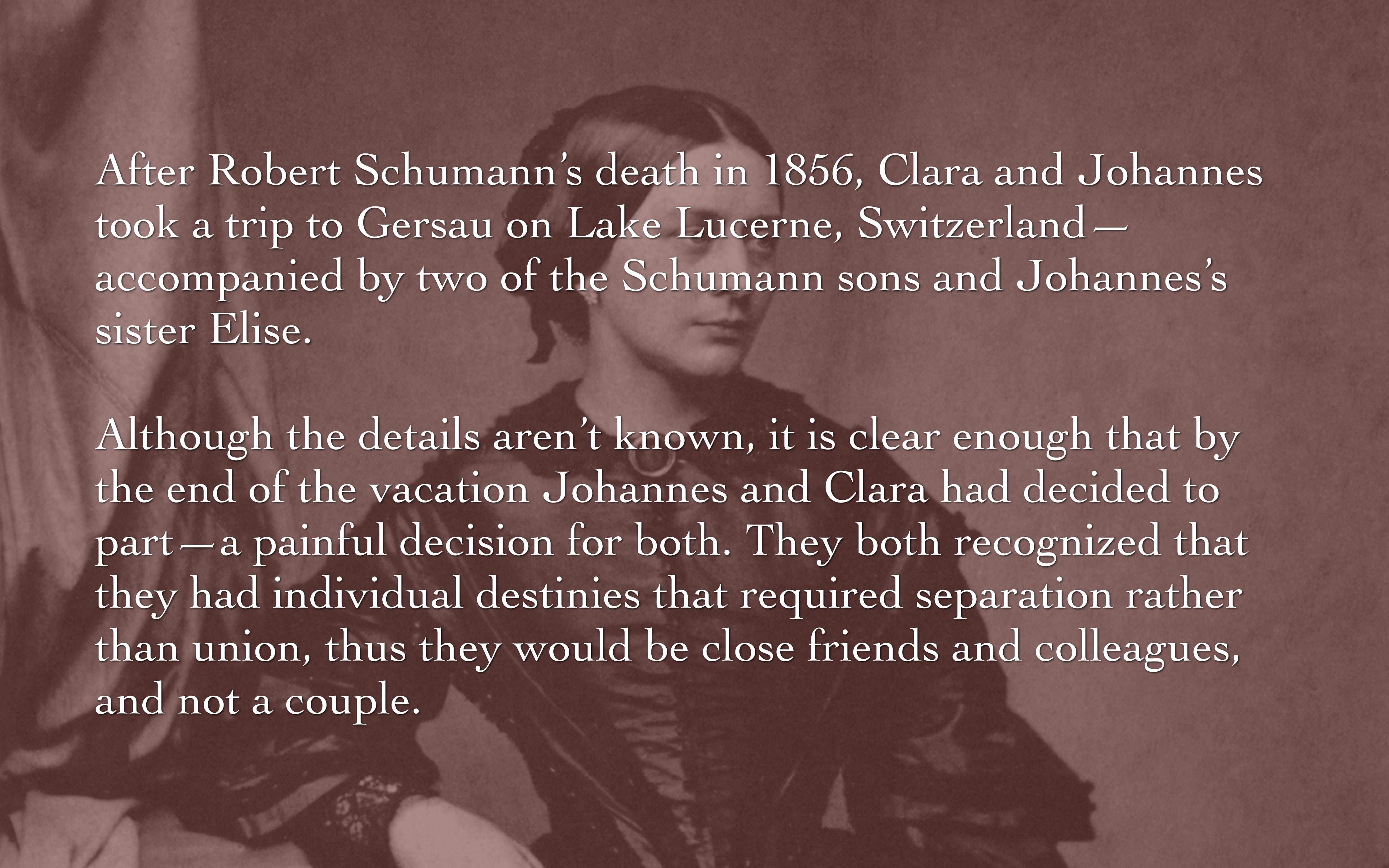


Brahms

3 - To Vienna



After Robert Schumann's death in 1856, Clara and Johannes took a trip to Gersau on Lake Lucerne, Switzerland — accompanied by two of the Schumann sons and Johannes's sister Elise.

Although the details aren't known, it is clear enough that by the end of the vacation Johannes and Clara had decided to part — a painful decision for both. They both recognized that they had individual destinies that required separation rather than union, thus they would be close friends and colleagues, and not a couple.

A sepia-toned portrait of Clara Schumann, a German pianist and composer. She is shown from the waist up, wearing a dark, patterned dress with a high collar and a brooch. Her hair is styled up, and she has a gentle expression. The background is plain.

Clara never remarried, and Brahms remained a lifelong
bachelor.



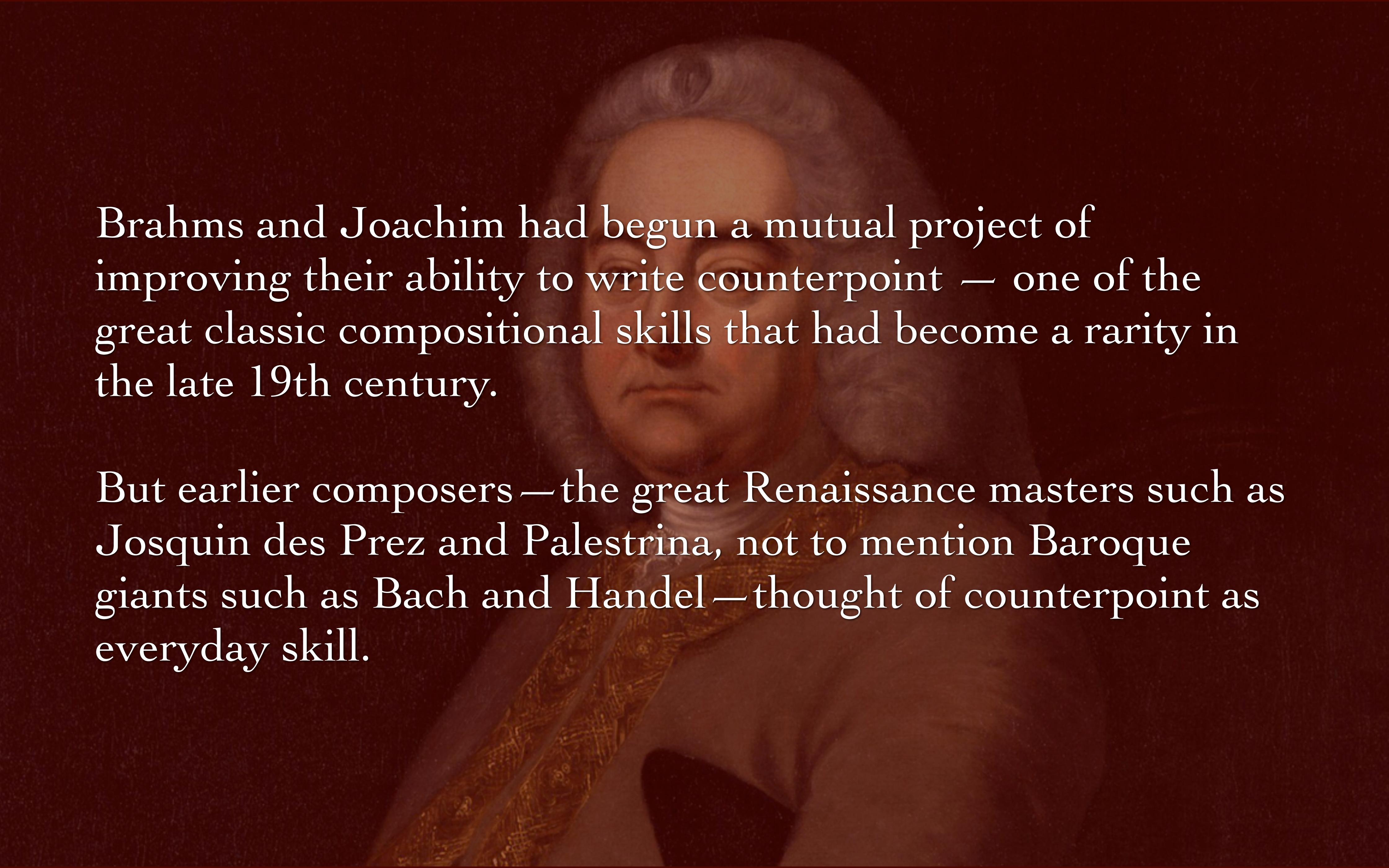
Their professional commitment to each never wavered.

Clara was the second pianist—after Brahms himself—to perform the magisterial Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24, which she played in Hamburg in 1859.



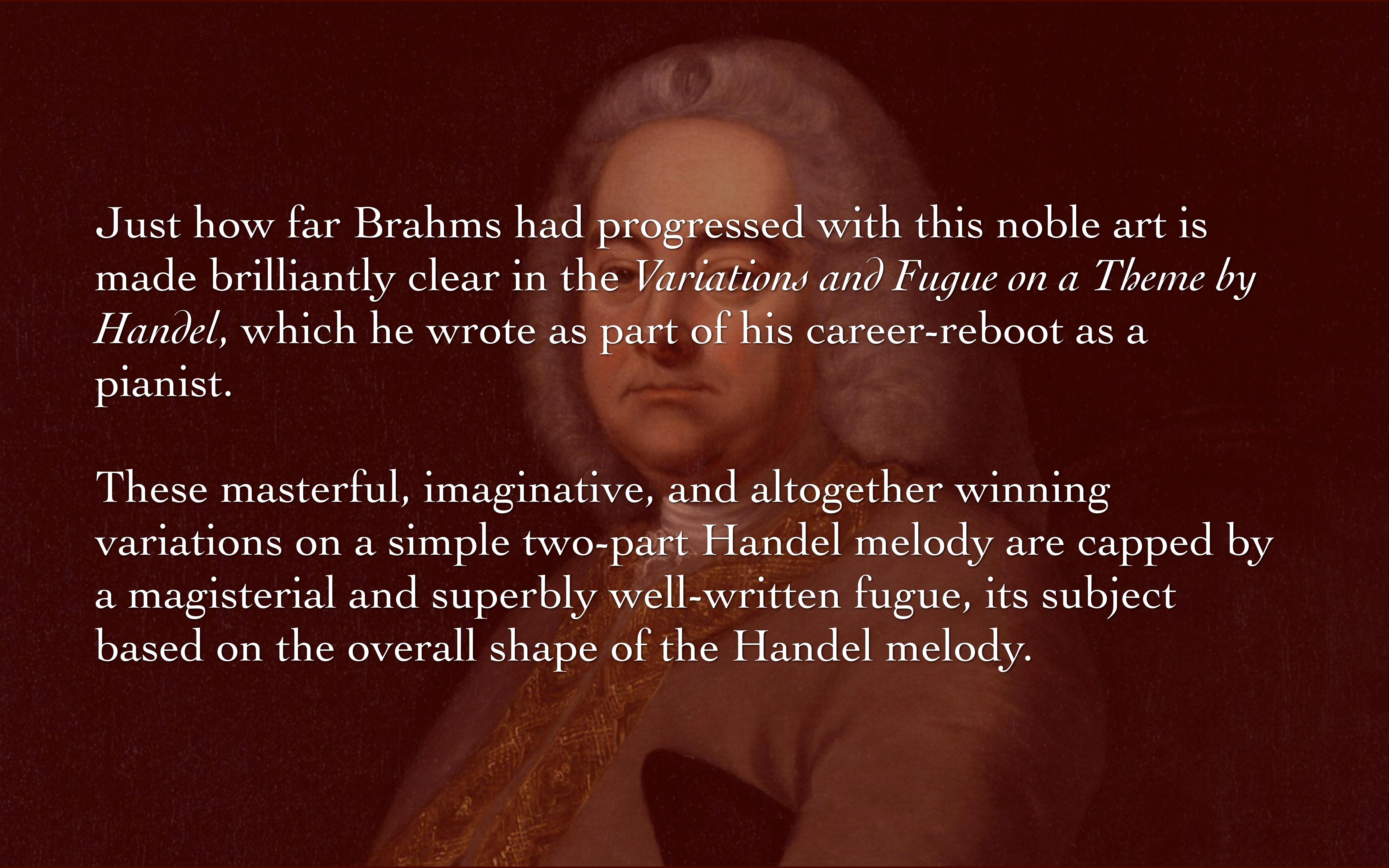
Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24

Scott Foglesong, piano



Brahms and Joachim had begun a mutual project of improving their ability to write counterpoint — one of the great classic compositional skills that had become a rarity in the late 19th century.

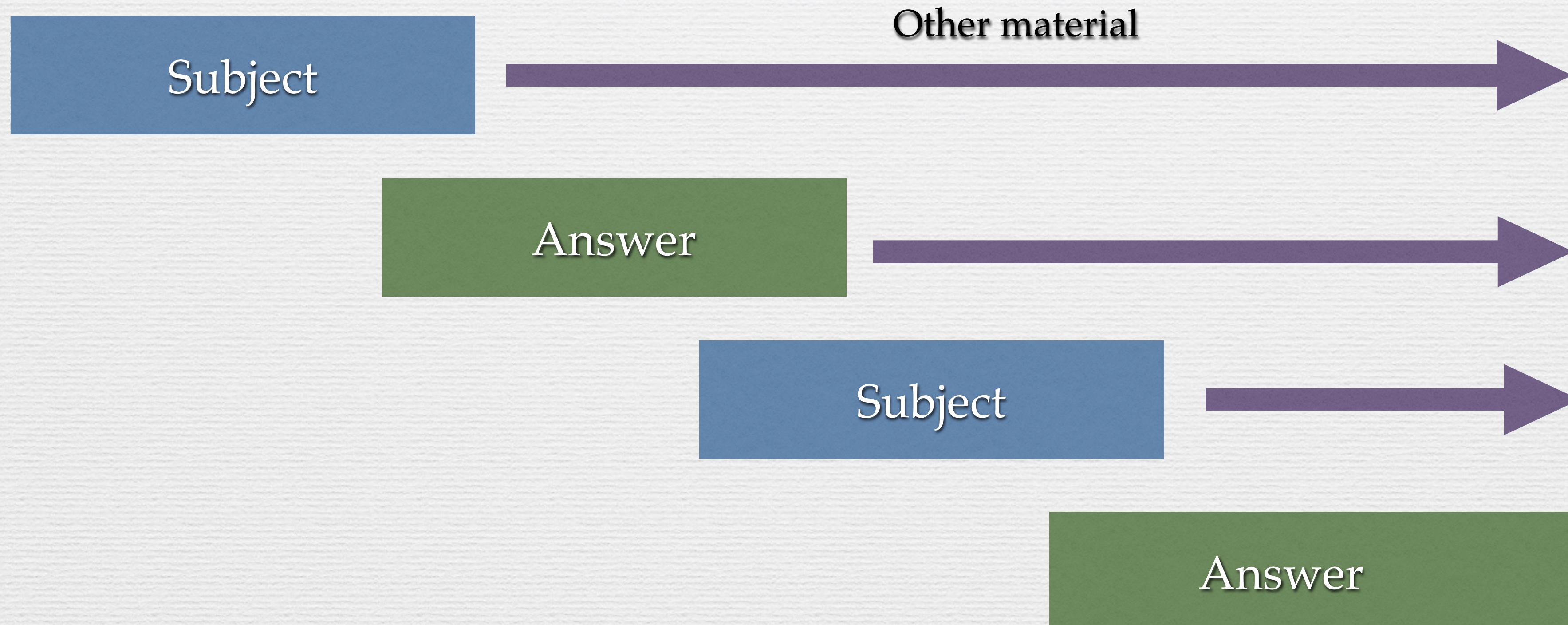
But earlier composers—the great Renaissance masters such as Josquin des Prez and Palestrina, not to mention Baroque giants such as Bach and Handel—thought of counterpoint as everyday skill.

A portrait of Johannes Brahms, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a suit and tie, looking slightly to the right.

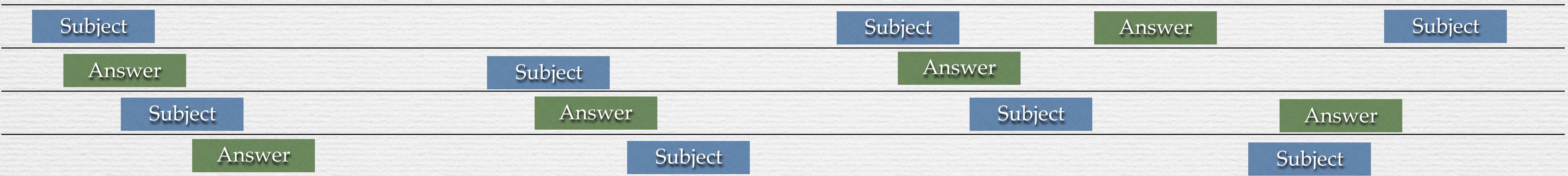
Just how far Brahms had progressed with this noble art is made brilliantly clear in the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, which he wrote as part of his career-reboot as a pianist.

These masterful, imaginative, and altogether winning variations on a simple two-part Handel melody are capped by a magisterial and superbly well-written fugue, its subject based on the overall shape of the Handel melody.

How a Fugue Works: Exposition



How a Fugue Works: Typical Layout

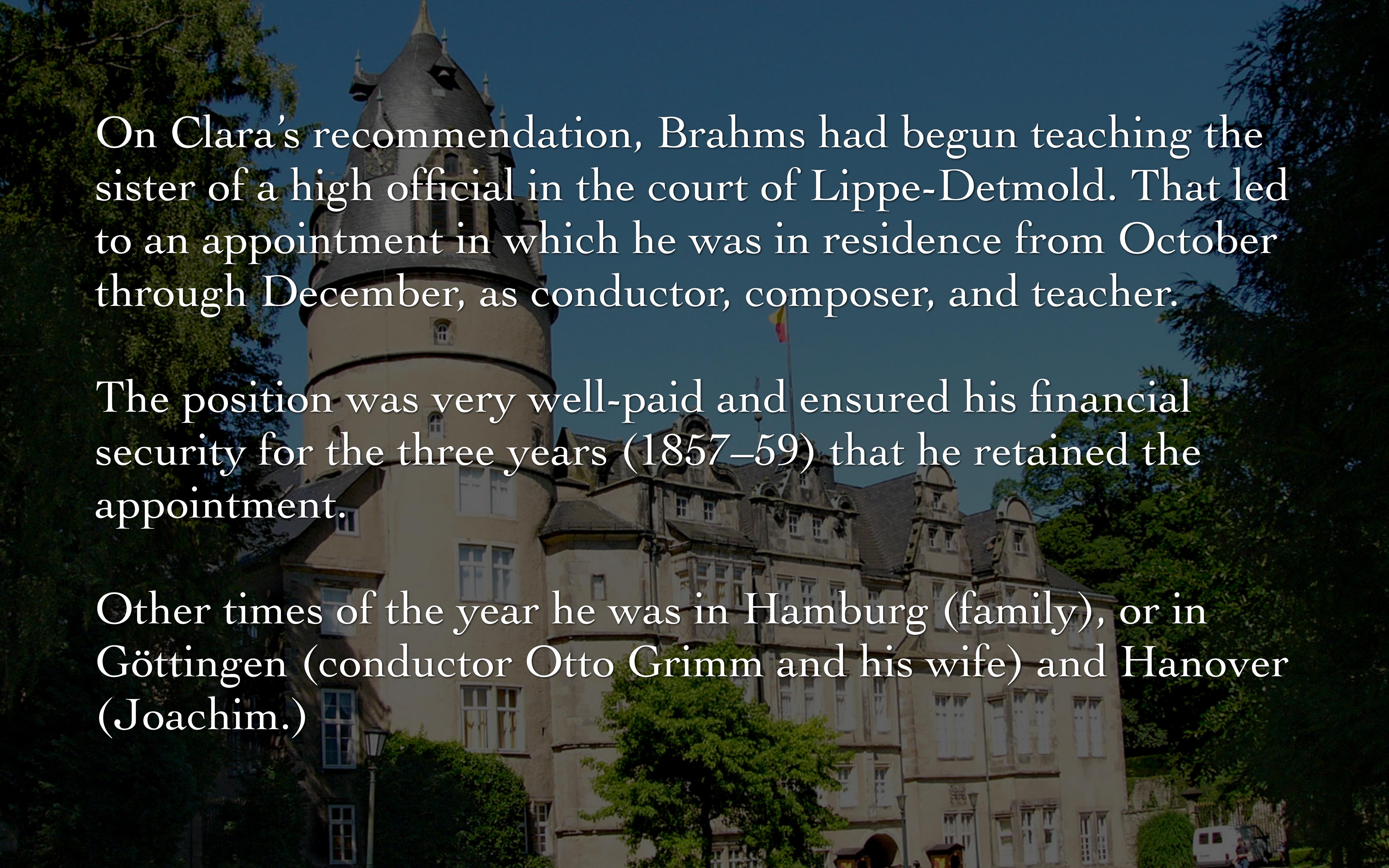


A portrait painting of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, showing him from the chest up. He has powdered grey hair and is wearing a dark blue jacket over a white cravat and a patterned waistcoat. His gaze is directed slightly to the right.

We'll hear the last group of variations, followed by the fugue.

The video is taken from my January 10, 2016 recital at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

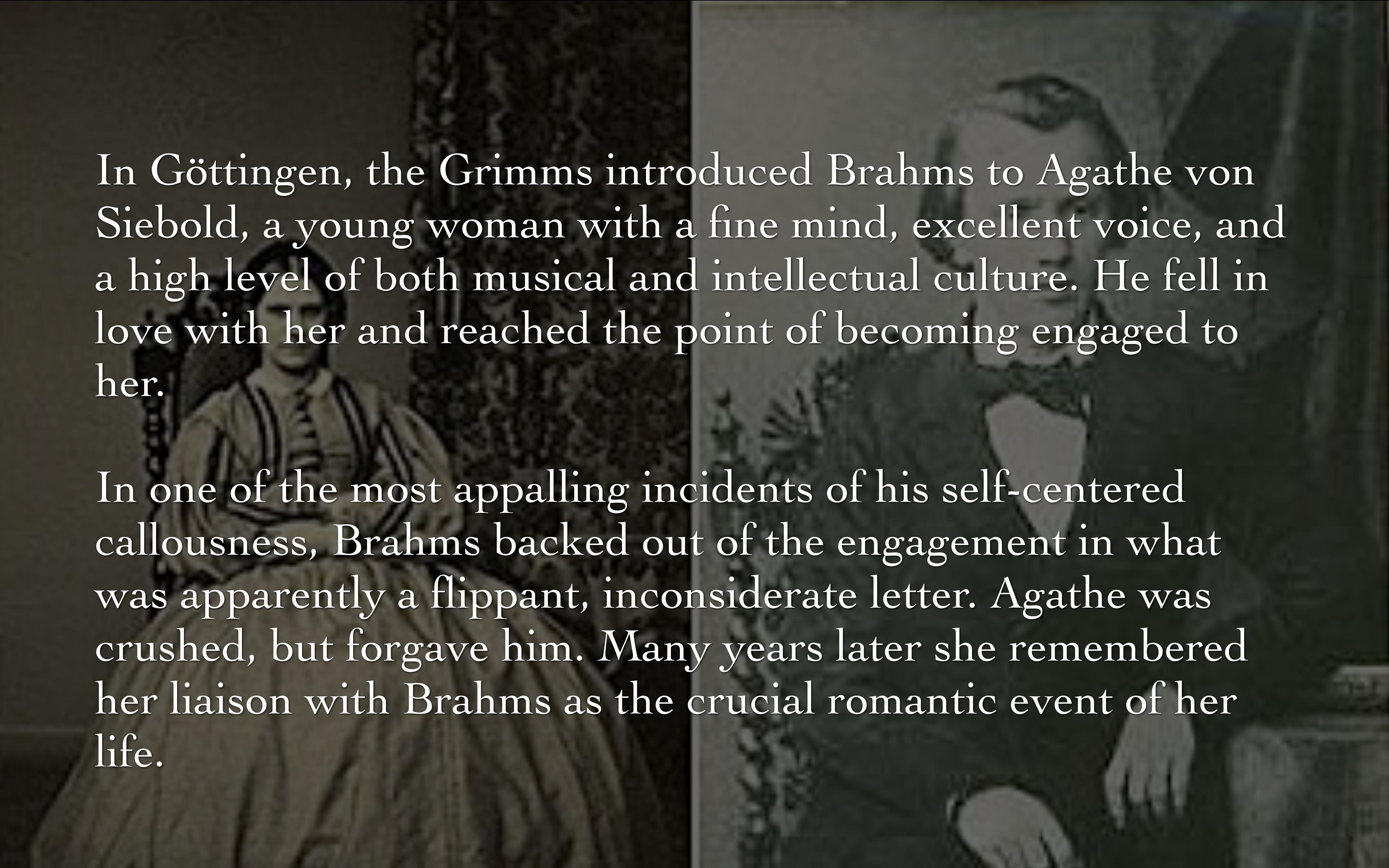


A photograph of a large, multi-story building with a light-colored facade and dark roofs. A tall, cylindrical tower with a conical roof is visible on the left side. A flag is flying from a pole in front of the building. The building is surrounded by green trees.

On Clara's recommendation, Brahms had begun teaching the sister of a high official in the court of Lippe-Detmold. That led to an appointment in which he was in residence from October through December, as conductor, composer, and teacher.

The position was very well-paid and ensured his financial security for the three years (1857–59) that he retained the appointment.

Other times of the year he was in Hamburg (family), or in Göttingen (conductor Otto Grimm and his wife) and Hanover (Joachim.)



In Göttingen, the Grimms introduced Brahms to Agathe von Siebold, a young woman with a fine mind, excellent voice, and a high level of both musical and intellectual culture. He fell in love with her and reached the point of becoming engaged to her.

In one of the most appalling incidents of his self-centered callousness, Brahms backed out of the engagement in what was apparently a flippant, inconsiderate letter. Agathe was crushed, but forgave him. Many years later she remembered her liaison with Brahms as the crucial romantic event of her life.

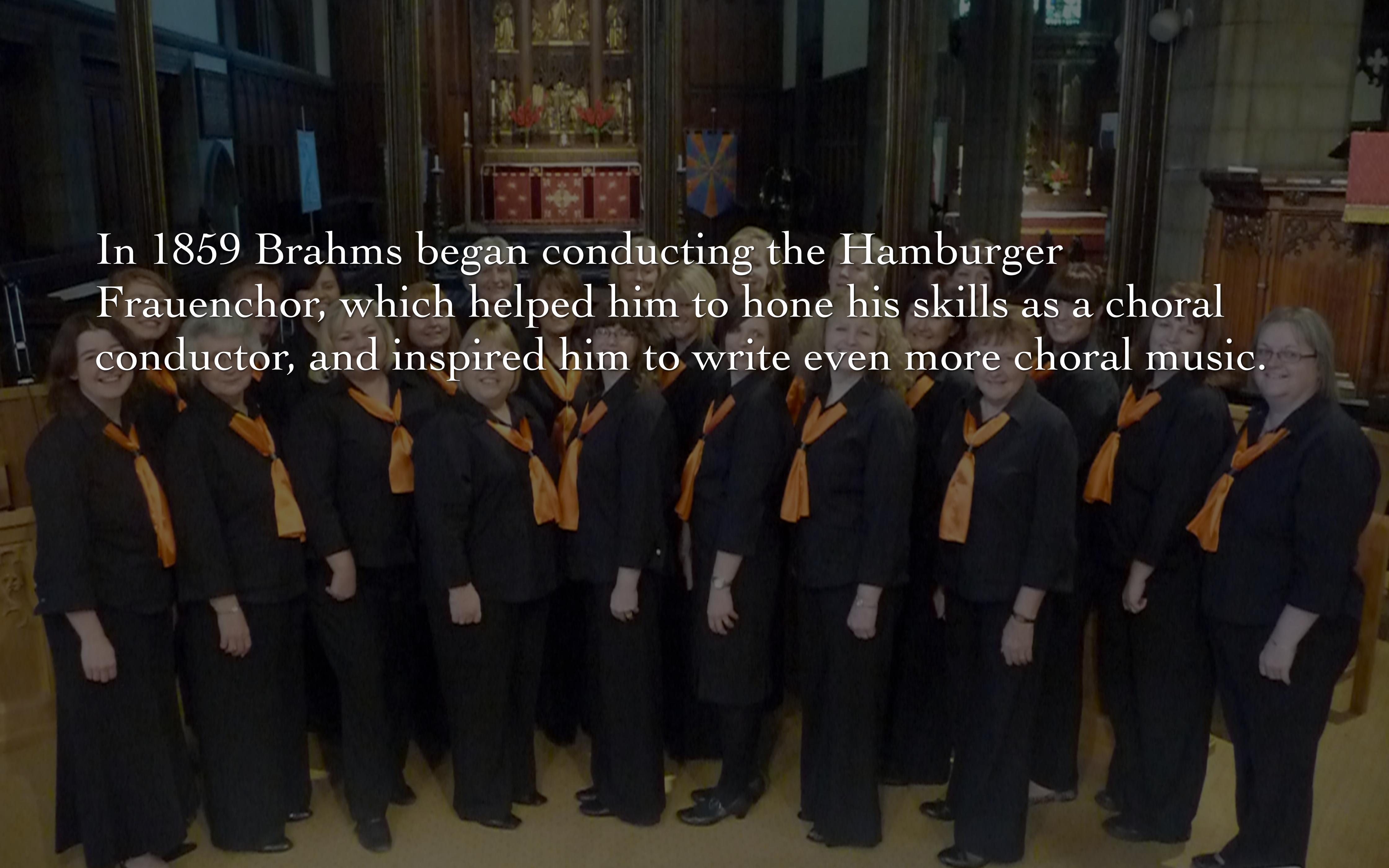


Eight Songs and Romances, Op. 14: Ein Sonett

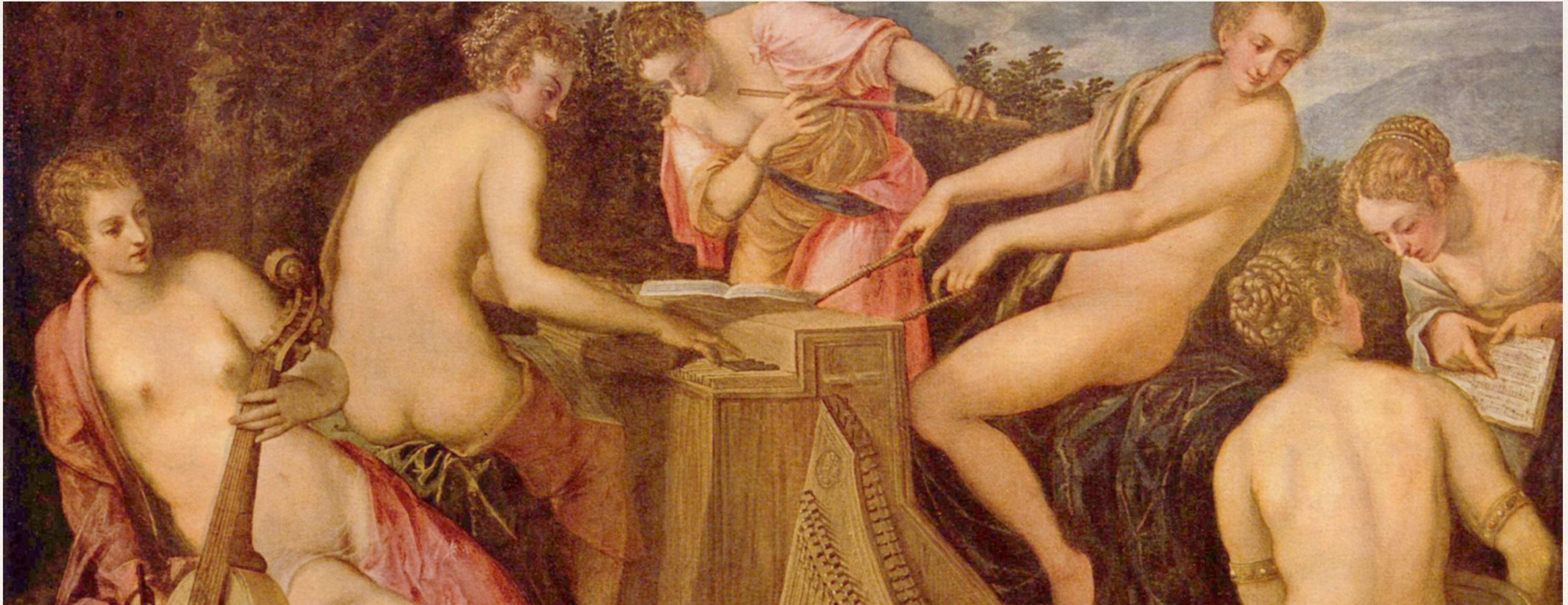
Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, baritone | Daniel Barenboim, piano

Ach, könnt' ich, könnte vergessen Sie!
Ihr schönes, liebes, liebliches Wesen,
Den Blick, die freundliche Lippe, die!
Vielleicht ich möchte genesen!
Doch ach! mein Herz, mein Herz kann es nie!
Und doch ist's Wahnsinn, zu hoffen Sie!
Und um sie schweben,
Gibt Muth und Leben,
Zu weichen nie! --
Und denn, wie kann ich vergessen Sie,
Ihr schönes, liebes, liebliches Wesen,
Den Blick, die freundliche Lippe, die!
Viel lieber nimmer genesen!

Oh, could I only forget her,
Her fair, lovely, charming nature,
Her glance, her friendly lips!
Perhaps then I might be well!
But oh, my heart, my heart can never do so!
And yet it is madness to hope for her!
Yet to hover near her,
Gives me Life and Courage
Never to weaken.
And how then can I forget her,
her fair, lovely, charming nature,
Her glance, her friendly lips!
Much rather would I never be well again!

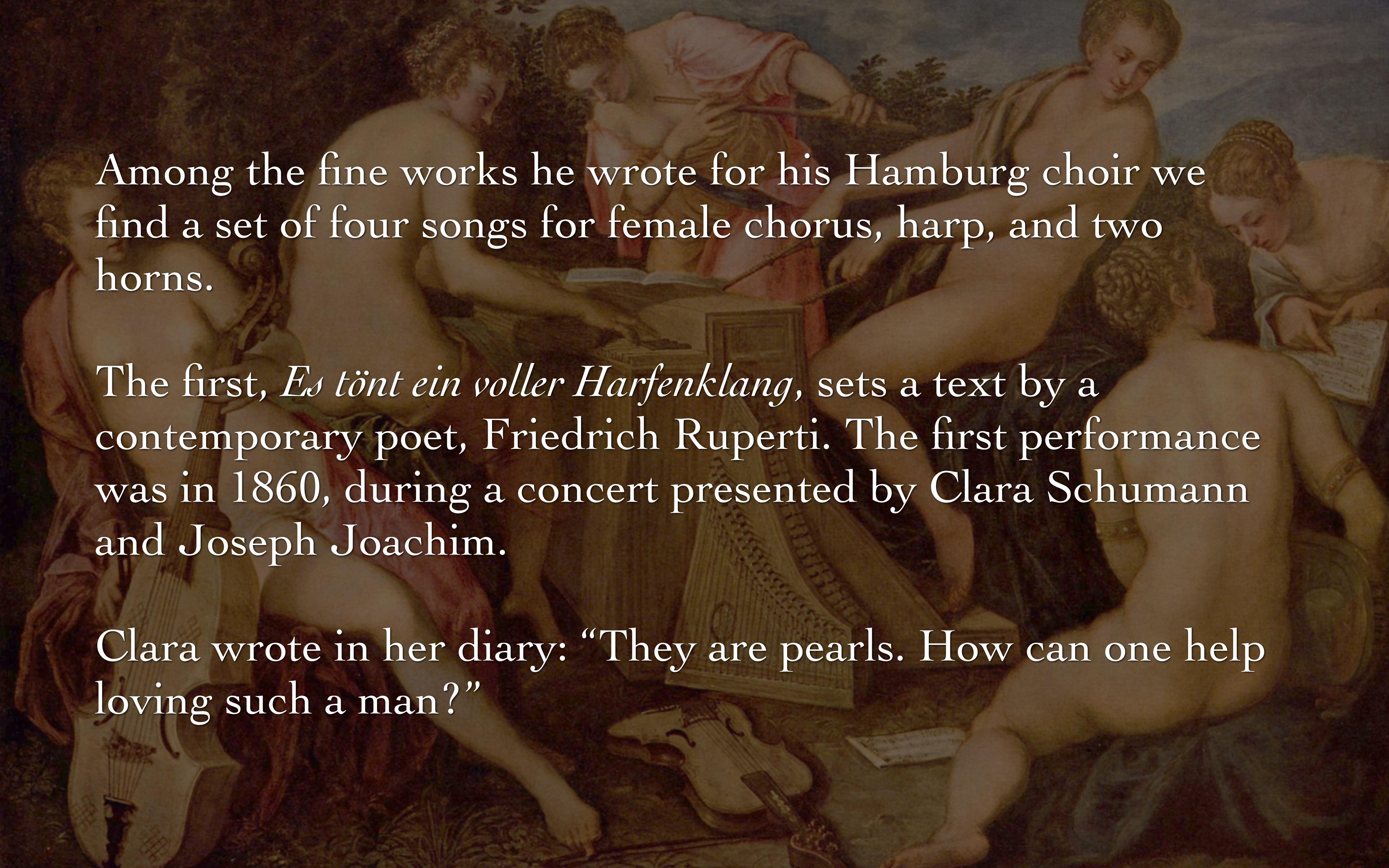
A photograph of a choir of women standing in a church. They are all wearing dark grey or black choir robes over white shirts, each with a light orange or yellow stole tied around their necks. The choir is arranged in several rows, filling the frame from left to right. The background shows the interior of a church with wooden pews, a large organ on the right, and a decorated altar area at the far end.

In 1859 Brahms began conducting the Hamburger Frauenchor, which helped him to hone his skills as a choral conductor, and inspired him to write even more choral music.



Es tönt ein voller Harfenklang, Op. 17 No. 1

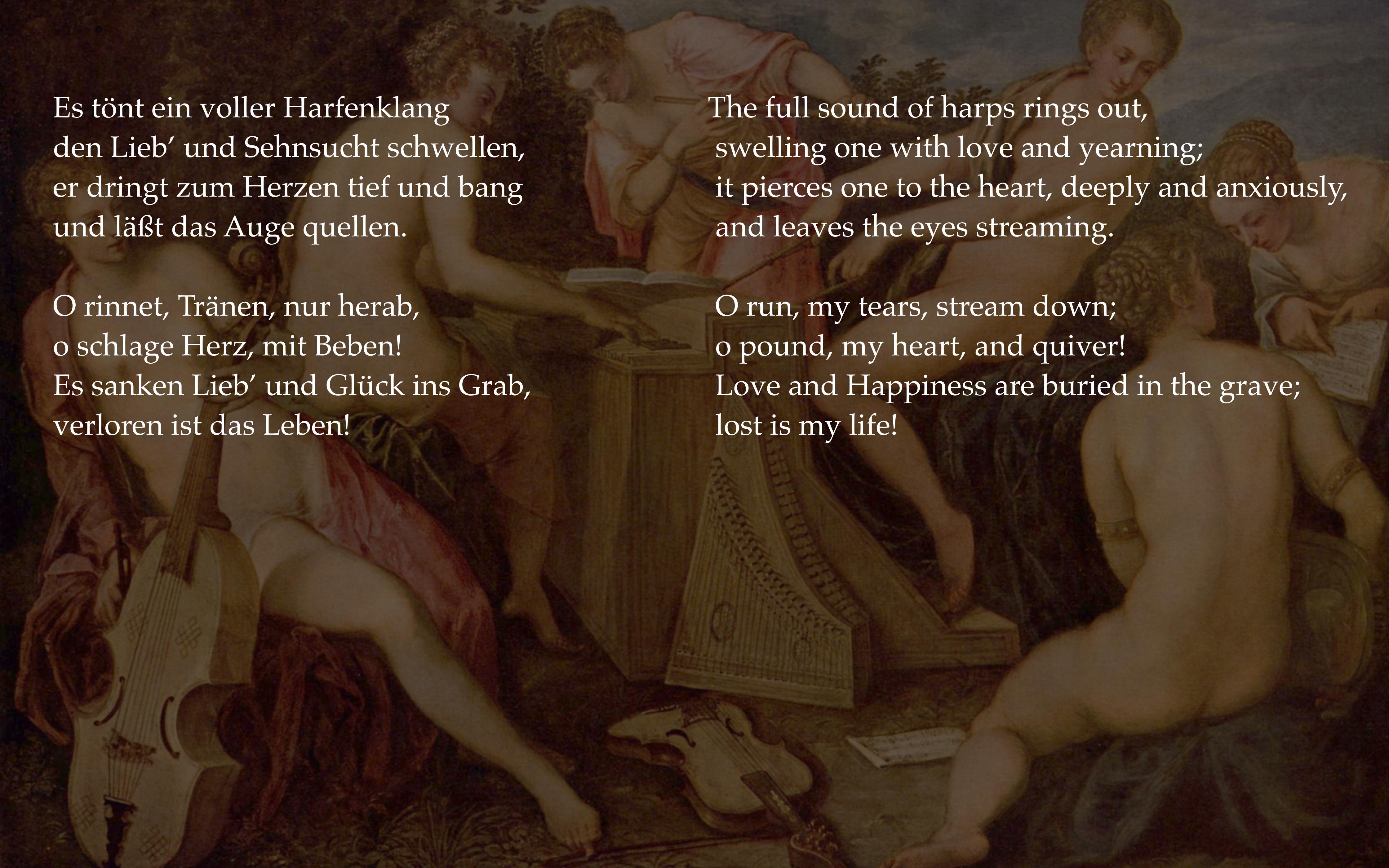
John Eliot Gardiner, conductor | Monteverdi Choir



Among the fine works he wrote for his Hamburg choir we find a set of four songs for female chorus, harp, and two horns.

The first, *Es tönt ein voller Harfenklang*, sets a text by a contemporary poet, Friedrich Ruperti. The first performance was in 1860, during a concert presented by Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim.

Clara wrote in her diary: “They are pearls. How can one help loving such a man?”

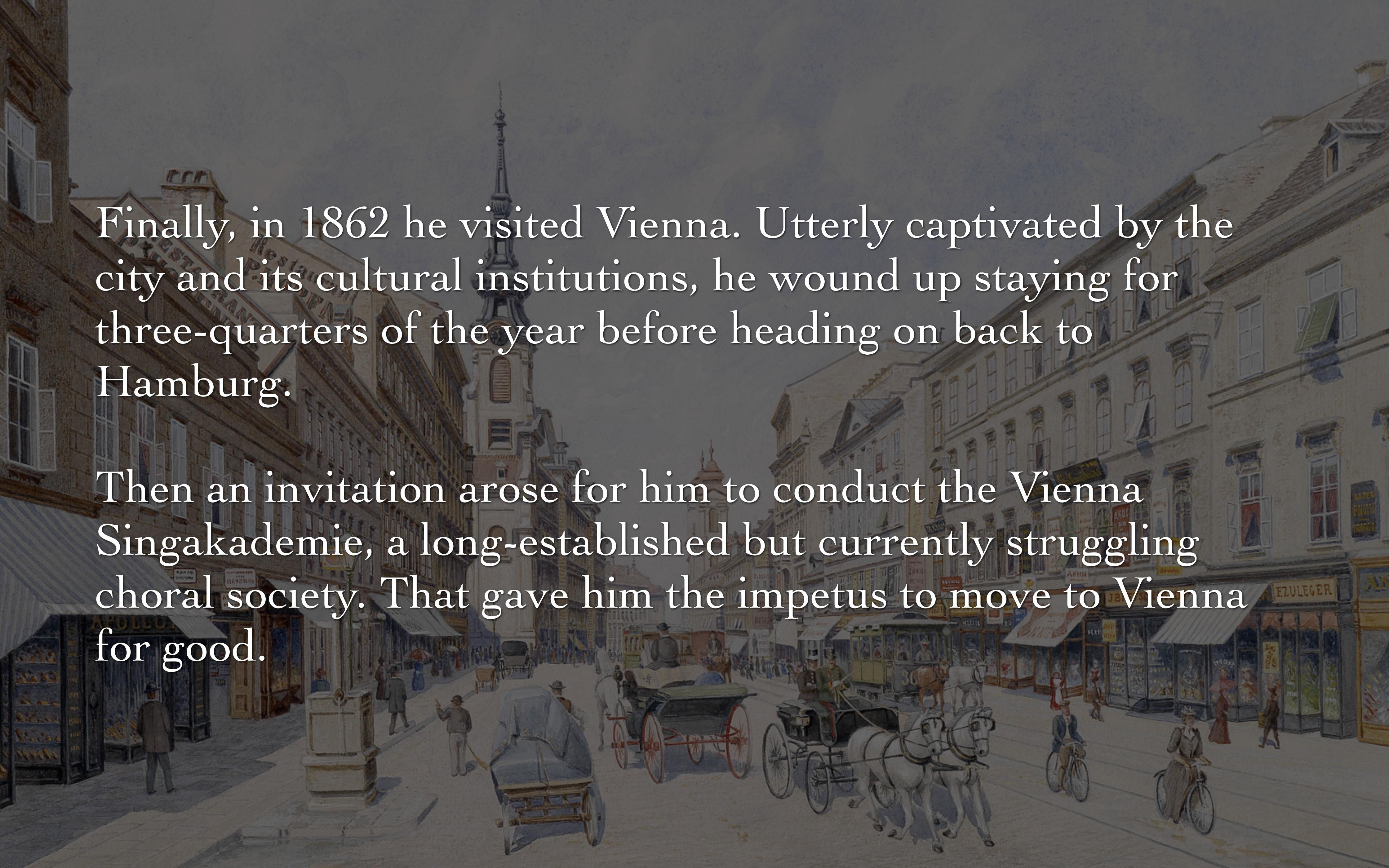
A painting depicting a scene of musical performance. In the foreground, a harpist with curly hair, wearing a pinkish-red dress, plays a large harp. To her right, a violinist with dark hair, wearing a greenish-blue robe, plays a violin. They are positioned on a grassy bank next to a body of water. In the background, a woman in a white dress stands near a building, and another person is visible on the far right.

Es tönt ein voller Harfenklang
den Lieb' und Sehnsucht schwellen,
er dringt zum Herzen tief und bang
und lässt das Auge quellen.

O rinnet, Tränen, nur herab,
o schlage Herz, mit Beben!
Es sanken Lieb' und Glück ins Grab,
verloren ist das Leben!

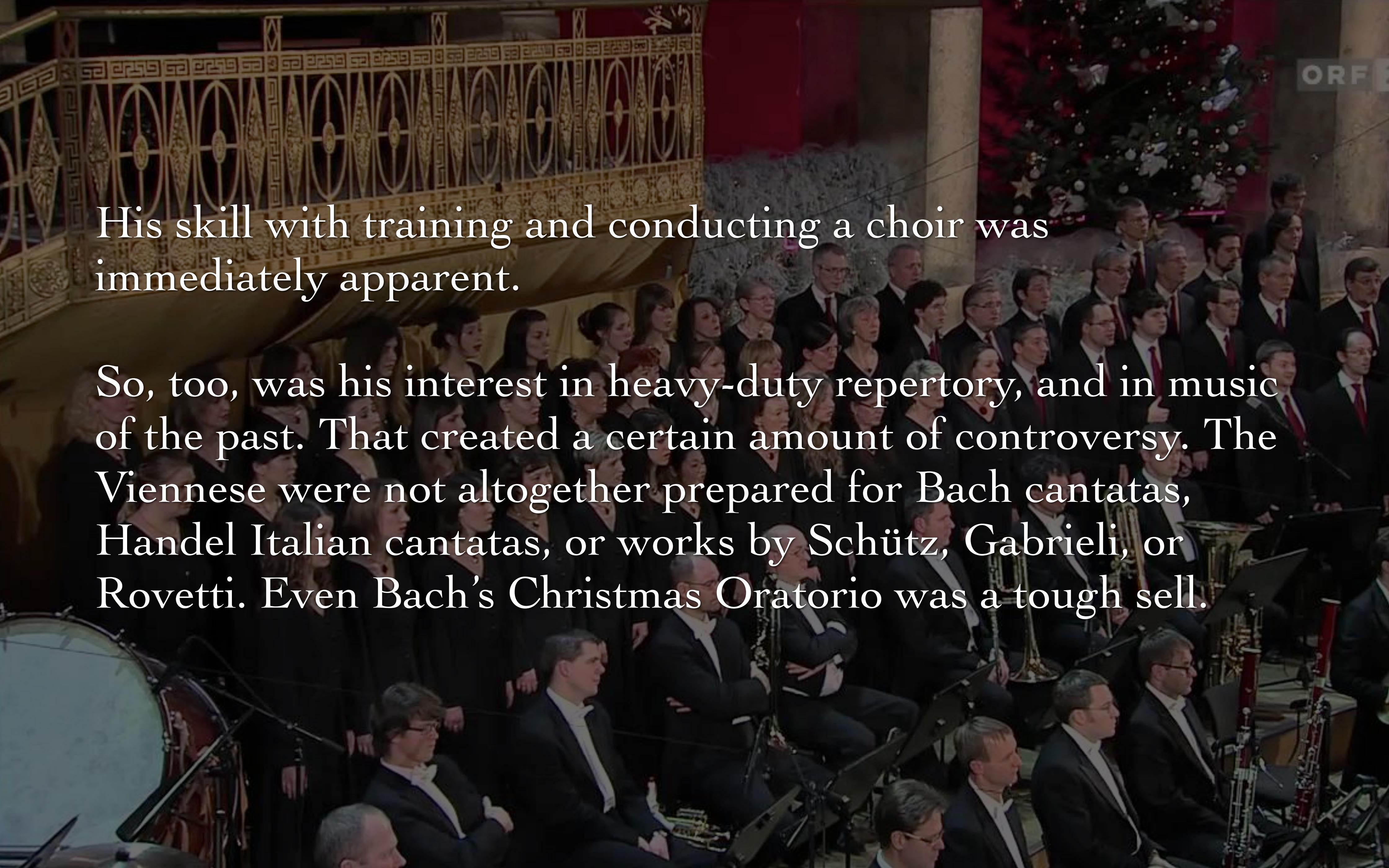
The full sound of harps rings out,
swelling one with love and yearning;
it pierces one to the heart, deeply and anxiously,
and leaves the eyes streaming.

O run, my tears, stream down;
o pound, my heart, and quiver!
Love and Happiness are buried in the grave;
lost is my life!

A historical painting depicting a bustling street scene in Vienna. The foreground shows a wide, paved road filled with various modes of transport: several horse-drawn carriages of different sizes, some with red wheels, a few bicycles, and a man pushing a handcart. Pedestrians in 19th-century clothing walk along the sidewalks. In the background, there are multi-story buildings with numerous windows, some with blue shutters. A tall church spire rises above the rooftops. The overall atmosphere is one of a busy, modern city of the late 1800s.

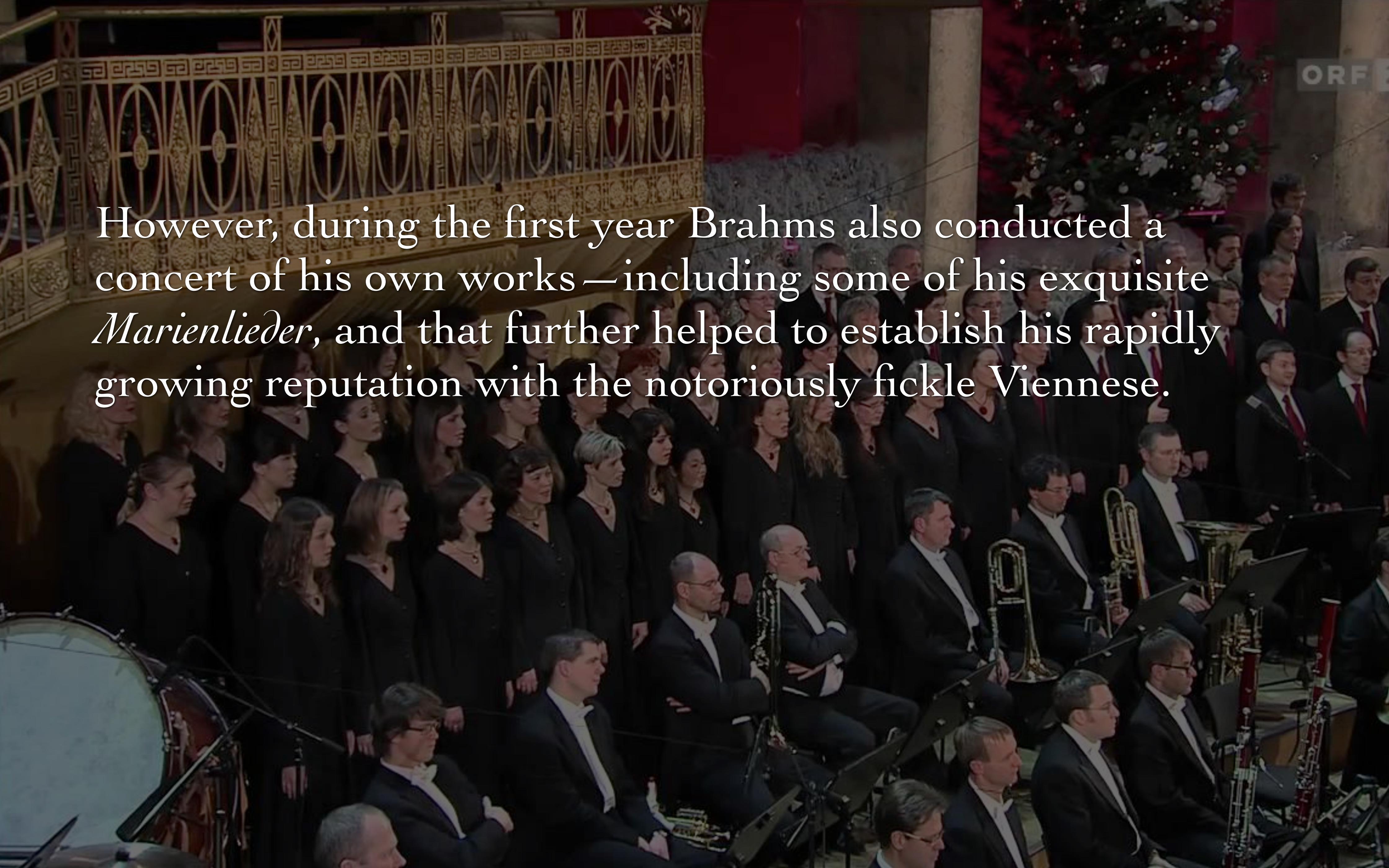
Finally, in 1862 he visited Vienna. Utterly captivated by the city and its cultural institutions, he wound up staying for three-quarters of the year before heading on back to Hamburg.

Then an invitation arose for him to conduct the Vienna Singakademie, a long-established but currently struggling choral society. That gave him the impetus to move to Vienna for good.

A wide-angle photograph of a classical music performance. In the foreground, a large orchestra is visible, with musicians playing various instruments like violins, cellos, and brass. Behind them, a large choir of men and women in dark attire sings. In the background, a large, ornate organ with gold-colored pipes is visible. To the right, a Christmas tree is decorated with lights and ornaments. The overall atmosphere is formal and festive.

His skill with training and conducting a choir was immediately apparent.

So, too, was his interest in heavy-duty repertory, and in music of the past. That created a certain amount of controversy. The Viennese were not altogether prepared for Bach cantatas, Handel Italian cantatas, or works by Schütz, Gabrieli, or Rovetti. Even Bach's Christmas Oratorio was a tough sell.

A photograph of a large-scale musical performance. In the foreground, a brass section is visible, including several tubas and a large drum. Behind them, a large choir of women in black dresses is singing. In the background, a large Christmas tree is decorated with lights and ornaments. The stage has ornate gold-colored railings. A small logo for "ORF" is in the top right corner.

However, during the first year Brahms also conducted a concert of his own works — including some of his exquisite *Marienlieder*, and that further helped to establish his rapidly growing reputation with the notoriously fickle Viennese.



Marienlieder, Op. 22: Der Jäger

Chor des Norddeutschen Rundfunks



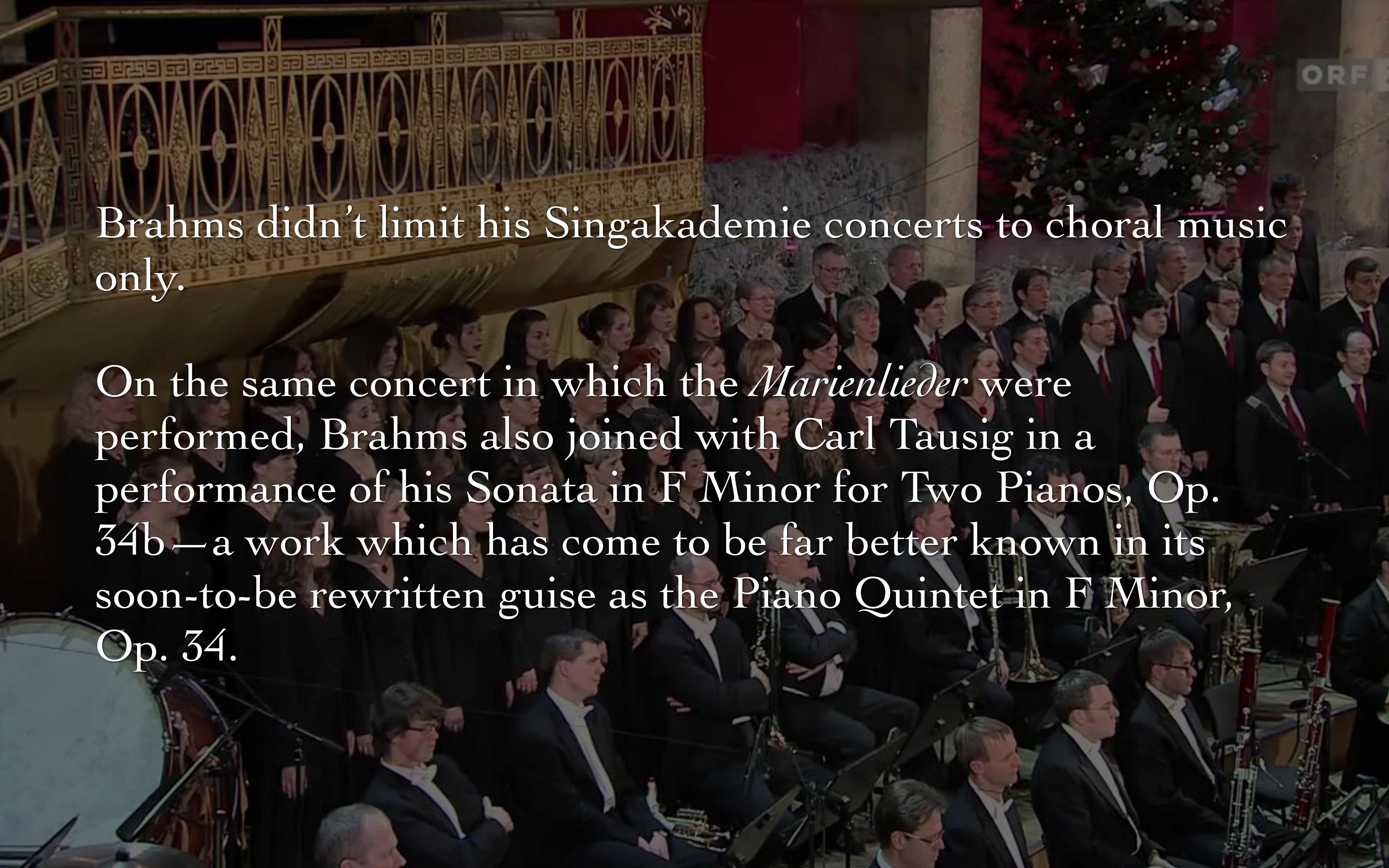
Marienlieder, Op. 22: Magdalen

Chor des Norddeutschen Rundfunks



Marienlieder, Op. 22: Marias Lob

Chor des Norddeutschen Rundfunks



Brahms didn't limit his Singakademie concerts to choral music only.

On the same concert in which the *Marienlieder* were performed, Brahms also joined with Carl Tausig in a performance of his Sonata in F Minor for Two Pianos, Op. 34b — a work which has come to be far better known in its soon-to-be rewritten guise as the Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34.



Sonata for Two Pianos, Op. 34b: III

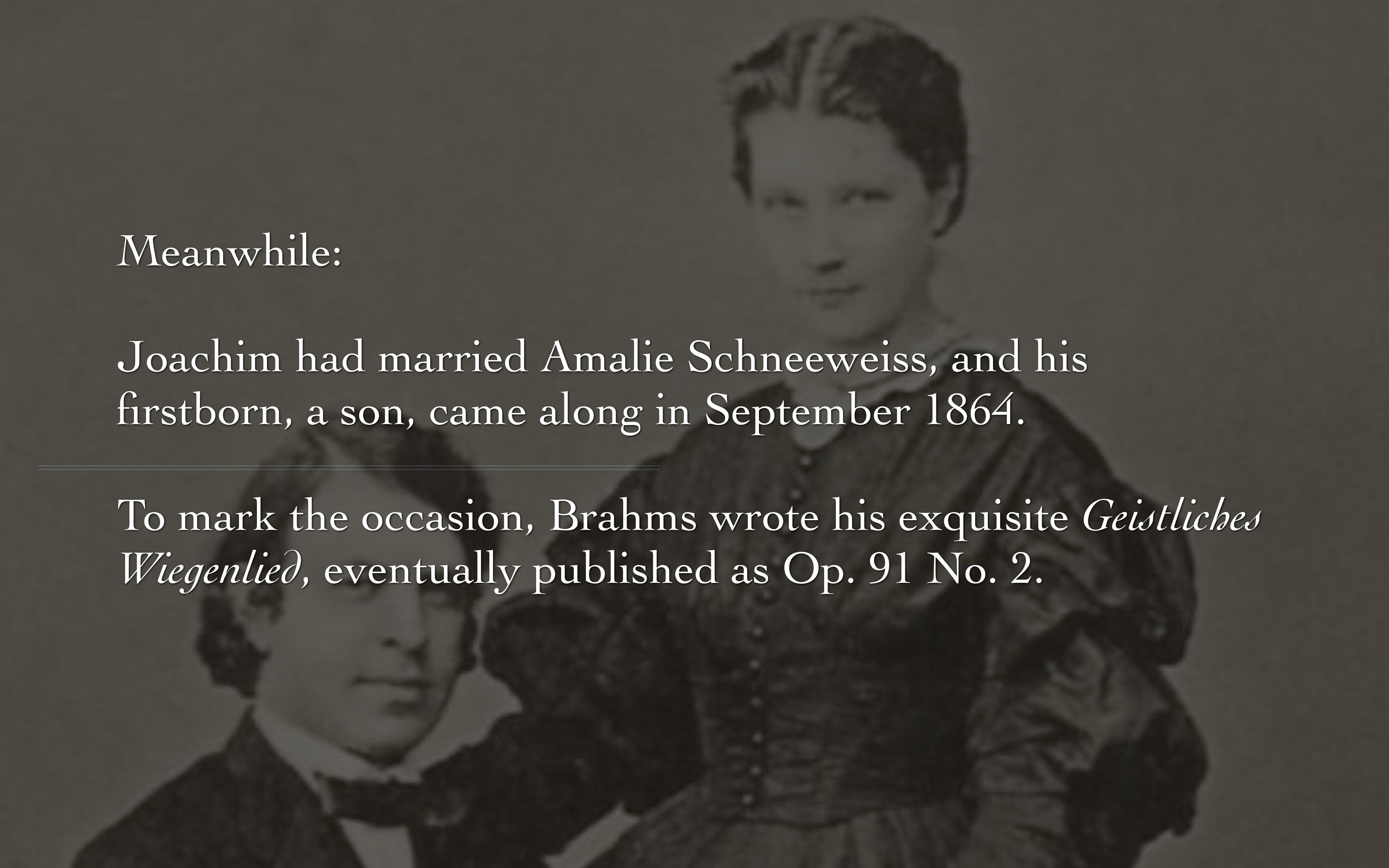
Alfons and Aloys Kontarsky



Among the new friends and acquaintances in Vienna was none other than Russian poet, playwright, and novelist Ivan Turgenev.

Turgenev and Brahms seriously discussed the possibility of writing an opera together — which rather gives the lie to the old canard about Brahms being indifferent to opera.

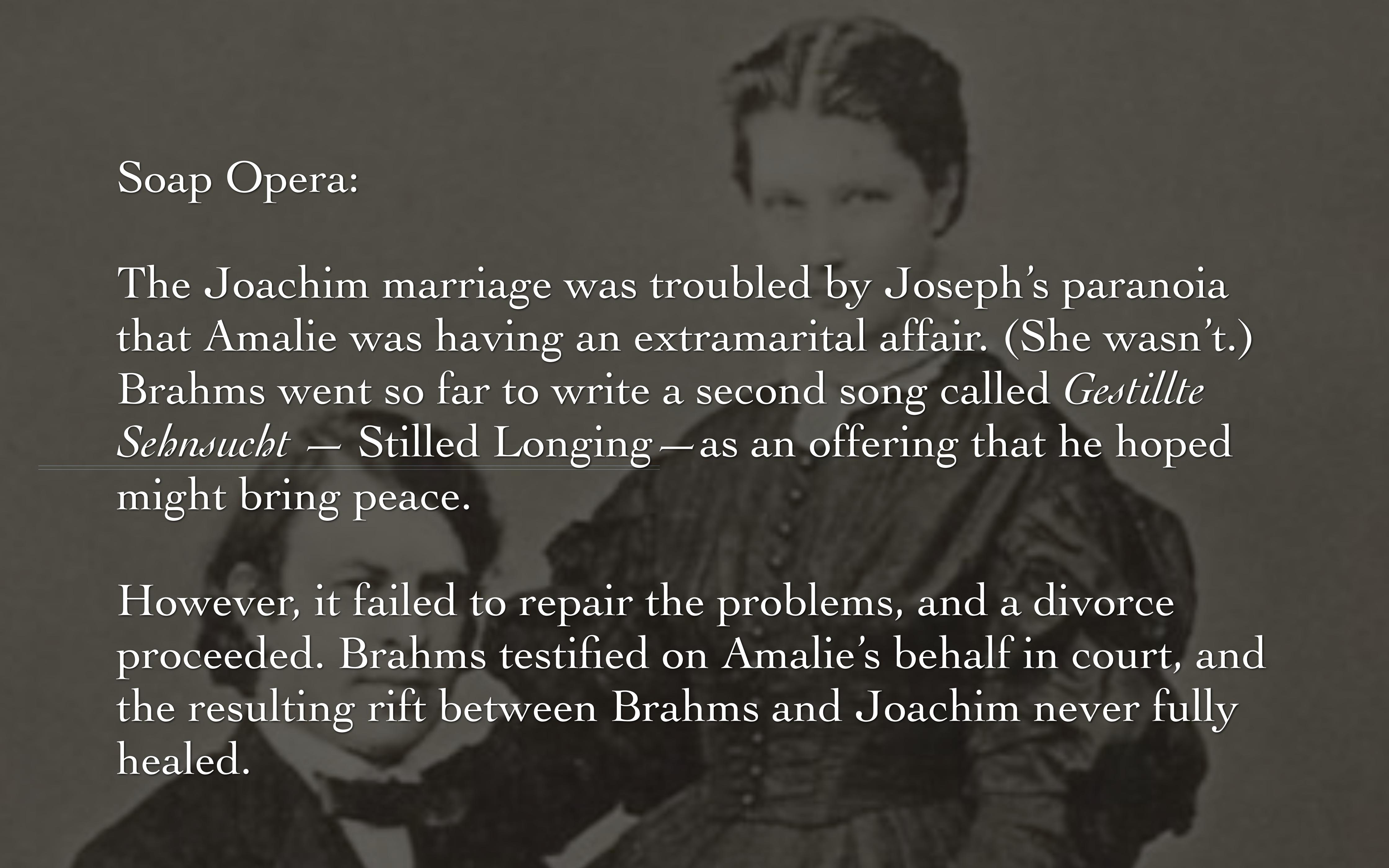
However, nothing came of the project.



Meanwhile:

Joachim had married Amalie Schneeweiss, and his firstborn, a son, came along in September 1864.

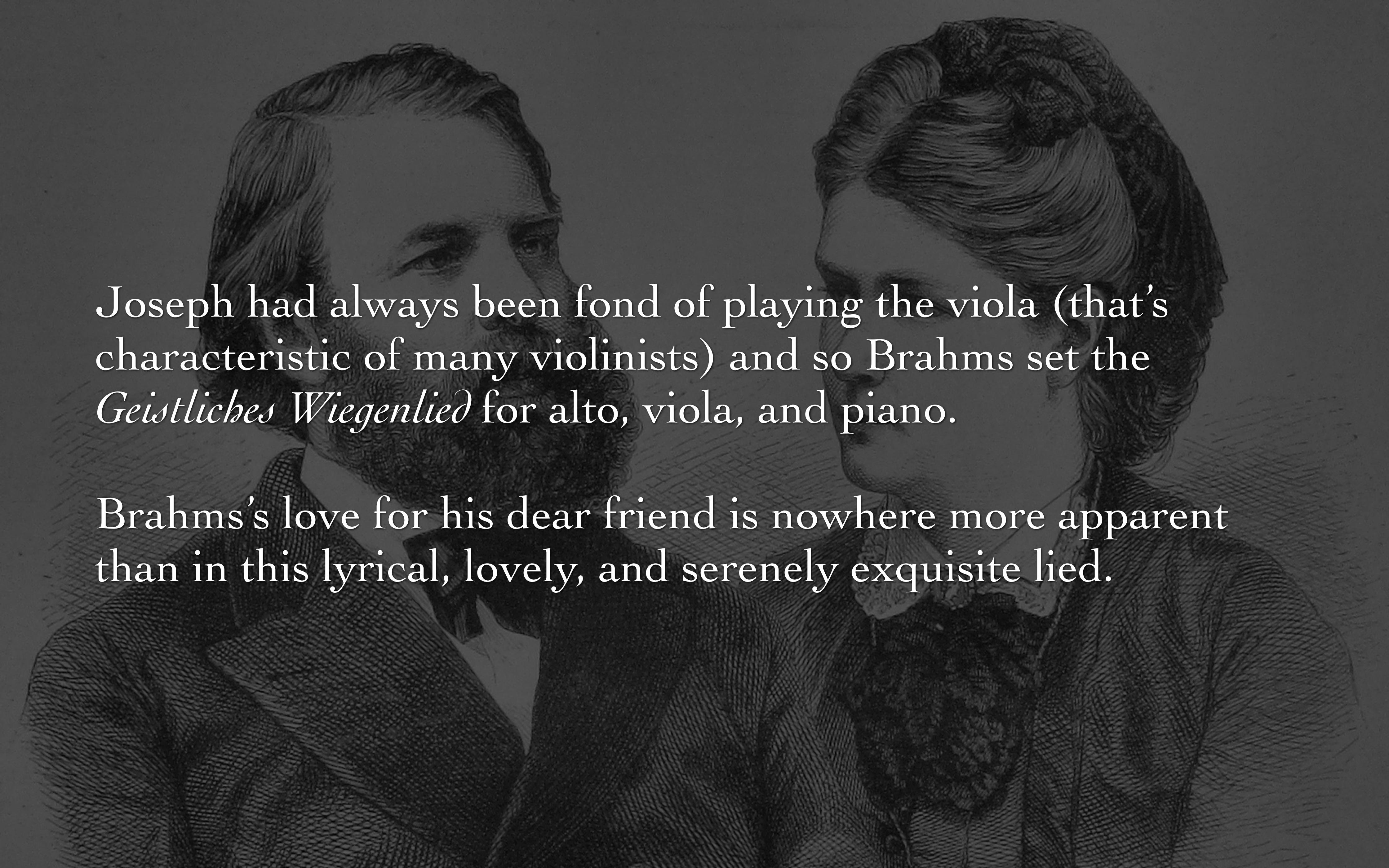
To mark the occasion, Brahms wrote his exquisite *Geistliches Wiegenlied*, eventually published as Op. 91 No. 2.



Soap Opera:

The Joachim marriage was troubled by Joseph's paranoia that Amalie was having an extramarital affair. (She wasn't.) Brahms went so far to write a second song called *Gestillte Sehnsucht* — Stilled Longing — as an offering that he hoped might bring peace.

However, it failed to repair the problems, and a divorce proceeded. Brahms testified on Amalie's behalf in court, and the resulting rift between Brahms and Joachim never fully healed.



Joseph had always been fond of playing the viola (that's characteristic of many violinists) and so Brahms set the *Geistliches Wiegenlied* for alto, viola, and piano.

Brahms's love for his dear friend is nowhere more apparent than in this lyrical, lovely, and serenely exquisite lied.



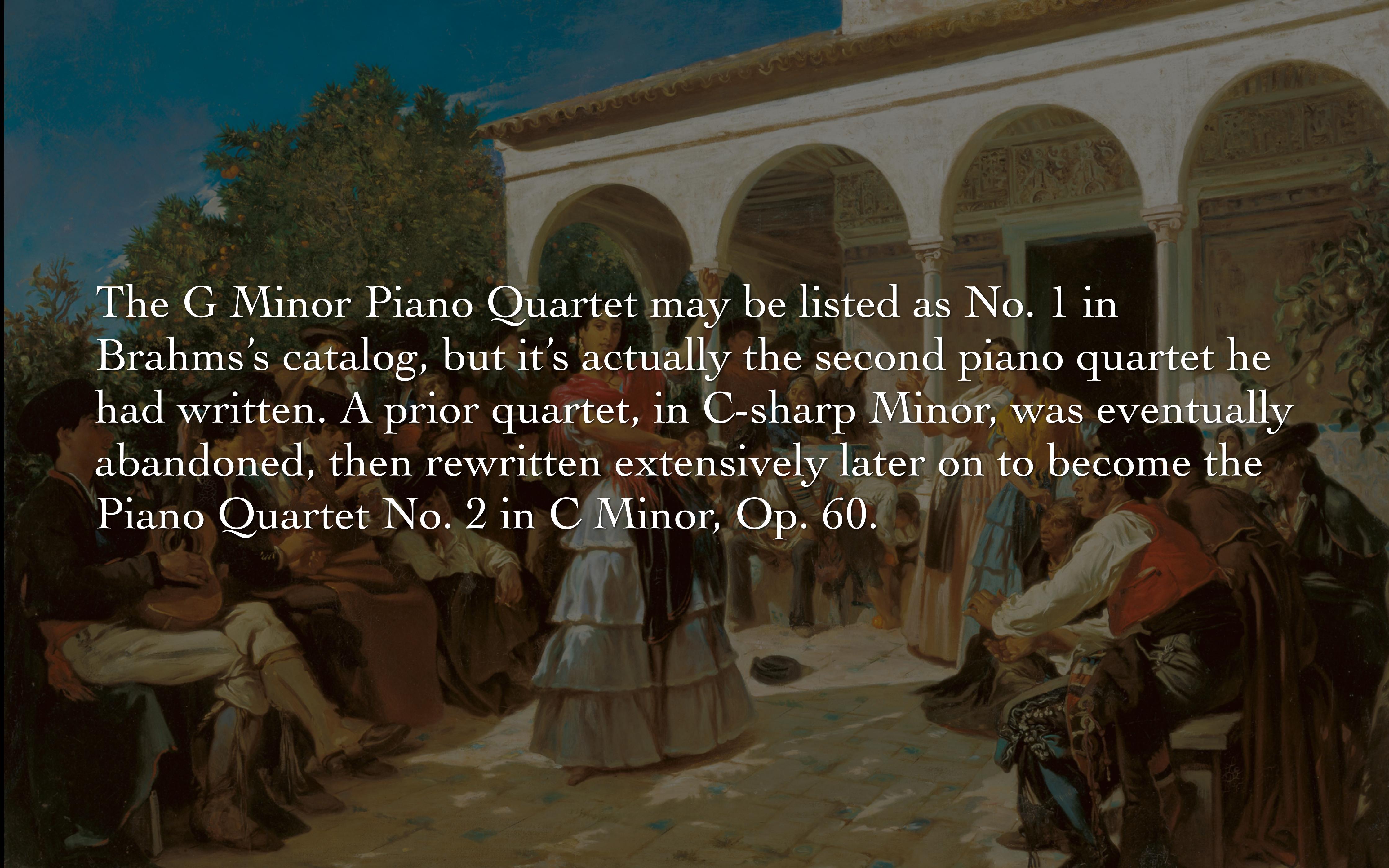
Geistliches Wiegenlied, Op. 91 No. 2

Jessye Norman, voice || Daniel Barenboim, piano || Wolfram Christ, viola

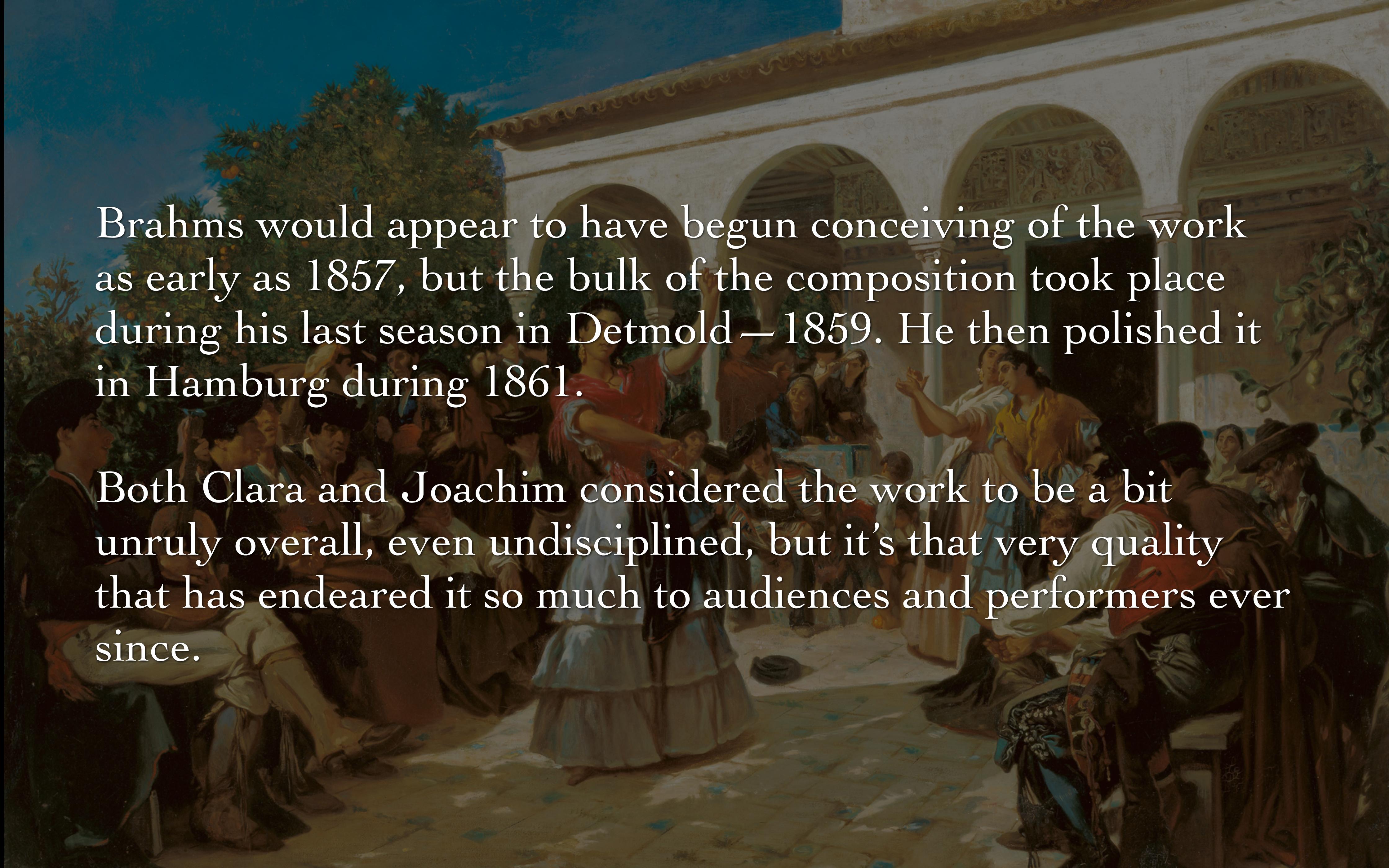


Piano Quartet in G Minor, Op. 25: IV

Thomas Brandis, violin | | Ottomar Borwitzky, cello | | Wolfram Christ, viola | | Tamás Vásáry, piano

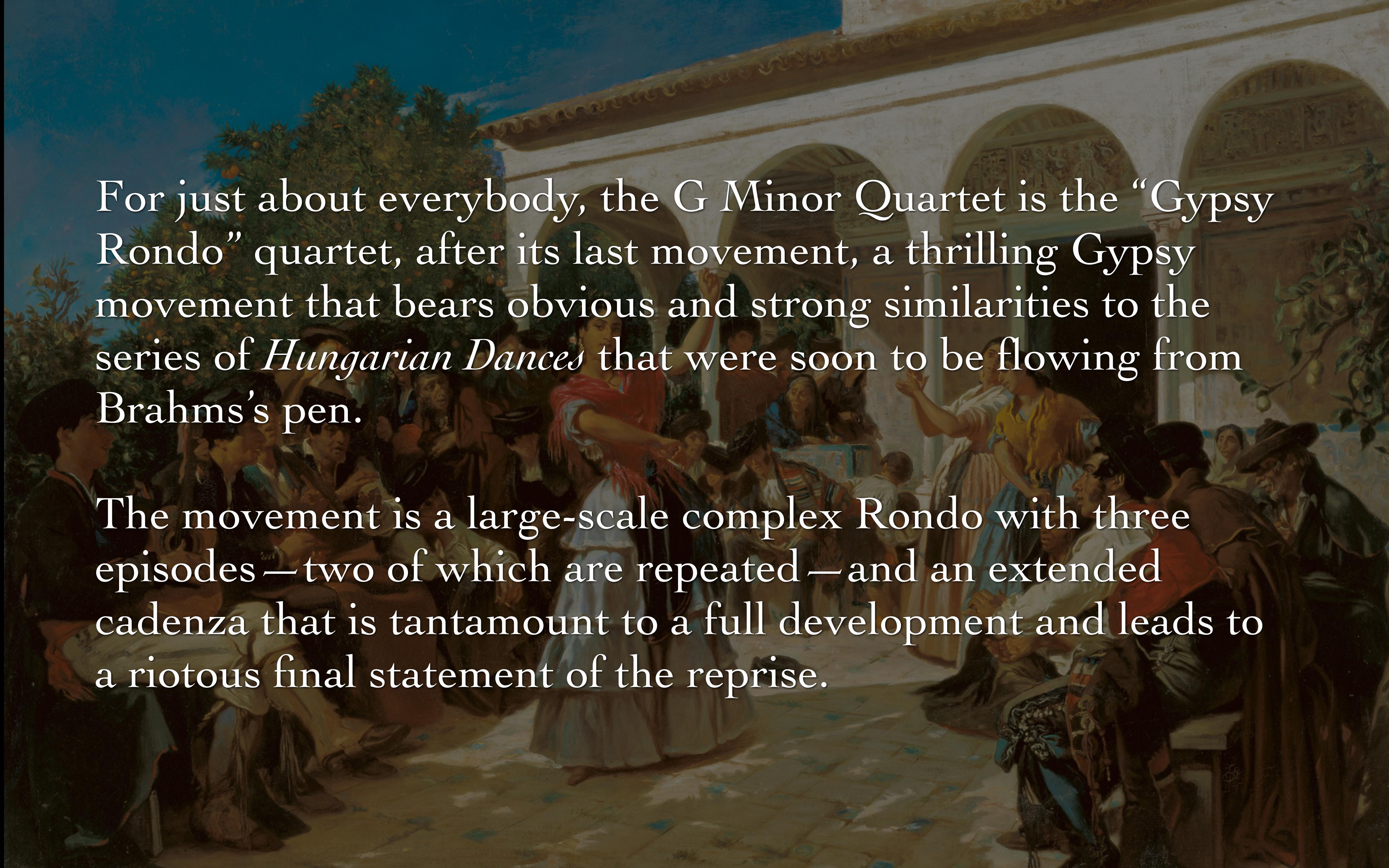
A painting depicting a group of people in a courtyard setting. In the foreground, a woman in a blue dress and a man in a red vest are prominent. The background features a building with arched windows and lush greenery. The scene is rendered in a painterly style with visible brushstrokes.

The G Minor Piano Quartet may be listed as No. 1 in Brahms's catalog, but it's actually the second piano quartet he had written. A prior quartet, in C-sharp Minor, was eventually abandoned, then rewritten extensively later on to become the Piano Quartet No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 60.

A painting depicting a vibrant outdoor dance scene. In the center, a woman in a red dress holds a long, thin object, possibly a ruyan or a fan. She is surrounded by men in various colored shirts and trousers, some in traditional styles. The background features a building with arched windows and lush greenery, including orange and lemon trees. The overall atmosphere is one of a traditional celebration or festival.

Brahms would appear to have begun conceiving of the work as early as 1857, but the bulk of the composition took place during his last season in Detmold – 1859. He then polished it in Hamburg during 1861.

Both Clara and Joachim considered the work to be a bit unruly overall, even undisciplined, but it's that very quality that has endeared it so much to audiences and performers ever since.

A painting depicting a lively gypsy dance. In the center, a woman in a red dress with a white shawl is performing a dynamic pose, her right arm raised and hand open. Around her, several other figures in traditional gypsy attire—men in hats and women in colorful dresses—dance in a circle. The setting appears to be an outdoor courtyard or a festive gathering, with a building featuring arched windows and a balcony in the background. The overall atmosphere is one of energy and celebration.

For just about everybody, the G Minor Quartet is the “Gypsy Rondo” quartet, after its last movement, a thrilling Gypsy movement that bears obvious and strong similarities to the series of *Hungarian Dances* that were soon to be flowing from Brahms’s pen.

The movement is a large-scale complex Rondo with three episodes—two of which are repeated—and an extended cadenza that is tantamount to a full development and leads to a riotous final statement of the reprise.





Reprise

- a* Gypsy theme, piano “pedal” note
- b* Whirring, descending line
- a* Gypsy theme
- c* Piano alternates with strings
- b* Whirring line
- a* Gypsy theme