CD Reviews

Brahms

Symphony No. 4 in E minor Op. 90

Schoenberg

Variations for Orchestra Op. 31
German Symphony Orchestra
Kent Nagano *cond*

Harmonia mundi HMC 901884 (61 minutes)
Notes and translations included.

Brahms

Symphony No. 4 in E minor Op. 90
Tragic Overture Op. 81
For Four Hands Vol. 8

Silke-Thora Matthies/Christian Köhn *pf*

Naxos 8.554117 (54 minutes: DDD)
Notes in English and German.

In an era where all the major orchestral works of Johannes Brahms enjoy a level of popularity comparable with those of Beethoven, and one in which instant accessibility to dozens of recordings and related scholarly materials is available at the click of a mouse, one might be tempted to ask the question: Is another recording of Brahms's Fourth Symphony really needed, and especially one of the four-hand piano version of the work? One of his last major orchestral works, the Fourth Symphony represents for many Brahms's finest and most profound achievement in the genre, composed by a master who, by this point in his compositional career, had fully addressed and conquered the much-discussed issue of how to continue the symphonic tradition after the monumental contributions of Beethoven to the genre. In spite of the somewhat muted and gauche response to the work from his immediate circle of friends and colleagues on the 8 October 1885 after a private performance of the four-hand version in Vienna, the first orchestral performance in Meiningen under Brahms himself is said to have been 'a great success'.[1] The work was also successful in its English premiere under Hans Richter on 10 May 1886, with particularly good reviews of the Allegro non troppo and the Andante Moderato movements in the *Musical*

[1] Walter Frisch, *Brahms: The Four Symphonies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003): 116.

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Times and Singing Class Circular.[2] The success of the work continues in today's very different musical world, where it enjoys something of a double life as a piece respected, discussed and performed by musicians and scholars, as well as one that is frequently played as a 'popular classic' (along with the other major orchestral works, including the preceding three symphonies, serenades, concertos and overtures) on popular radio stations such as Classic FM.

Based on current attitudes to the work outlined above and, as a result, having only ever experienced performances of the work with a full orchestra, I must confess that Matthies and Köhn's performance of Brahms's four-hand piano arrangement of the work was not initially a particularly attractive prospect. Brahms produced these piano arrangements for many of his major orchestral works, and some of his chamber works, with the intention of allowing people to experience and acquaint themselves with the works outside the concert hall in the era before the gramophone. Raymond Knapp has summarized this succinctly in his monograph *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony*, in which he says that 'surpassing even the public concert hall, the piano became the single most important agent in the preservation of a widely known – and well known – symphonic repertory. In short, the piano became, so to speak, the phonograph of the nineteenth century.'[3] One could conclude from this that Matthies and Köhn's ongoing recording project of Brahms's four-hand piano transcriptions is obsolete. However, it is well known that Brahms used the piano a great deal in the creation of his orchestral works. Knapp also points out that 'using the piano in the preparatory stages of an orchestral work was an inevitable result of the increased complexity of orchestral thinking in the nineteenth century'[4] and that Brahms's four-hand piano arrangements reflect his 'characteristic division of the orchestra into two opposed groups: the winds and the strings'.[5] It must also be remembered that the four-hand piano arrangements of Brahms's orchestral works were created and sent for publication by the composer himself (as opposed to a subsequent arranger), thereby presenting performers with an indisputably approved arrangement of the work. Knapp's comments present the piano transcription in a very favourable light and, therefore, set up the perfect context in which a comparison can be made between the orchestral recording for Harmonia mundi under Kent Nagano, and the four-hand piano version for Naxos by Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn.

Nagano conducts a beautifully elegant, lyrical, and unusually restrained opening Allegro non troppo with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester of Berlin. Most conductors have a tendency to be a little over-indulgent in the famous opening movement, normally resulting in overly drawn-out phrases and exploding forte sections requiring an adjustment of the volume on most sound reproduction systems (the flowing legato string phrases in bars 10 to 12 being one of the most usual examples). This is not the case here. Nagano keeps the tempo relatively firm and steady all the way through, carefully observing Brahms's articulation marks, taking care not to allow the players to engulf the listener in the forte sections. The atmosphere of care and restraint makes for superb ensemble playing, both in the individual instrumental groups and in

[2] Ibid.

[3] Raymond Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997): 62

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 63.

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the orchestra as a whole. The string section is particularly outstanding, creating a warmth of timbre and tone that is rarely encountered in this movement. I suspect that many will probably find Nagano's initial approach unappealing upon first hearing, but his intentions become clear as one listens to the remaining movements.

In light of Nagano's refreshingly unique approach to the opening (alongside the historical contextual difficulties already discussed), Matthies and Köhn's task of creating an equally affecting performance on two pianos is made extremely difficult. However, bearing in mind that both are internationally renowned and respected pianists and that Christian Köhn is also the principal editor of Brahms's four-hand piano transcriptions for Bärenreiter, Brahms's transcription could (quite literally) not be in better hands. Indeed, upon first hearing of the opening movement, any contextual reservations plaguing the listener will disappear extremely quickly. Matthies and Köhn present a close-to-perfect performance of the opening movement, paying absolutely meticulous attention to Brahms's articulation throughout. There are occasional slight ambiguities in harmonic clarity, particularly in the lower voices (for example at bars 66–73), that, aside from Brahms's generally thick piano writing, are arguably inevitable when one is restricted to the use of only one instrumental timbre. Some listeners may also understandably find the timbre of the piano slightly cold, certainly in comparison with Nagano's very lyrical interpretation. Nonetheless, Matthies and Köhn present themselves as an unexpected force to be reckoned with in the Allegro non troppo, setting a superb standard which is maintained throughout the remainder of their performance.

The two glorious inner movements of Brahms's Fourth Symphony (the Andante moderato and the Allegro giocoso) have been inexplicably neglected by conductors, performers and scholars in recent years. Many conductors fall into the trap of giving excellent and possibly over-zealous interpretations of the two outer movements, leaving uninspired, flat and dull performances of the two inner movements. This is almost certainly related, in part at least, to the common analytical coupling of the outer movements, when in bar 233 of the finale, the descending third motif (the principal thematic entity in the Allegro non troppo) returns prominently in the strings as part of the 29th variation on the famous chaconne theme. As one listens to Nagano's interpretation of the Andante moderato, it quickly becomes apparent that one of the reasons for his restraint in the first movement was to ensure that the expressive thematic ideas, lush harmony and orchestration of its successor are not lost or easily forgotten. The ensemble and contrast in timbre of the opposing wind and string sections of the orchestra (particularly in bars 80–82) is a particularly enjoyable and memorable feature of the movement. Occasionally, Nagano's direction is, if anything, slightly too introvert (for example in bars 41–44), almost implying and anticipating a soloist, which obviously never happens. This is almost certainly a result of the operatic roots of his conducting career.

Matthies and Köhn's performance of the slow movement is probably the least successful of all their interpretations on this CD. The main difficulties encountered are not with the performers themselves, but the lack of suitability of the pianistic idiom to this movement. The piano's harsher timbre and inability to sustain longer notes unfortunately means that some of what could be termed the 'musical seams' – usually concealed by the orchestra – become quite visible. The percussive quality of the instrument also feels slightly intrusive at certain points, particularly in bars 89–96, which is a string passage in the orchestral

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score, marked legato and poco espressivo. Their performance would have almost certainly benefited from a softer touch and a slightly faster tempo (it is only 18 seconds shorter than Nagano's) to help conceal the instrument's limitation in sustaining long notes.

Any doubts created by Matthies and Köhn's slow movement quickly disappear as they move into the boisterous realms of the Allegro giocoso. Of all the movements in the symphony, this is certainly the best suited to the piano with the exuberant, heavily accented and staccato-marked principal theme. In spite of the neglect it has suffered in recent years (it was apparently often requested to be repeated in its early performances[6]), the movement is an extremely important element of the work. Walter Frisch aptly comments that it looks 'both forward and backward within the symphony. From the harmonic point of view, its C major serves to bring fully, gloriously into the open the key that has shadowed E minor in the first movement and E major in the second. This key will also play a significant role in the finale.'[7] In the case of Matthies and Köhn, this movement is undoubtedly the highlight of their recording. The meticulous accuracy with which the movement is executed (particularly in the observation of Brahms's articulation markings), combined with faultless ensemble and very transparent crystal-clear digital recording quality, makes this possibly one of the best recorded interpretations of Brahms's Allegro giocoso currently available. Nagano also reserves much of his energy for this movement, which, after the muted first movement and celestial second, provides the listener with a hugely exhilarating and welcome change. The horns in particular produce fine performances in this movement, even though they are not especially prominent in the orchestration, adding a warm, smooth timbre to the predominantly aggressive execution (bars 181–188 are definitely worthy of mention at this point). The full extent of Nagano's command of the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester becomes apparent throughout the movement with the exquisite contrast he achieves between the rowdiness of the recurring main theme and the lighter interjections.

The fourth and final movement of Brahms's Fourth Symphony is currently one of the most popular and famous in the repertory. The unusual evolution of the movement and its analytical merits have been amply documented by musicologists, from Brahms's initial conversation with Hans von Bülow in January 1882 to detailed analyses of the movement in subsequent monographs and journals. Indeed, Walter Frisch has somewhat tenuously suggested and discussed the possibility that the 30 variations on the modified chaconne theme from Bach's cantata 150 can actually be placed within an overall sonata structure.[8] In spite of its current popularity, the movement has not always been well received, particularly upon first hearing. When the piece was premiered in London on 10 May 1886, an anonymous reviewer for the June edition of the *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* referred to the finale as being 'less satisfactory upon first hearing' than the earlier movements, and that 'it is more than doubtful whether the Passacaglia and variations will pass muster as an ideal symphonic finale'.[9] Such reviews seem strange and unfounded when one hears Nagano conduct the movement. The full force of his approach is revealed as he creates an extremely exciting denouement to Brahms's work. Although Nagano is obviously assisted

6 Frisch, *Brahms: The Four Symphonies*, 127.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 132–3.
9 'Richter Concerts', *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 27 (Jun 1886): 333.

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by the articulation and dynamic markings in the score, he becomes even bolder in terms of dynamic contrasts than in previous movements, particularly from the 16th variation (bar 129) onwards. A poignant example is the anticipation, build-up and climax of variations 22, 23 and 24 respectively (bars 177–200), as well as the transition from the 30th variation into Brahms's extended coda at bar 253. The final bars of the movement could perhaps have been dynamically slightly more assertive, but this is a minor issue in what is, overall, a unique and extremely refreshing interpretation. Whilst Matthies and Köhn cannot match the grandeur and sumptuousness of the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester, one hears many details in their performance that are often lost in Brahms's vast ensemble orchestration, in particular fast, detailed triplet passages in the accompanying voices (for example in variation 26 or bars 209–217), and virtuoso fast scale-based passages, such as those in variation 21 (bars 169–176). In a similar fashion to Nagano, their dynamic contrasts are particularly pronounced.

Both recordings have the advantage of excellent modern technical production techniques, evident in the aforementioned clear and crisp sound quality. The Naxos producers couple the symphony logically with another excellent four-hand piano performance from Matthies and Köhn's recording project of Brahms's famous Tragic Overture op. 81. Harmonia mundi take a slightly more unusual approach by coupling the symphony with Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra op. 31, although trends in nineteenth-century musicology over the past 40 years make this pairing almost as logical as that of Naxos. There are brief accompanying notes in the sleeve of each CD case that provide helpful information about the pieces and the performers. It should be noted (even with my rudimentary understanding of German) that the translation provided by Naxos is poor and should by no means be treated as accurate. I would thoroughly recommend the Harmonia mundi recording for all listeners, as it provides the novice with an easily digestible interpretation and the seasoned listener with an innovative and unusual approach. The Naxos recording is perhaps not an appropriate one for 'first-timers', but it is an essential and fascinating item for specialist Brahms scholars and performers, and inevitably one against which all other pianists venturing into this field will be measured.

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