



Johannes Brahms: The Complete Chamber Music for Clarinet

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RECORD REVIEW

Just as Mozart was inspired, toward the end of his short life, by a clarinettist, so Brahms, near the end of his, and after his self-imposed retirement from composing, was seduced by the playing of another. Richard Mühlfeld had entered the Meiningen Court Orchestra as a violinist, but he later taught himself to play what was still a relatively new instrument, and his skill as a clarinettist seems to have been at least one of the factors that stimulated Brahms into returning to composition.

Brahms wrote four works for the clarinet, all of which are to be found on these two discs. The Trio and Quintet were both completed during the summer of 1891. The wonderful series of short, solo piano works (Opp. 116-19) followed, after which Brahms composed the two sonatas, a form that barely existed previously. By turns lyrical and dramatic, the Trio, Op. 114 lacks both the autumnal quality of the Quintet and the sombre melancholy of much of the piano music that was to follow. The first movement is as notable for the intricacy of its structure and its mastery of instrumental timbre as it is for the beauty of its themes. Wonders abound, though, not least the magical way Brahms harnesses a series of scales to bring about the close of the movement. The nocturnal slow movement is not without its darker moments; it is followed by a waltz-like scherzo. The finale is rapid, sometimes turbulent, and with more than a trace of Hungarian folk influence. In spite of all this energy the work ends firmly in the minor key.

The Quintet, one of the glories of the chamber music repertoire, has proved the more popular work. It opens with four bars of music for the strings which provide much of the thematic material of the movement. The clarinet melody that follows is directly derived from this, and has something of the improvisatory quality of the late piano pieces. The work as a whole, despite the forces required, shares their intimacy and inward quality. There is certainly a feeling of the composer looking back in this work, though Brahms was such an 'absolute' composer that it seems presumptuous to suggest this. Yet the clarinet's imitation of a Hungarian gypsy instrument in the middle section of the slow movement is surely part of it, and the masterly return, totally natural and inevitable, of the opening theme at the end of the work makes for music that is as poignant as any you are likely to hear.

The focal point of this collection is the Spanish clarinettist Laura Ruiz Ferreres. Photos of her are given pride of place in the packaging, but she needs no special pleading, as she is a superb player. All the attributes of a fine clarinettist are there – agility, lovely woody tone in the lower register, rising through a rich middle to a piercing top – and these are allied with a most satisfying musical sense. She is joined in the sonatas by pianist Christoph Berner, who plays alongside cellist Danjulo Ishizaka in the Trio. I can do no better than to say that they make a most unified team. The Mandelring Quartett has made several recordings for Audite and its

performance of the Quintet maintains previous high standards. The performance underlines Brahms's skill in integrating a wind instrument into the sound of a string quartet, with textures beautifully balanced and each instrumentalist aware of his or her role in the ensemble. Pacing is just right too, with a global view of the work that leads to a particularly successful performance of the sometimes problematical finale, and a most moving final coda. The performance cannot efface memories of one or two classic performances from the past – why should it? – but a previously admired performance, live, from Sabine Meyer and the Alban Berg Quartet now seems bland by comparison.

The first movement of the F minor Sonata is marked 'Allegro appassionato' and there is certainly plenty of passion in this performance. This is very expressive playing, emphasizing the romantic over the classical. Both players are very faithful to the score, and their feeling for the music comes across powerfully whilst remaining apparently spontaneous. The final appearance of the main theme of the slow movement is played in exquisite piano by Ruiz Ferreres. Only in the scherzo did I occasionally feel that a slightly more affectionate approach to phrasing might have paid dividends, though I prefer to draw attention to the way in which the clarinetist delivers the subtle tracery that is the accompanying passages whilst at the same time investing the notes with real meaning and purpose. The finale sets off at a cracking pace and the high spirits – Brahmsian high spirits, that is – are tossed off with utter conviction.

The glorious opening melody of the E flat major Sonata is delivered in Ruiz Ferreres's most singing tone and it is perfectly matched at the piano by Berner. The whole movement is a most successful realization of Brahms's charming tempo indication, 'Allegro amabile', with a particularly touching tranquillo close. The middle movement goes splendidly, its central section properly sombre and almost church-like. The gurgling, liquid sound from the clarinet in the third variation in the finale is another high spot of this outstanding performance, one of four that can be confidently recommended.