



Johannes Brahms: Clarinet Chamber Music

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This SACD brings together three of the four masterpieces Brahms wrote for Richard Mühlfeld, the self-taught virtuoso clarinetist who inspired the composer to come out of compositional retirement. The missing piece, the gorgeous Clarinet Quintet Op.114, is frequently coupled with the Clarinet Trio, its immediate predecessor in Brahms oeuvre. Here it is replaced with the two sonatas for clarinet and piano which date from three years later.

American clarinetist Arthur Campbell turns in polished performances of the sonatas, with Frances Renzi a sympathetic associate artist. Their accounts emphasise the dreamy beauty of Brahms' writing, and Campbell's variation of tone is quite beguiling in and of itself. The performance of the first sonata is perhaps more successful. Here Campbell and Renzi find more ardour in the first movement than they manage to project in the second movement of the second sonata, both of which are marked "allegro appassionato". They also turn in a lovingly detailed accounts of the first sonata's allegretto grazioso third movement and dancing vivace finale.

For the trio Campbell is joined by a pair of French musicians, both of whom raise the intensity somewhat without erasing the lyricism of Brahms' conception. Together the three musicians deliver a fine performance of this piece. The beauty of Campbell's tone is compromised a little in the upper extremes of his register in the first movement, but elsewhere it remains warm and mellifluous. My only serious reservation here concerns the balancing of the sound, which favours the piano and clarinet but obscures Raclot's cello. Perhaps this problem is unique to the CD stereo layer of the disc, and is not repeated in the SACD layers, which I have not heard. Certainly the sound is otherwise excellent, closely recorded perhaps but lacking nothing in warmth.

The booklet notes, in both German and English, are helpful, even if the picture of Brahms selected to adorn Michael Struck-Schloen's essay depicts the composer in his youth rather than the gentleman of late middle age who penned these works.

If you prize the autumnal beauty of these pieces above their latent passion, these accounts will give you pleasure.