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**The Joy of Six**

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In my last Gresham College lecture I dealt with the art of making a masterpiece in terms of keeping it short; the art of brevity. Today, we will deal with what I might daringly described as the “joy of six”, represented by six of the leading students of the moment at the Royal Academy of Music, who have come to demonstrate to us some of the joys and some of the problems of being a group of six.

Today’s lecture will concentrate on two composers, Richard Strauss and Brahms, to see how they coped with the peculiar difficulties of having six instruments. You might think six players was not a problem, but it is, for various reasons. When Tchaikovsky was invited to compose the piece that was, in the end, called “Souvenirs of Florence”, he complained bitterly in several letters, saying that he found the technique of writing for six stringed instruments extremely difficult. He was brought up in the tradition of the string quartet – that, he could manage, but a string sextet is not a string quartet plus two people; it’s quite a different concept.

Last year, we also took on the problem of difficult combinations, when I talked about the Mendelssohn Octet, which was also demonstrated by players from the Royal Academy. The question of the octet was working out what you did with it without its simply being two string quartets. You have many options, but you could not play one quartet off against the other.

Similarly, I think in the repertoire for true sextets, you hardly ever find a moment where you play in the form of a string quartet. This is because there is two, two and two – two violins, two violas and two cellos – there are many groupings possible that don’t exist with the string quartet, and also because of the fact that the violins don’t have the dominant stance in this grouping. In the quartet, there are two of them against one of everybody else, but here the two violins are opposed by two violas and two cellos, both of whom can aid and abet each other.

So, one of the difficulties of working with a sextet is that it is not a quartet and therefore one is on strange ground, so composers have had to invent their own terms of reference.

Another problem inherent in the sextet, I think, is the question of numbers. If you play a single musical line, most people can hear it and remember it. If you play two melodies simultaneously, it is possible to hear them both at the same time and notate them afterwards. It is like a conversation, when two people speak, you do not have to disregard one to hear the other. When three people speak, it gets a little more problematic. Many people, when trained, can listen to an example of three-part musical writing and then notate it. You can hear the activities of the three together. When it comes to four, that is getting really difficult. Some composers heard in four parts simultaneously. Some musicians nowadays will be happy listening to four-part writing. Certainly, if it is of a conventional type, like four-part choral harmonisation, you can usually hear all those four vocal parts moving simultaneously. Brahms is the only person I know of who claimed that he could hear and remember five parts simultaneously, and nobody has said they could see, hear, follow or memorise six parts simultaneously. This, I think, is the beginning of the sextet problem: six is too much for all of us.

So, if six is impossible for anybody to hear simultaneously, what do you make then of a conversation piece for six instruments?

Our first example is from Richard Strauss’ last opera, called *Capriccio*. It is a rather rococo piece, written during the War, 1940-1941. Its thesis is a discussion between rococo characters, a composer, and a librettist, in the house of the countess, who is discovered at the beginning at the opera on her chaise longue, listening to the music written by her composer, which is playing off-stage. It is this off-stage “overture” to the opera, which is the string sextet. It is something of character already in the opera, because it is representing the question that the opera asks: what comes first, the words or the music? There is much debate, and in the end, of course, it is not decided.

The sextet was written as an independent piece, first of all, although Strauss surely had the opera in mind. He deliberately called a conversation piece, which you might think is already prejudging the issue; if the question is words versus music, and the music is decided to be a conversation piece, then that seems to decide in favour of music.

It was given its first performance, you might think slightly ominously, in Vienna in 1940, in the house of the Nazi controller, who happened to be an enthusiast of Strauss. This gives you another element to the atmosphere in which Strauss was working.

Strauss later described this ten minute long piece, as being Rosenkavalier without the boring moments. He touches on some truth here because the piece really does compress an enormous amount into what I would call a single “discussion”. It really is one of the most elusive pieces there is, because you can hear the conversation moving from point to point, you hear a little moment when there is a storm in a teacup, you hear things happening and people taking up the thread, but essentially, the rules of conversation are not the rules of music. Conversation does not repeat verbatim in another key what somebody has just said; it takes a point and goes into it, or adds a little to it, or demotes it, or proposes a contrast, or gets very anxiety, or basically goes to sleep. There is a lot of “going to sleep” music in this, such as when you are just biding your time while two cellos are discussing and you are airily thinking about nothing in the background.

I think Strauss’ own description of it being a conversation piece in music is the best description for this. It is memorable by being unmemorable, I suspect, and it is very soon lost in the texture of the opera that comes up, but as an opening, it is one of the best demonstrations, I think, of how to use six people speaking together. You cannot possible hear all six simultaneously and remember them, so attention moves, as it always will, around the table. You will notice some returns to familiar topics, some contradictions of topics, and some excitement, but the whole piece, I think, is a great demonstration of the fact that this sort of music can be portrayed only by six individual players. You could not turn this piece into an orchestral number, as you can Tchaikovsky’s “Souvenirs de Florence”. That Tchaikovsky piece sounds equally good as a string orchestra piece or as a string sextet – there is nothing inherent in it which makes it, to some people’s judgement, less than a masterpiece because it can be shifted between groupings without damage to its message. However, Strauss’ piece is a particular gem of elusive writing which can only exist in this form.

It is quite surprising in how much of the piece’s long conversation all six players were speaking simultaneously. This is the art of writing an elusive piece where you can follow the train of thought. I would say there are quite a few landmarks in that: you know where sections begin and end, what is going on, and you recognise topics passed around. I would think that at first hearing, very few people would get a sense of architecture to it, which is exactly right for a conversation piece. It is not a pre-arranged organisation, but it is a ramble, so there is a sort of landscape feeling, which I think is very beautifully put together by Strauss. Landmarks but not architecture. I think that this could not be achieved in any other idiom than the sextet.

Let us now turn towards Brahms though for a very different set of precepts, using exactly the same six instruments. He wrote two major works for this combination, Opus 18 and Opus 36, and he made sure that he wrote for this combination before he attempted a string quartet. In this he was using the sort of complaint that Tchaikovsky made to good effect.

There was always a feeling hanging over Brahms’ thoughts that he was going to be judged against the great composers. He was not a backwards-looking composer, but he was certainly realistic about the history behind him. He was perhaps born 200 years too late, because his interests were very much in polyphony, in 17th and 18th Century music. He did a lot of editing of Couperin, Rameau and Corelli, and he was well aware of the architectural and formal concepts that held up that music. He was, of course, hugely admiring and influenced by Beethoven, but at the same time, terrified of being compared to him, and I think that is one of the reasons that he took to a medium where there were not very many immediate points of comparison. If you wrote a sextet, it could not be compared with famous sextets by many people prior to you.

As I said, the advantage of a sextet in its scoring patterns are the groupings that you have, but it is not a quintet plus one. There had been quite a few quintets prior to Brahms and he knew very well, from Mozart, the effect it made on a string quartet when you added a viola. What was quite special though about the sextet was having two cellos; one additional base instrument. I think you notice the sonorities that are possible in the Strauss piece and it is very apparent in Brahms’ use of the same instruments, that you can have tight-packed triads, up and down a chord, filled out in many octaves, by the use of six instruments.

We will pick out a few samples to show Brahms delivering to you his ideas of what are possible with this group, and you’ll notice, again, in this piece, that there is never a suggestion that it is a quartet-plus-two. There is never a moment for string quartet alone, but there are very many obvious moments, coming at the starts of movements laying out his thinking very clearly, that shows that he has no need to fall back on the quartet. In fact, he often has a deliberate line of attack, I think, saying “I have no need of violins” – and so the violins become rather extra to the argument.

A good example of Brahms’ writing comes at the very beginning of this Opus 18 string sextet. It begins with a duet from the two cellos, this rarity in string grouping, plus one viola, who puts in a comment. It is rather like a string trio for violins and viola but with the speed turned down, so that it is all turned into a trio for cellos and viola. It is very resonant and sets out the pattern that is available. Immediately following this, Brahms then goes on to orchestrate the same melody by adding the violins. You will notice, though, in the interests of clarity, he leaves one viola doing nothing very much, so unfortunately you think you are hearing the whole band you are only hearing five-sixths of it. It is the sonority of the quintet, with the one spare player for the moment held in reserve. There is an element throughout all this writing, as you might imagine when you have three pairs of people available.

When Brahms comes to the last movement of this same quintet, he reminds you of the opening again, by giving you a scoring that begins with cellos and viola, but this time, he shows you that the same material, instead of being amplified by just adding violins on the top, the whole musical concept can just shift to the other side of the stage and be played by the upper strings only, minus the cellos. Here he divides as three plus three, getting away from any idea of quartet. The effect is striking because, although you have two violas, one viola seems to do a completely different job when attached to the cellos than that viola does when attached to the violins. This is a very clever bit of scoring.

It might look as though Brahms is therefore avoiding the use of all six instruments but that is not so. He uses these devices to point up structure in some of the larger scale movements.

In the smallest scale movement though, which is the Scherzo of this sextet, he is clearly setting his sights on showing his admiration of Beethoven. It is a completely Beethovian sort of concept. It runs along very happily, with a little *accelerando* at the end, and the whole piece is for the whole group – there is no idea of playing parts against parts. But you cannot exist for very long on that sort of diet – it’s just too stodgy, there is too much weight. Remember, this is quite different from the build-up, say, of a string orchestra, where you always have more treble instruments and then a declining number of instruments, as you get to the bass section. Here in the sextet, you have as many cellos as you have violins, so there is bound to be a darkening of colour, as you go past the violins, and a darkening still as you get down to the two cellos beyond the violas.

The Scherzo is architecture personified: it is absolutely clear what is scherzo, what is trio, what is scherzo again, and slightly up-tempo, what is coda. The whole thing is absolutely clarity, more clarity than was usually offered by composers that were colleagues of Brahms. He was old-fashioned, even in his own day, in looking back to formal techniques. As I said, his main stomping ground would have been the baroque, and he lets one see that, very clearly, in the second movement of this quintet, which is basically a homage to the concept of baroque variations. It is set in D minor, with a couple of episodes in D major, and a final segment, but everything is very clearly marked off in eight-bar, 16-bar, standards, exactly as Corelli or Handel or Bach would have done it. In fact, the very theme that he uses to start the movement going, to the lower instruments, one viola, two cellos, is clearly very close homage to the folia theme, this set of harmonies that we know so well from Corelli and from his contemporaries. This was a basic set of harmonic patterns and a little melody that could be spun out into endless variations, and was spun out by all composers of that period – Corelli, Vivaldi, Handel. Even Bach used it in the Peasant Cantata.

In Brahms the theme is spelt out in the most baroque way with two cellos playing supporting harmonies underneath. It is then developed by adding the higher instruments, as we saw already in the first movement, but the basic baroque kernel of this give a very deep rich sound. With its being two violas and two cellos, the violins have not had any say whatsoever in this. But the feeling amongst the instruments in this piece is never one of an instrument fighting with its partner. It is nearly always the reverse; of supporting each other, so you get the effect of it being a double cello, a double viola, and double violins.

The beginning of the first variation is a good example of this. It leads off with arpeggios from the first cello, backed up by something like continuo chords from the second cello. This figuration is a baroque figuration. Once Brahms has started on a pattern, he settles into that and it is absorbed for the whole of that variation, before a new technique is deployed.

He can of course turn the switch partway through. He is not a composer who has to be wedded to pastiche. At the beginning of a variation, for example, that begins in canon, where the violins lead off, followed immediately, in imitation, by the violas. You think this might, in fact, go on for the whole variation, but no, Brahms turns that wonderful switch and it moves into a romantic texture, where suddenly everybody is playing triplets. Then somebody goes off with duplets, fighting against this rhythm, and the thing turns into what could only be written in the mid-19th Century. That switch halfway through, I think, tells you that Brahms is a real composer, in his own right. This movement is by no means a slave to baroque tendencies, but it certainly is complementing them at every possible turn.

In the variation following on from that, there are torrents of notes from the cellos, kept up throughout the piece, with comments from the violins. Again, it is a very strictly observed architectural feature, and then you get to a shift into the major. It sounds, at this point, as though you have moved into a different territory, with different melody and different mood, but in fact it has a very severely classical obedience to it. You can hear this distinctly by listening to what is going on in the bass line. You just get from tonic to dominant, and that, almost exactly the same patterning of notes put into the major, becomes the support for this variation that will be in the major. So, although it looks as though you have moved into new territory, you are in fact supported by the same scaffolding. This is very Corellian.

After two major variations, you come back to the minor again, a re-scored version of what we heard in the opening, and then you get a pure bit of Brahms’ invention to wind up this piece. You cannot just stop on your sixth or seventh variation and say “That’s it, folks!” – In a work that is constructed on the scale of the other movements that surround this, there has to be some extra flesh at the end that will take you down, and he attaches, to the end of the last variation, this re-scored version of the opening. This is the brilliant idea of having a coda which is basically a conversation piece between pairs of instruments. It is the sort of music you could not effectively write for a string quartet – there would not be enough pairs to go round, but he takes the final tag of the theme, this little Hungarian slide that ends the theme, and debates it. It is passed around while the whole sextet are deciding whether to end in the major or the minor. Because it is such a tiny fragment, you know the end is in sight, the thing is breaking up into small pieces, but you are still not certain whether you are going to end in the major or the minor. It is delightful the way he keeps you hovering between the two tonalities.

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