

A SHORT PROGRAMME NOTE FOR A COMPLETE PERFORMANCE OF THE BRAHMS VIOLIN SONATAS

Virtually all the chamber works we have by Brahms are masterpieces. Of course, he had chosen to confront the past in the shapes of *both* Bach and Beethoven – and early on equipped himself with the technique and the depth of materials to consciously carry this burden. So, unlike with some of his contemporaries, there is an obsession with the 'finished' work – and with consistency in output.

We do not know exactly how much other such sonata-work Brahms destroyed, but the three published sonatas 'for piano and violin' are all highly-wrought products of an absolute artistic maturity, and also of the inscrutable professionalism of their composer. Everything seems to be dependent on everything else in a way which is close to the happy ideal. Such is the subtlety and control at work that even the most delicate confidences revealed can unfold with a breadth of expression that is symphonic in scale. Indeed it is this intimacy and tenderness that so readily evolve into great passions that makes these works so endearing to listeners – and provide players with special challenges: for, while the 'wisdom' and Teutonic command of later Brahms are undeniable, there is also fragility and trepidation, at times even sentimentality. Maybe it is not only the beard and portly physique of the older Brahms in photos that should inform us, but also the vulnerability and tinges of regret evident in the eyes.

Hearing the three works in one sitting is, one might say, a kind of exercise in 'anti-programming' – more akin to how works would be presented in an art exhibition than in concert. One-composer programmes of course provide both listeners and players with a moment to immerse in, and reflect on the particular expressive vocabulary and dialectics of a master – and how these come to life within the ambitions and problems of each particular work. Thus one hears the works in relation to one another too, rather than in relation to different styles altogether. And so a one-composer programme, not so say a one-composer-one-genre programme, gives a rich indication of how flexible, malleable and various the language. Never more so than in

these three sonatas, where each work possesses a highly distinct identity (indeed most listeners seem to have their own particular favourite), and where it is clear that Brahms was at pains not to repeat himself. It is almost as if they were composed specifically for posterity!

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