The sounding part of the project consists of the following recording:

1. Old recording (2020) of Brahms Quintet made in Grünewaldsalen
2. New recording (2021) of Brahms Quintet made in Körsalen
Abstract

In this thesis, I have studied the composer Johannes Brahms. I have talked about the background and history of his Quintet in B minor for clarinet and string quartet and I have then analyzed the piece.

The purpose of this thesis is to find lesser known but significant information about Brahms to help other clarinetists when they have to perform this important piece of clarinet repertoire. Moreover, my artistic questions are if one piece can change your perception or your way to play it after doing a deep analysis and if the interpretation is in a way stronger than before.

I decided to analyze this piece due to my interest in Brahms and to learn more about the expressive qualities in his music. I wanted to know more about the composer and so I chose this Quintet, because it is a challenging piece to play and is often performed.

From the quintet, I concentrated specifically on the possibilities of performing it and I tried to search for a way to have a deeper understanding of Brahms to produce the most convincing artistic performance of the piece.

After I learnt more about the background of this piece it resulted in a stronger interpretation of his quintet.

Keywords: Johannes Brahms, Clarinet, Brahms quintet, Clarinet with string quartet, Analysis.
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Introduction

Personal purpose

In the history of instruments we have always found that for each of them there are a series of pieces that are crucial for their history. In the clarinet field, the Brahms Quintet for clarinet and string quartet is one of them.

In 2019-20, I was in the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra Academy (RSPO Academy). It was an important experience that brought me many different musical opportunities. One of them was my first chance to perform the Quintet in B minor by Brahms for clarinet and string quartet. I had the chance to get to know the piece and learn more about its musical content. We worked on the piece for almost one and a half months, during which we focused on issues of balance between instruments and musical phrasing. We also listened to different versions of the piece played by different chamber groups in order to find out which style we wanted to play in and to get a general musical idea.

I was curious of the fact that it is a piece that is not only interesting musically but also has a lot of history behind it. Our teachers were keen for us to know the importance of context so we could further understand the musical nuances and expressiveness. However, we did not focus so much on its’ historical content and we worked more on the musical expression of the piece and how we wanted to play it.

Nowadays this piece is one of the most important in the clarinet repertoire; a piece that is played and requested in auditions. I realized that my knowledge of this piece was not very good. I knew almost nothing and needed to delve deeper into it to understand it better and give a better result in the future in terms of auditioning or a concert.

Aim/Question

The first step that I will show in this project is my focus on the history. I will talk a bit about the history of Brahms and when he decided to write this piece. I will also talk about the relationship between Brahms and the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld to whom Brahms dedicated the quintet. I want to find out if meeting the musician changed the way he wrote this piece. In this section I will also talk about other composers who had a close relationship with clarinetists like Mozart and Stadler. I will also point out the importance of the clarinet system that Richard Mühlfeld was playing since he was
playing a different type of clarinet compared to the standard models of instruments that other clarinetists were playing during that time.

The next step is to focus on the analysis of the composition. I will talk about some interesting examples from the quintet and explore how to approach them in different ways as a clarinetist stylistically and technically. I will talk about some performance issues that clarinetists can find in the piece and will give some examples. Furthermore, I will try to explain how to play some parts that I consider important in order to give your own personality to the piece.

Moreover, I will show how the way of interpreting has changed throughout history. To do that I will compare the modern recordings with older ones in order to analyze and show the development that we have had with this music. I will discuss different recordings including the earliest recording that exist, made in 1916, through to modern recordings from 2019.

This piece, apart from being important within the musical repertoire of the clarinet, is a piece that can often be requested for an orchestral audition for the final rounds. Therefore, I find it interesting to be able to discuss with my clarinet colleagues which aspects of the music are important for them to take into account when they have to play this piece; what are the things that you show to the audience and what to focus on to play it better.
1. History and background

This section will focus on the background of the piece. It is very important and interesting to know why and to whom Brahms wrote this piece in order to understand the context and analysis in the next part a bit better.

This piece had a great reception not only for the music but also for the history that is behind the piece. An important process took place during the creation of the piece and it is good for this thesis to go deeper into it.

Johannes Brahms

Brahms was born in 1833 in Hamburg. When he was very young he started to have lessons on the piano, cello and horn. In 1843, his first performance was as a pianist in a chamber music concert.

To contribute to the family's income after leaving school, Brahms gave piano lessons and he also earned reasonable fees playing popular music at private gatherings and accompanying in the theatre, among other things. He also arranged for brass bands, and for four-hand piano.\(^1\) In the early 1850s Brahms started to love folk and popular music. It became a great source of inspiration to him and is apparent in his own compositions.

During the first half of the 1860s, Brahms produced an extensive series of chamber works: two string sextets, a piano quintet, two piano quartets, a horn trio, a cello sonata and piano pieces (variations on themes by Schumann, Handel and Paganini), as well as numerous songs and solo vocal ensembles. In addition, on the lighter side, dance music (the Waltzes op.39).

Over the next two decades, Brahms appeared in all the major cities in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and in Budapest, Prague and Kraków. But Brahms worked to establish his professional career in Hamburg by founding a women's chorus (1859), teaching, conducting, and working to further his solo career. In 1862, he travelled to Vienna after being rejected as the conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic and Choral Society. Brahms became the conductor of the Vienna Singverein in 1863, but he resigned after only a year in order to devote more time to composing, performing, and getting his music published.

Brahm’s renewed his travels as a concert pianist, and the beginning of invitations as guest conductor started in 1874. The works performed were most often his own. In 1875 he settled into his career of touring as a performer and conductor during the autumn

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\(^1\) Grove Music Online, 2001. *Brahms, Johannes.*
and winter, travelling during the spring, and spending the summers composing.

From 1881, he developed a special relationship with the court orchestra at Meiningen, under the conductor Hans von Bülow. During the 1890s, death took a terrible toll on Brahms's circle of friends. Brahms himself was beginning to feel his age. He originally planned to retire from composing after completing his String Quintet in G Major (“Prater”), Op. 111. However, his mind was quickly changed after being inspired by the performances of Meiningen clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. The artistry of Richard Mühlfeld, clarinetist of the court orchestra in Meiningen, stirred him from his lethargy, inspiring a rich harvest of chamber works with clarinet (op.114, 115 and 120), the last issued in 1895.

**Quintet in B minor, history**

In 1881, Brahms was invited by Von Bülow as the guest of Duke George of Saxe-Meiningen to hear performances at the festival and to perform his second piano concerto during their "Brahms Series" of performances in Meiningen. Von Bülow was also an important admirer of Brahms' music and encouraged the Duke's interest in Brahms and his music.

The Meiningen court orchestra became the ensemble to give the most widely accepted performances of the music of Brahms. Brahms himself developed a good relationship with the Duke and made frequent visits to Meiningen.

During his time as a conductor, Brahms is known to have met Richard Mühlfeld the clarinetist of the orchestra, during some rehearsals in 1885. At first, Brahms was not very impressed with Mühlfeld’s performances. It is known that Brahms, before his friendship and admiration for Mühlfeld, thought that the art of the clarinet playing had deteriorated. He planned to retire from composing after completing his String Quintet in G major "Prater" op.11.

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5 Bernard P. 1949 *Brahms' Primma Donna*.
However, in 1891, von Bülow drew Brahms’s attention to the playing of Richard Mühlfeld. Brahms asked to be familiar with his repertory and discussed the nature of the clarinet with him at some length. The clarinetist played a private recital and it was not long after that that Brahms began to work on his compositions for clarinet. In that private recital, Brahms requested him to play the Mozart Clarinet Quintet, Weber’s F minor Concerto, and other works for which he had become famous. During this session, the composer and artist discussed the physical and musical possibilities of the instrument.\(^8\)

Brahms was captivated by his interpretation and his sound. He thought that he was one of the finest wind players he had ever heard, calling him the “Nightingale of the orchestra”. In March of that year he wrote to Clara Schumann saying ‘Nobody can blow the clarinet more beautifully than Herr Mühlfeld of this place’.\(^9\)

He was fascinated by his way of performance, for his dark sound and the ability of moving between the registers without any problem. Furthermore, Brahms was inspired by Mühlfeld’s tone and his execution of the Weber and Mozart pieces. Agility or technical ability were not the things that interested Brahms. It was Mühlfeld’s abilities as a solo performer that most impressed Brahms, since he believed that this talent was something different from all clarinetists of the time. Brahms called the clarinetist: “absolutely the best wind-instrument player I know”.\(^10\)

As I pointed out before he had declared his work as a composer at an end, but this private concert that Mühlfeld gave to Brahms, motivated him to write more pieces for the clarinet such as:

- Trio for clarinet, piano and cello, Op. 114 in A minor in 1891.
- Quintet for clarinet and string quartet, Op. 115 in B minor in 1891.
- Sonata for clarinet and piano, num. 1 Op. 120 in F minor in 1894.
- Sonata for clarinet and piano, num. 2, Op. 120 in Eb major in 1894

The Quintet’s greater impact was immediate. Both Trio and Quintet were composed during Brahms’ annual summer residence at Ischl and performed by the Joachim Quartet, one of the most famous string quartets of its’ time.

The first private performance took place on November 21st 1891 with the Trio and the Quintet. The Quintet was immediately more popular than the Trio.\(^\text{11}\)

After this success, the pieces were performed in other places by other musicians. In Vienna they played the Trio with the clarinetist Adalbert Syrinek, principal clarinet of the Vienna Philharmonic. Later, the Quintet was played by the clarinetist F. W. Steiner who was in Baron Albert de Rothschild’s private orchestra. Mühlfeld also performed both works in Vienna and London.

Also in Germany there were soon performances by clarinetists other than Mühlfeld, for example the clarinetist Friede. In America the Quintet was played in Boston and by the clarinetist Goldschmidt.

**Johannes Brahms and Richard Mühlfeld relationship**

The relationship between the composer Brahms and the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld was not the only close composer/performer relationship during the history of the clarinet. The similarity of the Brahms – Mühlfeld relationship to former such duos is interesting.

The early nineteenth-century period was glorious in the history of the clarinet and its repertoire. This instrument was given virtuosity and a natural pre-eminence among wind instruments, while at the same time lending an important tone color to the orchestra. Clarinet quartets and quintets were very popular during that period.

However, its music must necessarily take as reference the remarkable collaboration between Mozart and Stadler, which inspired a host of other smaller pieces but also the relation with other clarinetists and composers like. Brahms and Richard Mühlfeld in 1891. It was Mühlfeld’s performance of Mozart’s Quintet K.581 which played a major part in inspiring Brahms to begin work on his own Clarinet Quintet.\(^\text{12}\)

An important relation for both performer and composer was Heinrich Baermann. He was a seminal influence upon the genre, writing clarinet quintets with a virtuosic solo part. Baermann also inspired Meyerbeer to compose his Clarinet Quintet in E flat (1813) but his remarkable work was with the composer Weber, who wrote two concertos, a concertino and the Quintet Op. 34. Baermann played with brilliant virtuosity and gave an exploration of the clarinet’s cantabile qualities with a wide-ranging expressive vocabulary.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^\text{11}\) Graham, J. E. 1968. *Graduate Council."


\(^\text{13}\) Lawson, C. 1998. *Brahms Clarinet quintet.* p.9
The personality of Baermann also inspired other composers as well. Mendelssohn wrote his clarinet pieces for him and Spohr dedicated his Concertos to the clarinetist.

Another important quintet in this period was the one by Antonin Reicha; Op. 89 in B flat (1829). Reicha had probably heard of Mozart's Quintet in Vienna and he tried to compose his own quintet for Jacques Jules Bouffil. He was a professor at the Paris Conservatoire and a member of the wind quintet for which Reicha wrote as many as twenty-four pieces. Reicha's Quintet can hardly be compared with Weber's, even though it contains some melodically, harmonically and rhythmically interesting material. In France during this period, another example could be the clarinet quintet by Rodolphe Kreutzer.

Seeing all these relationships between composers and clarinetists, I would say that in most cases composers change their way of writing depending on who they are writing their pieces for. As it happens, Brahms wrote the Quintet in B minor (and the other pieces as I previously mentioned) thinking about the way that Richard Mühlfeld was playing taking into consideration his sound and the special clarinet that he had. I would say that perhaps if Brahms had written a piece for a clarinetist other than Mühlfeld, this quintet could have been completely different.

**Mühlfeld’s Baermann clarinet system**

It is known that Mühlfeld was using a different clarinet body with another system of keys than other clarinetists were using during his time.

The five-keyed clarinet became established as the standard instrument in Mozart's day. This clarinet was played by the clarinetist Stadler.

In 1802, Lefèvre added an additional c# / g# key to the clarinet saying that this mechanism was essential to add to the normal mechanism. The increased musical demands upon the clarinet brought new attempts to render the instrument more flexible. An
anonymous writer in 1808 remarked that at least eight keys were necessary to avoid dull and unusable notes.\textsuperscript{14}

Baermann employed a ten-keyed clarinet, whilst Crusell purchased an eleven-keyed model. In 1812, the player-inventor Iwan Müller presented to a panel at the Paris Conservatoire a new thirteen-keyed Bb clarinet which he claimed as the perfect clarinet.

While composers like Cherubini and Méhul rejected the new clarinet and wanted a single instrument, Mozart and Brahms wanted to work with and make a difference between the tone-quality of clarinets in Bb and A.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite all the different opinions about the new clarinet, Ivan Müller proved to be very influential. Actually, it remains the basis for the modern German clarinet nowadays. Later, Müller designed a larger clarinet with more even-sized tone holes in the lower half of the instrument, giving a warmer sound at louder dynamic levels. He stood out from other makers for this reason. His clarinet had a hollow cup soldered to the end, in which was fixed a cushion-type pad of leather stuffed with fine wool. This has remained as an important feature of clarinet design since for the first time each tone hole on the clarinet was nailed having a rim for the pad to rest on.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{clarinet.png}
\caption{Iwan Müller's new thirteen-keyed Bb clarinet.}
\end{figure}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} Lawson, C. 1998. \textit{Brahms Clarinet quintet}. p.10
\textsuperscript{15} Lawson, C. 1998. \textit{Brahms Clarinet quintet}. p.11
\end{flushright}
The larger tone holes caused some problems in the right-hand area of the clarinet, which Adolphe Sax alleviated by adding rings allowing the three uppermost fingers to control four tone holes.

Richard Mühlfeld used the system developed by Carl Baermann, which in essence was Müller's model with a number of additions. Sax's right-hand rings were supplemented by a left-hand set, but the principal enhancement was the provision of alternative levers and touch-pieces, to aid technical fluency. Mühlfeld played on Baermann system clarinets built by Ottensteiner from early in his career, and remained faithful to them until the end of his life, despite the fact that by 1907 the design had been superseded by more advanced models.¹⁷

Mühlfeld's instrument played an important role in creating the sound and playing style he was most known for. The clarinet was constructed with eighteen keys and several rollers to facilitate sliding.

Mühlfeld also had a thin strip of metal affixed to the mouthpiece to cushion his top teeth, and he tied his reed to the mouthpiece instead of using a metal ligature.

The more modern instruments at this time were much better suited for playing fast technical passages than Mühlfeld’s clarinet, but made smooth transitions between registers a little more difficult. Mühlfeld's clarinet, on the other hand, made technical passages more cumbersome to play, but made it possible for him to change registers with much more grace and ease than was possible on these newer instruments. In addition, Mühlfeld was used to playing using a lower pitch. This made his sound much darker and broader than the sound of instruments tuned to the modern tuning system.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Fox, Sn. Mühlfeld’s Clarinet. (Accessed 30/01/2021)
¹⁸ Tyndall, E. 2010.. Theses and Dissertations. 141.
2. Historical performances

Historical recordings

The first recording that we have is not by Richard Mühlfeld. It is by Charles Draper, a famous clarinetist of his time. The first recording that I found was not the “official” one. I found a recording made in 1916 by this clarinetist and the London String Quartet. It is true that it was very difficult to make a recording during this time. The conditions were not the same as we have nowadays. You can hear that the sound is not great and probably they played a short version of the piece due to not being able to make a longer recording. The result is a short recording of 8 minutes with the first and the second movement of the piece just in one unique tape cutting some parts of the movements.

Even though it is not a great recording because of the circumstances, I anyway found it very interesting to compare to other recordings in many different ways. First, how they play stylistically. During the whole tape, we cannot appreciate many colors or different kind of atmospheres and it sounds more or less the same dynamic. Moreover, they do not change the tempo so much. Most of the time they play directly without doing many rubatos. I would say that the rhythms are exaggerated. It seems that they do not want to add anything more to this music. They play as it is written without giving anything “special” or anyway playing it in a different way than we are used to hearing it nowadays.

I do not know if it is the best to talk about the sound. I am sure that the recording makes the sound a bit worse that what they actually were playing, but if we have to compare, I would say that I could appreciate that this clarinet is different from the clarinets that we have nowadays. The sound is more like a flute without colors or variety. It gives the feeling that all the registers are equal but it does not give you the feeling of plenty of different textures in the sound.

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The following recording that we have was made 11 years later. This time it is Charles Draper playing with a famous violinist of that time called Johannes Joachim and the Léner String Quartet. It was made in 1928.20

This time we can find the whole piece recorded by them. This recording is with a clearer sound. Unlike the first recording, this one has more colors and variety in the sound. I can feel they try to interpret using more tension and release, different tempos and dynamics. It could be a close interpretation to what we can listen to nowadays.

It could be that after this recording everyone was trying to imitate it. By the early twentieth century, Draper was the preeminent clarinetist in Great Britain. When he was a student, he had the opportunity to hear the quintet performed by clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld and get inspired for his performance. Later, Mühlfeld heard Draper play it in the early years of the century and he said that his interpretation revealed subtleties in the work that he had not previously observed.21

Another important recording of this landmark was in 1937; made by Reginald Kell with the Busch Quartet.22

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22 Kell, Reginald, and Busch Quartet, Brahms, Emi Classics, CDH 7649322, 1937.
In this recording, the clarinet sound has changed from the sound of Charles Draper. I can notice a big difference regarding colors and textures. More dynamics are added and I would say that it sounds more in tune. They try to give different characters, with suspense, melancholy, etc.

About rhythms, it seems that they want to “show off” a bit more, playing the difficult parts a bit faster. They exaggerated some other rhythms, almost making them as if they were written in a different way. I do not think there is anything wrong with that. One of the principal stylistic areas for Brahms’s performance is tempo flexibility. This recording is one of the examples where you can see that in that time, musical tempo was considerably more flexible than it is today. It also fluctuates in the surface rhythm of individual passages as well as in basic pulse for longer passages.

**Contemporary Performances**

During the following years, different chamber music groups displayed a fascinating variety of stylistic approaches.

In order to compare the last recordings with the contemporary performances that we can find nowadays, I chose the one that the clarinetist Martin Fröst made in 2015.23

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23 Fröst, Martin, *Brahms*, Bis, B00L9QWGII, 2014.
In this recording, we can see how the clarinet matches completely with the sound of the string quartet while in the oldest recordings the clarinet stands out too much for my taste. His sound is smoother, and charming.
This version plays with the character of the piece, giving different colors and atmospheres. They try to give different kind of dynamics. In contrast with the old versions, this one is trying to explain something, like a story.
I find it very accurate since, as we saw before, one of the best characteristics of Mühlfeld was the simplicity of playing this piece without showing the problems between the registers of the clarinet.

The fastest parts are played a bit slower than we heard before in the older recordings. Maybe they emphasized each note giving a feeling of more legato between notes.

Another comparison could be with the clarinetist Sabine Meyer, another great clarinetist of this century, playing with Alban Berg Quartett. While the character in the first recording was calmer, this one has a bit more power. They also exaggerate the dynamics and articulation more. I would say that they have a very “German” way to play this piece. Personally, I do not follow this kind of interpretations since they seem a bit over exaggerated but, however, their character and their phrasing can always inspire you.

I would like to add another recording made by a teacher who is teaching at my old school in Barcelona. I feel very related to his recording, since it is made in my country and with musicians that I met once. I have been in many of his masterclasses and feel he has in a way influenced my interpretation of the Brahms quintet. This recording is by Joan Enric Lluna and the Alexander string Quartet made in 2012. I like the expression he uses during the whole recording and the colors he gives. Although I do not agree in some ways of how he phrases, I think he has a sound that matches quite well with Richard Mühlfeld’s sound and it is very inspiring.

To conclude this section, I will compare my favorite recording. The one by Sebastian Manz and the Danish String Quartet made in 2014.

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26 Manz, Sebastian, and The Danish String Quartet, *Fuchs-Brahms Clarinet Quintets*, CA-vi music, B00XFZ5GBA, 2014.
It might be a bit old-style, but in my opinion, they give a lot of music all the time. The tempo is very flexible and a bit slower than all the recordings that we have been listening to before which makes everything calmer and creates a relaxed atmosphere. With this tempo they have the opportunity to explain everything. Even the fast parts are well articulated without rushing or trying to show good technique. You can notice they have good flexibility. Moreover, the sound of the clarinet is very round and I can feel that the clarinetist is taking care of it. For me it is definitely one of the best recordings. Not only for what I said before but also because when you listen to it you can see that they are trying to explain something through the music. I can feel that they want to create something beautiful and I can really appreciate that.

In my opinion, these recordings are a good inspiration in order to take some ideas and ways to make my own version of this piece.

3. Analysis

Brahm’s quintet is not a solo plus a quartet, but a musical texture for five combined instruments. We can see very beautiful lines in the clarinet melody but the other instruments also have their own solo parts in some moments.

This work provides us the opportunity to play with a lot of musicality, intimate expression and beautiful tone. Not only are the nostalgic elements of the Quintet important, but there are darker and more vigorous aspects of the material. The clarinet’s size gives tonal flexibility and different kinds of dynamics to combine with the strings and to play clearly as a soloist. The quality of the A clarinet emphasizes the somber colors of the instrument’s lowest register, as well as providing an extra low semitone not available on the more brilliant Bb.27

Style

“Clarinetists who are not fully developed musically and who are happy just playing the instrument instead of using it to music’s end would be well advised to turn their attention to a less complex style”28

All my life I have been hearing from all my teachers that in order to give a good performance of Brahms, you must have lived and had

27 Dyson, G. 1935. The Musical times.
different experiences in your life. Experiences like being in love, the loss of someone… And, in a way, I agree with them.

In this quintet, being sensitive and emotional is one of the first things to consider in order to create a good style for the piece. It has many different kinds of atmospheres and moods and you must be able to create something special for each of them. It needs emphasizing that the lyrical voice is coupled with dramatic and structural power and this becomes an important feature style of the Clarinet Quintet.

The character and the mood of this piece is influenced by the degree to which the tonic key of B minor prevails. Even though the Adagio is in B major, there is a minor part and has a middle section with a modulation. The third movement begins in D major, but the single definite modulation in the first section is to B minor. Its Presto is in the form of a sonata in B minor only going to D major at the end. In addition, all the movements finish with a very quiet dynamic.

It is important to do some preparation before you play this piece in order to get an idea of which kind of style or character you should give to this music. This work should include listening to other compositions of Brahms, as well as other works of a similar type. For example, the Quintet of Mozart K.581 or the Trio for clarinet, cello and piano by the same Brahms or his Sonatas Op. 120 no. 1, and 2 for clarinet and piano.

Another point of style is the Hungarian elements that Brahms added in the piece. Brahms began to incorporate folk elements in the early 1860s in the Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor-op. 25, Piano Quartet No. 2 in A major-op. 26 and the Piano Quintet in F minor-op. 34.

In the Quintet, it has been argued that the whole passage of the più lento (bars 52-86) in the second movement reflects Brahms’s experience of Hungarian gypsy bands, in which the clarinet might sometimes take the role of leader. Here, Brahms allows himself to use the virtuoso capacity of the clarinet, turning the quartet into a miniature orchestra employing tremolo, rich double-stopping and elaborate decoration.
It is said that the quality of Brahms’s music invites comparison with the wild Hungarian lament written by Haydn a hundred years ago, in the second movement of his C major Quartet no.2 Op. 54, where the first violin breaks into impassioned arabesques above a dark and brooding melody.\textsuperscript{29}

In fact, I found a very interesting video on YouTube of one gypsy group who was playing the second movement in a very gypsy style.\textsuperscript{30} This group is called ZRI, and they perform the Brahms clarinet quintet in the form of a tavern ensemble from the same era as the piece was written. Using rescored instruments with a santouri and accordion, they achieve the rich folk band sounds that inspired the original piece itself.

\textsuperscript{29} Lawson, C. 1998. *Brahms Clarinet quintet*. p.56

Performances issues

One point to discuss is how Brahms writes for clarinet in this piece. Since the Quintet is unquestionably a big piece of chamber music, it is clear that he wants to mark the clarinet as a soloist using different kind of techniques.

Even though Brahms knew how to write well for the clarinet, there are several passages that I find difficult in the Quintet, which must be overcome in order to ensure the smoothness of the piece. Intonation problems are often present during the whole piece, mostly between the first violin and the clarinet.

In the next section, I will talk about some difficulties that I had to deal with and work on during my time with the string quartet. Of course, I will focus on clarinet problems and I will not talk about problems between the string instruments.

First Movement

In this movement, we see a few problems regarding technical and intonation standpoints as well as a reflexion of which kind of style we want to give at the beginning of the piece.

The first difficulty that I find is to create a good atmosphere when the clarinet starts. It is important that the first and second violin conduct and lead the first phrase into the bar number five, going from forte to piano. Then, when the clarinet starts, the phrasing must be totally smooth and dolce, opening a new discussion and presenting this beautiful piece. Technically everything must be clear, trying to avoid any kind of difficulties between the registers.

Regarding the way to play it, I like to give a simple and easy style from the first note. There is no need to start precisely in time. It is good to start a tiny bit late at the beginning with a soft dynamic (not too soft so it can be heard from the string section). In the 7th bar, it is nice to stay on in the first Bb a bit longer and also the same two bars after with the G. Then, when the forte arrives, I like to give the feeling of direction so it is better to not stay so long on the first D, and try to give the direction to the highest D.

After this, it is normal that sometimes we give a small “cadenza” on the E in bar 12 and also in the F in bar 13. I would say that these small cadenzas should not be too long to not lose the direction and since we have to give the phrase to the cello and the viola in bar 14.

It is important to make a character difference when we arrive at bar 25. It should be like a contrast, playing this part stronger with a bit more power than what we have been hearing before. Moreover, it happens also in bar 98. One thing that can help you to make this character difference is how you play the sixteenth notes. When I was
working with the string quartet, we were discussing if they should be in time or a little bit late. We thought that the best option would be to play them in time without losing direction and power.

An intonation issue that I had was in bar number 81, when the clarinet is playing in the low register. In this register, it is impossible to do something to change the intonation since we are covering all the holes when we play this low E. Moreover, it is also a dangerous place in the piece since the cello is leading and everyone should fit their rhythm with what the cello is playing. After that, the cello gives the melody to the first violin, and then viola, cello and second violin. It is important to let them sing their part and not put pressure on them.

Another point to consider is in the bar 98. We find a “motor” played by the second violin, the viola and the cello. In this part we discussed in my group how we wanted to play this rhythm. Of course, I think that everyone should play it as they like, but it is good to make a decision so we play together and with direction. I think the discussion is about if this rhythm should be in time or played a bit later as we said before in bar 25.

In bar 114, the clarinet is playing in the high register in octaves with the violin. This can be very problematic since the A Clarinet is sometimes a bit difficult to tune when the high register comes. In my opinion, playing with my clarinet and my setup, that register is always very sharp. My suggestion here would be to think about having a warm sound and to put the intonation down a little bit. Because you are not playing alone, you must also always think about not making a sound that cuts through the rest of the group.
The last issue in this movement to consider is in bar 197, when the clarinet is playing these broken chords down. This passage requires practicing slowly and understanding each chord. It is a moment of “chaos” so you must try to sing all the notes even if there is a lot of tension. Maybe emphasizing the first note of each chord could be a good option.

From my point of view, this piece has parts that are more sensitive so sometimes there is no need to play with a lot of energy or giving a lot of tension to all the voices. It is good to create a warm sound all together.

**Second movement**

I would consider the second movement as one of the hardest ones. Regarding my personal problems, intonation (and being in tune with first violin) is one of the biggest problems that I find during the whole movement and which I had to work on the most.

In this movement, we found two different sections; the first one is at the beginning. It is slow with a warm sound and a calm atmosphere. The second one is the *Più Lento*. This one has a high temperament. It needs to have a contrast from the first one and needs to be played with power and energy. Then after that, the calm atmosphere comes again and it ends with this kind of mood.

One of the first things I found complicated to fix was in bars 5 and 13. I continuously had the problem that I was not playing at the same time as the viola with its triplets. I kept getting lost and realized it was important to listen to the triplets for the whole section so I knew where to play.
Another problem that we find is in bar number 32, when the clarinet is playing its melody with the first violin. This is a problem because sometimes you have to be careful with the intonation.

In my opinion, the transition to the *Più lento* is quite important. From bar 42, playing in a quite a comfortable dynamic until bar 50 where it “calms”, but not too much because the next bar gives way to the next section.

Another time we find that the clarinet is playing in the high register (G) together with the first violin is in bar 70 for two bars. This problem is raised by its placement. It occurs after a long crescendo with little or no rest in the clarinet part, making fatigue possible as an added factor. When played well, however, this particular passage is extremely delicate.

I think it is obvious that there are a lot of places where you have to practice the piece carefully since they are quite technically difficult. I do not think it is relevant to talk about them, because I think that all clarinetists know where these places are and how to practice them. I will just mention a few of them. In bar number 45 you have to be clear with all the notes and play the whole scale with the same legato, even if it is passing through all the registers. Something that helped me was to play it slowly and take care of each note.
The most difficult passage from a technical standpoint appears in bar 85, where you have many notes. At the same time, you have to show the string quartet where they have to play the next note. At this point, the different arpeggios make this spot extremely difficult.

Once you arrive at bar 88, it is almost the same as the first section. So you just have to remember everything from before.

**Third movement**

I consider this movement as the most free of technical and intonation problems.

I would suggest writing the breaths in the correct spots since, for example, at the beginning the clarinet plays for nineteen bars without a rest. My suggestion would be to breathe in the 5th bar before the last beat. And breathe once again before the upbeat of two bars before A.
This part demands to have direction, phrasing and good singing in
the sound (the same as the other movements). It is very important to
not cut the phrases if you really need to breathe, because the music
goes on and it does not sound good if we stop the direction.

From the presto, everything is about tempo and expression. You
have to follow the flow of the tempo and try to not slow down the
tempo.

**Fourth movement**

Another intonation difficulty stemming from the use of the high
register is in bar 66. The clarinet, following a rest, begins a
descending arpeggio from the high G; a note that, aside from its poor
intonation, tends not to be speak well.

One difficulty that I found in this movement is that it is quite long, and
since it is the last movement, it is quite hard to keep the energy up
until the end. It is good to know how to balance your stamina during
the whole piece. Since the first and the second movements are the
most important in my opinion, it is good to use all of your qualities to
make a good performance of them. Then when the 3rd movement
arrives, I see it as a “break” where you can relax and just play in a
comfortable way. Then when the last movement comes, you should
give everything again, but saving something because the last part of
this movement is delicate and the clarinet is exposed again.

The last part of this movement I see as a coda, as a memory of the
first movement. Therefore, in my opinion it is very important to give a
good ending and finish with the feeling of something melancholic.
4. Discussion

One of the first conclusions I wanted to explore was how I had changed playing the Brahms quintet after writing this thesis. I wanted to compare my previous attempt with now. I was lucky because the last time I played it I made a recording of it. Therefore, I could compare both results and I would say that there is a considerable difference.

First, in my latest performance I made for this thesis, I can hear a more mature result. There is sense to the playing. I can notice myself trying to find the Richard Mühlfeld sound that Brahms was so in love with. Perhaps in the previous recording that I made, I was just trying to satisfy the audience with my best sound and trying to “show off” a bit. This time I would not say that I did not want that, but it was not my primary goal. I had other things to consider this time such as how I would give an accurate performance as Brahms would have wanted.

After this reflection, I went to ask some clarinet friends about what their goal was for this piece. Almost all of them said that it was to make a good, round, warm sound and play in a “smooth” way with the string quartet. In addition, to be able to show different colors and play in tune as well as to play everything with the perfect rhythm. However, I was also curious about what they thought of the first recordings that we have of this piece. It was interesting to see that they liked it but no one would play it in that way in a performance.

I am happy with the result after playing and working on this piece with the string quartet. I felt very involved with this big piece. I think that during the whole piece you can notice that Brahms had a good sense of how to create different colors and atmospheres. For my part, I felt that it was very interesting to have a look at the score and do a deeper analysis to understand how to play it and how to create all of these things.

Another thing that I learnt was how to organize a project. During the corona pandemic, it feels very special every time there is the chance to play with someone. In my case, I found nice people who also knew how to work in a very good way and all of them had played the piece before. Another fact that I would like to remark upon is that we should be always able to discuss with other musicians about how we want to play music or be always open to discover and learn other points of views. For example, since I played this piece to many clarinetists, I always had an opinion based from a clarinetist’s viewpoint. So for me it was very interesting to ask the string quartet
what and how they were thinking about the music. In fact, I could learn a lot from them, even though they do not play the same instrument as me. We always discussed different ways to play Brahms Quintet. Also about how to create colors or about how we think about the phrases.

However, I know that a recording is never perfect. I would have preferred to record a live performance with an audience. Even though we did not have the best circumstances, I think that we managed to bring the music alive and created many colors and characters that, in my opinion, Brahms was searching for. For me, it was very useful to listen to many recordings from different periods to get a wider picture of his work and to get some ideas about how I wanted the result to sound. Working on this piece inspired me and prepared me to play other works of Brahms “better”, or at least to understand his goal. I would like to play his other chamber music pieces. For example the trio that he also wrote for Richard Mühlfeld, and Brahms’ other works for orchestra. It would be interesting to see how his use of rhythms and colors show and work in a big orchestra. I have perhaps never before studied a single composer and a composition as closely and in as much detail as I did for this work. I wonder if doing that with a different composer would have the same effect on my interpretation.

I hope my thesis will help other clarinetists or string players to find an interesting history behind the piece and to use it as a guide when looking for the most convincing way of performing it.
5. References


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**Youtube Link**


**Brahms’ Score**