

Johannes BRAHMS

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Drei Intermezzi opus 117



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Johannes BRAHMS

1833 — 1897

Drei Intermezzi Op 117 1892

1	E flat major	1
2	B flat minor	5
3	C sharp minor	11

Composed in Bad Ischl during the same summer as Op 116, the *Three Intermezzi* represent perhaps the most intimate and personal of all Brahms' late piano works. If the *Fantasiestücke* Op 116 still feature agitation and drama, Op 117 withdraws almost entirely into an inward, reflective world. In a letter, Brahms described these pieces as "lullabies of my sorrows" — a phrase that has shaped their reception ever since.

By this point in his life, Brahms was living quietly in Vienna, his public career secure, his artistic voice distilled to its essence. The large forms of earlier years had given way to music of concentration and suggestion. In Op 117, expression is pared down to its most essential elements: a singing line, a gently rocking accompaniment, and a harmonic language that shifts with subtle, often ambiguous warmth. These are not "lullabies" in any simple sense, but rather meditations — music that seems to hover between memory and feeling for the present.

All three Intermezzi share a similar expressive terrain: moderate tempos, understated dynamics, and a pervasive sense of introspection. Yet each has its own distinct character, and together they form a quietly unified triptych.

Intermezzo in E flat major

Marked *andante moderato*, this is among Brahms' most popular piano compositions and the most unmistakably like a lullaby; its rocking rhythm and simple, folk-like melody reflect the quoted text in German — an extract from a translation by Johann Herder of the Scottish poem "Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament":

Balow, my babe, ly stil and sleipe!
It grieves me sair to see thee weipe...

Sleep softly, my child, sleep softly and well!
It breaks my heart to see you weep...

The music unfolds with tender simplicity, yet beneath the surface lies a deep poignancy — consolation tinged with loss.

Intermezzo in B flat minor

Darker and more introspective, this Intermezzo, my favourite from the opus, moves into a shadowed emotional landscape. The texture is more intricate, the harmonies more searching, and the melodic line emerges magically within the accompaniment. A central section offers a fleeting sense of warmth, but the prevailing mood remains one of quiet sorrow and introspection. Glenn Gould wrote "of total introversion, with brief outbursts of searing pain culminating in long stretches of muted grief, its restraint in matters of dynamics and tempo, a restraint which extends to the frontiers of silence... and its slow, tentative groping towards such fragile music sustained by an atmosphere of improvisation."

Intermezzo in C sharp minor

The final piece deepens an introspective impression while introducing a more flowing, continuous narrative. The interplay of voices is especially subtle, with inner lines



Brahms — c.1890

shaping the emotional contour as much as the melody itself. Moments of brightness appear, but they are fleeting; the piece closes not with resolution, but with a sense of gentle, lingering ambiguity. The transition back to the A section at **78** is possibly the most anguished from all Brahms' oeuvre.

In Op. 117, the composer achieves an extraordinary level of expressive economy. There is little overt contrast or display; instead, the music

invites close listening, revealing its depth gradually through nuance of tone, timing, and voicing. These three pieces seem less like statements than confidences — private reflections set down with remarkable restraint and sincerity.

Together, they stand at the heart of Brahms' late style: music of quiet intensity, where the smallest gesture carries profound emotional weight, and where simplicity becomes the vehicle for some of his most deeply felt expression.

1 E flat major

4 acciaccaturas should be played on the beat — see **53**

38 For 3 bars Brahms divides the melody between the hands. However, I find it equally comfortable to play it with the RH only.

2 B flat minor

32 in conformity with the accompaniment of **24**

69 acciaccatura simultaneously with the bass

1
INTERMEZZO

andante moderato

Schlaf sanft, mein Kind, schlaf sanft und schön!

Mich dauert's sehr, dich weinen sehn.

1

2 *p dolce*

4

8

11

14

poco a poco ritenuto

diminuendo

dolce

(a tempo)

p

ritenuto molto

16

21

più adagio

pp sempre ma molto espressivo

21

pp

24

p

pp

p

27

p

30

3

33

pp

3

3

35

pp

4

ppp

un poco più andante

col Fed.

41

p

4

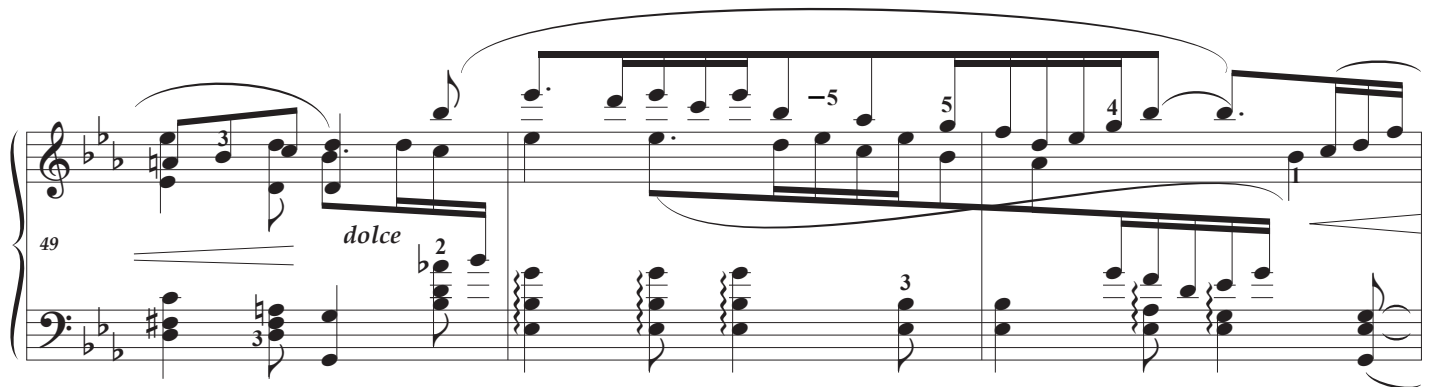
44

The musical score for 'The Rose Tree' is presented in a grand staff format, featuring a treble and bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score begins with a treble clef and a bass clef, with a large brace on the left side. The treble staff contains the melody, which starts with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a half note B4. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment, starting with a quarter note G2, followed by a quarter note A2, and then a half note B2. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and half notes, as well as rests and accidentals. The piece concludes with a final chord in the treble staff, consisting of a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4.

46 *dolce*



49 *dolce*



ritenuto *espressivo*

52 *rf*



ritardando

55

Red.



INTERMEZZO

andante non troppo e con molto espressione

2 3 *p dolce*

col Ped.

3

6

pp p

espressivo

Ped.

Ped.

12

15 *diminuendo*

18 *diminuendo*

ritenuto - - - - -

21 *p*

24 *legato espressivo e sostenuto*

ritenuto - - - -

28

p dolce

32

espressivo e sostenuto

editorial
ossia

*

36

ritenuto - - - -

f

p dolce

40

43 *p* *m.s.* *m.d.* *diminuendo*

Measures 43-45: Treble and bass staves. Measure 43 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. Measure 44 includes markings for *m.s.* (mezzo-soprano) and *m.d.* (mezzo-drammatico). Measure 45 is marked *diminuendo*. The music features a wide intervallic leap in the treble staff, spanning from a low bass note to a high treble note, with a slur connecting the two staves.

46 *pp*

Measures 46-48: Treble and bass staves. Measure 46 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. Measure 47 includes a *pp* (pianissimo) marking. Measure 48 ends with a fermata. The music features a wide intervallic leap in the treble staff, spanning from a low bass note to a high treble note, with a slur connecting the two staves.

49 *dolce*

Measures 49-51: Treble and bass staves. Measure 49 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. Measure 50 includes a *dolce* (dolce) marking. Measure 51 ends with a fermata. The music features a wide intervallic leap in the treble staff, spanning from a low bass note to a high treble note, with a slur connecting the two staves.

52 *p*

Measures 52-54: Treble and bass staves. Measure 52 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. Measure 53 includes a *p* (piano) marking. Measure 54 ends with a fermata. The music features a wide intervallic leap in the treble staff, spanning from a low bass note to a high treble note, with a slur connecting the two staves.

55

System 1, measures 55-57. Treble and bass staves in B-flat major. Measure 55: Treble has eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5; Bass has eighth notes Bb3, C4, D4, E4. Measure 56: Treble has eighth notes E4, F4, G4, A4; Bass has eighth notes G3, A3, Bb3, C4. Measure 57: Treble has eighth notes C5, Bb4, A4, G4; Bass has eighth notes D4, E4, F4, G4.

58

System 2, measures 58-60. Measure 58: Treble has eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5; Bass has eighth notes Bb3, C4, D4, E4. Measure 59: Treble has eighth notes E4, F4, G4, A4; Bass has eighth notes G3, A3, Bb3, C4. Measure 60: Treble has eighth notes C5, Bb4, A4, G4; Bass has eighth notes D4, E4, F4, G4. *pp* marking. *Red.* marking below the staff.

61

System 3, measures 61-63. Measure 61: Treble has eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5; Bass has eighth notes Bb3, C4, D4, E4. Measure 62: Treble has eighth notes E4, F4, G4, A4; Bass has eighth notes G3, A3, Bb3, C4. Measure 63: Treble has eighth notes C5, Bb4, A4, G4; Bass has eighth notes D4, E4, F4, G4. *crescendo* marking above the staff.

64

System 4, measures 64-66. Measure 64: Treble has eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5; Bass has eighth notes Bb3, C4, D4, E4. Measure 65: Treble has eighth notes E4, F4, G4, A4; Bass has eighth notes G3, A3, Bb3, C4. Measure 66: Treble has eighth notes C5, Bb4, A4, G4; Bass has eighth notes D4, E4, F4, G4. *sempre crescendo* marking above the staff.

67

System 5, measures 67-69. Measure 67: Treble has eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5; Bass has eighth notes Bb3, C4, D4, E4. Measure 68: Treble has eighth notes E4, F4, G4, A4; Bass has eighth notes G3, A3, Bb3, C4. Measure 69: Treble has eighth notes C5, Bb4, A4, G4; Bass has eighth notes D4, E4, F4, G4. *f* marking. ** f* marking.

ritenuto - - - - -

System 1, measures 70-71. Treble and bass staves. Measure 70 features a triplet of eighth notes in the treble and a pair of eighth notes in the bass. Measure 71 continues the triplet in the treble and has a single eighth note in the bass. A fermata is placed over the final chord of measure 71.

System 2, measures 72-73. Measure 72 is marked *più adagio* and *p*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. Measure 73 is marked *dolce* and *if*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. A fermata is placed over the final chord of measure 73.

System 3, measures 74-75. Measure 74 is marked *legato espressivo* and *f*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. Measure 75 is marked *diminuendo*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. A fermata is placed over the final chord of measure 75.

System 4, measures 76-78. Measure 76 is marked *ritardando molto*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. Measure 77 is marked *ritardando molto*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. Measure 78 is marked *ritardando molto*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. A fermata is placed over the final chord of measure 78.

System 5, measures 82-83. Measure 82 is marked *p*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. Measure 83 is marked *pp*. It features a half note in the treble and a half note in the bass. A fermata is placed over the final chord of measure 83.

INTERMEZZO

andante con moto

3 2 *molto p e sotto voce sempre*

4

8 *p legato*

12

16

Detailed description: This is a musical score for a piece titled 'INTERMEZZO' in A major (three sharps). The tempo is 'andante con moto'. The score is written for piano in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). It consists of five systems of music. The first system starts with a treble clef and a bass clef, with a '3' and a '2' indicating fingerings. The tempo is 'molto p' and the instruction 'e sotto voce sempre' is written. The second system starts with a treble clef and a bass clef, with a '4' indicating a fingering. The third system starts with a treble clef and a bass clef, with an '8' indicating a fingering. The tempo is 'p' and the instruction 'legato' is written. The fourth system starts with a treble clef and a bass clef, with a '12' indicating a measure number. The fifth system starts with a treble clef and a bass clef, with a '16' indicating a measure number. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, slurs, and fingerings.

20

p sempre sotto voce

24

28

pp

32

36

ritenuto - - - -

poco più lento

Measures 40-42 of a musical score in G major (one sharp). The piece is in 3/4 time. Measure 40 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand features a descending eighth-note scale, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 41 includes a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand. Measure 42 continues the eighth-note accompaniment. A *Red.* (Reduction) marking is present below the left hand in measure 42.

Measures 43-45 of the musical score. Measure 43 begins with a *ritenuto* (ritardando) marking. The right hand has a descending eighth-note scale, and the left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 44 features a *lunga* (long) marking. Measure 45 ends with a double bar line and a key signature change to A major (two sharps).

più moto ed espressivo

Measures 46-48 of the musical score. Measure 46 starts with a *m.d.* (maestri di) marking and a *p* (piano) dynamic. The right hand has a descending eighth-note scale, and the left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 47 includes a *dolce ma espressivo* (sweet but expressive) marking. Measure 48 continues the eighth-note accompaniment. A *m.s.* (maestri di) marking is present below the left hand in measure 48.

Measures 49-51 of the musical score. Measure 49 begins with a *p* (piano) dynamic. The right hand has a descending eighth-note scale, and the left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 50 features a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand. Measure 51 continues the eighth-note accompaniment.

Measures 52-54 of the musical score. Measure 52 starts with a *p* (piano) dynamic. The right hand has a descending eighth-note scale, and the left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 53 includes a *p* (piano) dynamic. Measure 54 continues the eighth-note accompaniment.

55

59

f

60

63

p

64

67

f *p* *sempre*

68

71

pp

72

75

p

*ritenuto**tempo primo*

76

*poco ritenuto**pp*

79

*ritenuto**p*

82

85

poco crescendo

88

91

f

94

pp legato

98

p

102

ritenuto - - - - *più lento*

106

ritardando molto e egualmente

p



Intermezzo N° 1 in E flat major

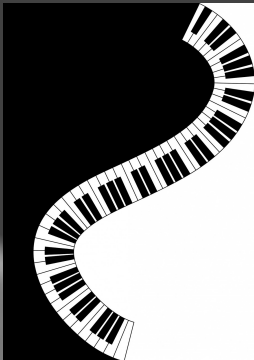
Through these facsimiles, performers and scholars can follow the evolution of musical ideas from first conception to final form. Subtle details such as phrasing slurs, dynamic inflections, and even the physical spacing of notation suggest interpretative possibilities often unrevealed or standardised in printed editions. These manuscripts feel less like relics and more like living documents, bridging the distance between composer and performer, and bringing us closer to the human act of composition itself.

Beyond the polished clarity of sophisticated publications, Brahms emerges as a meticulous craftsman: pages crowded with revisions, deletions, and layered annotations that reflect a constant quest for structural balance and expressive depth. His handwriting, sometimes bold and decisive, sometimes hesitant and reworked, seems to register both inspiration and doubt in equal measure.

For my part, when confronted with suspected errors, omissions, or ambiguities, I consult available sources. Yet in the end, I find that one must still rely on experience and instinct, indispensable guides in bringing this music to life.

Ray Alston May 2026





B R A H M S

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