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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Yet gramophone and radio have been responsible not only for the decline of the piano arrangement, but also for its renaissance – at least in the case of Brahms's music. In the final stages of the LP era the first recordings of four-hand arrangements of the Brahms symphonies were issued, and since then numerous recordings of piano arrangements of different genres within Brahms's œuvre have become available (even if they are presently no longer so). At about the same time, musicological interest in Brahms's arrangements began to develop.[1] This seemed to be justified since Brahms had accorded his piano arrangements a considerable amount of creativity and pianistic originality. As the arranging composer, he was allowed to treat his works 'less respectfully' and 'more audaciously than … anyone else' could,[2] as he once admitted.

Since, in this way, Brahms arranged his works much closer to the 'sense' of the original than would be the case in a strict 'word-for-word' translation, some pianists, musicologists, and writers of CD labels and booklets became much too enthusiastic during their rediscovery of the arrangements: they ranked and designated these versions, which had after all been essentially intended for home consumption when they were made, as aesthetically of equal value and status as the original versions. (Such exaggeration was, without doubt, to some extent motivated by reasons to do with marketing.) But both historically and aesthetically this view was in error, however much Brahms's arrangements may continue to attract and fascinate. The composer himself unequivocally took his arrangements to be versions for domestic use, and he always treated and indicated his true alternative versions in special ways: for example, the well-known Sonata for Two Pianos – a former state of the still better-known Piano Quintet op. 34, but published only some years later – received the variant opus number '34, bis'. And in considering the *Haydn Variations*, we find the orchestral version published as 'opus 56a' and the alternative version for two pianos as 'opus 56b'. Anyone reflecting at all on the relationship between piano

[1] See especially Robert Komaiko, *The Four-Hand Piano Arrangements of Brahms and their Role in the Nineteenth Century* (Ph.D., Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1975: typescript), 2 vols.; Helmut Loos, *Zur Klavierübertragung von Werken für und mit Orchester des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (München/Salzburg, 1983): 56–64 (the chapter: 'Johannes Brahms'); Valerie Woodring Goertzen, *The Piano Transcriptions of Johannes Brahms* (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1987: typescript); Martin Feil, *Die eigenhändigen Klavierbearbeitungen der Streichquartette von Johannes Brahms* (MA thesis, University of Hamburg, 1997: typescript); Gernot Gruber, 'Opus 111: Vergleich der Versionen für Streichquintett und für Klavier vierhändig', *Internationaler Brahms-Kongreß Gmunden 1997. Kongreßbericht*, ed. Ingrid Fuchs (Tutzing, 2001): 73–86; Michael Struck, 'Werk-Übersetzung als Werk-Alternative? Johannes Brahms' Klavierbearbeitungen eigener Werke', *Edition und Übersetzung. Zur wissenschaftlichen Dokumentation des interkulturellen Texttransfers. Beiträge der Internationalen Fachtagung der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für germanistische Edition, 8. bis 11. März 2000*, ed. Bodo Plachta and Winfried Woesler (*Beihefte zu editio*, vol. 18, Tübingen, 2002): 447–64; Michael Struck, 'Surrogat und Hybris – Wirkungsbereiche des Klaviers im Umfeld tradierter Gattungen: Johannes Brahms' vierhändige Arrangements eigener Werke und Charles Valentin Alkans Douze études op. 39', *Musik, Wissenschaft und ihre Vermittlung. Bericht über die Internationale Musikwissenschaftliche Tagung der Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hannover 26.–29. September 2001*, ed. Arnfried Edler and Sabine Meine (*Publikationen der Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hannover*, vol. 12, Augsburg, 2002): 119–35.

[2] *The Brahms-Keller Correspondence*, ed. George S. Bozarth in collaboration with Wiltrud Martin (Lincoln and London, 1996): 76.

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style, thematic shapes and genre in Brahms's music will recognize that a four-hand piano arrangement of a Brahms symphony belongs to quite another genre from an original four-hand work of the composer. (One needs only to listen to the opening 50 bars of Brahms's Second Symphony in the original version and in his piano arrangement – and one will hear that, while the piano reduction without doubt provides a valuable surrogate for the orchestral sound-patterns, it distinctly does *not* constitute a genuine work for piano.) However, the importance of these arrangements for the propagation of Brahms's music during the nineteenth century cannot be denied – and similarly neither can the fact that they are extraordinarily attractive from the pianistic point of view. Thus their rediscovery is undoubtedly both legitimate and fascinating.

The most ambitious and extensive CD project in this regard is surely the recording of Brahms's four-hand works and arrangements by the German piano duo Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn (*Johannes Brahms: Four-hand Piano Music*). With the recording here under review, containing the arrangements of Brahms's String Quartets in C minor and A minor op. 51 nos. 1 and 2, they have reached Volume 10 of this important undertaking.

We know that Brahms's C minor Quartet was brought to its final shape only after a long period of compositional work, lasting at least eight years. It was published together with the A minor Quartet, which had also taken Brahms several years to complete, in November 1873. The arrangements for piano duet were printed shortly after that (for the C minor Quartet, at the end of 1873, for the A minor Quartet, at the beginning of 1874). It is pleasing that the CD booklet does not try to re-evaluate the piano reductions into alternative versions having the same aesthetic standing and formal status as the original version for strings. The introductory remarks, giving much information within a brief space – a typical feature of NAXOS booklets – in any case chiefly deal with Brahms's life and the main (quartet) version; I note with regret that the German translation is somewhat clumsy. It is particularly gratifying, however, that the two pianists approach their task in a most serious way, for these are technically demanding arrangements and anything but easy for the performers. Matthies and Köhn give us the arrangements with qualities of piano technique and sound which are diametrically opposed to every sort of preliminary *primavista* playing: Brahms's superb arrangements may never before have been played in such a perfect manner, especially since such perfect playing would not have been expected by the composer, as it seems. Nevertheless his 'art of arranging' distinctly deserves such an 'art of playing'. Compared with the recording of the same arrangements by the Italian pianists Tiziana Moneta and Gabriele Rota (*Discantica 33*, Milan 1998), the NAXOS recording is considerably more refined: pianistically, in sound, and in transparency of musical texture and structure. Nothing seems to be casual in the German duo's way of playing the music. The pedal is handled economically, and Brahms's articulation observed in every last detail – much more so than in the Italian recording. Musical intensity, a joy and vividness in the playing, and pianistic mastery can be heard in every bar. It counts as one of the very few exceptions that one could perceive only somewhat dimly the crucial overlaying of duplet and triplet motion in the second subject of the first movement of the A minor Quartet; sometimes it was easier to believe in syncopated duplet rhythms than in pure triplets. The same may be said of the coda of the movement, which is indeed similarly difficult to realize effectively. Perhaps here Brahms the arranger overtaxed even two brilliant pianists such as these

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(or the ears of some of their audience), demanding more from them than he did of the four string-quartet players.

Compared with the Italian rival, the NAXOS recording has a more transparent sound, but also one which is a trifle more austere. Some listeners will perhaps miss in the wiry, more virtuoso-like NAXOS production the sometimes, so-to-speak, golden glimmering timbre of Moneta and Rota, together with their qualities of legato – which are however purchased by abundant and in part exaggerated pedalling. But in the final analysis Matthies and Köhn expose the layers of Brahms's piano-writing so much more clearly; the sound of their playing is in this respect both more suggestive and more precise. In their playing the rigour and profundity of Brahms's arrangements are brought much closer to the rich shading of the original version than is the case with the alternative Italian recording, which is altogether more muddy and more fortuitous in the resultant sound. Matthies's and Köhn's playing is clearly more refined and masterly; the outer movements of the C minor Quartet, for example, are really executed (and mastered) in a tempestuous fashion. On the other hand, the slow movements of both Quartets and the 'Allegretto molto comodo' of the C minor Quartet are taken too slowly and therefore become too static (here the Italian pianists choose more animated tempi with good reason and good results). From this we may learn that the piano, producing sounds of comparatively short duration, might need a somewhat more flowing tempo than is required for the original version, where the strings can shape and nuance musical 'time' by giving individual notes distinctive light and shade, as well as by using vibrato. On the other hand the F major Intermezzo in the third movement of the C minor Quartet under Matthies's and Köhn's hands evokes an altogether enchanting sound world. One could cite many more such fine examples. In as much as Brahms found a convincing balance between a self-assured, inventive piano language and the 'domestic' function for his four-hand arrangements, Matthies and Köhn's recording brings these qualities to the fore and gives them expression in a captivating and fascinating way. The continuation of their recording project is eagerly and optimistically anticipated.

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