

ALL BRAHMS - CD LINER NOTES

The genesis of this album comes from an experience I had as a young teenager. When I was about thirteen years old, I heard a reel-to-reel tape recording, a copy of the early Edison 1889-cylinder roll of Brahms performing the beginning part of his 1st Hungarian Dance. Edison traveled around the world and made many of these brief historical cylinder documents while he was testing and improving his product. The cylinder roll was the forerunner of the first gramophone. This minute-long tape copy with a charming introduction of the cylinder's discovery, followed by Brahms, introducing himself, "Ich bin Doktor Brahms, Johannes Brahms!" and concluding with forty-some seconds of Brahms actually playing the piano gave me an indescribable thrill. Even hearing it today evokes the same feeling!

At that time, I was struck by the insight that dead composers are still whole, real "living" people. Pictures, letters are one thing but the actual voice and playing makes any image of Brahms vastly stronger. Relating to dead composers as colleagues and understanding who they were and what they are really about is a tricky subject even in today's hi-tech world. Just for a second this fleeting tape copy put me in direct contact with Brahms' personality and his enormous pianism. That is all one really needs to have a life changing experience. I hadn't realized that Brahms was such a wonderful pianist! Yes, this instant of music is wonderful playing by any standards, and yes, since this is one of the first sound recordings, it is of course very primitive acoustically. So, I had to listen over and over again to separate the static from the sound, and the more I listened, the more I was able to hear details in Brahms' timing and rubato, pedaling and articulation. From then on, I felt that I "knew" Brahms; I was in awe of his tremendous pianistic powers. I looked at other solo piano works and imagined how he would play them. This process taught me just how well Brahms knew the piano and what he could do with it.

His arrangement of the Hungarian Dances for two hands with their impressive and challenging difficulties always winked at me while suggesting that I continue to enjoy performing them in the original, very comfortable, 4-hand version. But recently, a student, Rose Chanler, walked into my studio with a clean and lovely edition of the Dances for 2-hands. She knew how much I love to play Brahms and what special delight I get playing the 4-hand Hungarian Dances. This was the moment: "Look what I found! Why don't you play these?" she said. "You wouldn't need a partner and it sure would be great to hear you play them all by yourself!" And so began the journey and joy of this CD.

The Ballades, Op. 10 (1854) are among the early pieces for piano. Brahms (1833-1897) was twenty-one years old and looking for less traditional and rigid forms in which to present his material. By now he had written his all his sonatas for piano as well as a set of variations for piano, three short sets of lieder, and the first version of the piano trio, Op.8. The Ballades, four character pieces, are sprinkled with seeds from which more concise inventions come to

fruition. Taken on their own merit, they remain some of his most moving piano music. This first set of piano pieces (Klavierstücke) reveals a unique personal style and predicts great promise. The first Ballade is based on a real Scottish ballad, "Edward", a story of parricide. It is the only piece in the set with an acknowledged program. The darkness and sadness of the poem seems to interlink with the music and spill over into the second piece. It profoundly influences the unusual coloration of the entire set. The third Ballade entitled "Intermezzo" also in dark hue, serves as a scherzo and trio and represents the first use of this term by Brahms. The fourth, a truly inspirational "Song Without Words" is again more inward and intimate. I find these four pieces incredibly emotional and personal. The deeply sonorous beautiful colors are among the most vivid of his whole output for piano.

Brahms wrote the Op.116 Fantasies after about a fourteen-year hiatus from the Klavierstücke form; however, it is interesting to note that all the late sets of piano pieces, Op. 116, Op. 117, Op. 118 and Op. 119 were written in the same year, 1892. These sets are not unified "cycles" like piano suites by other composers of the romantic period but rather pieces attractively arranged like the many songs that Brahms published as groups. Perhaps the one exception is Op.116. The three capriccios (pieces 1, 3, and 7) are all strong, dramatic, and virtuosic, and they are all in a minor key. The four intervening intermezzos (nos. 2,4,5 and 6) are lyrical and dreamy, providing ultimate contrast. Brahms originally called no. 4 a nocturne, perhaps because it stands almost still in the middle of the set providing a large and glorious slow movement. Definitely significant is the fact that the last capriccio comments on the other two capriccios, thereby tying the set together. It is a compressed variant of the second capriccio, it is in d minor, and the 3/8 coda definitely reflects the first capriccio. These are passionate pieces in which Brahms is extremely successful in expressing tremendous emotional range. He gives us a long good look at the fine beauty of his workmanship as he simultaneously explores and reveals the range and splendor of limited form.

The Hungarian Dances are elaborate irresistible arrangements of popular gypsy music of the time. In total there are twenty-one dances, four books, spanning more than two decades of the composer's life and work. The first sketch appeared in 1850 and culminated in books one and two for piano duet (1869). Subsequent intricate versions for solo piano (1872), and for orchestra (1874) were very well received, and books three and four, also for piano 4-hands were published in 1880. The recent (1990) Budapest Edition of the 4-hand version reprints many of the popular Hungarian dance pieces in print at that time. It clearly shows that the material Brahms used was already part of the common musical knowledge of the period. The material is extremely heterogeneous and encompasses both arrangements of folk songs surviving intact till now as well as popular salon music of known or unknown contemporary composers satisfying the tastes of the town people. Brahms himself made no secret of this and described the Hungarian Dances to his publisher as: "genuine gypsy children, which I did not beget, but merely brought up with bread and milk." All the dances follow a distinct pattern with alternating sections of fast slow

fast or vice versa. In originally setting his dances for piano duet, Brahms was addressing himself to a performing medium then enjoying great popularity and which was one of the great social and musical pleasures of the time. The Hungarian Dances became widely popular and were a bonanza for Simrock the publisher as well as for Brahms. The solo version is not often played; nonetheless, it stands as an ingenious and dazzling arrangement by a master composer/pianist, full of great imagination, great joy, and enormous technical difficulty. Elizabeth von Herzogenberg, a close friend and confidante of Brahms wrote that they "suggest so vividly the indescribable quality of a Hungarian orchestra, so individual in its mixture of whirling and banging, rattling and piping, gurgling and jingling, that the piano ceases to be a piano. If I were to quote all I have to praise in these dances, I should go on until I had quoted nearly everything." Perhaps the strongest statement is from Brahms who chose to represent himself to posterity with an excerpt from this body of work.

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