality of the clarinet. The first movement, Allegro amabile, opens with a gentle, lyrical first theme, which is developed throughout the Sonata Allegro form. The second movement is a Scherzo with Trio. The scherzo begins in Eb minor with a heroic and passionate tune that is later contrasted by the more tender and reserved theme in the trio section. The third movement begins with a gentle theme in 6/8 time, which is then followed by 5 different variations. As the movement progresses into the final variation, Allegro ma non Troppo, the tempo evolves into a faster, more energetic 2/4 beat, which then leads into the CODA in the home key, E-flat major. The piece ends with a series of successive scales and arpeggios interweaving between the clarinet and piano, concluding triumphantly on an Eb chord.

Hindemith Sonata for Clarinet and Piano

Paul Hindemith’s Sonata for Clarinet and Piano is a prime example of Gebrauchsmusik, meaning “music for use”, a compositional style that favors simplicity and clarity. Composed in 1939, it is one of the eleven sonatas Hindemith composed around that time for expanding the repertoire for orchestral instruments with a more modern compositional approach. The sonata is characterized by an overall light and thin texture often found in Neoclassical works, with a meticulous balance kept between the clarinet and piano throughout. With his innovative use of counterpoint and quartal harmony, the piece has become one of the major works in the twentieth century clarinet literature.

The first movement opens with a lyrical clarinet line with light piano accompaniment, which gradually develops into more complex textures as the piece progresses in sonata form. The movement concludes with a serene CODA that brings it to a peaceful end. The second movement is a Scherzo, characterized by its angular, lively, and energetic nature. The clarinet and piano engage in a rhythmic dialogue, with frequent superposition of rhythms that bring a sense of excitement, contrasting to its quite ending. The third movement is a slow movement in ternary form, with lots of dialogue between the two instruments. The occasional use of triplets provides a sense of flow despite the movement’s slow tempo, leading into the final movement, a little Rondo in arch form. Opening with a staccato diatonic clarinet line accompanied by light but continuous piano chords, the fourth movement remains its playful character throughout, bringing back glimpses of materials from the previous movements as it reaches the end.

Mozart Trio in E-flat major, K.498, "Kegelstatt"

Mozart's Trio in E-flat major, K.498, also known as "Kegelstatt", was written in 1786 for clarinet, viola, and piano, and is one of his most popular chamber works. Its title "Kegelstatt" means "a place where skittles are played", or a bowling alley, in German, and thus it is believed that Mozart wrote this piece while playing skittles. The piece is characterized by its delicate interplay between the three instruments and graceful elegance, its remarkable charm and beauty typical to Mozart's chamber works.

The trio is consisted of three movements. The first movement is a pensive Andante movement instead of the more traditional Allegro. It opens with a note on the downbeat followed by a "grouppetto" – a little group of notes played by the piano and viola, which is repeated for many times throughout the movement, maintaining a sense of continuity and unity. Mozart's meticulous use of materials leaves out precious moments of silence, contrasting with the distinctive opening theme. The second minuetto movement begins with a sweet and lively minuet marked by Mozart's intuitive use of counterpoint as the phrase develops. It is then contrasted by a more mysterious trio in g minor that begins with a chromatic four-note phrase played by the clarinet. After a rather long journey in the minor tonality, it finally returns to the minuet after a chromatic scale played by the clarinet. The final movement, Rondeaux, is a seven-part rondo that repeatedly returns to the beginning theme, with contrasting middle themes that leaves Mozart ample room for variations. The movement concludes with a playful CODA, landing on an E-flat tonic chord played by all three instruments together.