Nicholas Yonge Society: London Piano Quartet 30 Jan 2026
Programme notes by Chris Darwin

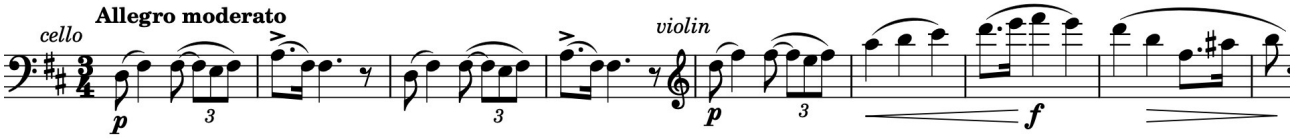
Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) Piano Quartet in D, Op. 23 (1875)
Allegro moderato
Andantino con variazioni
Finale. Allegretto scherzando

In 1875 Dvořák was on the edge of a breakthrough in his career. His compositional style had been based on the German romantics such as Mendelssohn and Schumann, and then Wagner. In 1871 he was working on an opera *'King and Charcoal Burner'* which a Prague theatre promised to produce. However when rehearsals began two years later it rapidly became clear that the work was so influenced by Wagnerian principles as to make almost insuperable demands on the Prague singers and players alike. The production was cancelled. Dvorak took this rejection seriously, destroying many works from his 'mad period'. He moved his style away from contemporary German to a simpler, classical one which importantly incorporated Slavonic folk music. He completely rewrote *'King and Charcoal Burner'* in 'national rather than Wagnerian' style and it was very successfully premiered in November 1874.

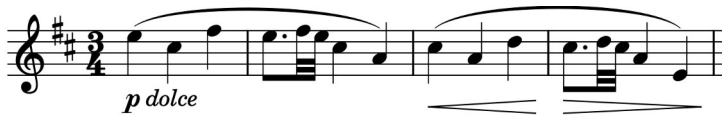
To supplement his meager income from teaching, in 1874 Dvořák successfully submitted works for an Austrian National Stipendium. In 1877 a subsequent application was reviewed by a committee that now included Brahms who was eight years older than Dvořák and well-established. Brahms was so impressed by one of Dvořák's submissions – 10 Moravian Duets for 2 sopranos and piano - that he wrote to his publisher Simrock urging him to publish the Duets along with more of Dvořák's work ('He is a very talented man. Moreover he is poor!'). Brahms' and Simrock's support transformed Dvořák's career. Almost overnight he became famous – and richer.

Curiously, a few years later Dvořák returned to a less nationalistic style as a result of a commission from the Vienna-based Hellmesberger Quartet – Czech nationalism was no longer welcome in Vienna either politically or musically.

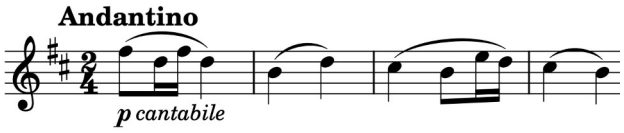
The nationalistic Czech folk style, elements of which Dvořák learned from Smetana and friends such as Janáček, contains for example: pentatonic phrases, a sharpened fourth in the minor, strong syncopation and often an absence of an upbeat to a melody, reflecting the Czech language's stress on a word's first syllable. The opening cello phrase of tonight's piano quartet (see below) is an example of a rhythm which looks like it might start with a quaver upbeat, but the quaver is actually the downbeat, followed by syncopation.



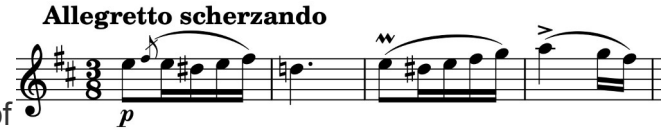
The first movement, in sonata form, is built around two contrasting folk-like melodies, the first (*illustrated*) with the cello introduction we have just mentioned. It contains (bar 2) a descending, dotted rhythm figure which recurs prominently in the movement. The second theme (*illustrated*) makes a genial contrast throughout this extensive movement.

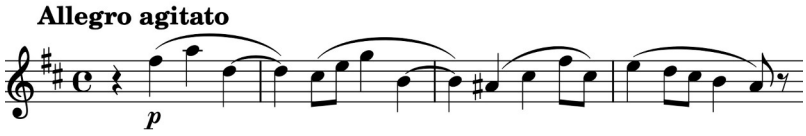


The second movement is a set of 5 variations and coda on a theme (*illustrated*) that moves from the minor to the major.



The last movement alternates two different sections. The first is scherzo-like in 3/8 with a theme (*illustrated*) clearly related to that of the previous movement. The second section is faster, in 4/4, and its syncopated main theme (*illustrated*) is related to the theme at the start of the first movement.





John Hawkins (b.1949) 'Blake Visions' for Piano Quartet (2024)
Pity
Innocence and Experience
The Ghost of a Flea

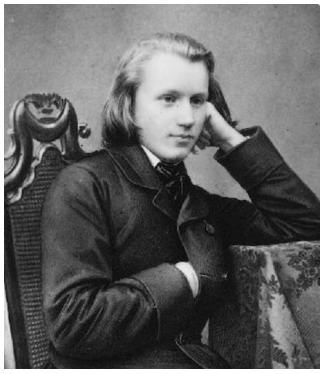
John Hawkins writes:
"I first encountered William Blake in my parallel role as a book designer while working with the poet and Blake scholar Kathleen Raine. I have since written many settings of Blake's words and instrumental music based on his work. These include 'This World' for choir and two trumpets, 'Urizen' for viola and piano and the song cycle 'Portions of Eternity'. The Piatti Quartet performed the string quartet 'Fuzon' at the Nicholas Yonge Society in 2023.

"Blake's, visionary ideas often include apparently irreconcilable opposites, as in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'. In these three short pieces I have alternated such contrasts. The first movement, 'Pity' follows Blake's print illustrating lines from Shakespeare's Macbeth: '*Pity, like a naked newborn babe striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin like angels on horseback, riding the sightless couriers of the air.*'
The movement begins with the piano sounding the rhythm of the word 'Pity' while the strings suggest a lulling mood which is abruptly interrupted by the wild sightless horses taking up the babe. It ends with 'Pity'. The second movement explores the contrast between Blake's books of Innocence and Experience beginning with the sound of a young piper, instructed by a child-like angel to write down his joyful songs. But the playing is interrupted and ultimately 'stains the water clear', hinting at the lessons of experience and ending in joyless emptiness. The final piece illustrates Blake's bizarre vision of 'The Ghost of a Flea' which, although one of his tiniest images, seems monumental and threatening, contrasting the sinister muscled bulk of the spirit with what we expect of a fragile insect. In the painting, the flea is seen 'swaggering among shooting stars, carrying a bowl of blood'."

John Hawkins studied composition with Malcolm Williamson and Elisabeth Lutyens. He lives in Lewes, where the song cycle 'Strange Bridge' was recently included in the Festival of Song. Another cycle, 'Both Beauties', was premiered at Brighton's Chapel Royal in 2025. As well as 'This World' (BBC Singers), broadcasts include a 'Sea Symphony' (by both the Bournemouth and BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestras), 'Variations' for piano solo and 'Urizen'. His opera 'The Dong with a Luminous Nose', was recently performed in the Tête à Tête opera season in London. 'Blake Visions' was first played by the London Piano Quartet in London in 2025 and 2026 will see the release of a CD with them including that and several others of the Blake pieces.

INTERVAL

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor Op. 26 (1861)



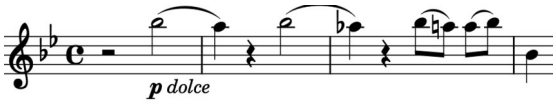
Allegro
Intermezzo: Allegro ma non troppo; Trio: Animato
Andante con moto
Rondo alla Zingarese: Presto; molto presto

In the autumn of 1853 the 20-year-old, well-read, blue-eyed, long fair-haired, slender pianist and composer Johannes Brahms (*illustrated*) arrived at the home of Robert and Clara Schumann, introduced by the violinist Joachim. As their protégé, Brahms' career flourished, while he in turn not only helped with the household as Robert's illness progressed, but also fell in love with Clara, 14-years his senior (Brahms' mother was 19 years older than his father). After Robert died in 1856, Brahms and Clara decided to go their separate ways but remained close friends. Brahms then found it hard to compose; he wrote to Clara that he felt he no longer knew *'at all how one composes, how one creates'*. However, he recovered, partly thanks to Joachim who provided him with an encouraging exchange of polyphonic exercises; he also studied early music and folksong and conducted the court choir.

By the early 1860s he was composing a string of chamber masterworks: two string sextets, a piano quintet, two piano quartets, a horn trio and a cello sonata. The choice of forms is a break with the classical masters. Neither Mozart nor Beethoven wrote mature string sextets or piano quintets; as for piano quartets, Mozart wrote just the two that defined the genre and Beethoven wrote three in Bonn in his teens (eventually published as WoOs – works without opus numbers). Closer to home Robert Schumann had written both a piano quartet and a quintet. One reason that Brahms and Schumann turned to the larger chamber groups with piano was that pianos had by the 1860s developed the power to stand up to the strength of three or four string instruments. This increased force is certainly exploited by Brahms. His two piano quartets provided a great showcase not only for the piano but also for the strings. Their first performances, in Vienna, were given by Brahms with Joseph Hellmesberger's quartet, itself a showcase for the leader Joseph who billed his group as the "*Hellmesberger Quartet, with the assistance of ... [names of the other players]* ".

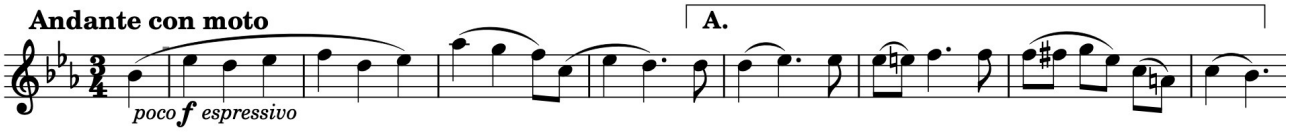
Unlike Wagner and Liszt, Brahms respectfully and meticulously adhered to classical forms; however, within those tight structures lies much innovation. Schoenberg wrote a chapter on '*Brahms the progressive*' and Anton Webern believed that Brahms had anticipated the radical developments of their Second Viennese School. Schoenberg gave tonight's Op 25 G minor piano quartet the substantial accolade of arranging it for full orchestra. As you listen to the final bars of the piece you might be entertained to imagine them orchestrated by Schoenberg complete with trombone glissandi and a large percussion battery including xylophone and glockenspiel!

Ivor Keys cites the first subject of the G minor Piano Quartet as an example of Brahms' use of classical forms. One feature, that mirrors Mozart, is to give the first subject two contrasting parts: the opening 10 bars is a figure in angular unison (*illustrated*) followed after a significant silence by a second part that is a smoother figure built on a simple change of a tone or semitone (*illustrated*). Each of these is separately developed in what Schoenberg called 'developing variation'; Brahms makes a series of relatively small changes to themes, gradually transforming them into something new.



The second movement, a *Scherzo* structure marked *Intermezzo*, is an ingenious contrast to the movements that flank it. The strings are muted throughout and predominantly play quietly to a 9/8 time signature which embeds a fast three quavers within three slower beats. The result is an intriguing ethereal texture.

The somewhat grandiose opening theme of the *Andante* third movement (*illustrated*) is



reminiscent of the first theme of the first movement, and also shares with it a second part (under A) with a similar semitone movement. Brahms produces a splendidly rich texture with the three strings harmonising the theme against a Bach-like moving base in octaves on the piano. A section with an insistent dotted rhythm leads to a slightly faster section with an exaggerated version of the dotted rhythm – a sort of curious march in three-time!

The *Presto* last movement is titled *Rondo alla Zingarese* - the *'Gypsy Rondo'.* It captures the style and excitement of the music that Brahms had toured Europe with accompanying Eduard Remenyi, a Hungarian violinist. Brahms mistakenly believed the music was based on the Magyar folk tradition, but it was actually based on the popular version of Hungarian music played by travelling gypsy bands who had no roots in the real Magyar tradition. This tradition was rescued much later by the field work of Bartók and Kodály,

The energy is evident in the heavily accented, *forte* opening phrase (*illustrated*) and rarely lets up. A famous passage of very fast, *molto leggiero*, octave semiquavers on the piano gives the strings a *pizzicato* respite, before a slower tempo allows the players to bask in a glorious Brahms' melody. Faster and slower alternate before a cadenza from the piano leads to a manic *Molto Presto* rush to a roof-raising conclusion.