

# A Brahmsian balancing act

**B**RAHMS in G minor before interval and Brahms in C minor after it. Suggest such a program — in this case the two piano quartets in those keys — to many listeners and they may well be inclined to compare it in prospect to a meal consisting of gravy-drenched rounds of beef followed by mounds of steamed pudding. The actuality can be quite different, as Roger Woodward (piano) and three string-playing friends (Ilya Grubert, James Creitz, Jacopo Scalfi) demonstrated in the last of their current series of chamber music recitals, nurtured in the Austrian Alpine resort of Kötschach-Mauthen and brought in fully developed form to Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne.

They applied, under Woodward's artistic leadership and perhaps with the encouragement of Scalfi's rather recessive but often elegantly lovely cello playing, an unusual collective sensibility to their task, reserving Brahmsian assertiveness and solidity of texture for a very few passages and preferring to make bold experiments with rarefied tone and mere gleams and glints of emphasis.

Brahms's own directions lend considerable plausibility, at times, to this quasi-impressionistic approach. His G Minor Piano Quartet opens as a sort of thoughtful murmur. Its second movement makes its entrance with muted string delicacy, ushering in an equally stealthy piano. The slow movement of the C Minor Piano Quartet has a kind of silvery gentleness in its lyricism; its finale surges with feeling at times but moves towards final measures of full sonority but pianissimo dynamics.

Then there is the testimony of Joseph Joachim, the composer's violin-playing friend and lifelong colleague, that Brahms's own piano playing was — and he meant it as a compliment — "so light and clear, so cold and indifferent to passion". Woodward's own study of the pieces seemed designed to echo this description, not in being cold and indifferent — which was probably Joachim's way of saying that Brahms's playing was free of

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## MUSIC

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### ROGER WOODWARD AND FRIENDS

Music: Brahms

Sydney Opera House, March 22

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### ROGER COVELL

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obtrusive emotional effects — but in having the characteristics of lightness and clarity.

Ilya Grubert is naturally a strong violinist, but he reined in his tone to a state of slim purity. James Creitz, warm-hued in timbre but never sloppy in tone, showed how extreme discretion could be combined with a suggestion of power held in reserve.

Of course, that is not the whole story. The gypsy-style finale of the G minor score may have idiomatic changes of pace but it must blaze out rhythmically and dynamically and, in its final section, reach a state of hectic excitement. If the performance had failed in this respect, delicacy elsewhere might have been regarded as a mere symptom of effeteism.

Put together with the driving brilliance of the group's performance of this movement, however and its brief but telling moments of climax and robustness, the gentle aspects of the recital were persuasive either as a return to Brahmsian restraint and sensitivity or a Brahms filtered through a late 20th-century sensibility. What seemed to be blown to smithereens in any case, was the old dictum that the Brahmsian piano cannot be kept easily in scale with the three collaborating strings: the balance of piano and strings, it seemed to me, was never under serious strain.

One outstanding achievement of this occasion was the intermezzo movement of the G minor quartet. Another was the first movement of the C minor sonata, which Brahms himself aligned in retrospect with the suicidal thoughts of Goethe's Werther and therefore with the most desperate moments of his own youthful passion for Clara Schumann. Pressure of feeling and scrupulous observance of dynamic kept this movement full of an appropriate and tender restlessness.