



Johannes Brahms: The Complete Chamber Music for Clarinet

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Here, on two discs, are the four valedictory clarinet works Brahms bequeathed to Richard Mühlfeld and, of course, to posterity. Brahms knew Mühlfeld from the Meiningen Court Orchestra, an ensemble the composer had conducted and in which Mühlfeld played principal clarinet. As far as we know, Brahms did not play the clarinet himself, but there was no indication that he solicited Mühlfeld's technical advice in writing for the instrument as he had Joseph Joachim's when composing his Violin Concerto.

In 1890, for all practical purposes, Brahms considered his composing career done with the completion of his String Quintet in G Major, op 111. He was already feeling unwell and had begun putting his affairs in order. In the fall of that year, he asked his publisher, Simrock, to take stock and make an accounting of his works; and a few months later, he wrote his will, leaving his collection of original manuscripts to the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. Brahms had decided to rest on his laurels and live out whatever time he had left in leisure.

Obviously, that didn't happen, for thanks to Mühlfeld, Brahms was suddenly inspired in 1891 to compose the Clarinet Trio, op. 114, and its companion, the Clarinet Quintet, op 115. And more was yet to come four sets of late piano pieces, opp 116 & 119, then the two follow-up clarinet sonatas (alternately for viola), op 120/1 and 2, the Four Serious Songs, op 121, and finally, the 11 Chorale Preludes for organ, op 122.

Undoubtedly, it was Mühlfeld who brought Brahms out of retirement, but I suspect that if Mühlfeld's instrument had been anything other than the clarinet his entreaties to Brahms would have met with stubborn resistance. There was something about the timbre of the clarinet reedy, rich mix of autumn colors and the feelings of loneliness and longing evoked by fallen leaves and the stirrings of approaching winter resonated with Brahms's fatalistic mood. All four of the works he composed for the instrument reflect a sense of wistful melancholy and of turning inward.

very familiar with these works, as I am with the Mandelring Quartet from a number of its other recordings. I can not say the same, however, for clarinetist Laura Ruiz Ferreres, cellist Danjulo Ishizaka, or pianist Christoph Berner, but I can say that from the moment disc 1 of this set began to play, I knew I was in the presence of something special. To quote a phrase uttered by Brahms's friend, Eusebius Mandyczewski, upon hearing a performance of the clarinet trio. It is as though the instruments were in love with each other; That's the impression conveyed by these performances.

Laura Ruiz Ferreres was born in Spain, but currently calls Frankfurt, Germany,

home. There she is professor of clarinet at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst. Prior to that, she played principal clarinet in Berlin's Comic Opera Orchestra. She studied with practically a Who's Who of the clarinet world: Joan Enric Lluna, Anthony Pay, and Karl-Heinz Steffens, and participated in master classes given by Thea King, Andrew Marriner, Michael Collins, Karl Leister, and Walter Boeykens.

There are many wonderful recordings of these works, and as beautiful as the music-making on these discs is, I wouldn't want to be without the clarinet trio performed by David Shifrin, David Finckel, and Wu Han on Artistled, or without the performance by Richard Stoltzman, Yo-Yo Ma, and Emanuel Ax on Sony; and most of all, I wouldn't want to be without the recording by Martin Fröst, Torleif Thedeen, and Roland Pöntinen on a BIS CD, which also includes the two clarinet sonatas.

For the quintet, I wouldn't want to part with a brand new version, just released and not yet reviewed in Fanfare, with clarinetist Sharon Kam and the Jerusalem Quartet on Harmonia Mundi. Still, the playing on this new...