Johannes BRAHMS



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 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' œuvre.

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.



B r a h m s *— c.1890*

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**

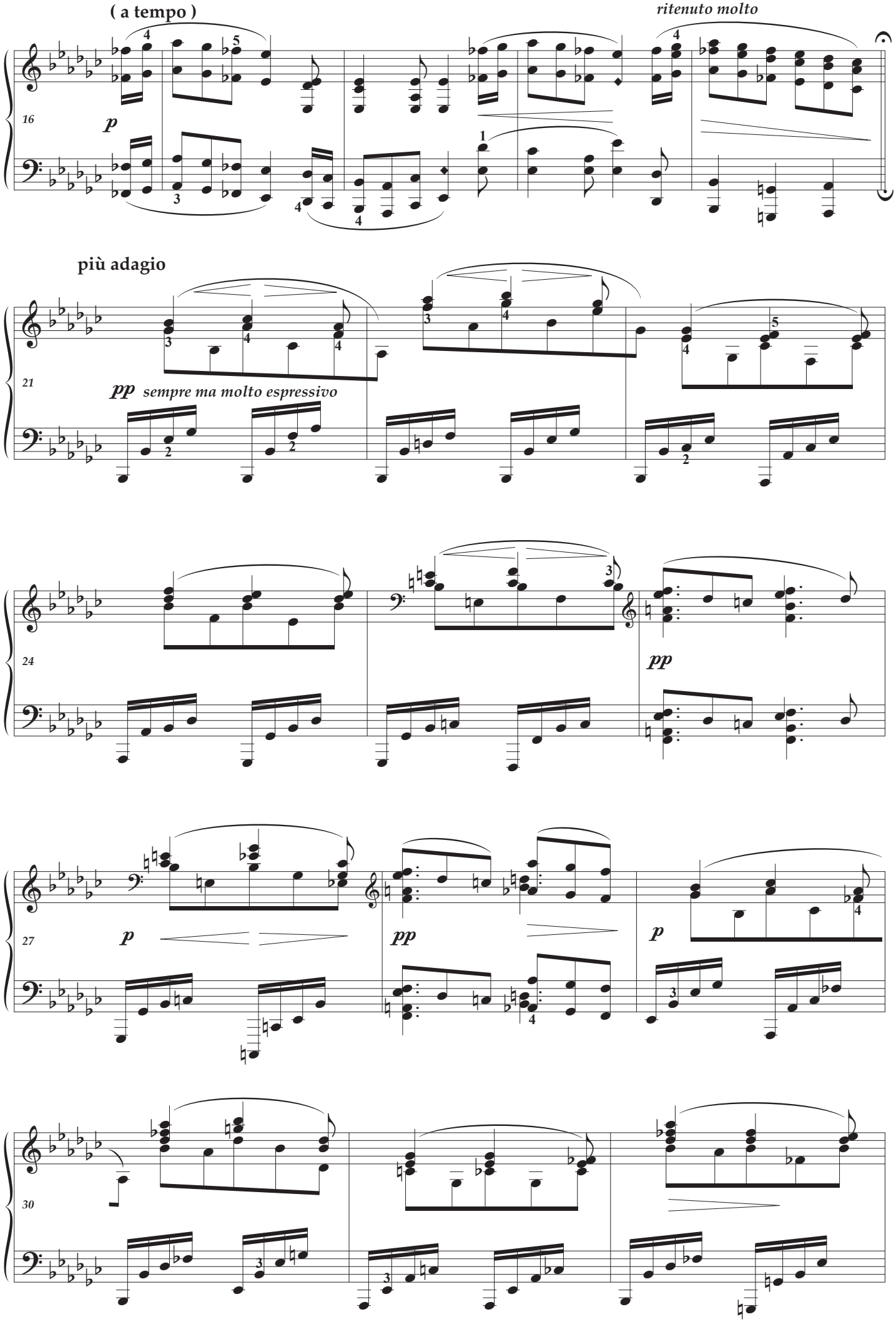
69 acciaccatura simultaneously with the bass

INTERMEZZO

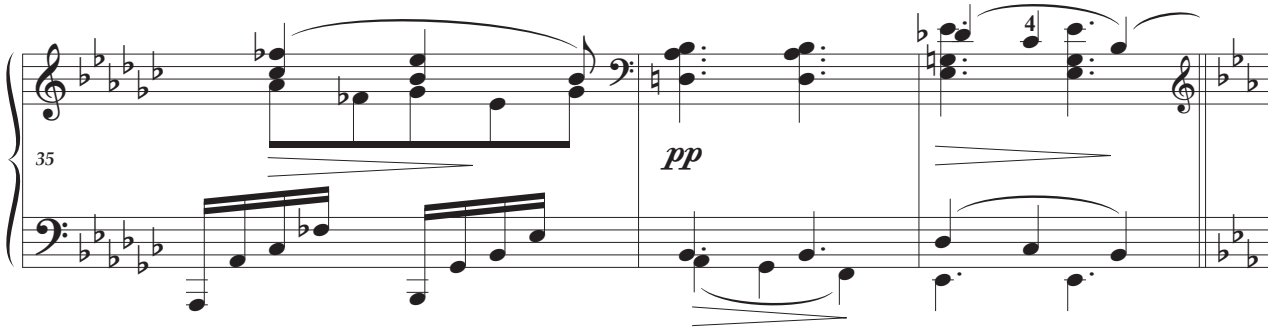
Schlaf sanft, mein Kind, schlaf sanft und schön!
Mich dauert's sehr, dich weinen sehn.

andante moderato



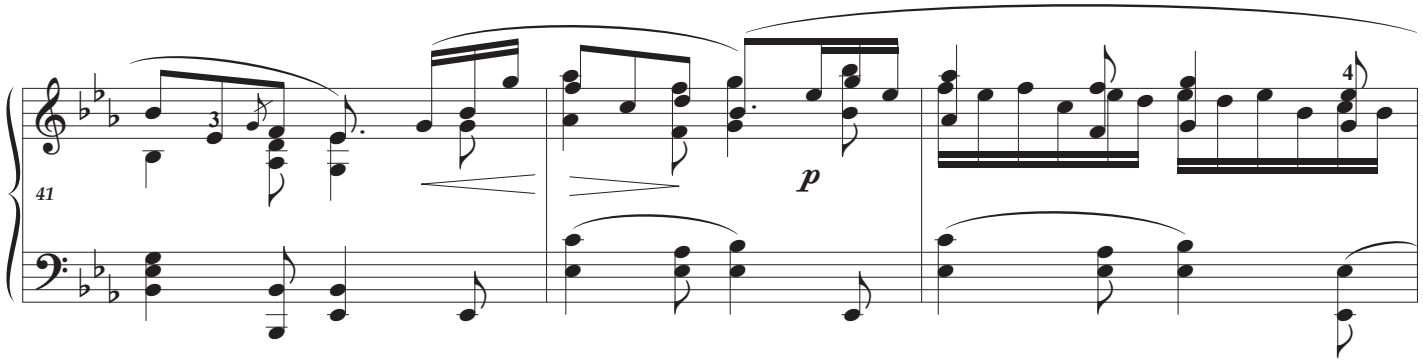

(a tempo)
ritenuto molto
16
p
più adagio
21
pp sempre ma molto espressivo
24
pp
27
p
pp
p
30





un poco più andante








46
dolce
49
dolce
ritenuto
espressivo
52
rf
ritardando
55
Ped.

INTERMEZZO

andante non troppo e con molto espressione




12
15
diminuendo
18
diminuendo
ritenuto
21
p
24
legato espressivo e sostenuto


ritenuto - - - -
28
p dolce
32
espressivo e sostenuto
editorial
ossia
*
ritenuto - - - -
36
f
p dolce
40


43
p
m.s.
m.d.
diminuendo
46
pp
49
dolce
52
p


55
58
pp
Ped.
Ped.
crescendo
61
sempre crescendo
64
f
67
*
f


ritenuto
70
più adagio
dolce
72
p
rf
Ped.
Ped.
legato espressivo
diminuendo
76
f
ritardando molto
79
83
p
pp
Ped.

INTERMEZZO

andante con moto




20
p sempre sotto voce
24
28
pp
32
ritenuto - - - - -
36

poco più lento

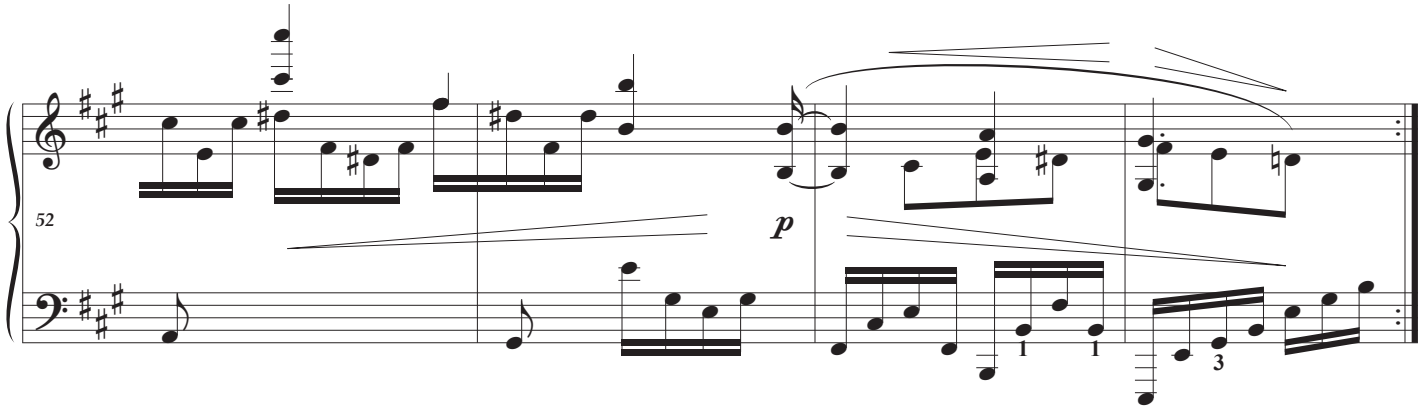




più moto ed espressivo








55
f
60
p
64
f
p
sempre
68
pp
p
72
1


ritenuto
tempo primo
pp
76
poco ritenuto
pp
79
ritenuto
p
82
85
poco
crescendo
88


91
f
94
pp
legato
98
p
ritenuto
più lento
102
ritardando molto e egualemente
106
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

3 Intermezzi opus 117

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