Brahms

Clarinet Sonata in F minor op. 120 no. 1
Clarinet Sonata in E♭ major op. 120 no. 2

Thea King *cl*
Clifford Benson *pf*

Hyperion-Helios CDH55158 (43 minutes: AAD)
Notes and translations included.

Brahms's two Clarinet Sonatas, op. 120 nos. 1 and 2, written in 1894, involve a captivating union of twilights and new dawns. The sonatas were composed in the final years of Brahms's life and were the last works he wrote in the genre of chamber music. They are, however, a far cry from being a retrospective summation of his achievements in the field. Instead, the two sonatas explored unchartered territory and forged the way for a new sphere of the clarinet and viola repertoires; few earlier models exist for the combination of clarinet and piano, or indeed for viola and piano, the alternative scoring Brahms made of the sonatas.

Despite the ever-enduring popularity of the sonatas among clarinet players, truly satisfying performances are in surprisingly short supply. The Brahms centenary year of 1997 occasioned several worthwhile contributions to the recording body, most notably by Karl Leister and David Levine (Camerata 75) and Kálmán Berkes and Jeno Jandó (Naxos 8553121). Little of note has followed in their wake, however, and as such, this reissue of the 1987 Thea King and Clifford Benson recording on Hyperion is to be welcomed.

The clarinet sonatas, like the late piano works, are intimate, often introspective in nature, and tinged with a warm nostalgia, qualities that lend themselves particularly well to the rich sound produced by King and Benson. King's clarinet playing in particular is marked by a clarity and warmth of tone that is especially conducive to the more reflective passages in the two sonatas. As is the case with most recordings of the clarinet sonatas, the performers adopt a decidedly leisurely pace in the opening movements of both sonatas. This has mixed results. The tempos in Brahms's late music often demand a level of elasticity, a demand that is compounded in the case of the clarinet sonatas by their quasi-improvisatory qualities. Brahms himself tellingly wrote to Clara Schumann: 'If you could extemporize a little in F minor and E Flat major you would probably chance on the two sonatas.'[1] King and Benson's choice of tempo is effective in the 'Allegro amabile' of the second sonata, enabling them to capture perfectly the rhapsodic tendencies alluded to by Brahms. In other movements, however, the players' relaxed approach diminishes the effect of Brahms's more passionate writing, and in the 'Allegro appassionato' of the F minor sonata, I would have welcomed a greater sense of urgency. A similar problem arises in Brahms's *Ländler*-type middle movements; in particular, the 'Allegretto grazioso' of the

[1] Letter dated 3 August 1894. Berthold Litzmann, ed., *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms, 1853–1896*, 2 vols (London, 1927), II: 262.

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F minor sonata would benefit from a livelier tempo more in keeping with the spirit of the *Ländler*.

It is rare to come across discussions of Brahms's clarinet works and other late music these days that do not have the adjective 'autumnal' in tow. There is clearly a strong element of melancholy in the music. Death featured prominently in this period of Brahms's life; between the years of 1892 and 1894 alone he lost close friends Elizabeth von Herzogenberg, Hermine Spies, Hans von Bülow, Theodor Billroth and Philipp Spitta, together with his sister Elise. His spirit was far from quashed, however, and his late works contain passages that are laden with vibrant energy. King and Benson capture this energy in their sprightly rendition of the final movement of the F minor sonata. More often, however, I feel that the vitality inherent in the sonatas eludes them. This is an issue that arises repeatedly in recordings of the sonatas; all too often, performers channel their attention into portraying the autumnal, wistful qualities of Brahms's late style, and inevitably sacrifice some of the character of the works in the process. Some indication of the spirit in which Brahms himself envisaged the sonatas to be performed can be divined from the genesis of the works and their association with the principal clarinettist of the court orchestra at Meiningen, Richard Mühlfeld. Close collaborations between clarinettists and composers played a crucial role in the development of the early clarinet repertoire, and Brahms's relationship with Mühlfeld echoed the partnerships between Mozart and Anton Stadler, Weber and Mendelssohn and Heinrich Baermann, and Spohr and Simon Hermstedt. The collaboration between Brahms and Mühlfeld occurred at a particularly opportune time. On 11 December 1890, Brahms had sent his publisher, Fritz Simrock, the four-hand version of his String Quintet in G major op. 111, with the remark, 'With that scrap of paper you can take your farewell from my music – because quite generally, it is time to stop.'[2] Several months later, however, Brahms heard Mühlfeld perform a number of works, including Mozart's clarinet quintet and Weber's Clarinet Concerto in F minor, and was revitalised.[3] By the summer of 1891 he was ensconced in Bad Ischl, composing happily once again, and he returned to Vienna that autumn with manuscripts of the clarinet quintet and trio. Thereafter followed a fruitful period of composition, from which came the *Klavierstücke* opp. 116–19, the *Vier erste Gesänge* op. 121, the organ preludes op. 122, and the two clarinet sonatas.

The clarinet sonatas are inextricably linked with Mühlfeld's clarinet playing, fruits of a new lease of life that Mühlfeld inspired in Brahms. Mühlfeld's playing was a genuine revelation for Brahms who had little time for other clarinettists; as he observed to Clara Schumann: 'You have never heard such a clarinet player as they have there in Mühlfeld. He is absolutely the best I know. At all events this art has, for various reasons, deteriorated very much. The clarinet players in Vienna and many other places are quite fairly good in orchestra but solo they give one no real pleasure.'[4]

Mühlfeld's playing was, by all accounts, idiosyncratic and utterly Germanic in style. After hearing him play the clarinet quintet, Clara Schumann wrote in

2 Styra Avins, ed., trans. Avins and Josef Eisinger, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (New York, 1997): 674.

3 Colin Lawson, *Brahms: Clarinet Quintet* (Cambridge, 1998): 32.

4 Litzmann, *Letters*, II: 196.

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her diary, 'His playing is at once delicate, warm and unaffected and at the same time it shows the most perfect technique and command of the instrument.'[5] Colin Lawson observes, however, that Mühfeld's style of playing was something of an anathema to the English clarinet school; he apparently employed vibrato freely and the emphasis in his playing was on character rather than tone.[6] The English critic Oscar Street, writing in 1916, remarked that Mühlfeld's 'phrasing was carried to a high pitch of perfection, but his tone and execution at times left much to be desired'.[7] Such accounts of Mühlfeld's playing were typical in the English press. Praise was given to his animated and fiery technique, but his tone was generally found wanting.[8] This vibrant style of playing clearly resonated with Brahms, and the accounts of Mühlfeld's idiosyncratic style offer much food for thought for present-day interpreters of the clarinet sonatas.

Thea King's clarinet tone is pure and finely controlled. She pays meticulous attention to dynamics and articulation, and every phrase is subtly nuanced. At times, however, I feel that this control is at the expense of the more spirited elements of the music. King's playing lacks the fire and personality evident in the various recordings of the sonatas by de Peyer or Leister, and she does not always succeed in conveying the energy of the more vibrant movements of the sonatas. Once again, it is in the two *Ländler*-type movements, the *Allegretto grazioso* of the F minor sonata and *Allegro appassionato* of the E♭ sonata, that this problem is particularly conspicuous. King's prevailing lyrical style is also reflected in Benson's piano playing, which involves some colourful shading. The sound on this disc is rich and reverberant, and Benson achieves a sonorous yet delicate tone in the upper registers. The lower registers of the piano, however, do not come across as clearly. Benson makes extensive use of the sustaining pedal and the resulting textures are overly viscous for my liking. The bass is often muddy and indistinct, and, as a result, the full effects of Brahms's contrapuntal passages are not clearly conveyed. Given the importance that Brahms placed on bass lines in his music, this is a problem. The resonance of the piano part is compounded by Benson's tendency to adopt a heavy articulation even in the crisper passages of the sonatas, an approach that does not feel quite attuned to King's lighter style of delivery.

These gripes aside, there is much to appreciate in the recording. The short running length of the CD is acceptable at its budget price range. (Listeners looking for a little more content at budget price should turn to the Naxos recording by Berkes and Jandó, which has three additional tracks, including the *Lieder* op. 91 with the clarinet replacing the viola part.) King and Benson respond sensitively to Brahms. Both players produce a tone that is rich and velvety, and King, in particular, offers a wide range of dynamics. The recording captures the mellowness of Brahms's late style very convincingly. I would, however, like to hear a little more of his vivacity, a

5 Berthold Litzmann, trans. Grace Hadow, *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life* (London and Leipzig, 1913), II: 422.

6 Lawson, *Brahms: Clarinet Quintet*: 68.

7 Oscar Street, 'The Clarinet and its music' (1916): 108. Cited in Lawson, *Brahms: Clarinet Quintet*: 69.

8 See Lawson, *Brahms: Clarinet Quintet*: 68–71 for further reports of Mühlfeld's style of playing.

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little more of the by-all-accounts spirited clarinet playing that inspired Brahms to write the sonatas.

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Brahms

Four-hand Piano Music Vol. 10

String Quartet in C minor op. 51 no. 1

String Quartet in A minor op. 51 no. 2

Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn *pf*
Naxos 8.557056 (69 minutes: DDD)
Notes in English and German.

In the musical world it has been almost forgotten, indeed for decades, that Johannes Brahms arranged quite a substantial number of his own works for piano duet. After 1930 or so, only fanatical enthusiasts for four-hand playing – and they had to be good sight-readers into the bargain – took their old music out of the cupboard to play Brahms's own piano arrangements of his orchestral works (the symphonies, serenades and overtures), of some of his chamber music (the string sextets, quintets and quartets, the first two piano quartets), and of additional selected compositions (*Ein deutsches Requiem*, the *Triumphlied*, and the First Piano Concerto). Of course, in the late nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, four-hand arrangements of Brahms's piano trios, duo sonatas, and the Violin and Double Concerto were also available. But these had been provided by other arrangers because Brahms himself had clearly been uninterested in making additional arrangements for these particular genres. Publishers, in calculating the relation between expenditure and receipts for new works they planned to publish, included estimates for piano arrangements and piano scores as important factors in their budget strategies. In the field of piano reductions, mere *piano arrangements* 'translated' *all* parts of a score into a two-, four- or eight-hand piano setting, while *piano scores* of operas, oratorios or solo concertos put *only* the orchestral parts into a two-hand piano setting, leaving the solo and/or choral parts unchanged. During the nineteenth century, piano arrangements and piano scores were, unquestionably, indispensable for the promulgation and establishing of new compositions outside concert halls – during times when gramophone and radio were still a 'music of the future'. Indeed, it is by no means surprising to learn that, at the same time as the gramophone and radio started their worldwide career in the early twentieth century, the piano arrangement began its inexorable decline. (Piano scores nevertheless are still of course used today in instrumental teaching for children and music students, in preparing opera or concert performances, in musical competitions and in studio concerts within conservatoires.)

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