



Johannes Brahms: Clarinet Chamber Music

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The Clarinet (Justin O'Dell - 2007.12.01)

Arthur Campbell has released a new compact disc with three of the four chamber music works with clarinet by Johannes Brahms. The Trio in A Minor, opus 114, and both clarinet sonatas are beautifully captured in this hybrid Super Audio CD in surround sound format. This type of recording can be used in any CD player, but when played by equipment especially designed for it, the listener is rewarded with a depth of sound and range of dynamics much wider than available on ordinary CDs. When you have an SACD player, proper amplification, and five speakers, the result is truer to a live performance.

Arthur Campbell, according to the biographical notes accompanying the CD, was one of only three doctoral students of Robert Marcellus at Northwestern University in Illinois. A native of Canada, Dr. Campbell won the ICA's International Clarinet Recording Competition in 1996 and the top clarinet prize in the National Music Festival of Canada (1988). Campbell chose first-rate musicians with whom to collaborate on this recording. Daniel Raclot, principal cellist with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio-France, pianist Jean Pascal Meyer (in the trio), and wonderful pianist Frances Renzi (sonatas) all generously contribute their developed artistic personalities to these masterworks.

The Trio is the opening work on the disc. Mr. Raclot roots out just the right expression with his solo at the beginning. Too often, cellists miss the opportunity to convey the poetry and poignancy of this opening. Raclot's version radiates a melancholic wistfulness, and one imagines Brahms' tentative first scribbles as he emerged from retirement to pen this sublime work for its dedicatee, Richard Mühlfeld. I especially enjoyed the taut, composed character set up by pianist J.P. Meyer in the first half of the transition. He holds back slightly and he sets up a terrific push forward just when the clarinet joins the transition. Now the tempo carries enough momentum to welcome the second theme. Raclot penetrates beautifully with a searing, full sound here. Later in the movement, when it is the clarinetist's duty to call in the recapitulation, Campbell phrases it purely, instead of evoking longing. His attractive, lengthy phrases and clear sound are free of sentimentality, allowing the music to speak without interference. Campbell shines in the opening of the slow movement. He relishes the chance to show off his silky, soft sound. The third movement is also very well played, but it would benefit from a little more collective contrast from the group. The main tempo, while slow, could have been more effective if the trio section had a little more Teutonic rollick. The approach is thoroughly elegant and unhurried, but sometimes I thought of a pavane more than of a Ländler. The definition of character set up by Raclot is confident and chiseled in the opening of the last movement, however. He pilots a strong and powerful primary theme. The movement is full of fire and excitement. This trio performs expertly together, and one senses they are enjoying the music to the fullest.

Both of the opus 120 sonatas are played very well. Frances Renzi's contributions as both pianist and duo partner are commendable. Renzi has a beguiling sound, marked by clear textures and judicious use of pedaling. She supports Campbell so he can sing freely, but at the same time she succeeds as a full and sensitive chamber music participant. Campbell takes his opportunities to full advantage in the sonatas. His expression recalls that of his great master teacher, Marcellus. The phrasing is straightforward and within beats, and he rarely strays from what the composer asks. There are occasional touches of boldness, which add to the personality of the artist. Listen to the climax of the development of the second sonata, for example. For me, I found the slow movement of the F minor sonata particularly satisfying. Campbell's lucid tone and spot-on intonation make for a performance that is easy to listen to. He takes it beyond the workmanlike, with some of the tenderest playing one could wish for. Renzi superbly performs the last movement of the first sonata. She at once conveys the neo-classicist in Brahms' opening refrain, but she adeptly unleashes all the requisite power called for in the second episode.

All in all, this new Brahms release is an appealing newcomer to a bookshelf crowded with Brahms' sonatas. The use of advanced recording technology lends it further interest.