

Reference Recording: Brahms's Clarinet Sonatas

CD (52'30"). Brahms's Sonatas Op. 120 and Schumann's „Fantasy Pieces“ Op. 73 by Selvadore Rähni (clarinet) and Tuuli Rähni (piano). Producer and engineer Andreas Neubronner.

It would be an understatement to describe Brahms's Sonatas Op. 120 as standard repertoire – these works are nothing less than a landmark of clarinet music, a touchstone against which to measure one's technical proficiency and musicianship. If one thinks of the 19th-century clarinet repertoire, the reasons why the Sonatas (as well as the Trio Op. 114 and the Quintet Op. 115) have acquired such a unique status should not be difficult to fathom. Although the first quarter of the 19th century was the golden age of woodwind repertoire and the clarinet had an ever-increasing role in orchestral scores, the remaining century strikes us as surprisingly ungenerous in terms of clarinet music. Of the chamber works produced in that period, only a few are more or less frequently performed today (Mendelssohn's two “Concert Pieces” for clarinet, basset horn, and piano, Schumann's „Fantasy Pieces“, and, to some extent, Glinka's „Trio pathétique“). During the period of roughly a hundred years preceding Carl Nielsen's Concerto (1928), the genre of instrumental concerto was, quite similarly, at low ebb, and such works as Rimsky-Korsakov's “Concert Piece” (for clarinet and military band) and Stanford's Clarinet Concerto are hardly significant enough to challenge that view. Of the composers who lent their voice to the clarinet in the latter half of the 19th century, nobody comes even close to Brahms's towering achievement.

It is anything but easy to make one's mark in works so generously represented on disc as Brahms's Op. 120, and this is probably the main reason why the wisest of clarinetists embark on recording them only after a lengthy period of introspection and deliberation. The latest CD by the Estonian duo Selvadore Rähni (clarinet) and Tuuli Rähni (piano), however, makes a solid contribution to the apparently crowded discography. Having been tutored at what is presently known as the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Selvadore Rähni enrolled at the University of Music Karlsruhe in the early 1990s to study with Wolfgang Meyer. In 1997–2005 he served as the principal clarinetist of the Kyoto Symphony Orchestra and currently resides in Iceland. Obviously, Rähni's Karlsruhe schooling has very much to do with the way he approaches Brahms. The 19th century saw the rise of two different clarinet types, known as the German and French systems, the former taking the innovations of Iwan Müller (1812) as its point of departure and the latter being the outcome of a mid-century attempt to install a system of keywork similar to that used on Theobald Boehm's flute. The differences in terms of keywork concern not only fingering but also result in a somewhat different tone quality. In the present recording, Selvadore Rähni has set the

goal of evoking the dark and mellow timbre generally associated with the German tradition on the ubiquitous Boehm clarinet. And speaking of the German tradition, it is noteworthy that the pianist Tuuli Rähni is also a graduate of the Karlsruhe school.

The task of performing Brahms's Sonatas is not made easier by the almost anecdotal story of their creation. There always remains the question of how much should the performers let themselves be carried away by the knowledge that the Sonatas represent the “autumnal” Brahms and emerged from his fascination with the Meiningen clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. Indeed, the adjective “autumnal” has become a cliché in characterising the music of Brahms's final years, and, more often than not, one feels compelled to evoke a fitting degree of sombreness on the concert platform (it suffices to consider some of Brahms's earlier works, such as the “German Requiem”, to realise that the elegiac and valedictory sentiments are not unique to “autumnal” Brahms). As a consequence, it might seem tempting to settle for a ponderous *amabile* version of the Sonatas, with little of the *appassionato* quality so characteristic of Brahms's oeuvre in general.

Thankfully, Selvadore and Tuuli Rähni have not fallen for the “autumnal” discourse and, instead of that, present a lively and refreshing account, which, however, is by no means devoid of lyricism. The most remarkable aspect of the present take is undoubtedly Selvadore Rähni's sumptuous clarinet tone. Let us compare his approach with Martin Fröst's version, released under BIS ten or so years ago and widely considered as one of the definitive recordings of that repertoire ever since. Although the subtlety of Fröst's reading is undeniable, his clarinet tone, for all its occasional forcefulness and analytically cold quality, would be more appropriate in instrumental concertos; Rähni, though, has managed to capture the intimacy inherent in chamber music much more convincingly (also note that Rähni never builds a *crescendo* while performing a sustained note, whereas Fröst does not always succeed in avoiding that oddity). Even though Rähni's clarinet tone loses nothing of its roundedness in *forte* and *fortissimo* passages, he wisely allows the pianist to take the lead whenever greater force is required. Brahms's way with the clarinet is aptly characterised by the fact that a viola part was provided as an alternative in the 1895 edition. Some of the passages that pose no difficulty on the viola are, obviously, rather awkward on the clarinet, and vice versa, which means that the clarinetist has to face a plethora of technical challenges. As far as it comes to rock-solid and accurate intonation in every register, sumptuous phrasing, and impeccable co-operation, I recall no recording that could beat the present release by Selvadore and Tuuli Rähni. The producer and sound engineer is Andreas Neubronner of the multiple Grammy-winning studio Tritonus. In short, the present CD has all what it takes to be the new reference recording of Brahms's Clarinet Sonatas.

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