



LAWO
CLASSICS

JOHANNES BRAHMS

LATE PIANO WORKS
OPP. 116, 117, 118

EUGENE ASTI



A FEW YEARS AGO, when I was making my first recording for LAWO of music inspired by Norway, Vegard Landaas asked me if I might like to record some Brahms solo piano pieces for his label. I was very surprised, and naturally excited by the suggestion, but as I rarely play solo repertoire in my career as a song accompanist, I hesitated at first. However, Brahms has always been one of my great passions and a composer with whom I feel a particular affinity, so after much thought and encouragement from those close to me, I decided to do it. I saw it as an artistic challenge – something that would push me out of my comfort zone and deepen my understanding and connection with Brahms and his music.

When I was trying to decide which solo pieces to record, I felt drawn to the late piano works as they seemed in some way related to his songs. Brahms's *Lieder* are some of his most intimate and personal compositions, and although small in scale, there is a wealth of emotional depth and poetic sensibility to be explored in them. The exact same thing can be said of the late piano works, which are likewise small in dimension and certainly not composed as virtuosic showpieces. They are also among the most beautiful and profound of all his works, possessing a truly vocal quality with which, as a song pianist, I can immediately identify (some could almost be called 'songs without words'). There is an incredible level of musical structure and unity in these pieces (as one

would expect with Brahms) and the multi-layered, multi-faceted writing presents a constant challenge to any pianist who encounters them.

In the making of this recording, I was very fortunate that LAWO chose a wonderful reconditioned Steinway D dating from 1893, which is just a year after the composition of these late piano pieces. Its gorgeous tone and unique sound quality served as a constant inspiration to me. The beautiful acoustic of the Sofienberg Church in Oslo not only provided a naturally warm and vibrant sound, but also helped to create the right atmosphere so essential for this music.

I would like to thank all my dear friends and colleagues for their support and encouragement, but especially my dear partner Simon, without whose belief in me I would never have dared to think that I might be able to fulfill this project.

EUGENE ASTI



JOHANNES BRAHMS

FANTASIEN, OP. 116
DREI INTERMEZZI, OP. 117
KLAVIERSTÜCKE, OP. 118

During the nineteenth century, no instrument was more popular or widespread than the piano. Not only the vehicle for virtuoso showstoppers on the concert stage, it also democratised a vast repertoire of chamber music, song accompaniment, and operatic-symphonic repertoire in thousands of homes. Brahms, himself a pianist, exploited the instrument in all these ways for over half a century. Indeed, his piano-playing had been his ticket to success when he was twenty years old; in 1853, his mentor Robert Schumann, deeply impressed by the youthful genius, emphasised to the publishers Breitkopf & Härtel that Brahms the composer was inseparable from Brahms the pianist.

And yet the pieces recorded here were by no means a foregone conclusion. Brahms's public piano career had already drawn to a close a few

years earlier. Furthermore, in 1890, at the age of 57, Brahms had also decided to wrap up his compositional life, with his String Quintet Op. 111. He was, after all, firmly established in Vienna as the 'grand old man' of Austro-German music. The following year, he wrote a will of sorts (the 'Ischl testament'), and ruthlessly went through his paperwork, destroying much correspondence and numerous manuscripts which he felt did not merit publication.

Interestingly, it was not the piano which caused a change of heart, but the sweet, expressive playing of the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld (whom he met in Meiningen in 1891), which inspired a return to composition in a series of chamber works with clarinet. The piano works recorded here followed shortly afterwards; the seven *Fantasien* **Op. 116 [Tracks 1–7]** were published at the end of 1892,

and the *Drei Intermezzi* **Op. 117 [Tracks 8–10]** and *Klavierstücke* **Op. 118 [Tracks 11–16]** at the end of 1893 (together with the final set Op. 119).

These pieces therefore distil his lifelong experience as a pianist-composer, exploring every possible nuance, colour, texture and timbre. And yet, his friend Philipp Spitta felt that they were 'different from everything' that Brahms had hitherto written for the instrument. Perhaps he sensed Brahms was opening up a different expressive space from other works composed for private enjoyment, such as the *Waltzes* Op. 39 and the perennially popular *Hungarian Dances* WoO1. Spitta felt the pieces should be 'absorbed slowly in peace and solitude, not just to think about afterwards, but also beforehand'. The influential critic Eduard Hanslick called the **Op. 118 [Tracks 11–16]** and Op. 119 pieces 'monologues which Brahms holds with himself and for himself in solitary evening hours, in stubborn, pessimistic rebellion, in broody contemplation, in romantic reminiscences, and every so often also in dreamy wistfulness.'

The public did not initially warm to these searching, introspective works, although Clara Schumann's pupils Fanny Davies and Ilona Eibenschütz persisted with them, laying the foundations for their enduring popularity. Asti's interpretation recalls some aspects of these early pianists' performance styles, as evinced in rare surviving recordings from

that generation; for example, his alertness to the inner voices in the texture, and his rhetorical handling of melody. Conversely, the austere dignity of Asti's reading of the slower lyrical works like **Op. 116 nos. 2 and 4 [Tracks 2 and 4]** recalls Brahms's creative roots in Bach and Mozart.

All the pieces are relatively small-scale, especially in comparison with Brahms's own earlier vast sonatas and variation sets. In this, they reveal two things: firstly, his commitment to the amateur performer, who with determination, might master them (particularly **Op. 117 [Tracks 8–10]**, which eschews Brahms's typically fearsome technical demands); secondly, his allegiance to Schumann, whose sets of piano miniatures from the 1830s inspired a century of pianist-composers (Schumann seems to march, ghostlike, through **Op. 116 no. 6 [Track 6]**). Characteristically, Brahms left his pieces abstract – although he did privately refer to the Op. 117 pieces 'three lullabies of my sorrows' (a quotation from the poet Friedrich Rückert). Unusually, the first piece **Op. 117 no. 1 [Track 8]** bears a poetic tag from a lullaby, namely Johann Gottfried Herder's translation of a section from a Scottish poem, *Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament*: ('Schlaf sanft mein Kind, schlaf sanft und schön! Mich dauert's sehr, dich weinen sehn.'). **Op. 117 no. 3 [Track 10]** may also have a Herder connection, as it was possibly inspired by a folksong lament by this poet: ('O weh! o weh, hinab ins Tal, und weh,

und weh, den Berg hinan, den Berg hinan.'). Brahms had admired Herder's writings since he was a boy.

These pieces were probably not performed as complete sets in Brahms's lifetime, but he nevertheless evidently thought carefully about the sequence of musical events within and between each piece in each opus. Moods and textures are carefully alternated, and although the pieces are usually associated with nostalgia and grief, they can also be energetic and dance-like, agitated, spooky, humorous and playful. And if there is grief, there is also consolation; for example, the heartbreaking **Op. 118 no. 2 [Track 12]** opens as a duet – we weep, but we do not weep alone – and the whole is wrapped in the consoling warmth of a major key. We can be children, rocked by a lullaby in **Op. 117 no. 1 [Track 8]**. Consolation also comes through chorale, which evokes both nation and religion, such as **Op. 118 no. 5 [Track 15]**. But we also travel to distant realms; the eerie openings of **Op. 116 no. 5 [Track 5]** and **Op. 118 no. 6 [Track 16]** which quotes the opening notes of the *Dies irae* Gregorian chant, are played here with almost chilling restraint and clarity, and seem to transport us to darkest outer space.

Ever aware of his Austro-German musical inheritance, Brahms often used ternary form (three sections, with the opening material returning at the end). The pieces are also highly contrapuntal, in which the music contains many separate voices (constructing the delicate hierarchy of those voices

is both a challenge and a delight to the pianist). Along similar lines, Brahms frequently resists the tyranny of the bar line, often concealing the musical pulse for long stretches, such as in **Op. 116 no. 1 [Track 1]**. And contrary to stereotyped images of Brahms, he often achieves astonishing delicacy and transparency of texture in the upper range of the piano, for example in the second section of **Op. 116 no. 2 [Track 2]**.

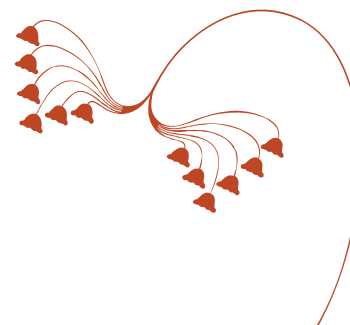
Brahms never played these pieces in public, although he delighted his friends and admirers with performances in their homes (as the artist on this disc has done in mine). Eibenschütz recalled Brahms playing some of these pieces to her for the first time in 1893. In her recollection, after dinner, Brahms mentioned 'a few exercises (...) which I have just composed.' She recalled that he 'played as if he were just improvising, with heart and soul, sometimes humming to himself, forgetting everything around him'.

Early reviewers emphasised the pervasive tone of mourning and nostalgia in this music. Some authors have suggested this might reflect Brahms's loss of various beloved friends such as his old friend and fellow-scholar Gustav Nottebohm, his brother Fritz, his teacher Eduard Marxsen, and perhaps most painfully, his dear friend and acute critic Elisabeth von Herzogenberg. She was just 44 when she died in January 1892, the year that Opp. 116–119 were begun (his sister Elise also died that

year). But the quality of the pieces – and the critics' responses – may also be infused with the sense of decline pervading Brahms's beloved Vienna in the 1890s. The city eventually fell into the hands of the Catholic far-right party after thirty years of the liberal secularism Brahms endorsed. Within a handful of years, the world which had nurtured Brahms's music had changed irreversibly.

With Brahms's friends' reactions in mind, these late piano pieces are ideally suited to recording. It is perhaps no coincidence that just two years earlier, in 1889–90, Theo Wagemann toured Europe promoting Edison's phonograph, an early sound recording device. Brahms wholeheartedly endorsed this 'new miracle'; for him, it was like living 'in a fairy-tale', and he presciently declared that they now 'lived under the sign of the phonograph'. Ultimately, however, whether we hear this music live on the recital stage, played at home in private, or on a recording, its expressive power remains unchanged.

NATASHA LOGES







EUGENE ASTI

Eugene Asti studied at the Mannes College of Music, New York with Jeannette Haien where he earned his B.Mus. and M.A. and subsequently studied piano accompaniment with Graham Johnson at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. Eugene now teaches at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and is Vocal Accompaniment Coordinator at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and regularly gives masterclasses both in the UK and abroad.

One of the foremost accompanists of his generation, he has performed with many great artists including Dame Felicity Lott, Dame Sarah Connolly, Sir Willard White, Sir Thomas Allen, Sir Bryn Terfel, Angelika Kirchschlager, and Dame Margaret Price in venues such as the Wigmore Hall and the Barbican, London; the Musikverein in Vienna; Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg; the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam; the Kölner Philharmonie; the Megaron in Athens; the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels; the Pierre Boulez Saal in Berlin; Symphony Hall in Birmingham and the Alice Tully Hall and Carnegie Hall in New York. He also performs regularly with

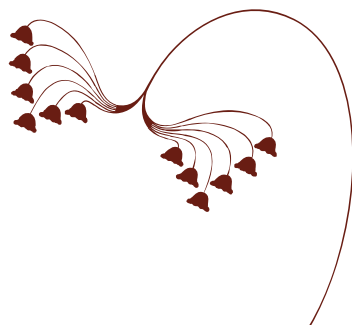
many leading recitalists such as Sophie Karthäuser, Sophie Daneman, Katherine Broderick, Mhairi Lawson, Helene Wold, Roderick Williams, Stephan Loges, Mark Padmore and James Rutherford.

His many recordings include the complete songs and duets by Felix Mendelssohn, songs by Fanny Mendelssohn and the complete songs of Clara Schumann all for Hyperion. Other recordings include a live recital disc with Dame Sarah Connolly for Signum; the complete Mozart songs with Sophie Karthäuser and Stephan Loges for Cyprès; a disc of Schumann Lieder entitled *Songs of Love and Loss* with Sarah Connolly for Chandos; a recital of English song entitled *Most Grand to Die* and Schubert's *Schwanengesang* for BIS with James Rutherford and most recently, a disc of Poulenc songs *Les Anges Musiciens* and Hugo Wolf *Kennst du das Land* both with Sophie Karthäuser for Harmonia Mundi. For LAWO he has recorded a disc of Norwegian inspired songs called *Roser og Kjerlighed* (LWC1029) with Helene Wold, Per Andreas Tønder and Vegard Lund and a disc of songs and piano music by Rikard Nordraak (LWC1119) with

Helene Wold. Future recordings include a disc of Debussy songs with Sophie Karthäuser for Harmonia Mundi and Schubert's *Winterreise* with James Rutherford for BIS.

In 2009 Eugene devised and curated a recital series to honour the anniversary of Felix Mendelssohn, for London's King's Place. He has also completed an edition of rare Mendelssohn songs for Bärenreiter which was published in 2008. Recent engagements include recitals with Sophie Karthäuser at the Landeskonservatorium, Innsbruck and La Monnaie, Brussels; a recital with Sir Bryn Terfel at the Dresden Music Festival; recitals at the Oxford Lieder and Spring Festivals with Dame Felicity Lott, Dame Sarah Connolly, Sophie Karthäuser, Roderick Williams, Stephan Loges and Mhairi Lawson; and he shared the platform with pianist Graham Johnson and seventeen of the finest young singers of today for the season's final song recital at the Wigmore Hall.

Future plans include recitals with Dame Sarah Connolly, Sophie Karthäuser, Stephan Loges and James Newby at the Oxford Lieder Festival; with Dame Sarah Connolly at the Wigmore Hall; with Sophie Karthäuser at the Vortragssaal, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, the Kölner Philharmonie, the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels and in Zürich; with Stephan Loges at the Barbican in London and in Harrogate; and with Sir Willard White at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham. Eugene is a Steinway Artist.



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FANTASIEN, OP. 116

- 1___I. Capriccio: Presto energico (D minor) 02:18
- 2___II. Intermezzo: Andante (A minor) 03:47
- 3___III. Capriccio: Allegro passionato (G minor) 03:18
- 4___IV. Intermezzo: Adagio (E major) 04:59
- 5___V. Intermezzo: Andante con grazia ed intimissimo sentimento (E minor) 03:02
- 6___VI. Intermezzo: Andantino teneramente (E major) 03:45
- 7___VII. Capriccio: Allegro agitato (D minor) 02:20

DREI INTERMEZZI, OP. 117

- 8___I. Andante moderato (E-flat major) 05:08
- 9___II. Andante non troppo e con molto espressione (B-flat minor) 04:42
- 10___III. Andante con moto (C-sharp minor) 06:00

KLAVIERSTÜCKE, OP. 118

- 11___I. Intermezzo: Allegro non assai, ma molto appassionato (A minor) 01:44
- 12___II. Intermezzo: Andante teneramente (A major) 06:14
- 13___III. Ballade: Allegro energico (G minor) 03:21
- 14___IV. Intermezzo: Allegretto un poco agitato (F minor) 02:45
- 15___V. Romanze: Andante (F major) 03:54
- 16___VI. Intermezzo: Andante, largo e mesto (E-flat minor) 05:17