Brahms Cello Sonatas

Alisa Weilerstein
Inon Barnatan

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Cello Sonatas

	Sonata for Cello & Piano No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 38	
1	I. Allegro non troppo	10. 20
2	II. Allegretto quasi Menuetto - Trio	5. 18
3	III. Allegro	6. 24
	Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in G Major, Op. 78 (Arrangement for Cello and Piano by Alisa Weilerstein & Inon Barnatan)	
4	I. Vivace ma non troppo	10. 52
5	II. Adagio	7. 51
6	III. Allegro molto moderato	8. 33
	Sonata for Cello & Piano No. 2 in F Major, Op. 99	
7	I. Allegro vivace	8. 59
8	II. Adagio affettuoso	7. 01
9	III. Allegro passionato	6. 53
10	IV. Allegro molto	4. 34
	Total playing time:	76. 47

Alisa Weilerstein, cello
Inon Barnatan, piano

Acknowledgements

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Cover painting ***Fifth Street C09.04* (2009) by Caio Fonseca**
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This album was recorded between the 20-25th of March 2024, at Sol Joseph Recital Hall, San Francisco, Bowes Center, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, San Francisco, CA.

Alisa Weilerstein and Inon Barnatan are Opus 3/Askonas Holt Artists, and this recording came together within the framework of the SFCM alliance.

Alisa and Inon are very grateful to their dear friend Caio Fonseca for providing them with his painting as the cover for this album. Besides being a celebrated artist, Caio is also a talented musician, bringing his understanding and fascination with classical music, and its relationship between tone and form, to his works.

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Recording these three Brahms sonatas has been a profound and exhilarating experience for me, enriched by the deep bond I share with my longtime friend and collaborator, Inon Barnatan. This project is a celebration of our shared artistic vision and mutual respect that has grown over many years of performing together.

Inon and I have been playing the two sonatas originally written for cello and piano since the beginning of our partnership. Our rehearsals are always wonderful moments of discovery and creativity, where we continuously inspire and challenge one another. We also share a love for transcriptions that respect the intention of the composer while enriching the color and texture palette of the music. Our recording of the G Major violin sonata in its original key—albeit an octave lower than the original, most of the time—is a testament to this. Perhaps it reflects my own natural bias as a cellist, but I believe that this sonata, one of the most beloved of Brahms' compositions for any instrument, is particularly well served by the cello's natural multi-dimensional timbre and depth.

This remarkable music, with its profound emotional depth and intellectual rigor, remains one of my favorites in the cello and piano repertoire. It has been both a privilege and a pleasure for both Inon and me to grow alongside it. I hope that this recording celebrates not only the beauty of these masterpieces, but also of the joy and camaraderie that have always been at the heart of our musical partnership.

Alisa Weilerstein

Recording these three masterpieces with Alisa was a joy. We've played the two cello sonatas since the very beginning of our musical partnership, so it seemed almost inevitable that we would record them; The G Major violin sonata, however, is another matter. While I adore the piece, I've never been quite convinced by the cello arrangement made during Brahms' time (but not by Brahms), which transposed the piece to D Major. I never fully enjoyed that version—I was too attached to the original key's colors and timbre, and I felt the changes to the piano part and the cello's high, virtuosic writing made it sound too much like a transcription.

We had played the D Major version before, but while preparing for this recording, I decided to ask Alisa what she thought about playing it in the original key of G Major, an octave lower than the violin register. Amazingly, she didn't hesitate, even with such a short time to relearn it. Once we tried it, there was no going back—here was the piece we missed: those dark colors, the dusky yet shimmering texture that we love so much in the violin version. I absolutely love the result, and I hope you do too.

Brahms has a unique way of writing for both instruments—melding their sounds together, writing idiomatically for each while demanding they transcend their own voices and embody one another's sound. This recording is a testament to that extraordinary synthesis, and I hope listening to these recordings brings you as much joy as making them brought us.

Inon Barnatan

Muscle and Melancholy

The cello and piano were mainstays of Brahms' youth. While life at home in Hamburg was not always easy, given the family finances, there is no doubt that the composer's parents made significant sacrifices to educate and entertain their children. Of the three, Johannes was nonetheless the favoured child.
He became a voracious reader and was given piano lessons – the family had an instrument – as well as learning the horn, following his father's example. Within this early line-up, the cello was something of a novelty, and an expensive one at that. Yet the instrument's natural soulfulness, rising to flights of heroism, perfectly suited Brahms' sound world.

Certainly, most of his juvenilia – largely destroyed – and all the chamber works of the 1860s, have one instrument in common. But Brahms was adamant when writing his Sonata for piano and cello in E Minor op. 38 in 1862, the year he made his first trip to Vienna, that this was a marriage of equals. Part of a finely wrought duologue, the piano 'should be a partner – often a leading, often a watchful and considerate partner – but it should under no circumstances assume a purely accompanying role'.

Brahms' two cello sonatas were composed at very different points in his career: the later F Major work was written during his maturity, its op. 99 numbering placing it between the Fourth Symphony and the Second Violin Sonata. The E Minor Sonata, on the other hand, is contemporaneous with Brahms' initial plans for his First Symphony. And yet the earliest of the two points more to the composer's last symphonic masterpiece, in that it shares the key of E Minor and draws its thematic material from Bach.

Op. 38 begins in more songful terms, though some have also perceived a Bachian ghost in its opening theme. Played against pulsating piano chords, the melancholy first subject leads into a much bolder narrative. Restive, even combative, the exposition of the Allegro non troppo is in constant flux. Only a cajoling lullaby, played first by the piano, offers reprieve from the persistent minor mood, before moving into an even more expressive development section. The recapitulation, on the other hand, is generated out of simple but effective variations, with the movement ending in the warm glow of the lullaby.

Paving the way for the quasi-Baroque Finale, the second movement, based on a minuet and trio, strikes an intermediate, Classical pose, recalling the Scherzo of Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. 3 in A Major op. 69. Brahms' original plan also included an Adagio, completed during the summer of 1862, but this was then discarded. Instead, he used the cautiously uneven Allegretto, with its searching Trio, as a bridge between the Allegro and the last movement.

The Finale recalls the two mirror fugues (Nos. 16 and 17) in Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge*. Here, a countersubject provides a second subject, as Brahms maintains an elegant battle between the two, mirrored in the relationship of the players. If the 'watchful and considerate' nature of their partnership has been superseded by energetic intent – here jocular, there skittish – a rhapsodic middle section harks back to the cradle song of the first movement. Indeed, this early Finale takes a summatory approach, as in Brahms' Sonata for violin and piano in G Major op. 78, with the coda drawing all the lines together.

The E Minor Cello Sonata provided Brahms with rare, almost immediate pride in his work. Completed in 1865, the score was dedicated to the amateur cellist and renowned Viennese singing teacher

Josef Gänsbacher. Brahms duly performed the work privately with his friend, before giving public performances later that year. Simrock then published the score in 1866, though its establishment within the repertoire was largely thanks to Robert Hausmann. A German-born cellist, he was known for his 'round', 'unusually powerful' and 'trombone-like' playing. Hausmann had been a protégé of the violinist Joseph Joachim, also a significant support to the young Brahms, and became a major chamber musician during the late 19th century. At first, he joined the Dresden-based Hochberg Quartet and then, from 1879, was a member of Joachim's own quartet, which remained one of the mainstays of Berlin (and wider) concert life until the violinist's death in 1907.

Hausmann owed Joachim a huge amount, not least his long and happy association with Brahms. In return, the composer dedicated the second of his cello sonatas to Hausmann in 1886, followed in 1887 by the 'Double' Concerto for violin, cello and orchestra in A Minor op. 102. Like Joachim, to whom that Concerto was dedicated (as a peace offering), and, later, Richard Mühlfeld's 'nightingale-like' clarinet playing, Hausmann's rich tone was the epitome of how Brahms perceived the instrument. Continuing their working relationship during the final chapter of the composer's life, Hausmann was also to be the cellist at the premiere of the Clarinet Trio in A Minor op. 114, which Brahms, seated at the piano, had written for Mühlfeld, before he joined his colleagues in the Joachim Quartet for the first performance of the Clarinet Quintet in B Minor op. 115, also composed for Mühlfeld. Collectively, these works have often been described as autumnal, yet the Sonata for piano and cello in F Major op. 99 is of another mood entirely.

The work is closest in date to the Fourth and last of Brahms' symphonies, yet it shows a more immediate kinship with the Third of 1883, created in the immediate aftermath of Wagner's death. In the same key, the Second Cello Sonata is similarly grand and Romantic, opening with another dauntless motif, as the tonic gives way to a stirring chromatic chord. Thanks to the tremolos in the piano, however, this gesture can sound febrile, before the cello leaps into the treble clef, with all the impetuousness of youth. Such was the daring of this opening that even Schoenberg was surprised by how 'indigestible' the music sounded, while Hugo Wolf – never a fan – thought it was utterly chaotic when first performed in Vienna, with Brahms' set on mystifying his worshippers'.

The energy of the first movement may, indeed, be headlong, yet it also stutters and can prove neurotic. It is only when the cello and piano move in tandem towards the second subject – the quintessence of Brahms' musical partnership – that the material is less thwarted. An underlying sense of competition will, however, return in the development, with a surprising shift to F-Sharp Minor, followed by further investigations of the unsettled music from the beginning of the movement. This takes on a menacing tone, with the cello growling at the bottom of its range, before the piano provides a sequence of gestures, at turns heroic and reflective, that lead into the potent recapitulation.

The unexpected key change in the development of the Allegro vivace presages the tonic of F-Sharp Major in the ensuing Adagio affettuoso. While its soulful song looks to Brahms' late style, it may have roots in the discarded second movement of the E Minor Cello Sonata (as well as recalling the lullaby from its opening Allegro). But if its music does look back, the Adagio also reverses the modulation from this Sonata's first movement by moving down a semitone in the middle section. Here, the temperament wavers between a passionate F Minor, always a stormy key for Brahms, and hints of

the more self-possessed relative of A-Flat Major. But eventually, the music returns to the tonic with great conviction.

The ensuing Scherzo is back in F Minor and features one of Brahms' virtuoso piano parts. Its storminess is only enhanced by the players' juxtaposition of duplets and triplets, as well as another disruptive modulation, this time to E Minor – the home key of that First Cello Sonata.
And then the Trio provides a moment of respite within the structure as a whole. Brahms continues to weave a tangled web of cross-rhythms, though this middle section acts as a preview of the much blither mood in the Rondo-Finale, where tensions do, indeed, appear to dissipate. There are confrontations, too, of course, as well as a tendency to drift back towards the minor, but the cello and piano are now as one, with impassioned climaxes and a Lied-like theme in B-Flat Minor. With its fluidity of form and variety of material, the Finale confirms Brahms' conviction in this combination of instruments.

On top of the two proper cello sonatas, Brahms' Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Major has been performed on cello and piano regularly, mostly in Paul Klengel's transposition to D Major, while the current recording presents it an octave lower, keeping it in G Major and employing the warmer middle register of the cello. Nicknamed the 'Regensonate', it was written on the Wörthersee in southern Austria in 1878. An outwardly pastoral work, it is, in many ways, the chamber companion to Brahms' Second Symphony – written the previous year and on the same lake. But like that orchestral work, there are deeper, less idyllic currents here.

The opening tempo of Vivace ma non troppo, for instance, appears at odds with the piano's steady chords. As the cello enters, the accompaniment reveals rippling cross-rhythms. The second subject, in the dominant, sees the two instruments come together in more ardent terms, before there is a faltering third subject. This evokes the childhood memories of Brahms' 'Regenlied', hence the Sonata's sobriquet, in the first of two allusions to the *Acht Lieder und Gesänge* op. 59 (with texts by Klaus Groth). The rain shower is but a warning, however, for wilder storms ahead – as in the first movement of the Second Symphony – which the recapitulation seeks to temper, capped by a winning coda.

The second movement is more reserved and chorale-like, as the piano takes the lead. There are discrepancies here too, though the melody eventually passes to the cello in heartfelt tones. Not all concerns have been vanquished, however, judging by the fretful start to the Finale, in which the cello's anacrusis from the first movement triggers a recollection of the sobbing 'Nachklang' from op. 59. But after motifs from both the Vivace and the Adagio are heard – hinting at the 'distant echoes' of the song's title – Groth's (unsung) promise of the returning sun, when 'the grass gleams twice as green', comes to characterise the Sonata's final bars.

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