

BRAHMS Clarinet Sonatas: No. 1 in f; No. 2 in E \flat • Jon Manasse (cl); Jon Nakamatsu (pn) • HARMONIA MUNDI 907430 (44:04)

I began having doubts about this assignment as soon as the CD arrived from Tenafly. Who is more critical of a clarinetist—sometimes unfairly—than another clarinetist? And, having lived with and performed these pieces for some 40 years (I now find myself the same age that Brahms was the year before he met clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, when he decided he was finished as a composer), I have pretty definite ideas about how they should go. I also have my long-favored recordings, against which I measure any upstart competition. At this point I hope you understand why I feel the necessity to abandon my usual practice of avoiding the overuse of the first person in my reviews; playing a recording of the Brahms Clarinet Sonatas is for me about as personal a listening experience as there is.

So, here's what happened. I inserted the disc in my CD player and pushed the "play" button, at which point I was met with three successive surprises, each more wonderful than the last. First, as I hastened to my favored listening spot, hoping to get settled in before too much music had gone by, I heard only silence for about five seconds. Why haven't all CD manufacturers thought of this? Second, having sat down and opened my copy of the score to the first page, and having prepared for the stark piano octaves that begin the F-Minor Sonata, I was met instead with the exquisite opening of the E \flat -Major. (I hadn't yet read the booklet.) Third (really, simultaneously with the second), I heard what the *Boston Globe's* Richard Dyer described, in his review of the Harold Wright/Peter Serkin recording, in words far more poetic and descriptive than any I could summon: "[Y]ou don't so much listen to him as overhear him as he steals sound from silence, drawing us into a volatile private world of thought, feeling and dream."

The emphasis on the *amabile* in the tempo indication *Allegro amabile* was clear from the very first languorous measure, in which the two Jons enter seemingly hesitantly, almost diffidently. A detailed description of the performance is both impossible and pointless: let it just be said that the entire sonata—to which I listened with both the score and my eyes closed—is performed here with a fresh but never arbitrary conception of Brahms's musical ideas; with great sensitivity of phrasing; with a dynamic range that incorporates some of the most perfectly controlled *pianissimos* I've ever heard on the clarinet; with a rhythmic flexibility that, if it were any less subtle and beautiful, might sound precious; with an ideally gauged relationship between the two instruments; and, in Manasse's case, with a purity and evenness of sound—vibrato-free, vibrant, and focused, with superb breath control—that together place this recording among the greatest ever made of this music.

Manasse's and Nakamatsu's conception of the E \flat -Major Sonata is not "merely" beautiful, though; it also emphasizes the work's occasional but crucial dramatic outbursts, in part through the contrasts between these passages—Figure 2 in the first movement, for example, or the final E \flat -Minor *Allegro non troppo* in the third movement—and the intimate worlds of the preceding music: the fourth variation of the finale, for example, in which time almost stops altogether.

I didn't listen to the F-Minor Sonata until the following day. If the two Jons play its first movement with less overt *Sturm und Drang* than standard readings, it is not because they are downplaying conflict, but rather that they are emphasizing tragedy. For once, one hears ideal balances between the two instruments in the ruthlessly contrapuntal development section; and, the restlessness of the second movement, with its many unresolved dissonances and spare textures, along with the dark trio to the third, has never so clearly sounded like an emissary from the world of the late piano pieces, a relationship I recognized in the performance even before I saw that George Gelles, in his unusually detailed and scholarly notes, had remarked on it.

So, who is this Jon Manasse, anyway? From what I have been able to find, both in the biographical blurb in the program booklet and on the Web, he is the ultimate freelancer's freelancer. This term is sometimes used pejoratively (i.e., he doesn't have a "regular" gig); but, not when a musician works on the level that Manasse does: he teaches at both Juilliard and Eastman; he appears regularly in major chamber festivals and with many standing chamber ensembles; he played a season as principal clarinetist at the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra; he is principal clarinetist with the American Ballet Theater Orchestra and the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, and so on. You probably have the best chance of hearing him if you live in the New York metropolitan area.

As I said in my opening paragraph, I still have certain older recordings of these works that I continue to treasure: Wright with Harold Goldsmith on an MHS LP, not currently available, for Wright's uniquely vibrant tone and the honesty and straightforward, but never prosaic, nature of their approach; and, David Shifrin and Carol Rosenberger on Delos, for Shifrin's beautifully dark, subtly shaded tone colors, the subtleties of his phrasings, and his and Rosenberger's sense of passion. There is also room on my shelves for the Wright/Serkin version, and the Stoltzman/Goode (for some reason these pieces seem to fare well when the two performers share a given name), plus some others that earn their way as "historic" documents.

Normally, at this point in a review, I would scold the company for putting a mere 44 minutes of music on a full-priced CD. But this would be throwing out the baby with the bath water: which to have, 44 minutes of musical gold, or 74 of tin? Forget it.

It's a treat to know this early in the year (I write this in late January) what will top my Want List for 2008. If you care about Brahms or the clarinet, you will treasure this one. **Richard A. Kaplan**