



Johannes Brahms: Clarinet Chamber Music

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[Fanfare](#) (Jerry Dubins - 2007.07.01)

Brahms's four works for clarinet—the trio and two sonatas recorded here, plus the Quintet, op. 115—were all products of the composer's late years, and byproducts of his relationship with the virtuoso clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. The sonatas, in both their originally conceived versions for clarinet and their composer-sanctioned versions for viola, along with the trio and quintet, have been covered in these pages a number of times; so brevity is in order.

Canadian-born clarinetist Arthur Campbell, now a US resident, received his degrees from Northwestern University, earning his doctorate as a student of renowned clarinetist Robert Marcellus. Pianist Frances Renzi, who partners Campbell in the sonatas, graduated from the University of North Texas, and then pursued graduate studies at Juilliard under Rosina Lhevinne and Beveridge Webster. French pianist Jean Pascal-Meyer, heard here in the trio, studied with, among others, Gabriel Tacchino and Gaby Casadesus. Cellist Daniel Raclot studied at the Limoges Conservatory in France, and took further training under André Navarra and Genevieve Joy.

One would be hard-pressed to find a recording of these works poorly played on today's modern clarinet, (Campbell plays Leblanc, Opus II models). And therein is the dilemma, for there are so many recordings to choose from. What it comes down to in the end, I think, is one's preference for the style or school of playing. There's the English school, represented by artists past and present, such as Reginald Kell, Jack Brymer, Janet Hilton, and Thea King. The approach, not unlike that of a certain school of English singing, emphasizes a "white" sound that is light on vibrato, pure of tone, precise in pitch, and smoothly regulated or modulated between the instrument's register breaks.

The French school, of which Gervase de Peyer is probably the most famous exponent, tends to cultivate a somewhat less focused sound in favor of a richer color palette and a more pronounced vibrato. Between the two—English and French—my personal taste leans towards the former. I've long had de Peyer's Angel/EMI LP of the Mozart and Brahms clarinet quintets with the Melos Ensemble in my collection, though I've never much cared for the performances.

That brings us to the American school, which has managed to produce, in my opinion, the finest clarinetists of all—Stanley Drucker, David Shifrin, Richard Stoltzman, Harold Wright, and let us not forget Benny Goodman; and now Arthur Campbell can be added to this prestigious list. The American approach is one that adopts the best attributes of the English style, (the purity of tone and pitch and well-balanced registration) while eschewing the bland "white" sound in favor of the richer color palette and vibrato of the French school, but without the flaw of flabby

focus.

This latest entry then into a highly crowded field is highly recommended for exquisite playing, enhanced by a wonderfully warm and perfectly balanced recording. The hybrid SACD will play on all CD players; and, of course, when played on a system equipped for full surround sound will add an extra degree of dimensionality.

