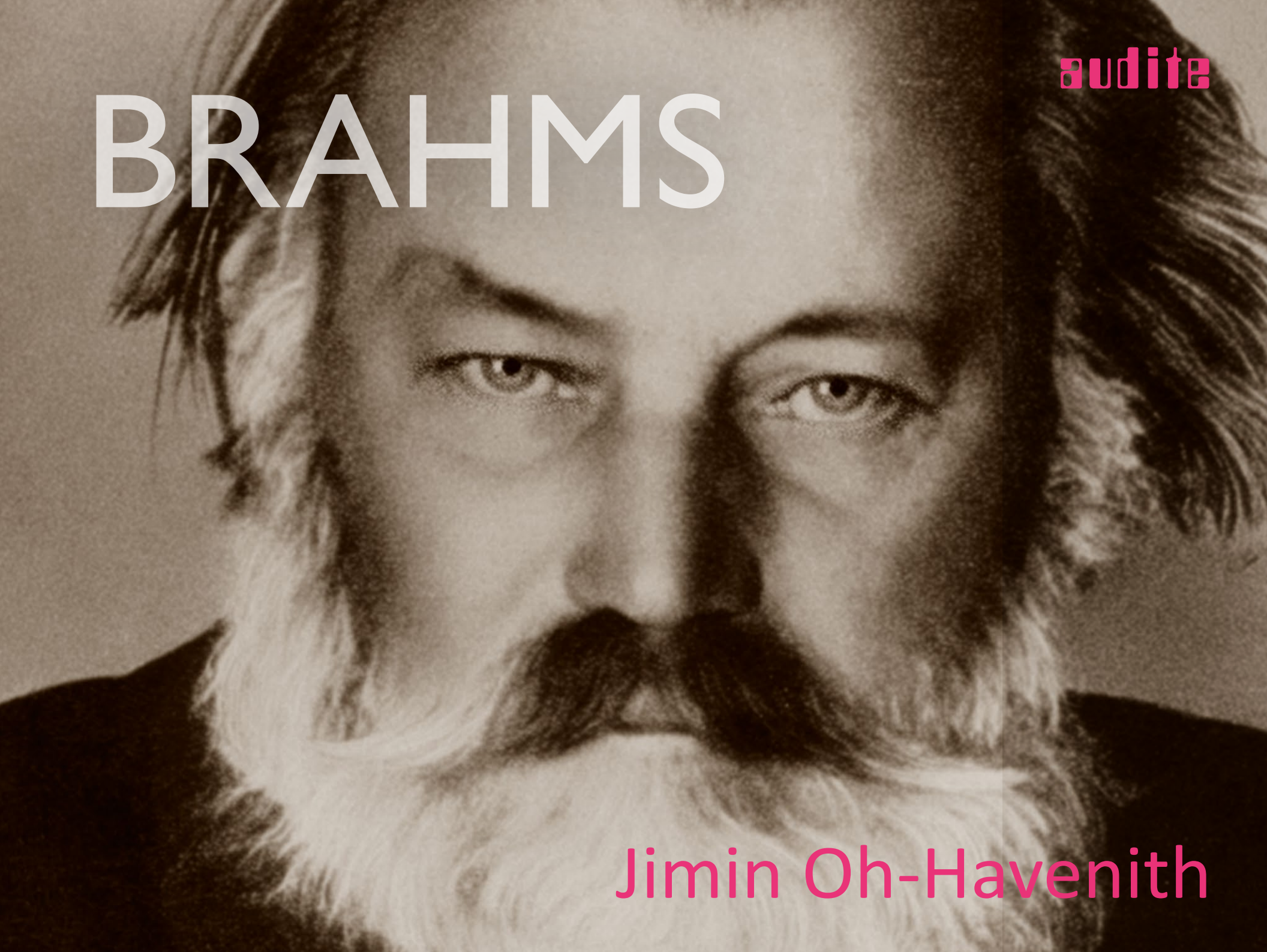
audite
BRAHMS
Jimin Oh-Havenith

audite

Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Händel op. 24

Aria *1:02*
Var. I *0:57*
Var. II. Animato *0:45*
Var. III. Dolce *0:42*
Var. IV. Risoluto *0:50*
Var. V. Espressivo *1:11*
Var. VI *1:16*
Var. VII. Con vivacità *0:44*
Var. VIII *0:44*
Var. IX. Poco sostenuto *1:14*
Var. X. Energico *0:39*
Var. XI. Dolce *0:57*
Var. XII. Soave *1:05*
Var. XIII. Largamente, ma non più *1:39*
Var. XIV. Sciolto *0:44*
Var. XV *0:53*
Var. XVI. Ma marcato *0:44*
Var. XVII. Più mosso *0:35*
Var. XVIII. Grazioso *1:09*
Var. XIX. Leggiero e vivace *1:08*
Var. XX. Legato *1:15*
Var. XXI. Dolce *0:48*
Var. XXII *0:59*
Var. XXIII. Vivace e staccato *0:33*
Var. XXIV *0:36*
Var. XXV *0:46*
Fuga *7:03*

Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann op. 9

Thema. Ziemlich langsam *1:30*
Var. 1 *1:25*
Var. 2. Poco più moto, espressivo *0:30*
Var. 3. Tempo di tema *1:16*
Var. 4. Poco più moto, espressivo legato *0:43*
Var. 5. Allegro capriccioso *0:56*
Var. 6. Allegro *0:55*
Var. 7. Andante *0:57*
Var. 8. Andante (non troppo lento), espressivo *1:46*
Var. 9. Schnell *0:36*
Var. 10. Poco adagio, espressivo dolce *1:42*
Var. 11. Un poco più animato *0:52*
Var. 12. Allegretto, poco scherzando, staccato e leggiero *0:42*
Var. 13. Non troppo Presto, molto leggiero *0:45*
Var. 14. Andante, espressivo *0:57*
Var. 15. Poco adagio, espressivo *1:36*
Var. 16 *3:10*

Variationen über ein eigenes Thema op. 21 Nr. 1

Thema. Poco larghetto, poco forte, molto espressivo e legato *1:25*
Var. 1. Molto piano e legato *1:23*
Var. 2. Più moto, espressivo *0:59*
Var. 3. Dolce *1:04*
Var. 4. Dolce *0:51*
Var. 5. Tempo di tema, canone in moto contrario, molto dolce, teneramente *1:40*
Var. 6. Più moto, espressivo, legato *1:14*
Var. 7. Andante con moto, dolce *1:05*
Var. 8. Allegro non troppo, poco forte *0:56*
Var. 9 *1:39*
Var. 10. Espressivo agitato *1:10*
Var. 11. Tempo di tema, poco più lento, dolce *3:45*

audite

Chaconne von J.S. Bach,
für die linke Hand allein bearbeitet
Studien für Pianoforte
Nr. 5 Anh. Ia/1 *17:10*

Vier Balladen op. 10

Nr. 1 d-Moll. Andante *4:27*
Nr. 2 D-Dur. Andante, espressivo e dolce *7:12*
Nr. 3 h-Moll. Intermezzo. Allegro *4:42*
Nr. 4 H-Dur. Andante con moto, espressivo *9:15*

Zwei Rhapsodien op. 79

Nr. 1 h-Moll. Agitato *10:13*
Nr. 2 g-Moll. Molto passionato, ma non troppo allegro *6:24*

Walzer op. 39

Nr. 1 H-Dur. Tempo giusto *0:57*
Nr. 2 E-Dur *1:27*
Nr. 3 gis-Moll *0:49*
Nr. 4 e-Moll. Poco sostenuto *1:14*
Nr. 5 E-Dur. Grazioso *1:16*
Nr. 6 Cis-Dur. Vivace *1:11*
Nr. 7 cis-Moll. Poco più andante *2:00*
Nr. 8 B-Dur *1:34*
Nr. 9 d-Moll *1:12*
Nr. 10 G-Dur *0:44*
Nr. 11 h-Moll *1:38*
Nr. 12 E-Dur *1:26*
Nr. 13 H-Dur *0:46*
Nr. 14 gis-Moll *1:44*
Nr. 15 As-Dur *1:25*
Nr. 16 cis-Moll *1:13*

Klavierstücke op. 76

Nr. 4 Intermezzo B-Dur. Allegretto grazioso *2:30*
Nr. 6 Intermezzo A-Dur. Andante con moto. Sanft bewegt *3:29*
Nr. 7 Intermezzo a-Moll. Moderato semplice *3:29*

Fantasien op. 116

Nr. 2 Intermezzo a-Moll. Andante *3:45*
Nr. 4 Intermezzo E-Dur. Adagio *4:33*
Nr. 5 Intermezzo e-Moll. Andante con grazia ed intimissimo sentimento *5:13*
Nr. 6 Intermezzo E-Dur. Andantino teneramente *3:20*

Drei Intermezzi op. 117

Nr. 1 Intermezzo Es-Dur. Andante moderato *5:43*
Nr. 2 Intermezzo b-Moll. Andante non troppo e con molto espressione *4:42*
Nr. 3 Intermezzo cis-Moll. Andante con moto *5:17*

Klavierstücke op. 118

Nr. 2 Intermezzo A-Dur. Andante teneramente *5:29*
Nr. 6 Intermezzo es-Moll. Largo e mesto *5:54*

Klavierstücke op. 119

Nr. 1 Intermezzo h-Moll. Adagio *4:25*

Jimin Oh-Havenith
plays Johannes Brahms

Within the distinguished tradition of dual talents that has shaped music history since the 17th century – those individuals known in English as "composer-pianists" – Johannes Brahms holds a special place. Unlike Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt, Busoni, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Reger, or, in the 20th century, Bartók, Prokofiev and, for a time, Stravinsky, Brahms is far less recognised by the general public for his prowess as a pianist than for his contributions to piano music. Yet his works for the instrument have long been regarded as an essential benchmark of artistic and technical command for pianists of any standing. Willy von Beckerath's 1896 drawing of the elderly Brahms – made a year before the composer's death - depicts him in a contemplative, almost blissful pose, smoking a cigar at the piano built around 1870 by the esteemed Viennese piano-manufacturing family Streicher. The portrait reveals little, if anything, of Brahms' earlier career as a virtuoso, a path already set during his first lessons at the age of seven with Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel, a chamber music partner of his father, Johann Jakob Brahms. Just three years later, the boy was already hailed as a piano prodigy, giving a (private) debut with chamber works by Beethoven and Mozart, and was even considered for a concert tour through the United States. Cossel prevented this plan and instead introduced Johannes to his own teacher, Eduard Marxsen, who immediately recognised the boy's compositional talent and nurtured it significantly. Marxsen himself had studied with Carl Maria von Bocklet, a pianist of Prague origin who was based in Vienna. Bocklet was highly esteemed as both a performer and improviser, and, as a friend of Franz Schubert, had premiered works such as the B-flat and E-flat major piano trios. Brahms' later move to Vienna in 1863 can thus be seen, with regard to this genealogy, as a return to the beginnings.

Starting in 1847, at the tender age of just fourteen, Brahms began appearing publicly as a soloist, performing demanding piano works by Sigismond Thalberg and the now unjustly forgotten German-Jewish pianist and composer Jacob Rosenhain. In 1850, Brahms became the piano accompanist of the Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi, with whom he toured for the next three years. This partnership not only sparked in Brahms a lifelong love for Hungarian folk music (or at least what was perceived as such), but also led to his first encounter with Franz Liszt. Introduced by the violinist Joseph Joachim – Brahms' close friend and, as a composer in his own right, his most important artistic adviser – he met Liszt in Weimar in 1853. Liszt, twenty-two years Brahms' senior, was not only the greatest piano virtuoso of the century but also a formidable figure as a composer. Their meeting culminated in something of a scandal: Brahms is said to have fallen asleep during a private performance by Liszt of his B minor Piano Sonata, dedicated to Robert Schumann. Later, however, Brahms played the piece for Clara Schumann, who dismissed it as nothing but "blind noise." A few years later, Brahms was among the signatories of an open letter to Liszt and the so-called New German School – a gesture tantamount to a declaration of aesthetic war. This marked the beginning of Brahms' conscious decision to take up the mantle of Schumann and Mendelssohn, and to confront the towering musical legacies of Bach and Beethoven – those "giants" whom, as he confided to conductor Hermann Levi while struggling with his First Symphony, he always felt "marching behind" him.

That Brahms was nevertheless drawn to Liszt's revolutionary liberation of pianistic virtuosity becomes evident in his earliest piano works: the three piano sonatas Opp. 1, 2, and 5, which he composed and published directly after their meeting in Weimar. Their orchestral writing also reflects the significant advances in piano construction of the time: in 1853, the German firms Bechstein and Blüthner were founded, and Steinway opened its American branch in New York. The extraordinary technical demands of Brahms' First Piano Concerto in D minor, Op. 15 – premiered in 1859 in Hanover with Brahms as soloist and conducted by Joachim, but met with hisses from the audience – explicitly presuppose the sonic richness of these modern grand pianos. Brahms performed on such instruments in his concerts, including the Viennese Bösendorfer pianos. His pianistic mastery – demonstrated again 22 years later as soloist in the premiere of his technically even more demanding Second Piano Concerto in B-flat major, Op. 83, in Budapest – is documented in the concert programmes from 1855 to 1865, which the Italian pianist and conductor Andrea Bonatta has compiled in his highly recommended book on Brahms' piano works. The virtuosic climax of Brahms' piano output is undoubtedly the *Paganini Variations*, Op. 35, composed in 1864, and the far lesser-known *51 Exercises*, WoO 6. The former, a homage to both Liszt's sixth and final *Paganini Étude* from S.140 and to Schumann's *Études after Paganini*, Op. 3, prompted American music critic James Huneker to write that "to play them requires fingers of steel, a heart of burning lava and the courage of a lion." The *Exercises*, published in 1893 as a summation of Brahms' own teaching experience and his close professional exchange with Clara Schumann,

audite

"Brahms at the Piano" 1896, Willy von Beckerath

were described by musicologist and Bach biographer Philipp Spitta in a letter to the composer as "(...) genuine cruelties at times, yet immensely instructive and a kind of key to your free piano compositions. Many of their forms, in motion and sound, I now understand more clearly."

While Brahms' pianistic "cruelties" reflect his profound command of the instrument, the "motion and sound" of his music are above all inspired by Robert Schumann, whose piano works Brahms knew intimately thanks to their close friendship and Schumann's support. The unique fusion in Schumann's piano music of improvisational fantasy, contrapuntal sophistication, and extreme contrasts of mood – combined with a deep engagement with the musical and spiritual legacy of tradition – became a lifelong model for Brahms. His decision, after the three early sonatas, to concentrate primarily on the genres of variation and the free-form character piece grouped in cycles, stems largely from Schumann's dual conception of the piano: as both an intimate, monologic medium and a powerful, quasi-orchestral sound body. Yet, whereas Schumann – particularly in his works of the 1830s – frequently explored hypertrophic and at times "unplayable" extremes, Brahms, for all the technical demands posed by his fondness for double-stopping and dense counterpoint, always tailored his piano writing and its resulting sonority to the real capabilities of both player and instrument.

In his transcription of Johann Sebastian Bach's famous *Chaconne* from the *Partita in D minor for solo violin*, BWV 1004, arranged solely for the left hand, Brahms undoubtedly pushed the boundaries that would later be surpassed by Leopold Godowsky – the so-called "God of the Left Hand". Published in 1879, this transcription is the final piece in a series of five studies based on works by Chopin, Weber, and Bach. Here, Brahms not only paid tribute to three great names but also offered a uniquely personal response to the triumph of transcription as a practice – a movement most notably associated with Liszt. However, despite the virtuosic challenges, Brahms placed the dialogue with tradition and a reflection on his own historical and aesthetic position at the very centre. In this, he also followed Schumann, who had composed an additional piano part for the *Chaconne*; Brahms often performed this version together with Joseph Joachim.

The Brahms expert Christian Martin Schmidt pointed out that in Brahms' piano music the "fundamental constellation of Brahmsian composition" and his artistic personality becomes tangible as a dialectic to be reconciled: the "contrast between classical rigor and Romantic freedom." Jimin Oh-Havenith explores this contrast in three directions in her selection of Brahms' piano works; the genre of the piano sonata, from which Brahms distanced himself so early, is consciously omitted. In the art of variation, Brahms found his strongest pianistic and compositional expression. Accordingly, with the exception of the *Paganini Variations* and the *Variations on a Hungarian Folk Song*, Op. 21, No. 2, the first CD features three major works for solo piano from the group of variations composed between 1853 and 1864. Among these, the *Variations on a Theme by Handel*, Op. 24, was, according to the composer himself, his "favourite work." Brahms composed it in a remarkably short time in September 1861, as a gift for Clara Schumann, who celebrated her birthday that month, and premiered it publicly in Hamburg on 4 November of the same year. Three years later, Brahms played it for Richard Wagner during their sole meeting and received his approval: Wagner asserted that Brahms demonstrated in the variations "what the old forms can still endure when someone comes who understands how to handle them." However, Wagner's praise was tinged with criticism, as he considered Brahms part of the conservative camp – especially since Brahms chose not only a pre-existing theme but one already 130 years old at the time (taken from Handel's Suite in B-flat major in the second volume of the *Suites de pièces pour le clavecin* from 1733) as his source. Seventy years later, Arnold Schoenberg took the opposing stance with his influential lecture *Brahms the Progressive*, in which he declared Brahms' method of "developing variation" as the foundation of musical modernism. What this means is exemplified by the *Handel Variations*, where fantastic metamorphoses arise from a very simple diatonic melodic structure. The variations are not merely strung together but evolve organically; in the fugue, Brahms achieves an intensification of polyphony through the genuinely pianistic device of chordal densification. Thus, virtuosity has a purpose and is never an end in itself.

The two preceding sets of variations pursue these principles in different forms. In the enigmatic final (16th) variation of the *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, Op. 9, composed in 1854 and dedicated to Clara Schumann, only the bass line of the theme remains. Brahms had drawn the theme from Schumann's *Bunte Blätter*, Op. 99. Here, Brahms already experiments with the subtle technique he would later master: developing variations – or rather transformations – not from melodic material, but from inconspicuous figures in the bass. In the *Variations on an Original Theme*, Op. 21, No. 1, which only reached its final form after substantial critique from Joachim,

the theme initially captivates with the intimacy of a melody that faintly recalls the secondary theme of the first movement of the *First Piano Concerto* – itself inspired by Beethoven's Second Symphony. Brahms later revisits its melodic contour in the first *Intermezzo*, Op. 117, No. 1, in E-flat major. Yet once again, in the eleven variations that follow, Brahms' attention is consistently drawn to the lower registers, achieving in the ninth variation, for instance, astonishing instrumental and tonal effects. The boldness and originality of these sonorities find a rare parallel in the piano music of his French contemporary Charles Valentin Alkan. Even such surprising perspectives and connections are an integral part of the artistic profile of the composer-pianist Johannes Brahms.

The singular transcription of the Bach *Chaconne* is contrasted on the second CD with the four *Ballades*, Op. 10, composed in 1854; the two *Rhapsodies*, Op. 79, written in the summer of 1879; and the 16 *Waltzes*, Op. 39, from 1865.

The *Waltzes* occupy a special place within Brahms' œuvre for solo piano. Originally written for piano four hands, they mark his foray into the world of the Viennese social dance – a realm dominated by the "Waltz Kings" Johann Strauss the Elder and his more famous son (with the latter Brahms shared a friendship). Schubert and Chopin had also produced popular and brilliant models in the genre of the piano waltz. Yet it was precisely this challenge that inspired Brahms to create miniatures of great elegance, subtle craftsmanship, and intricate pianism. Toward the end, they take on a distinct "Hungarian" hue, reflecting Brahms' characteristic inclination towards nostalgia and melancholy. That sensibility is already present in the *Ballades* and *Rhapsodies*, which lead us to the "Romantic" core of Brahms' artistic vision – his lifelong fascination with folk song, which he also pursued as a collector. In the second half of the 18th century, Rousseau and Herder – followed by the early Romantics – sparked an intense discourse on the relationship between music and language. In the search for their shared origins, increasing focus was placed on the oral traditions of folk poetry and music, culminating in Herder's influential anthology *Voices of the Peoples in Songs*, published from 1771 onward. The first *Ballade* of Op. 10 directly references this collection with its subtitle: "After the Scottish ballad 'Edward' (in Herder's *Voices of the Peoples*)." The tone it sets – harsh and dramatic – together with its full-fingered piano writing, which demands highly refined pedal technique, became a hallmark of Brahms' style and also shapes the three remaining *Ballades* as well as the later *Rhapsodies*. The terms "Ballade" and "Rhapsody" themselves point to the connection between music and language: the *rhapsode*, in its Greek etymology, is a reciter of poetry, and the *ballade* in the Middle Ages was an epic poem traditionally performed by a travelling minstrel. (In French, *ballader* also means "to wander.")

Brahms gave the third *Ballade* from Op. 10 the title *Intermezzo* – a term he had previously used for the fourth and penultimate movement of his Piano Sonata No. 3, Op. 5. Literally meaning "interlude" or "pause", this form – inviting lingering or meditating – seems to have most closely matched Brahms' conception of the musical character piece. (It is worth recalling here that Schumann, with his *Intermezzi*, Op. 4, was the first to title a set of independent piano pieces in this way – a term that resonates with other 19th-century keyboard genres such as the *Moment musical* and the *Impromptu*.) In the final phase of his piano output, Brahms devoted himself exclusively to the character piece, which he grouped – again in retrospective cycles – under titles such as *Intermezzo*, *Capriccio*, and occasionally *Ballade*, *Romanze*, or *Rhapsody*. Among the 18 *Intermezzi* that appear in the collections composed and/or published between 1878 and 1892/93 – Op. 76, Op. 118, Op. 119, and the *Fantasies*, Op. 116 – Oh-Havenith has selected 13 works for the third CD, including the complete *Three Intermezzi*, Op. 117. Her aim is to illuminate the full spectrum of expressive nuance and structural sophistication Brahms achieves within the genre. Brahms' famous remark that the Op. 117 *Intermezzi* were the "lullabies of my sorrows" captures only one dimension of this music. Jimin Oh-Havenith describes the other side as follows: "There are no other Brahms pieces that speak so deeply and directly of loneliness – his own, or loneliness as such. At the same time, the *Intermezzi* already possess a modern abstraction that makes them so difficult to bring to life. On the surface, they appear beautiful and romantic – but that's a cliché. In reality, they tread the narrowest of paths along the edge of the abyss. In that sense, I understand why these pieces resonated so deeply with Schoenberg. For me, with Brahms and these *Intermezzi*, the psyche truly entered music for the first time."

Wolfgang Rathert

audite

JIMIN OH-HAVENITH

An exceptional sonority and fidelity owed to the text determine Jimin Oh-Havenith's piano playing. Her warm sound, which is always embedded within the rhythmic structure, lets music come alive in all its richness. Synchronicity of sound and rhythm, not arbitrary changes in tempo and dynamics determine the clarity of her interpretation.

Jimin Oh-Havenith was born in Seoul, South Korea. After studying piano with Jin-Woo Chung (Seoul National University) and Aloys Kontarsky (Musikhochschule Köln) she performed as a soloist and recorded for radio and CD, also as a piano duo with her late husband Raymund Havenith (†1993). The pianist taught at the Hochschule für Musik Mainz and the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Frankfurt am Main.

Since 2013 she has been active again as a soloist and has recorded eleven solo CDs.

recording: November 23 - 26, 2024
recording location: Leibniz Saal, Hanover
recording format: pcm, 96 kHz / 24 bit
recording producer / editing: Dipl.-Tonmeister Justus Beyer
executive producer: Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff
piano: Bösendorfer 280 (Gerd Finkenstein)
photos: Uwe Arens (*p. 2 - p. 9*)
art direction & design: AB·Design, Detmold

audite
info@audite.de · audite.de


audite
Bösendorfer


audite