String Sextet No. 2 in G major, Johannes Brahms
Novye Shoes, Agatha Belaya

Johannes Brahms wrote this hauntingly beautiful piece of music to express his experiences with love. In the period of his life before he wrote this piece, he had been very much in love with two women: first, Clara Schumann, the wife of his good friend (then deceased) Robert Schumann; second, Agathe von Siebold, a singer to whom he was engaged to be married. Both of these relationships ended in sadness.

Brahms broke off both of these relationships in a state of clouded confusion and fear. He was worried about the strains of supporting a wife, and he was also disgusted by the potential "pity" in which his wife would have for an unsuccessful husband. His love was tangled by his fear and pride, and all of his plans for love were foiled by his own mind and hand.

It seems the only way Brahms could be open and free in love was to express it in his music. In this piece, Brahms included a yearning melody that he had previously put in a letter to Clara, not daring further to articulate his love for her. This theme, heard in its entirety during the slow movement, pervades the entire work. In the first movement's climax, Brahms traces his lost love's name: A-G-A-H-E (the 'H' in German denoting B natural.) As though to accentuate the mixed feelings associated with both women, the first movement is mercurial and enigmatic, a quality heightened by the viola's unsettling semitones.

Observe the painting by surrealist painter, Agatha Belaya. Look at the movement and listen to how the music moves within the painting. Pay attention to the colors--how do they make you feel? Pay attention to the sense of mystery and surprise.

Imagine now that the woman has spent time meticulously placing and arranging the flowers in the vase--only to be blown over. Such are our own plans! Meticulously laid. Plans of love. Plans of achievement. What comes to knock down our own designs, and how do we react to such a wind?

Ask yourself:
What have I been laying plans for or arranging lately? Are my plans a distraction from reality?

What about my openness to surprise and change?

Have I been open to love? Or too full of pride to be open?

How can I become open again?

How can I answer the call to transformation (concretely)?

How am I being awakened?