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Chapter 3 Domesticity in Brahms's String Sextets, Opp. 18 and 36

Marie Sumner Lott (Georgia State University)

When we speak of domestic music-making in Brahms's lifetime, piano music and song frequently dominate the conversation. Scenes of women and, less often, men gathered around the keyboard to sing through a popular song or aria or to play four-hand dances and arrangements of larger works spring readily to mind. Indeed, many music history textbooks and surveys of the period emphasize new genres and approaches to the piano in order to illustrate the Romantic style of the 1830s-50s and discuss works like the piano quintets of Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms to demonstrate the centrality of the keyboard in Romantic musical life.¹ Such sources often imply that this focus on the keyboard and on producing music, instruments, and instruction for domestic pianists replaced previous generations' interest in chamber genres like the string quartet and quintet, genres that had occupied composers and their patrons in the Classical and early Romantic eras (c.1770s-1820s).

For amateur and professional musicians of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, though, including members of Brahms's circle, performances of string chamber music continued to be a vital part of domestic musical life. Brahms's correspondence is filled with references to casual performances of his chamber works in the private homes of friends, as other contributors to this volume attest. For instance, the surgeon Theodor Billroth, a close friend of Brahms from about 1865 until his death in 1894, regularly held soirées to play music by Brahms and others. Early in their friendship, Billroth performed one of Brahms's string sextets in his home in Zurich and wrote to the composer about the effect it had on him:

¹ The illustrations of nineteenth-century music-making in Peter Burkholder, *A History of Western Music*, for example, all feature the keyboard and its players in their typical (often gender-coded) roles at the heart of domestic musical life: in Arthur Hughes's *The Home Quartet* (1883), a mother leads her daughters in performing a piano quartet; in Sebastian Gurtzwiller's *Family Concert in Basle* (1849), a woman at a square piano accompanies a violinist and flautist while other family members look on; and in the obligatory image for all studies of this period, Moritz von Schwind's drawing *Schubertiade* (1868), Franz Schubert and Johann Vogl perform from the piano at the centre of an imagined gathering of friends and supporters. See P. Burkholder, D. Grout, and C. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 8th edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), pp. 566-67, 599, and p. 609. For a correlating study of the period that focuses on works involving the piano, see the monumental *Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. by J. Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 500-21. Jonathan Dunsby's chapter 'Chamber Music and Piano' treats only piano trios, piano quartets, and piano quintets by the major figures of this period (Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms) and their solo piano works, excluding works for winds and for strings alone.

Dear Brahms!

Yesterday we played your new sextet at my home, partly with professionals, partly with amateurs, and I wish to tell you what an extraordinary joy we had in the playing of it. *Playing it as a four-handed arrangement for piano, I could not have any realization of the extraordinarily beneficent and happy feeling.* This is due not only to the ease with which the stream of melody flows and in which one charming motif after the other associates itself, but also to the entire construction of this work of art, to the crescendo of the emotions and the harmonic entity of the whole . . . Please accept a thousand thanks for the beautiful hours which you prepared for us.²

Billroth’s particular reaction to playing the sextet as a string player – he was also a very capable pianist, and he often played four-hand arrangements with Brahms in Vienna – emphasizes the communal experience and the pure sensual pleasure of Brahms’s string style in this work. As a performer who could (and did) experience works like this one both as an arrangement for piano and in its true form as a work for strings, he offers us an important reminder that this music was designed to bring pleasure to the players, and that Brahms made compositional choices with that environment in mind.

Much string music produced in the 1830s-1870s, in fact, addresses its particular niche in the musical marketplace with a style of partwriting and an approach to instrumental forms tailor-made for domestic string players performing recreationally for their own pleasure.³ This chapter addresses Brahms’s engagement with that tradition of domestic string music by examining the musical style, reception, and compositional history of his first string chamber works, the String Sextets Opp. 18 and 36. These works bear many similarities to earlier examples of string chamber music designed for performance in the home, and these features differentiate the sextets from Brahms’s later works, especially the string quartets, written with a different setting in mind.⁴ Situating the sextets in their correct social and cultural tradition allows us to understand better the role that domestic music-making played in the development of Brahms’s musical language during his early maturity. Perhaps more importantly, it allows us to re-examine the relationships between the intended

² Author’s emphasis. Letter dated 4 May 1866, quoted from H. Barkan (ed.) *Johannes Brahms and Theodor Billroth: Letters from a Musical Friendship* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 5.

³ The author has explored this phenomenon and the repertoire associated with it in some detail elsewhere: see M. Sumner Lott, ‘Changing Audiences, Changing Styles: String Chamber Music and the Industrial Revolution’ in R. Illiano and L. Sala (eds.), *Instrumental Music and the Industrial Revolution: Proceedings of the International Conference, Cremona, 1-3 July 2006* (Bologna: Ut Orpheus, 2010), pp. 175-239; and ‘Producing and Receiving Chamber Music in the Nineteenth Century, c. 1830-1880’ (Ph.D. dissertation: Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, 2008).

⁴ On the string quartets and their particular relationship to the Viennese music culture of the 1870s, see M. Sumner Lott, ‘At the Intersection of Public and Private Musical Life: Brahms’s Op. 51 String Quartets’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 137/2 (2012), pp. 243-305.

settings of musical performance (including the performers involved in them) and the choices that composers like Brahms made in writing for those audiences.

The Sextet Genre

As previous authors have noted, Brahms's string sextets are essentially without precedent in the musical world.⁵ Although hundreds of trios, quartets, quintets, and octets survive from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the combination of paired violins, violas, and cellos remained an unusual grouping until Brahms's works were published. The Hofmeister-Whistling catalogues, which provide the most comprehensive record of music in print throughout the nineteenth century, list fifteen works for this combination, plus four others for different combinations of six stringed instruments, published during the nineteenth century (see Figure 1).⁶ Of these, only one precedes Brahms's Op. 18: Louis Spohr's Sextet in C major Op. 140, published in 1850.⁷ Ignoring just for a moment that single important predecessor – to which we shall return below – we might ask what prompted Brahms to compose string sextets at all, and why he chose to do so at this particular juncture in his musical career.

⁵ Three studies have explored the generic questions and problems raised by Brahms's string sextets: M. Kube, 'Brahms' Streichsextette und ihr gattungsgeschichtlicher Kontext,' in G. Gruber (ed.), *Die Kammermusik von Johannes Brahms: Tradition und Innovation* (Regensburg: Laaber, 2001), pp. 149-174; W. Ruf, 'Die Zwei Sextette von Brahms: Eine Analytische Studie,' in F. Krummacher and W. Steinbeck (eds.), *Brahms-Analysen, Referate der Kieler Tagung 1983* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1984), pp. 121-33; and W. Ruf, 'Kammermusik zwischen Exklusivität und Öffentlichkeit: Zum Sextett Op. 18 von Johannes Brahms,' in M. Sammer (ed.), *Leitmotive: Kulturgeschichtliche Studien zur Traditionsbildung* (Kallmunz: Lassleben, 1999), pp. 427-34. Neither Kube nor Ruf mention Louis Spohr's String Sextet in C Major Op. 140 (1850).

⁶ These catalogues are also referred to in Chapter 10 as the Hofmeister *Monatsberichte*, where a fuller explanation is also supplied in n. 24

⁷ Only Niels Gade published a sextet for the same instrumentation between the publication of Brahms's Op. 18 in 1862 and his Op. 36 in 1866; the other sixteen works follow Brahms's Op. 36. Gade's E♭ Sextet Op. 44, was published by Kistner of Leipzig in May 1865.

Table 1: String sextets published in the nineteenth century

Date	Composer	Op no. and key, if given	Instrumentation, if not
of Hofmeister-Whistling entry			2 Vln, 2 Vla, 2 Vc
May-June 1850	Spohr, L.	Op. 140 in C Major	
June 1861	David, F.	Op. 38 in E Minor	3 Vln, 1 Vla, 2 Vc
January 1862	Brahms, J.	Op. 18 in B-flat Major	
January 1865	Rudorff, E.	Op. 5 in A Major	3 Vln, 1 Vla, 2 Vc
May 1865	Gade, N.	Op. 44 in E-flat Major	
April 1865	Dietz, F.	Op. 15 in D Minor	4 Vln, 1 Vla, 1 Vc
September 1866	Brahms, J.	Op. 36 in G Major	
October 1873	Raff, J.	Op. 178 in G Minor	
November 1874	Hofmann, H.	Op. 25 in E Minor	
November 1879	Dvořák, A.	Op. 48 in A Major	
September 1880	Davidoff, C.	Op. 35 in E Major	
May 1882	Franck, E.	Op. 41 in E-flat Major	
December 1882	Wilm, N.	Op. 27 in B Minor	

May 1884	Franck, E.	Op. 41 in E-flat Major	
June 1894	Franck, E.	Op. 50 in D Major	
September 1896	Glass, L.	Op. 15 in D Minor	
May 1897	Köhler, B.	(WoO) Sextet in A-flat Major	
September 1897	Krug, A.	Op. 68 in D Major	2 Vln, 1 Vla, Violotta, Vc, Cellone OR 2 Vln, 2 Vla, 2 Vc
November 1897	Molbe, H.	Op. 64 in D Major	2 Vln, 2 Vla, Vc, Cbs
November 1899	Heinrich XXIV	Op. 12 in D Minor	

The early 1850s had been a time of great productivity for Brahms. He published nine opuses of piano music and songs in 1853 and 1854, and he was heralded as the saviour of modern music in Robert Schumann's 'Neue Bahnen' ('New Paths') article for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.⁸ But in 1854, Schumann's suicide attempt, the stressful period that followed, and the high expectations the article inspired led Brahms to withdraw into the study of older music and to contemplate his role in the musical world. His next works reflect this period of study with a strong neoclassical aura, effectively purged of the Romantic impulses that characterize his early music. James Webster has described the

⁸ Reprinted in R. Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, ed. M. Kreisig (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1914), vol. 2, pp. 301-2. Schumann's article laid the foundation for the critical reception of Brahms's works in the second half of the nineteenth century, and twentieth-century scholars have discussed its messianic language at length. See M. MacDonald, *Brahms* (New York: Schirmer, 1990), pp. 18-19; J. Swafford, *Johannes Brahms, A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), pp.83-8; and M. Evan Bonds, 'The Ideology of Genre: Brahms's First Symphony' in *After Beethoven: The Imperative of Originality in the Symphony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 138-74.

Serenade Op. 11, for instance, as 'a compendium of wholesome influences'.⁹ After Schumann's death in 1856, Brahms separated himself from Clara Schumann and the duties as her aide and confidant that had consumed him for the previous two and a half years. He was invited to take a position at the court of Prince Leopold II in the small principality of Lippe-Detmold, and he began in these first years of freedom to rediscover his own compositional voice.¹⁰ The position could not have been better suited to the composer's needs at that time. For three months of the year he resided at the court, teaching lessons and conducting a small choir and, occasionally, the court orchestra. He spent the remaining nine months in Hamburg with his family – still drawing a generous stipend from the Detmold court – composing and finishing works for publication and touring as a performer to promote his compositions. Although the limitations of the small city's musical forces would soon push him to resign and seek a more artistically satisfying position, the three years of his Detmold tenure offered a degree of stability and comfort that led to the composition of the two String Sextets, two Piano Quartets Opp. 24 and 25, the Piano Quintet Op. 34, and much vocal music.

During this time, domestic music-making played an integral role in Brahms's everyday musical life. At Detmold, he gave lessons to the royal family members and their close friends and associates, and he led them in semi-public performances. In Hamburg, he led the Hamburg Frauenchor, an amateur women's chorus for which he wrote or arranged many works, and a smaller group of female choristers who performed vocal quartets and sextets.¹¹ His other compositions reflect these experiences with amateur music lovers. Like the later sets of *Liebeslieder-Walzer* Opp. 52 and 65, four-hand waltzes, and other 'light' works for the domestic market, the first String Sextet evokes cosy environment that produced it.¹² It also demonstrates many musical (especially formal) traits shared by domestic string music composed and published in the 1840s-60s by now unfamiliar or less revered composers such

⁹ J. Webster, 'Schubert's Sonata Form and Brahms's First Maturity' *19th-Century Music* 2 (1978-79), pp. 18-35; 3 (1979-80), pp. 52-71.

¹⁰ After Robert Schumann's funeral in 1856, Brahms had taken on some of Clara's piano students, including Laura von Meysenburg, whose family then invited him to visit the small principality. During the week-long visit, Brahms played for the court nearly non-stop and impressed the music-loving Prince and his compatriots enough to earn a position as musician to the court, beginning in late 1857. See S. Avins & J. Eisinger, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 155; and MacDonald, *Brahms*, 48-9. For information on Brahms's life in Detmold, see W. Schramm, *Johannes Brahms in Detmold* (Hagen: Linepe, 1983 [reprint of 1933 edition]).

¹¹ The most comprehensive source on Brahms's Frauenchor activities, the choruses' memberships, their repertoire, and individual members' recollections remains S. Drinker, *Brahms and His Women's Choruses* (Merion, PA: Musurgia Publishers, 1952).

¹² In 1866, Brahms dedicated the Op. 39 set of sixteen waltzes to his close friend, the Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick, to whom Brahms wrote: 'I was thinking of Vienna, of the pretty girls with whom you play duets, of you yourself, who like such things, and what not.' Quoted in MacDonald, *Brahms*, p. 191.

as Louis Spohr (1784-1859), George Onslow (1784-1853), and Vaclav Veit (1806-64). Publishers including Breitkopf & Härtel, Peters, and Hofmeister reprinted popular string works by these composers throughout the nineteenth century, demonstrating that a market for accessible string works thrived well into Brahms's lifetime and beyond. A quick examination of that musical style will provide the context in which we should place Brahms's sextets.

Domestic String Music in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

String quartets and quintets by Spohr and Onslow, to choose just two prolific composers of the early nineteenth century, enjoyed a long period of popularity among performers and publishers, as evidenced by printing records.¹³ Both composers' works were reprinted well past their deaths, into the last decades of the century. Despite their very different cultural backgrounds and career trajectories, Onslow and Spohr employed a common musical style that connects them to similarly popular works by contemporaries throughout Europe. Sometimes described as a 'gentleman composer,' wealthy Frenchman George Onslow composed and performed music primarily for his own pleasure. His family's wealth provided for his needs, but he published thirty-five string quartets and thirty-four quintets that found an avid audience in France and in German-speaking lands.¹⁴ In his youth, Onslow studied the piano with Dussek and Cramer, then harmony and composition with Anton Reicha. He took up the cello in his mid-twenties so that he could play chamber

¹³ The surviving records of these firms hold much valuable information about the process of producing and distributing music of all kinds in the nineteenth century. The author's monograph (currently in progress, under contract to University of Illinois Press) *Producing and Consuming Chamber Music in the Nineteenth Century* considers these sources in detail, as far as they relate to the composition and performance of string chamber works. On the history of technical advances in music printing, see H. Lenneberg *On the Publishing and Dissemination of Music, 1500-1850* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2003) or A. Devriès-Lésure, 'Technological Aspects' in R. Rasch (ed.), *Music Publishing in Europe 1600-1900: Concepts and Issues, Bibliography* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2005), pp. 63-88. Another excellent source on German publishing in the first third of the nineteenth century is A. Beer, *Musik zwischen Komponist, Verlag und Publikum: Die Rahmenbedingungen des Musikschaftens in Deutschland im ersten Drittel des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Tutzing: Schneider, 2000). On the Peters firm specifically, see I. Lawford-Hinrichsen, *Music Publishing and Patronage, C. F. Peters: 1800 to the Holocaust* (Kenton: Edition Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Onslow was the first son of former British parliamentarian Edward Onslow (1758-1829), who had moved from England to France a few years before George's birth and established a lavish country estate in the town of Clermont-Ferrand. According to some sources, Edward fled England in the wake of a homosexual scandal; his marriage to a wealthy French woman Marie-Rosalie de Bourdeilles de Brantôme produced four children and allowed him to live out his days as a man of leisure. The most recent study of Onslow's life and works is B. Jam, *George Onslow* (Clermont-Ferrand: Les Éditions du Mélophile, 2003), but V. Niaux, *George Onslow: Gentleman Compositeur* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2003) delves more significantly into matters of musical style. For analysis of the chamber music specifically, see C. Nobach, *Untersuchungen zu George Onslow's Kammermusik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1985).

music with friends, which he did regularly throughout his adult life at his country estate and in Paris during the winter social season.

Onslow's contemporary Louis Spohr (1784-1859), on the other hand, was a professional musician from a family of musicians.¹⁵ He became one of the most respected violin virtuosos of the period and a versatile composer. In addition to operas and oratorios, symphonies, concertos, lieder, and virtuoso pieces for his own concert appearances – including *quatuors brillants*, or works for solo violin accompanied by violin, viola, and cello – Spohr composed and published dozens of string chamber works clearly designed for more humble performances in his own middle-class home and homes like his. These quartet parties differed from the more formal musical evenings that he provided for his patrons in Kassel, as Spohr made clear in his autobiography. He described them in relation to the purchase of an especially pleasing country house:

The only thing I missed in the new house was a spacious music room. I therefore had a partition wall removed that separated two rooms on the first floor . . . I established here also a quartet circle, at which, in turn with some other families who were lovers of music, we gave three quartets every week, and concluded the evenings with a frugal supper.¹⁶

The inclusion of the performers' families and a 'frugal supper' depicts a cosy environment of entertainment and friendship.

The music of Onslow and Spohr addressed the needs and preferences of domestic musicians in several ways, but their uniform approach to sonata form and melodic writing best exemplifies the style. Both composers privileged long, lyrical themes that are frequently repeated in their entirety several times in the work, as opposed to motivically intricate themes that are broken down and rearranged in transitional and developmental passages. They favoured short developments built on simple procedures such as sequences around the circle of fifths rather than tension-mounting explorations of remote key areas and tonal relationships. In these sequential passages, every player has a chance to play the main melodic fragment being sequenced, sometimes creating a sense of tedium for listeners, but capitalizing on the anticipation of the players to give the passage momentum and excitement in the act of performance. In domestic works, straightforward recapitulations present the movement's primary and secondary materials exactly as they were introduced (though transposed to remain in the tonic rather than modulating) usually without shortening the

¹⁵ For a study of Spohr's life and works, see C. Brown, *Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁶ *Louis Spohr's Autobiography* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1865), p. 150.

themes. This emphasis on repeated melodies and passagework allows each member of the ensemble at least one turn to play an important melody and to participate in the procedures of the sonata form being explored. Very often, themes presented by the first cello and violin in the exposition are recapitulated by the second violin and viola.

For example, in Onslow’s 1831 String Quintet in E major Op. 39 (1831), the sonata-form first movement’s exposition features large-scale repetition in both thematic and tonal areas.¹⁷ After a brief introduction, the first cello presents a lyrical primary theme in the tenor range (marked with a ‘false’ treble clef, intended to be played an octave lower than indicated in the published part). The first violin repeats it with an extended brilliant-style ending, highlighting the fact that this movement showcases at least two highly capable performers (see Example 1a). After the transition and modulation to the dominant, the first violin presents the second theme in bb. 62-73 and repeats it in bb. 82-98, again with a showy extension (Ex. 1b). In the sonata-form finale of this work, the primary theme is introduced by the first violin, then repeated by the first cello. The first violin plays two iterations of the secondary theme, just as it had in the first movement: a simple version in bb. 41-48 and then a variation with additional flourishes in bb. 59-71.

Example 1a: Onslow, String Quintet in E major, Op. 39 (1831), 1st movt, bb. 20-41
(exposition and repetition of the primary theme).

Example 1b: Onslow, String Quintet, Op. 39, 1st movt, bb. 62-98 (exposition and repetition of the secondary theme).

Most of Onslow’s string quintets deploy this technique or similar ones that ‘script’ convivial social interactions among the players. As in polite conversation and friendly debate, each member of the group supportively attends to the needs of the others, awaiting a chance to interject with some relevant musical idea or extension of a phrase. Spohr’s works employ the same techniques – especially in the string quintets and in his String Sextet of 1848 (published in 1850), the only known predecessor to Brahms’s works for two violins, two violas, and two cellos, as mentioned above.

Like other domestic-style string works, Spohr’s sextet contains ‘loose’, leisurely forms with repeated themes. As Example 2 shows, the sonata-form first movement opens with a twelve-bar primary theme, presented in a duet by the first viola and cello. After an imperfect cadence and two bars of prolonged dominant harmony, the two violins take up

¹⁷ This work is now available at the Sibley Music Library’s online repository of public-domain scores: <http://hdl.handle.net/1802/5869>.

the theme, and in this iteration it cadences in the tonic, in b. 26. Note that this opening allows four of the six members to participate in the movement's main theme, each one in a somewhat prominent role, as a member of a duo. The secondary theme is likewise presented twice later in the movement: by the first violin in bb. 42-9, then by the first viola in bb. 50-7.

Example 2: Spohr, String Sextet in C major, Op. 140 (1850), 1st movt, bb. 1-26 (exposition and repetition of the primary theme).

The remainder of the work contains some idiosyncrasies worth noting for their potential interest to composers like Brahms. Most salient among them is the conflation of the A minor Scherzo with the *presto* Finale in tonic (C major). Spohr presents a sprightly, light Scherzo that continually plays with the juxtaposition of minor and major modes in a simple A-B-A form, then provides a transition to the Finale, marked *attacca subito il Presto* (see Ex. 3). The Scherzo material interrupts this Finale (a short monothematic sonata form in the tonic) twice, interjecting the minor-mode Scherzo theme after the exposition and the major-mode Scherzo theme in the midst of the recapitulation. The work closes with a rollicking *Prestissimo* in C major.

Example 3: Spohr, String Sextet in C major, 3rd movt, bb. 80-103 and 4th movt bb. 1-16.

Spohr's experimental form does not achieve the arresting suspense of Brahms's own later hybrids, such as the middle movement of his 1882 F major String Quintet Op. 88, with its vacillation between C sharp major and minor in the Grave sections juxtaposed with the A major fast sections. However Spohr's sextet certainly provides an early model for this type of work, and it demonstrates the innovative tendencies of a composer who has been labelled a conservative by history. Brahms's appreciation of composers like Spohr is apparent in his correspondence and in his assimilation of contemporaneous styles in his musical works.

In 1859, just as he began composing his Sextet Op. 18, Brahms wrote a letter from Detmold to two of the members of the Hamburg Frauenchor, responding to the latest gossip from his home town. In the middle of an otherwise playful note, Brahms mentions some sad news he had recently received and his reaction to it:

Spohr is dead! He may well be the last one who still belonged to a more beautiful era of art than the one we are suffering through. In those days, one could eagerly keep a look out every week for what new and even more beautiful work had come from this or that person. Now it is different. In a month of Sundays I see

hardly one volume of music that pleases me, but on the other hand many that even make me physically ill.

Possibly at no other time has an art form been maltreated as badly as our dear music nowadays.

I hope better things are quietly maturing, otherwise, in the history of art, our era will look like a trash heap.¹⁸

Brahms's choice to write a string sextet at this time may have been inspired by his encounter with Spohr's sextet, although no record exists to confirm whether or not he knew this particular work.

Brahms could also have encountered chamber works by Onslow in the late 1850s, at the same time that he was studying the music of Schubert and other early Romantics that would be so influential upon the style of his first maturity. Just after Robert Schumann was sent to Endenich following his attempted suicide in 1854, Clara Schumann asked Brahms to sort through her husband's library of books and music, and he diligently set to work putting things in order and studying scores, books, and manuscripts that interested him.¹⁹ Schumann's own hand-written catalogue of his scores shows that he owned several volumes of chamber music by Onslow, suggesting that Brahms had access to these works during the formative years of the mid-1850s and that they may have influenced his works composed in the early 1860s.²⁰ Previous studies of Brahms's first-maturity works have emphasized the influences of Classical composers such as Haydn and Beethoven, and Schubert's then newly-discovered works.²¹ Without diminishing the role of those models for Brahms's development, we should also consider the performance situations that Brahms could expect for his works in these decades as important factors in his compositional choices. The works of composers such as Onslow, Spohr, and others provide one way to understand the relationship between domestic performance and musical style at this moment of transition in Brahms's life as well as in musical culture more generally in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Domesticity in Brahms's First Sextet, Op. 18

As in many domestic quartets and quintets by Onslow or Spohr, Brahms's thematic construction in Op. 18 emphasizes long, lyrical melodies made up of repeated phrases that

¹⁸ Letter dated 15 October 1859. Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, pp. 203-4. With this letter in mind, perhaps the funereal quality of the second movement of Op. 18 should be read as a memorial to Spohr.

¹⁹ Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 117.

²⁰ The author wishes to thank Jennifer Ronyak for sharing information about this privately-owned document.

²¹ Webster, 'Schubert's Sonata Form and Brahms's First Maturity', pp. 59-60.

are passed around the ensemble, creating a conversational texture that is, contrary to typical Haydnesque or Beethovenian practices, leisurely and calm.

Example 4: Brahms, String Sextet in B flat major, Op. 18 (1860), 1st movt, bb. 1-46 (exposition of the primary theme).

The primary theme, in B flat, is a remarkable forty-two bars long, with continual forward momentum created by overlapping phrases (see Ex. 4). The theme begins with repetition: the first cello exposes the opening idea (a) to an atmospheric accompaniment from the two violas and gently rocking foundation from the second cello; the first violin repeats this phrase coupled with the first viola in octaves (a'). Bb. 20-30 present an answer (b) in the violin and viola, now playing in parallel sixths and thirds, thereby increasing the effect of euphonious, domestic agreeableness. The final phrase of the first theme (c, in bb. 31-42) sustains the harmonic momentum, prolonging the dominant and suspending musical time as the performers repeat small one and two-bar motivic ideas, toying with a variety of chromatic harmonisations of the principal theme's components. As in Spohr's sextet, the primary theme group allows three of the ensemble members to assume a highlighted role. At the recapitulation of this passage in b. 234, the two violas present the primary theme, finally allowing the second viola a chance to shine. The second violin and second cello continue the theme in bb. 269-73. This final pairing creates an unusual and effective low sonority, providing sonic variety and a new character for the theme, but more importantly, it closes the circle of repetitions: at the end of this theme, all six members of the ensemble will have played the movement's main melody while being accompanied by their colleagues at least once.

In compositional terms, this opening passage displays a playful approach to the motivic work that would come to define Brahms's style. Masked in the sweet sounds of parallel sixths and thirds, and de-emphasized by the 'heavenly length' of the thematic materials and their static accompaniments, a developing-variation approach to theme building is evident here, though always at work beneath the surface of the music. With the ear focused on the kaleidoscopic changes in texture and instrumentation, the motivic play that underscores the final section of the primary thematic and tonal area does not disturb the serene texture, but enhances it by extending the thematic process. For the players, those changes in texture allow each of the members to play multiple roles in the community of the ensemble, sometimes as soloist and sometimes as accompanist, always in a new configuration that explores the relationships among the individual constituents.

Brahms creates a Schubertian three-key sonata form in this movement, a procedure well suited to a style that favours large-scale repetition instead of motivic recombination.²² The first secondary theme (S1) has been described as a Ländler; though, if so, the rough, countrified manner of the dance has been smoothed out somewhat with slurs that de-emphasize the downbeat and a soft dynamic that suggests an indoor rather than an outdoor style.²³ In fact, the pizzicato accompaniment, triple meter, and lilting dotted rhythm in the theme evoke an elegant waltz in A major (Ex. 5), connecting this work to Brahms's other light works and to music appropriate for the home and for entertaining. A more straightforward secondary theme (S2) is introduced in b. 85, in the dominant, F major. The first cello exposes the theme in the tenor range, which resembles similar treatments of secondary themes by Onslow, Spohr, and Schubert. The first violin's repetition in bb. 94-102 allows another player to enjoy a melody that she or he has already heard performed by a fellow ensemble member.

Continuing in the domestic style, Brahms's development section in the first movement of Op. 18 is short – just ninety-three bars. A new theme is introduced, then broken down into a four-note motive and passed around the ensemble, and then the first secondary theme (the waltz-like theme first presented in A major) is explored in the minor mode (bb. 192-213). Rather than shorten or condense the melody, Brahms presents the entire twenty-three-bar theme in this new key. As in earlier domestic works, Brahms's approach here favours a reiteration of the theme, cloaked in the minor mode, rather than a developmental exploration of its parts.

Example 5: Brahms, Op. 18, I, bb. 61-103 (Secondary theme/key areas).

The subsequent movements of Op. 18 continue to explore repetition in forms that favour it as an organizational model. The finale takes shape as a rondo, for instance, whose refrain begins in the first cello in the tenor range and is repeated by the first violin (see Ex. 6). In this passage, the six-instrument ensemble is treated as two trios, and Brahms uses this division into sub-groups to enhance the repetition of material. The lower three voices present the theme in the first sixteen bars, the higher voices present it in bb. 17-32, and the two groups join to present a varied form of the opening theme in tonic before the music modulates to the dominant for the Rondo's B section. Here, as elsewhere, the form provides many opportunities for ensemble members to interpret individual ideas multiple times and to pass melodies back and forth within the ensemble.

²² The author has explored the relationships between Schubert's idiosyncratic approach to sonata form and domestic performances elsewhere (see n. 3).

²³ Webster, 'Schubert's Sonata Forms and Brahms's First Maturity,' p. 61; and Ruf, 'Kammermusik zwischen Exklusivität und Öffentlichkeit,' p. 432.

Example 6: Brahms, Op. 18, IV, bb. 1-62 (repetition of the rondo's refrain; division of the ensemble into two trios).

The second movement theme and variations connect this work to the domestic context in several ways. Free-standing variation sets provided a way for Brahms and other composers to engage the music of a favourite predecessor or contemporary and to experiment with motivic development, and Brahms composed many of these works on themes by Robert Schumann, Handel, Haydn, Paganini, in addition to sets on original themes and on a Hungarian song. The set of variations on a popular tune or in a popular style, was also a lucrative opportunity for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers and publishers to capitalize on the public's desire to bring music from the stage or from faraway lands into their homes. For instance, sets of variations on Russian themes (including Alexei L'vov's 'God Save the Tsar' after it was composed and adopted as the Russian national anthem in 1833) were printed in large numbers throughout the period.²⁴ Publishers sometimes created sets of variations on opera arias for dozens of different instrumentations, including solo piano, piano four hands, flute duo, violin duo, string trios and quartets, salon orchestras, and many others, as the Hofmeister-Whistling catalogues confirm.

Each of the variations in Op. 18 fills what we might describe as a normative role in the variation sequence, based on other composers' typical practice as well as Brahms's own. After a shared presentation of the D minor theme alternating eight-bar phrases presented by the first viola, then the first violin, the first variation resembles a cello showpiece (like the Bach cello suites) with arpeggiated chords in the first cello and accompanimental material in the other five voices. The second variation presents the theme in triplets, and the third recalls an operatic storm scene with chromatic scale runs in the two cellos. The fourth variation is the expected major variation, which gives a pastoral version of the theme to the first violin, then the second violin. The pastoral topic continues into the last variation, in which the first viola plays in a musette style. Here again, we can see Brahms spreading solo opportunities around the ensemble. The second viola is the only instrument not featured, though it plays thematic material to 'accompany' the cellos in other variations.

Previous commentators have noted that Brahms based this movement on the archaic *folia* dance model (see Ex. 7). Additionally in a nineteenth-century context, the duple meter, minor mode, and dotted rhythms of the *Andante, ma moderato* also suggest a funeral march, a popular trope in the period.²⁵ In fact, Brahms arranged this movement alone for the piano

²⁴ Brahms himself published an early set of variations, 'Souvenir de la Russie,' under the pseudonym G. W. Marks in 1852; they include a version of the Russian anthem by Lvov.

²⁵ J. Littlewood, *The Variations of Johannes Brahms* (London: Plumbago Books, 2004) contains a detailed discussion of the two variations movements of Opp. 18 and 36 (see pp. 135-168) in the context of Brahms's lifelong engagement with variation forms and sets. At the end of his treatment, Littlewood

and gifted it to Clara Schumann for her 41st birthday in 1860. The bittersweet quality of the funeral variations must have seemed appropriate because the day before (12 September) should have been Clara's twentieth wedding anniversary. The death of Louis Spohr in 1859, when Brahms was composing this work, may also have prompted him to use the funeral march style for this movement, as his letter quoted earlier suggests.

Example 7a: Typical Baroque *folia* theme.

Example 7b: Brahms, Op. 18, II, bb. 1-15 (*folia*-based theme).

In many of its features, Brahms's Sextet Op. 18 engages the same sort of domestic performance environment that Spohr's chamber music addressed, and it deploys gestures designed to appeal to that audience. That said, we can already see in this work the intermingling of private and public musical styles that characterize chamber music throughout the last third of the century. Documented early performances of the Sextet demonstrate the middle ground that chamber music already occupied at this point in musical history: performed by professional musicians in private spaces, the Sextet reflected its domestic venue with an appropriately intimate musical style, and when performed in public venues, it evoked the exclusivity and congeniality of a private *soirée*. For example, Joseph Joachim performed the work publicly from the manuscript in 1860 in Hanover as part of a series of regular recitals that he established there from 1856-68.²⁶ He also performed the work in private settings for friends and admirers, partly to promote the work and its composer, who was still a relatively unknown figure in much of Europe. Joachim wrote to Brahms in November of 1860, after the premiere in Hanover, saying,

Don't be angry because I am still keeping your work! I want to take it to Leipzig and play it there on Sunday or Tuesday, at David's House or Härtel's. . . . It has not been neglected here, for last Sunday evening we played it privately, as I had arranged some music for the Ambassador in Vienna, von

offers a 'poetic interpretation' of the sextets based on similarities between these variations and other variation forms in Brahms's song output. He connects the sextets and their similar songs to themes of love, death, and transformation, but never discusses the funeral march style or *topos* as realized in Op. 18.

²⁶ See M. McCorkle, *Johannes Brahms, Thematisch-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis* (Munich: Henle, 1984), pp. 62-6, on the first performance of Op. 18. For a discussion of professional string quartets in the nineteenth century and Joachim's string quartet concerts, see T. Potter, 'From Chamber to Concert Hall,' in R. Stowell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the String Quartet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 41-59.

Stockhausen. It gave us all a lot of pleasure and went well with the same players as before.²⁷

Not coincidentally, Joachim sought to share the work with his fellow string players in private, intimate settings. He refers here to his former teacher, violin virtuoso Ferdinand David (1810-73), who was also a friend of Mendelssohn and Schumann and who hosted domestic chamber music evenings that included some of Europe's finest players.²⁸ Englishman William Rockstro (1823-95) describes a seemingly informal performance by Spohr in Leipzig, probably in the 1840s at one of these gatherings, in which a veritable 'who's who' of string players participated:

As a Violinist, he [Spohr] stood unrivalled, save by one great Artist, only, whose name is now as much a 'Household Word,' in England as in Germany. His Quartet playing was especially delightful. We well remember hearing him lead his Double Quartet in E minor, at a private party, in Leipzig, in the month of June, 1846, with a delicacy of expression, and refinement of taste, to which no verbal description could possibly do adequate justice. He was assisted, on that occasion, by Ferdinand David, and Joachim; Mendelssohn, and Gade, playing the two Viola parts.²⁹

We can easily imagine a similar gathering arranged to perform Brahms's Sextet fifteen years later at Joachim's request. These private performances among friends, and semi-private performances such as that for von Stockhausen, occurred alongside public ones with larger audiences such as a performance at the Leipzig Conservatory in the same month.

²⁷ Quoted in Wilhelm Altmann's preface to the Eulenberg edition of the score (London: E. Eulenburg, 1950).

²⁸ When he refers to playing the work 'at Härtel's', he surely means Hermann Härtel, who, with his brother Raymund, led the publishing firm Breitkopf & Härtel from 1835 until his death in 1875. Hermann Härtel was friendly with Mendelssohn and Schumann in Leipzig, and he acquired the rights to Brahms's early works, but chose not to publish this and some other mature works based on the assessment of an in-house critic. See G. Bozarth, 'Brahms and the Breitkopf & Härtel Affair,' *Music Review* 55/3 (1994), pp. 202-13.

²⁹ W. Smyth Rockstro, *A History of Music for the Use of Young Students* 3d edn. (London: Robert Cocks, 1879), p. 79. Rockstro studied composition and piano with Mendelssohn at the Leipzig Conservatory from 1845-6. His reference to a violinist whose name is a "household word" must imply either Nicolò Paganini (1782-1840) or Joseph Joachim (1831-1907).

'Domesticity' for the Concert Stage in Op. 36

Whereas Brahms's first sextet is clearly a late product of the performer-centred domestic tradition, the second Sextet Op. 36 (1864-5) shows a more 'public' or listener-centred approach to chamber-music composition, and it comes at another important juncture in the composer's professional and personal life. During his first visit to Vienna in 1862-3, Brahms met many of the city's most influential musicians, including violinist and quartet leader Joseph Hellmesberger, founder of an important series of quartet concerts, and critic Eduard Hanslick, who would remain one of Brahms's closest friends throughout their long lives.³⁰ (In early 1863, Brahms moved to Vienna on a semi-permanent basis to conduct the Sing-akademie.³¹) Hellmesberger began programming Brahms's works during that first visit, beginning with the String Sextet Op. 18. Wilhelm Altmann reported that this first Viennese performance 'fell flat', which may have prompted Brahms to reconsider his approach in the next several chamber works written in and for Vienna, leading to his very successful piano quartets and quintet and the second string sextet.³²

The emphasis on repetition and on communal music-making so notable in Op. 18 recedes somewhat in Op. 36. The rounded, lyrical themes relayed from one ensemble member to another are replaced here with slow-moving melodies theatrically revealed to listeners. For example, when an altered version of the first movement's primary theme is presented in bb. 53-74, we first expect a straightforward repetition, but the second half of the theme is extended and intensified through the next twenty bars, prolonging the dominant harmony and ratcheting up the harmonic tension of this opening section (see Ex. 8a for the theme's first statement and Ex. 8b for the altered version). The musical texture thickens and unresolved dissonances pile up until the downbeat of b. 95, when the ensemble finally strikes a root-position tonic chord and the first cello bursts free with a cascading articulated scale in quavers. Although, in retrospect, this entire section clearly belongs to the primary theme area, its function seems introductory in nature, as it gradually unfolds, preparing the listener in calculated steps for a dramatic revelation at b. 95.

³⁰ For Hellmesberger's biography, see O. Strasser, 'Joseph Hellmesberger (1828-1893): Eine philharmonische Vaterfigur,' *Musikblätter der Wiener Philharmoniker* 48/4 (1993), pp. 117-24.

³¹ At several points over the next few years, Brahms would move away briefly to help his family members or he might consider taking a position in another town. He longed for a permanent position in Hamburg, though his hometown took an embarrassingly long time to recognize his talent. It was not until 1871 that Brahms moved to Vienna on a permanent basis, and from then on he considered himself at home there. See MacDonald, *Brahms*, pp. 123-42.

³² 'The sextet very soon experienced great success in other places, most of all Hamburg, but oddly fell flat in the first Viennese performance by the Hellmesberger Quartet in the autumn of 1862.' Author's translation of preface to Eulenburg edition of the score.

Example 8a: Brahms, String Sextet in G major, Op. 36 (1866), I, bb. 1-20 (first presentation of primary theme).

Example 8b: Brahms, Op. 36, I, bb. 49-98 (altered primary theme and long cadential build-up).

The light rondo finale of Op. 18 is replaced in this work with a weightier sonata form. This final movement contains almost no direct repetition, and it elides the development and recapitulation sections, creating a smooth and refined sonata style. The folk style of the themes tempers the seriousness of the form somewhat, and reflects Brahms’s multicultural encounters in the imperial capital. One of the main developments in Brahms’s musical language attributed to his move to Vienna is the adoption of musical dialects prevalent there, such as the music of the Gypsy musicians seemingly found in every corner café. Brahms had encountered Gypsy music before, and earlier pieces incorporated this style to a certain extent, but it takes on a new prominence in works such as the finale of the Piano Quartet Op. 25 (labelled ‘Rondo alla Zingarese’) and the Scherzo of the Piano Quintet Op. 34.³³

The rustic, even exotic style employed in the Sextet and in Brahms’s other Viennese chamber works is one of the more palpable differences between it and its predecessor the Sextet Op. 18. Although the influence of various ethnic and cultural ‘others’ in Vienna explains some of this compositional turn, the contemporary vogue for all things exotic can also be linked to their popularity in bourgeois salons and parlours, particularly as the subject of variation sets and collections of songs or characteristic pieces that evoke regions then broadly considered ‘the Orient’, including the middle East, and even sometimes Eastern Europe.³⁴

³³ Later incarnations of the *style hongrois* in Adagio movements and their meaning in Brahms’s expressive language have been discussed by J. Bellman, ‘Brahms’, in *The Style hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993); and M. Notley, ‘Adagios in Brahms’s Late Chamber Music: Genre Aesthetics and Cultural Critique’ in *Lateness and Brahms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); see especially pp. 195-203, subtitled, ‘Brahms’s Renewal: The Adagios in Gypsy Style’.

³⁴ For information on salon music and domestic pianists’ apparent predilections, see A. Ballstaedt and T. Widmaier, *Salonmusik: zur Geschichte und Funktion einer Bürgerlichen Musikpraxis* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989). One example of ‘Oriental’ influence on parlour piano genres is Robert Schumann’s ‘Bilder aus Osten’, a set of impromptus for piano, four hands, composed in 1848, during the period that Schumann seems to have turned to a *Hausmusik* aesthetic in his new compositions for piano and his revisions of earlier piano works. See A. Newcomb, ‘Schumann and the Marketplace: From Butterflies to *Hausmusik*’ in R. Larry Todd (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, rev. 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 258-315.

Just as the second movement of Op. 18 employs variations on the *folia* theme that also fit a description of contemporaneous funeral marches, the second-movement Scherzo of Op. 36 recycles an older dance style in a modern context. The theme of the second movement is based on a Gavotte for solo piano that Brahms had composed in 1854 or 55.³⁵ Some aspects of this movement that suggest an 'archaic' style, however, also make it possible to hear the themes as rustic or exotic folk music, increasing the movement's appeal for a broader spectrum of listeners or consumers. The opening theme (Ex. 9) contains frequent parallel motion between voices, a pizzicato accompaniment in the three lower voices, and short, trill-like ornaments on the second beats of bars 1, 2, 3, and 5. The folkish quality of the materials is enhanced by Brahms's use of the natural minor scale in many melodic passages (i.e., $\square \hat{6}$ and $\square \hat{7}$, or $F \natural$ and $E \flat$, see bb. 6-8) and an emphasis on the minor dominant in the second half of the theme (bb. 17-32). These features give the entire theme a faux-modal sound that fits a number of interpretive contexts, including exotic evocations of distant lands or suggestions of bygone eras in a European history, such as the Middle Ages, or 'primitive' folk styles. The contextual ambiguity is part of the charm of this movement, which allows each listener (and/or group of performers) to decide which aspects of the style to emphasize in any interpretation. Perhaps the work's good reception in Vienna rested on this ability to please a diverse audience of listeners and performers.

Example 9: Brahms, Op. 36, II, bb. 1-37 (primary theme).

Like the earlier sextet, Op. 36 was performed in both private and public settings in its first presentations, but commentators of the time suggested that it was most at home in an intermediate space, a 'semi-private, semi-public' space. Theodor Billroth's enthusiastic response to Brahms's string style, quoted above, actually was written in response to performing this second sextet in 1866. He would later write to Eduard Hanslick that the sextet 'demands a small hall, better even a moderately large room' because of its intimate style.³⁶ The European premiere of this work occurred in Zurich, probably at Billroth's instigation, six months after he had performed it in his home 'partly with professionals, partly with amateurs.' The Zurich Orchesterverein's first quartet soirée of the 1866-67 season included this work on its program.³⁷

The first documented public performance featured a professional group that had evolved from of casual domestic performances in Boston, Massachusetts. The Mendelssohn

³⁵ R. Pascall, 'Unknown Gavottes by Brahms' *Music & Letters* 57/4 (1976), pp. 404-11; and 'Die Erste in Wien aufgeführte Musik von Brahms und deren Nachklang im Brahms'schen Schaffen' in S. Antonicek and O. Biba (eds.) *Brahms-Kongress Wien 1983* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1988), pp. 439-48.

³⁶ Barkan, *Johannes Brahms and Theodor Billroth*, p. 6.

³⁷ McCorkle, *Werkeverzeichnis*, p. 130.

Quintette Club presented it as part of their annual subscription concert series in October 1866.³⁸ The Club began at the mid-century, as did many of the period’s most influential performance organizations and concert series in both Europe and in North America. A group of musicians employed by Boston’s theatre orchestras organized regular reading sessions for their own pleasure and edification on Saturdays, when theatres in Boston were closed. Like Theodor Billroth and other well-off music lovers in Austro-Germany at the time, Bostonian John Bigelow, a local businessman and a chamber-music connoisseur, hosted the earliest meetings of the Club in his home, and he and his family remained life-long supporters. At Bigelow’s suggestion, the group began giving ‘public’, invitation-only concerts to a select audience of 200 listeners at the Chickering Piano Company’s salon in 1849; these soon evolved into regular concert series in the Boston and Providence, Rhode Island, areas. The ensemble was soon in demand beyond New England, and they began touring in 1859, making appearances throughout North America and in Australia and New Zealand over the next 35 years.

These origins in private performance and in pseudo-private concerts mirror the beginnings of chamber concerts in London and Paris, where groups such as John Ella’s Musical Union hosted evenings of chamber music for invited guests or members. In Austro-Germany, the origins of concerts are more diverse, but in general, the tradition of public concerts evolved out of the subscription and charity events organized by individual musicians.³⁹ In Vienna, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde evolved from a club for aristocratic and upper-middle-class amateurs to a concert-giving professional organization over the course of the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁰

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³⁸ For a first-hand account of the Club and its history, see T. Ryan, *Recollections of an Old Musician* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1899). This source has been digitized and is available at www.archive.org/details/recollectionsofo00ryaniaala (accessed 6 June 2011).

³⁹ For more information on Joachim’s concert series and their role in musical life, see Robert Eshbach’s essay in this volume.

⁴⁰ On chamber music concerts in London and their origins in private gatherings, see C. Bashford, *The Pursuit of High Culture: John Ella and Chamber Music in Victorian London* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007) and J. Dibble, “Edward Dannreuther and the Orme Square phenomenon” in C. Bashford and L. Langley (eds.), *Music and British culture, 1785-1914: Essays in honor of Cyril Ehrlich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 275-98. For a comparison of continental chamber concert series, see W. Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes: the Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris, and Vienna Between 1830 and 1848*, rev. 2d edn (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002); on France see J. Cooper, *The Rise of Instrumental Music and Concert Series in Paris, 1828-1871* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983) and J.-M. Fauquet, *Les Sociétés de musique de chambre à Paris de la Restauration à 1870* (Paris: Amateurs de Livres, 1986). For Vienna in Brahms’s lifetime, see L. Botstein, ‘Brahms and his Audience: The Later Viennese Years, 1875–1897’, in M. Musgrave (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 51–75.

The two sextets bookend the period of Brahms's first maturity, a period in which he composed several works that have earned him a permanent place in modern concert halls. Both works belong to or refer to a longstanding tradition of domestic music-making that has been largely overlooked or forgotten. Assessments of this early period in his output have tended to extract Brahms and his works from their historical and cultural setting, pointing towards his absorption of previous generations's musical language and leading to his placement in a linear track of progress from Haydn and Mozart, through Beethoven and Schubert, to Schoenberg.⁴¹ But noting the relationships between his string sextets and contemporaneous music traditions, such as domestic music-making and nascent chamber concert traditions, helps us to place Brahms in his own unique place and time. The sextets transcend the divide between private music and public performance by creating intimate musical communications between the players that also invite listeners to participate vicariously. By employing a musical style associated with the home in works adaptable for the stage, Brahms responded to contemporaneous trends towards concert venues such as Joseph Joachim's Sing-akademie concerts as discussed in Chapter 2, and John Ella's Musical Union that simulated the cosy musical gatherings of earlier decades in ever-larger spaces.

⁴¹ Margaret Notley has long been engaged in a project 'to counter the common tendency to regard Brahms in neutralized, ahistorical terms', and her book *Lateness in Brahms* exquisitely situates Brahms's late music in its cultural milieu at the *fin de siècle*.