

Jazz Cellist Finds Brahms' Sonata Still Inspires Passion



Mark Summer of the Turtle Island Quartet reveals his love for the chamber music of a 19th-century Romantic ingenue

By Mark Summer

I'VE BEEN WORKING ON THE FIRST MOVEMENT of the Brahms for a lecture demonstration/performance. The program consisted of the Brahms and my solo pieces "Julie-O" and "Kalimba," as well as jazz works by Chick Corea and Egberto Gismonti. I like including a classical composer to balance and contrast the more improvisational pieces of my solo concerts. Brahms' music has a timeless quality that evokes the best of the Germanic Romantic composers: extremely well-constructed melodies, wonderful dynamic and melodic range, and inspiring interplay between the cello and piano.

This edition was edited by one of my very favorite cellists, Leonard Rose. Although it has lots of good fingerings, I miss the edition I used when I was in school, the Weiner urtext edition. Although the International edition is cheaper and easier to find, I recommend spending the extra money and buying the Weiner urtext—the note size is larger, the printing is of better quality, and you're able to see what Brahms intended in terms of slurs and articulations. You're going to keep this piece your whole life, so you might as well have the best edition possible.

I love the Brahms so much that it's one of the only "classical" pieces I have performed since I graduated from CIM in 1981. In my remarks before my recent performance, I told the audience the piece made me think of an old man at the end of his life, reflecting on that life and his impending death. Brahms has a way of bringing out the passionate side of most cellists, and this piece is no exception.

I was working on Beethoven's Sonata in A major before I tackled the Brahms and enjoyed contrasting the two. They begin with similar openings in that the cello plays the melody in a low register, with the Brahms beginning just a major third above the lowest note on the instrument. The pieces are so different, with the Beethoven being the more difficult and flamboyant of the two.

I wouldn't want to have to choose between these masterpieces.


It's always a challenge to get the opening to sound the way I hear it in my head. At my recent lecture/performance, I also struggled to get my pianist to play his part in the opening the way I thought would best complement my part. In the end, as always, I had to accept perfect imperfection.

I'm still absorbing the ways in which the Brahms informs my improvisational playing. And vice versa. The idea is to play classical music as though it's being improvised, and to play improvised jazz as though it's a well-thought-out composition. Like all inspired music, the lessons from Mr. Brahms never end. ■

Composition: Johannes Brahms: Sonata in E minor, Op. 38, for piano and cello (1865)

Edition: International Music Co., 1960

Considered by: Mark Summer, composer and cellist with the Grammy-winning Turtle Island Quartet

ON DISC  *Brahms: The Cello Sonatas* (DG 410510-2) Cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and pianist Rudolph Serkin