Johannes Brahms was 29 years old in 1862, when he embarked on this seminal masterpiece of the chamber-music repertoire, though the work would not reach its final form as his Piano Quintet until two years later. He was no beginner in chamber music when he began this project. He had already written dozens of ensemble works before he dared to publish one, his B-major Piano Trio (Op. 8) of 1853–54. Among those early, unpublished chamber pieces were 20-odd string quartets, all of which he consigned to destruction prior to finally publishing his three mature works in that classic genre in the 1870s. In truth, he did get some use out of those early quartets — to paper the walls and ceilings of his apartment. “I had only to lie on my back to admire my sonatas and quartets,” he once reminisced of his room in Hamburg.

Having wrestled with the implications of writing for ensembles of three, four, and six instruments, Brahms set about composing a piece for five: a string quintet for two violins, viola, and two cellos. (This instrumentation suggests that Brahms may have been thinking of Schubert’s C-major String Quintet as his textural model, rather than the more common “Mozartian” quintet arrangement of two violins, two violas, and cello.) The violinist Joseph Joachim, a close friend of Brahms, voiced reservations about the quintet’s effectiveness as string music; when a revision failed to convince, Brahms started over with a completely new texture in mind.

In the course of 1863, the music of Brahms’s String Quintet slowly re-emerged as a vast piano duet, which the composer premiered in Vienna in April 1864, with Carl Tausig seated at the other piano. Ironically, critics now complained that the work lacked the sort of warmth that string instruments would have provided — the opposite of Joachim’s objection. Unlike the original string-quintet version, which Brahms burned, the piano duet was published — and is still performed and appreciated — as his Op. 34bis.

By this time, however, Brahms must have grown convinced of the musical merits of his material and, with some coaxing from his friend Clara Schumann, he gave the piece one more try, incorporating the most idiomactic aspects of both versions. The resulting Piano Quintet, the composer’s only essay in that genre (and no wonder, after all that trouble), is one of the towering creations in Brahms’s catalogue — indeed, in all of music. Few works rival its masterful mingling of moods: majesty, serenity, tension, foreboding, anger, out-and-out joy.

The opening movement (Allegro non troppo) is a vast sonata-form structure whose exposition contains at least five themes that undergo extensive development. If Brahms

In Short

**Born:** May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

**Died:** April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

**Work composed:** 1862–64; dedicated to Princess Anna von Hessen

**World premiere:** June 22, 1866, at the Leipzig Conservatory. The earlier piano duet version had been premiered on April 17, 1864, at the Vienna Singakademie, played by Carl Tausig and the composer.

**Estimated duration:** ca. 38 minutes
is extravagant in his working-out of material, the musical ideas are themselves precise and concentrated, as tense as a tigress preparing to spring from a camouflaged crouch to an unbridled chase. The slow movement (Andante, un poco adagio) is as serene and tender as the opening movement is anxious. After this the Scherzo bursts forth with pent-up energy, its three musical cells following on each other’s heels: a nervous, syncopated melody (contrasting with the insistent on-the-beat pizzicatos of the cello); a crisp, staccato motif in the strings; and a grand, rather pompous, summation by the entire ensemble. A cantabile trio section provides a moment of relaxation before the main section of the Scherzo returns for another hearing.

The Finale balances the first movement in its vast scope. A brooding introduction begins the proceedings, but it soon gives way to an ebullient tune with Gypsy overtones, introduced by the cello. The movement builds gradually until, nearly exhausted, it reaches a coda marked Presto, non troppo (nearly an oxymoron, calling for the fastest tempo — but, even then, tempered). The end seems more a dance of death than a victory: the whirlwind of its final chords hammer the last remaining breath out of this passionate creation.

A Fair Exchange

In the summer of 1871 a young British pianist named Florence May arrived in Baden-Baden, Germany, to take piano lessons from Clara Schumann. After a number of weeks Frau Schumann needed to leave on a trip, so Brahms gallantly agreed to take over Ms. May’s instruction. In 1905 she would publish a two-volume biography of the composer — The Life of Johannes Brahms — which furnished a trove of anecdotes. She recounted how his Op. 34 would earn its composer generous recompense:

Brahms's sonata for two pianofortes was heard privately in Baden-Baden several times in the course of the summer [of 1864]. Receiving the manuscript from the composer in July, Frau Schumann at once found opportunities of trying the work .... Later in the season she performed it with Brahms himself before the Princess Anna of Hesse, and the work ... made its mark on this occasion. It appealed strongly to the royal listener, who, at the close of the last movement warmly expressed to the composer her sense of its beauty. Brahms, gratified and pleased at the Princess's unreserved appreciation, called on her the following day, and begged permission, which was readily granted, to dedicate the work to her; and on its publication the following year in its final form — a quintet for pianoforte and strings — Her Royal Highness's name appeared on the title page. The Princess acknowledged the compliment of the dedication by presenting Brahms with one of her treasures — the autograph score of Mozart's G-minor Symphony. It passed after his death, as part of his library, into the possession of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna.