

A Listening Guide to Brahms' Piano Quartet #2 in A maj., Op. 26

Part I (of III)

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Introductory note from the website *Musical Musings* and from *Hyperion Records*

Early in his career, Johannes Brahms was encouraged to travel from his hometown of Hamburg to Vienna by his friends Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim. They thought it was important for someone of Brahms' musical talent to expand his horizons in the city where Beethoven and Schubert had lived.

So in 1862 when he was 29 years old, Brahms made the trip to Vienna and took with him two piano quartets that he had written in Hamburg; *Quartet No. 1 In G Minor (opus 25)* and *Quartet No. 2 In A Major (opus 26)*. The *G minor Quartet* was premiered in Hamburg in November 1861, with Clara Schumann at the piano. Exactly a year later, in November 1862, Brahms himself was the pianist in the premiere of the new Piano Quartet in A major Op 26.

During Brahms' lifetime the *A Major Quartet* was the more often performed of the two, but in the twentieth century the dramatic and fiery *G minor Quartet* tended to eclipse it; the *A major Quartet* is now one of Brahms's more neglected major works. Certainly, it is less obviously 'exciting' than the *G minor*—instead, the *A Major* is more poised and lyrical, laid out on a broader, more symphonic scale. Three of its four movements are in sonata form, and their 'heavenly length' and extended melodic ideas testify to Brahms' study of the music of Schubert. This superb work's melodic richness is only one of its many strengths; and the gypsy energy of the G minor is still to be felt, especially in the final movement.

Now, **the Close Listening Guide**. I have written these notes to match the timing marks of this video: *Brahms - Piano Quartet No. 2 in A major, Op. 26. Borodin Quartet, Pavel Nersessian, piano*. You can find this video on the Resources page of our website under "Day #5 and #8." (Scroll down.)

- Listen to the first **55 secs.** of the piece.

Notice how the piano immediately presents a short opening melody—a relaxed but beautiful melody—then the cello enters with little response—a 'recitative,' and then all strings, together, immediately take up the opening melody. But the piano, not to be silenced, takes back the melodic lead at 00:35, picking up the *second half* of the opening melody, then moving down the keyboard and eventually moving up the keyboard to complete the opening theme's melodic arc. That is a lot of melodic drama and instrumental interaction in less than a minute of playing!

I recommend listening to this opening 55 secs *a few times*, until you are familiar with this complete opening theme. This theme will help you navigate the rest of movement #1—all 15 minutes of it!

- Now listen to these "clips" throughout the first movement:
 - 03:55 – 4:43 (here is an exact repetition of the opening 55 secs)
 - 08:11 (here is a teaser of the opening melody that lasts 5 secs.)
 - 10:10 – 11:02 (here is an exact repetition of the opening, but in a lower register)
 - 14:17 – 15:32 (here are echoes of the opening as the movement heads toward finale)

These repetitions help us 'navigate' this movement. We can listen for them as the movement proceeds, from start to finish.

- Now go back to the beginning of the movement, this time listen to *the first four minutes*, from 00 – 03:55. These four minutes constitute the ‘**first exposition**,’ that is, the first full statement of the main musical theme along with several ‘answering’ themes and little explorations that Brahms finds embedded in the opening theme.
 - I particularly like the strings passage that begins at 2:11, with a brief violin solo at 2:18-02:43.
 - Many critics like the two-note motive that goes between the strings and piano beginning at 02:51 and that leads to a lush melodic line, and then to a long transition back to—the opening melody! (at 03:56).
- At 03:56, we arrive at the **second exposition**, that is, the second full statement of the opening four minutes. Listen – carefully this second time through, can you hear the main melody and more of Brahms’ explorations on this theme?
- From 7:24 – 08:11 (starting near the end of the second exposition) the music seems to be heading toward a third exposition, but after a small explosion at 8:11 the tonality becomes slightly darker (minor key). Moving forward, the motives pile up upon each other, the dynamic range becomes louder, and the whole expressive impact is almost rhapsodic. This is the **development section—right up to 10:00**. Do you feel the intense, passionate quality of this section?
- Now listen carefully. What happens at 10:10? An exact repetition of the opening—that light, beautiful melody but in a lower register, giving that opening melody a more intense (serious) quality. We are now into **the recapitulation**, that is, the opening exposition is brought back. But there are some differences: in some instances, the melody is in the lower register, and in some moments the melodic line is smoothed out, giving the whole a more determined, serious quality. Perhaps, the emotional explorations of the development section have prompted Brahms to deepened the character of the whole movement.
- At about 13:30, we enter a long transition—the melody line seems heading toward a resolution. Indeed, at 14:18 we hear *echoes* of the opening motives. Will we start again on another series of melodic adventures? No, we are into a short **coda** (a final, short reprise of the main melodic motives) and the finale. The music slows down (*ritard*), almost to a stop. Will this be a quiet resolution, a fading out? No! The movement comes to an end with a final, emphatic, short burst of melodic energy. I find that the final impact of this movement of insistent intensity, not exhaustion. What do you think?