

D/CD 3025

DAVID  
SHIFRIN  
clarinet

CAROL  
ROSENBERGER  
piano

recreate the  
**BRAHMS/SCHUMANN  
SOIRÉE**

the place:  
the home of  
Clara Schumann

the date:  
November 13, 1894

the program:  
BRAHMS: Clarinet Sonatas  
op. 120 no. 1 & 2  
SCHUMANN: Fantasiestücke op. 73

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ORIGINAL DIGITAL RECORDING

**A BRAHMS / SCHUMANN SOIRÉE**

**D/CD 3025**

*On November 13, 1894, Clara Schumann held a musical soirée. At the centerpiece of the program were the two Clarinet Sonatas op. 120 performed by Johannes Brahms and the virtuoso clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. During the same evening, Clara Schumann and Mühlfeld played Robert Schumann's Fantasiestücke op. 73. The evening was a fitting tribute to the friendship between Schumann and Brahms.*

**JOHANNES BRAHMS**

**Clarinet Sonata in E-Flat Major op. 120 no. 2 (21:34)**

- 1 Allegro amabile (8:28)
- 2 Allegro appassionato (5:33)
- 3 Andante con moto. Allegro (7:25)

**ROBERT SCHUMANN**

**Fantasiestücke op. 73 (11:19)**

- 4 Zart und mit Ausdruck (3:25)
- 5 Lebhaft, leicht (3:43)
- 6 Rasch und mit Feuer (4:09)

**JOHANNES BRAHMS**

**Clarinet Sonata in F Minor op. 120 no. 1 (22:49)**

- 7 Allegro appassionato (8:00)
- 8 Andante un poco Adagio (5:12)
- 9 Allegretto grazioso (4:10)
- 10 Vivace (5:14)

**DAVID SHIFRIN**, Clarinet

**CAROL ROSENBERGER**, Piano

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 56:01**

The year 1853 was a formative one for Johannes Brahms (1833-1897). A brilliant young musician who had not yet won recognition as a composer, Brahms traveled to Düsseldorf on September 30 to make the acquaintance of Robert Schumann (1810-1856). The story of the two composers' meeting is a touching one. Brahms sat down at the piano and began to play his newest compositions, including two piano sonatas, a Scherzo, and the song "Liebestreu". He had not played for long when Schumann called in his wife, the pianist Clara Wieck, and said to her, "Now my dear Clara, you will hear such music as you never heard before." The Schumanns were overjoyed by Brahms' creative genius and extended his visit several times, so that he stayed with them until early November, 1853. Schumann's diaries from the period abound in references to "the young eagle", and he was soon arranging for the publication of Brahms' music by the prestigious Leipzig firm of Breitkopf & Härtel. Then on October 28, 1853, unbeknownst to Brahms, Schumann's article "New Roads" appeared in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Here Schumann described his prediction that there would arrive a musician summoned to give expression to his times, "a musician who would reveal his mastery not in a gradual evolution, but like Athene would spring fully armed from Zeus's head." "And such a one *has* appeared," reported Schumann triumphantly. "His name is *Johannes Brahms*, and he comes from Hamburg, where he has been working in quiet obscurity. . . ." As founder of the *Neue Zeitschrift* and longtime respected critic, Schumann's word carried enormous weight. Suddenly composers wanted to know who this Brahms was. In one fell swoop, Brahms rose from obscurity to a position of prominence in the musical world.

It is an interesting coincidence that late in their respective careers both Schumann and Brahms wrote music for the novel medium of clarinet and piano: Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* appeared in 1849 and Brahms' *Clarinet Sonatas* in 1894. Apart from the series of seven pieces — including the Grand Duo — which Carl Maria von Weber composed for clarinet and piano, no major composer since Mozart had written for this medium. It is quite possible, then, that Brahms was influenced by the scoring of his friend and mentor. David Shifrin sees many important similarities between the two composers' approach: "It's never a matter of the piano accompanying the clarinet so much as the clarinet being almost like a third hand of the piano, an extension that's able to sustain and color the sound in ways that the piano can't. Very often the clarinet is accompanying the piano. Very frequently, of course, the piano lays the harmonic

and rhythmic structure for the melodic line of the clarinet. But the net result in the Schumann and in the Brahms is a texture that is like one instrument."

Brahms' two **Clarinet Sonatas op. 120** belong to a group of chamber pieces which he composed for Richard Mühlfeld, the virtuoso clarinetist in the court orchestra of Meiningen, Germany. When Brahms first encountered Mühlfeld in March 1891, he had not written anything for a year and had even announced that the String Quintet in G Major of 1890 would be his last composition. A statement accompanying the Quintet read: "The time has come for you to say goodbye to any further compositions of mine." Hearing Mühlfeld changed all of this. Brahms was so impressed by the clarinet's expressive and technical possibilities, as demonstrated by Mühlfeld, that he wrote a wind Trio and a wind Quintet the next summer. Then in 1894 he completed the two Clarinet Sonatas op. 120 and gave the first performance of these works with Mühlfeld at a private gathering of the ducal circle of Meiningen. Brahms and Mühlfeld went on to play the sonatas throughout Germany and Austria, including the concert at Clara Schumann's musical soiree where Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* were also performed. Brahms derived a great deal of joy from these performances and gave Mühlfeld — whom he called "my prima donna" — all performing rights during his lifetime. When the sonatas were published, Brahms delivered them to Mühlfeld with an inscription of thanks.

Mühlfeld's great virtuosity led Brahms to write for the clarinet as if there were no limits to its expressive capabilities. In the Sonatas op. 120 the clarinetist must command extremely soft passages and play melodic lines with wide leaps. The performer must also act, in David Shifrin's words, as a "chameleon, masking the clarinet's sound and imitating so many of the different sounds of different instruments." This is consistent, Mr. Shifrin observes, with the orchestral nature of much of Brahms' chamber music. The **Sonata No. 2 in E-flat Major op. 120** opens with a lyrical curving theme in which the clarinet imitates a violin. The clarinet continues by playing bold leaps above the piano's stepwise ascent. Then, in a characteristic exchange of roles, the piano plays the clarinet's curving, turning motive while the clarinet provides the accompaniment. An octave leap heralds the second theme. Brahms creates a lovely canon by having the piano echo the clarinet at the distance of one beat. This canonic device, which appears frequently in the Brahms Sonatas, is another means of creating equality between the two instruments.

For four measures at the beginning of the development the clarinet sustains the lowest note of its range (D) as a pedal point while the piano plays the second theme in a minor key. Brahms then presents a lyrical interchange between clarinet and piano: we hear the curving theme start in the piano and shift to the clarinet which adds the remaining notes and extends the melody. The passage is a perfect example of the clarinet assuming the piano's role. From it we move to a mysterious dialogue in which triplets rotate between clarinet and piano, and the piano sometimes completes its partner's melodic line. The movement's coda features another trade-off: the clarinet plays triplets against the piano's two-note groups; then the piano plays triplets against the clarinet's twos. This pull of one element against another, and the resultant cross rhythm, pervades the two Brahms Sonatas and the *Fantasiestücke*.

The second movement is a Scherzo set in the unusually distant key of E-flat minor and given a more solemn tempo marking (*Allegro appassionato*) than Scherzo movements usually have. The principal seven-note theme, introduced by the clarinet, features an upward major sixth leap which we hear three times as the theme is repeated at higher pitch levels. Brahms proceeds to manipulate his theme, prolonging its high note so that the theme occupies twice as many measures as when first introduced. The piano brings us rhythmically back on track. At the end of the scherzo, Brahms gives the clarinet a climactic rhapsodic passage in which for a moment time seems to stand still. Playing the principal theme in augmented rhythms, the clarinet plummets two-and-a-half octaves until it rests on one of its lowest pitches. The unusual chalumeau register colors the high notes sounding with it in the piano.

The final movement of the E-flat Major Sonata is a theme and variations, one of Brahms' favorite forms. Brahms gives each of the five variations a distinctive personality. The first is sparse in texture and severe in mood, with counterpoint between the piano and the clarinet that, especially at the opening, recalls the contrapuntal style of Bach. By contrast, the second variation is lively and pert, full of cascading triplets in the piano which taunt the duple groupings in the clarinet. The third variation is a dialogue that becomes a lovely duet when the clarinet and piano start singing together in thirds. The fourth variation is a memory of the theme. Brahms provides scarcely more than the harmonic outline and asks us to fill in the melody. In the first and third phrases, low chalumeau notes of the clarinet alternate with the bass notes of the piano, producing a strange hollow sound. The minor mode of the fifth

variation belies the lively momentum of this section. The tempo has now shifted from Andante to Allegro, thrusting us directly into a Coda in which triplets abound and the clarinet plays fanfares in imitation of a trumpet.

Robert Schumann, like Brahms, tended to focus on a particular genre or form. Most of his small pieces for a single instrument and piano were written in 1849. In this year he composed his Adagio and Allegro for horn and piano op. 70, the Drei Romanzen for oboe and piano op. 94, the Fünf Stücke im Volkston for cello and piano op. 102 and the **Fantasiestücke for clarinet and piano op. 73**. No information survives on the musicians who may have inspired these duos. "My guess," notes David Shifrin, "is that there was a clarinetist for whom the Fantasiestücke were written, just as there was probably a horn player for whom he wrote his Adagio and Allegro and an oboist for whom he wrote the Romances." Certainly the precedent of Anton Stadler inspiring Mozart and Heinrich Baermann inspiring Weber supports Mr. Shifrin's conjecture.

Schumann's Fantasiestücke differ in important ways from the Brahms Sonatas. Each falls into a simple three-part form (ABA), and Schumann links the three pieces by thematic recall and a progression in mood from pensiveness in the first to animation, liveliness, and optimism in the second, to greater optimism in the third. The continuous variation of a few brief ideas is an essential trait of Schumann the miniaturist. Technically the Fantasiestücke "place very different demands on the clarinetist." (Shifrin) "Schumann was writing even more pianistically than Brahms if that's possible, and not really taking the instrumental difficulties of a wind player into account. The clarinet plays almost constantly throughout the entire three Fantasy pieces. There's never a chance to rest and very rare chances to breathe. In the Brahms pieces there's always a statement and then a chance to rest."

The first piece (Zart und mit Ausdruck) opens in minor and presents a wistful theme in the clarinet with phrases that end uncertainly. Schumann weaves into the piano part a motive that will introduce the principal theme of the second Fantasiestück. Throughout the piece, the notes of the piano's melody emerge from a texture of continuous triplets tugging against the clarinet's two-note groups.

The second piece (Lebhaft, leicht) contains a much longer middle section which begins with clarinet and piano tossing triplets back and forth in a delightful antiphonal game. The soothing coda suggests a lullaby with a rippling triplet accompaniment in the piano. In the last three measures, the piano softly intones the rising theme of the next piece (Rasch und mit Feuer).

Following a brilliant flourish, clarinet and piano play a canon at the distance of two beats. The canon propels the music forward, creating a sense of high drama and excitement. When Schumann repeats his principal melody, he moves into a quotation of the opening theme from the first piece. Threads of the main theme from the second piece are woven into the coda where they appear first in clarinet and then in piano. The final piece is thus a grand summation and an exuberant finish.

The **Sonata No. 2 in F Minor op. 120** provides a contrast both to the lively mood of the final Fantasy piece and to the graceful E-flat Major Sonata. The Allegro appassionato, full of passion and melancholy, opens with a slow, somber theme in octaves in the piano. This melody gives way to a clarinet theme featuring enormous leaps of register which illustrate the dramatic capabilities of the instrument and create "expressive turns in the phrase." (Shifrin) The second key area also contains two different themes, one heard above the octaves theme, the second a lively, restless figure which appears later in augmented version in the piano. The coda offers a magical close, with its canonic treatment of a figure based on the movement's principal themes.

The two middle movements of the F Minor Sonata are in the same key, something unprecedented in the four-movement sonata. Together they provide an elegant, expressive interlude. In the Andante un poco Adagio, Brahms does not create the same interweaving of the voices that characterizes the first movement. Instead, the clarinet plays the melody at the beginning; the spotlight shifts to the piano; the clarinet returns with an ornamented version of its melody. The harmonies are very beautiful and exploratory. They wander from the A-flat tonality of the opening clarinet section to remote harmonies in the piano's section. When the clarinet brings back its theme in A-flat major with ornamentation, Brahms fills out the piano part in triplets so that we hear twos against threes. The entire movement contains no dynamic markings louder than the poco forte at the very beginning, and most of it is played pianissimo.

From this tranquility, we move to a graceful scherzo which Sir Donald Tovey calls "the most deliciously Viennese of all Brahms' works." Indeed a more appropriate designation is *ländler*, the term for an Austrian dance resembling a slow waltz. Brahms' *ländler* contains rollicking melodic lines, pedal points, and an occasional emphasis on the second beat of the measure. The end of the *ländler* features a dramatic passage, reminiscent of the Scherzo in the E-Flat Major Sonata, in which the

clarinet soars up and then, in the span of only three measures, plummets two octaves.

The Vivace, in rondo form, opens with three half-notes struck boldly by the piano. They appear next in the clarinet. The sound is a summons, a call to action which both piano and clarinet must play like a trumpet. The trumpet call recurs throughout the movement, sometimes hidden in the bass lines of the piano, sometimes harmonized as full chords, and sometimes softly intoned and repeated in the clarinet. Four measures before the end, the mournful octave theme which opened the first movement returns in an optimistic major mode. The sonata concludes joyfully; we imagine Brahms at the piano playing the final chords while Mühlfeld unleashes bright triplet arpeggios from his instrument.

We have no information on the order in which the Brahms and Schumann pieces were performed at Clara Schumann's soirée. Carol Rosenberger explains that on the present recording, she and Mr. Shifrin follow the order they observe on concert programs: "We start with the E-flat Sonata which floats in gently and draws the listener into its lyrical world. The Fantasiestücke offer a refreshing change of pace with their smaller frames, their more intimate expression, and yet they heighten the lyrical mood set by the E-flat Sonata. By this time the listener is ready for the grand structure of the F Minor Sonata which carries the program's lyricism to an impassioned climax."

*Nancy Perloff*

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