

# ALBUMBLATT

in A minor, Opus posth. (1853)

Johannes Brahms

Piano Street Urtext

**Allegro con espressione**

*p poco agitato*

*f*

*p*

*p espressivo*

21

1/4 5/4 1/4 2/3 5/4

1 3 2

26

4/4 1/4 5/4 5/4 5/4

2 1 1 4 3 2

*p*

31

*poco a poco accelerando e crescendo*

36

*f*

1 1

41

1/4 1/4 1/4 1/2 1/2

1 1 1 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3

46

1/2 1/3 1/2 1/2 1/2

1 2 3 3 4 4 5 2 4 5 2 4 4

*p* *poco rit.* *p*

1. 2.

# Johannes Brahms - Albumblatt in A minor

## The young composer

The newly discovered piece by Johannes Brahms was composed in June 1853 as a contribution to Arnold Wehner's "Album Amicorum", a guest album containing entries from important contemporary composers. No source indicates that this little piece was intended for publication. However, it is certainly more than a rough sketch and includes careful performance markings.



Autograph manuscript

In 1853 Brahms was close to establishing himself as the most promising young composer of his time. During that year, he composed all three of his monumental piano sonatas, published in 1854 as Opp. 1, 2 and 5. Brahms' visit to Robert and Clara Schumann in October 1853 was instrumental in propelling him to fame. After the meeting, Schumann wrote his famous article "Neue Bahnen", where he hailed Brahms as the true musician of the future.

## "An intense feeling for nature" - The Horn Trio op. 40

The theme of the Albumblatt seems to have been precious to Brahms; twelve years later he re-used it in the Trio section of the Scherzo movement of

the Horn Trio Op. 40. Not only the melodic material, but also the accompanying patterns are the same in both works. According to Brahms' friend, the conductor Albert Dietrich, the inspiration for the trio was the view from the rooms Brahms had taken at one of his favorite retreats in Baden-Baden which looked out on three sides at "the dark, wooded mountains, the roads winding up and down them, and the pleasant houses". The pastoral setting and mood is also described by Brahms biographer Karl Geiringer: "The spirit of the horn imbues the whole work with a delicate melancholy and an intense feeling for nature." The Waldhorn (French horn) and its hunting signal was already used in baroque music and used extensively during the classical and romantic eras when describing pastoral moods and country landscapes. A similar passage in Franz Liszt's Rhapsodie Espagnole from 1867, the year after the publication of the Horn trio, may well have been inspired by Brahms' work. The thirds, sixths and pedal point of this Liszt excerpt also appear in the Albumblatt.



Excerpt from Liszt's Rhapsodie Espagnole (1867)

## Work comments

At a first glance the Albumblatt may call to mind some of Schumann's easier pieces (e.g. Kinderszenen or Album für die Jugend), but it also seems to anticipate the simple melodic ideas Brahms was going to use in his late period - although of course the Albumblatt lacks the complexity of harmony and voicing that the composer was able to put into such works as the piano pieces Opp. 116-119.

## Structure

The A section of Brahms' Albumblatt presents the four bar pastoral motive which is the main material of the piece. The writing of both hands is dominated by parallel thirds, which gives this section a somewhat orchestral character. A classic four-bar structure is maintained, but at the

same time slightly manipulated in the last bar which, unexpectedly, also functions as the first bar of the repeat. In the B section the texture becomes more transparent; the parallel thirds disappear and the left hand supports the theme with chords and a single voice in inverted motion. The four bar structure is also finally broken up from bar 19, where the latter, sighing part of the motive takes over and gives rise to a series of modulations back to the key of A minor. A very Brahmsian six bar transition leads to the return of the A section, this time marked *poco a poco accelerando e crescendo*. From bar 39, the first half of the main motive is stubbornly repeated, and the diminished chords over a pedal point (a) increase the tension and drama up to bar 47. Here we feel a sense of release at the appearance of the sub-dominant, after which a four bar cadenza ends the piece rather abruptly.

There are some passages which demand the performer's particular sensitivity to the harmonic subtleties of the piece. One of them is in bars 22-23, a rather surprising transition from B-flat major to E major, which may benefit from a slight *ritenuto* and requires careful balancing of the chords. In bar 44, on the second beat, the passing note g natural sounds rather hostile in a diminished chord environment. Unless the performer wants to emphasize this dissonance, a swift tempo - respecting Brahms' instruction to accelerate - and bringing out the upper voice would be a possible solution.

### The piano mark in bar 47

The main editorial problem in the Albumblatt is the piano mark on the first beat of bar 47. The autograph clearly says piano, but for Brahms this would be a very unusual way to achieve a melodic climax. The fact that the mark is repeated rather superfluously in the following bar adds to the impression that Brahms may have made a mistake here. In the corresponding place in the Horn trio, Brahms builds up to a climax in a more or less identical way and marks it forte.



From Brahms' Horn Trio Opus 40

On the other hand, if a forte was what Brahms actually intended in the Albumblatt, one would

have to say that the thin texture doesn't really support this. Also, the left hand in bar 46 has falling thirds ending on a harmonic resolution, as opposed to the rising thirds of the previous bars 42+43 and 44+45. A possible interpretation is that the last crescendo is intended for the right hand only. A softer touch already in bar 47 would enable the sound to sink back, preventing a too abrupt ending of the piece. The need for such preparation is further emphasized by the "*poco rit.*" mark in bar 47. Our edition retains the piano mark of the autograph and leaves it to the performer to find his or her own solution.

Patrick Jovell & David Wärm  
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