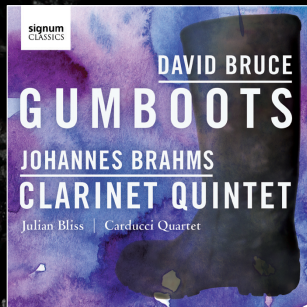
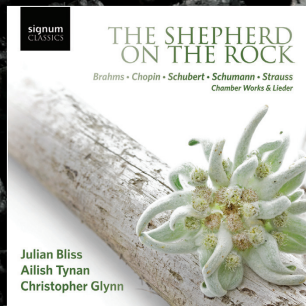


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JOHANNES BRAHMS

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Clarinet Sonatas, Op. 120

4 Ernste Gesänge, Op. 121

JOHANNES BRAHMS

(1833-1897)

Clarinet Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 120

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------|
| [1] I. Allegro appassionato | 8.15 |
| [2] II. Andante un poco adagio | 4.58 |
| [3] III. Allegretto grazioso | 4.08 |
| [4] IV. Vivace | 5.13 |

Vier Ernste Gesänge, Op. 121 (arr. Julian Bliss)

- | | |
|---|------|
| [5] I. Denn es gehet dem Menschen | 4.20 |
| [6] II. Ich wandte mich, und sahe an all | 3.49 |
| [7] III. O Tod, o Tod, wie bitter bist du | 3.19 |
| [8] IV. Wenn ich mit Menschen- und mit Engelzungen redete | 5.05 |

Clarinet Sonata No. 2 in E flat major, Op. 120

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------|
| [9] I. Allegro amabile | 8.31 |
| [10] II. Allegro appassionato | 5.21 |
| [11] III. Andante con moto — Allegro | 6.54 |

Total timings 60.02

JULIAN BLISS CLARINET
JAMES BAILLIEU PIANO

Introduction

The two Brahms Clarinet Sonatas are arguably some of the greatest pieces of chamber music for the instrument and they are truly my favourite works in the whole clarinet repertoire. I have studied, played and listened to these pieces over the last 20 years, and I'm aware that my approach and interpretation has evolved in that time – recording these great masterworks has always been a goal of mine.

The Brahms Sonatas are by no means Clarinet pieces with piano accompaniment; they are duos with equal standing for both instruments. James and I wanted to try a new recorded coupling for Brahms' Clarinet Sonatas, and so we started playing through his vocal works. The Vier Ernste Gesänge stood out to us because of their beauty and importance in Brahms' output. This set of songs were composed immediately after the sonatas and seemed to be a perfect fit, musically, alongside the Clarinet Sonatas. The first Sonata is quite dark at times, and the second is a more positive, happier piece – even the key signatures, F minor and E-flat major indicate this. By way of contrast, the first three songs of the Vier Ernste Gesänge have a dark subject matter and are in minor keys. The final song in E flat-major is gentle and consoling.

It was a pleasure to record this album with James and especially so with ace producer, Nick Parker, and sound engineer, Mike Hatch. To have a partnership like this one is a very special thing. There is never a dull moment when we work together and I appreciate all of their hard work and dedication to realise this album

Julian Bliss

Having been introduced by the lovely singer Aylish Tynan, Julian and I met one afternoon to play through a few pieces. I was immediately drawn into Julian's wonderful clarinet tone and admired his direct and honest music making. We got on very well both musically and personally, even sharing the same initials! We recorded these iconic Sonatas over a few intense days at Snape Maltings, guided by the wonderful team of Nick Parker and Mike Hatch.

James Baillieu

In 1891 Brahms was already planning his retirement, even warning his publisher and friends not to expect any further compositions from him. However, when he heard Richard Mühlfeld, principal clarinet of the Meiningen Court Orchestra, in performances of the Mozart Clarinet Quintet and Weber's First Concerto, he was so stunned that his creative drive was newly stimulated. The outstanding artistry of Mühlfeld (1856-1907), a violinist who taught himself the clarinet in three years and who later became principal of the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra, was widely admired. Clara Schumann described Mühlfeld's playing as: "... delicate, warm and unaffected ... most perfect technique and command of the instrument". In an article in *The Clarinet* of May-June 1989 Nicholas Shackleton and Keith Puddy describe the warm tone of Mühlfeld's boxwood clarinets, preserved in Meiningen. Brahms' various pet-names for Mühlfeld included "Fräulein Klarinette", "my dear nightingale" and "my prima donna". Another priceless anecdote comes from a viola-player who as a member of Joseph Joachim's quartet had performed the Brahms quintet with Mühlfeld. He remembered his "fiery technique, warm tone" and – surprisingly – "big vibrato".

The four works Brahms composed for Mühlfeld – a trio, a quintet and two sonatas – proved to be his last chamber compositions, but subsequently he completed the groups of piano pieces Opus 116-119 (begun 1891-2) before writing a set of German Folksongs, the Vier Ernste Gesänge (Four Serious Songs), Opus 121, and 11 Chorale Preludes for organ, Opus 122. Thus, without Mühlfeld's reawakening of Brahms' creativity we would have been deprived of not only the clarinet works but also these other late compositions. In 1894, while preparing the final book of the 49 German Folksongs for publication, Brahms again talked of ending his composing career. He wrote to Clara Schumann: "Has it ever occurred to you that the last of the songs comes in my Opus 1? [the First Piano Sonata]... It really ought to mean something. It ought to represent the snake that bites its own tail, that is to say, to express symbolically that the tale is told, the circle closed ... At 60 it is probably high time to stop".

In the two sonatas of 1894 Brahms' writing for clarinet is beautifully idiomatic, maximising the effectiveness of rapid arpeggios and the instrument's ease in changing register. This latter characteristic facilitates octave displacement within a melody, thereby enhancing expressive tension – as in the opening theme of the F minor Sonata, Opus 120 No. 1. The tempo is *Allegro appassionato*, but here the passion burns steadily rather than impulsively. A comparison with the stormy opening movement of the First Piano Concerto (dating from the late 1850's) is revealing of the older Brahms' relative restraint. For instance, the first entries of both piano and clarinet are marked only *poco forte*, and although there are several other passages of great emotional eloquence, *espressivo* and *dolce* are preferred instead of more assertive markings, and the dynamic only once rises above *forte*. Perhaps this discretion simply reflects the more sensitive, feminine qualities of ("Fräulein") Mühlfeld's playing. Brahms – in common with every other major composer writing for a specific performer – undoubtedly would have been influenced by Mühlfeld's style and technique. The opening movement, rich in melodic material, subtle and concentrated in development, concludes with a reflective coda marked *sostenuto ed espressivo*. In the manner of a serene reverie, the slow movement begins with a song-like melody, accompanied with spare simplicity. A slightly more active middle section does little to disturb the prevailing mood of resignation. Like a *ländler* in character, the genial *Allegretto grazioso* provides ideal contrast with the adjacent movements. Again the prevalence of markings such as *dolce*, *molto dolce*, *dolcissimo*, *più dolce sempre* and *teneramente* is striking. In the amiable rondo-finale Brahms achieves a balance between strongly marked rhythm and sunny lyricism. The assertiveness of the opening bars is soon mollified by the clarinet melody (*grazioso*, then *leggiero*). Of the contrasting episodes the first has a theme in crotchet triplets. The opening idea of three repeated notes subsequently returns to gently underpin a passage of development. This exuberant *Vivace* finale is just one of many examples from Brahms' late compositions which expose the inadequacy of the "autumnal" cliché.

Above all there is the Clarinet Quintet, a work rich in fantasy, emotional intensity and fiery abandon. "Autumnal" describes merely one element of these multi-faceted late pieces. Both clarinet sonatas have a wide expressive range embracing muscularity, passion, energy, humour and light-heartedness. In terms of compositional technique, Brahms' motivic development shows typical resourcefulness. Indeed, his supreme craftsmanship – especially when he engaged with any intellectually challenging medium such as the sonata – may be taken for granted.

Brahms composed his Vier Ernste Gesänge, Opus 121 in 1896, the year before his death aged 65. These were his first songs for ten years, if one disregards his settings of German folksongs assembled in 1894, though most of those were composed previously. For the Four Serious Songs Brahms turned to Luther's Bible, as he had done in choosing texts for his German Requiem of 1865-68. He composed these sometimes painfully honest songs against the background of personal tragedy – the death of his dear Clara Schumann – as well as his own cancer of the liver. Again, his essential atheism/agnosticism led him to select passages of undogmatic character, three from Ecclesiastes and the other from 1 Corinthians. He avoided the title Four Sacred Songs in favour of "Serious". The opening song, *Denn es gehet dem Menschen* (For that which befalleth the sons of man befalleth beasts) begins with a dignified and rather funereal *Andante*. For the middle section (*Allegro*) the time-signature changes from 4/4 to 3/4, with agitated triplet figuration and many repeated notes in the left hand, like a tolling bell. After a recall of the opening section, the *Allegro* returns briefly, its figuration receding into oscillations of adjacent notes, before the two emphatic final chords.

The second song, *Ich wandte mich, und sahe an* (I turned, and saw all the injustice that is done under the sun), is more deeply pessimistic in character. The pain evoked by the melisma in quavers (at the repeat of the word "Tränen" – tears – in bar 21) is acute. Such extreme pathos is rarely encountered in Brahms' music. The Alto

Rhapsody comes to mind, though the quite different source of bitterness there was probably unrequited love. Although in the coda Brahms turns from G minor to G major, any sense of comfort is negligible.

O Tod, wie bitter bist du (O death, how bitter is the remembrance of thee) begins in E minor and 3/2 before moving into the relative warmth of E major and a more expansive 4/2. Brahms' fondness for falling thirds, as at the beginning of his Fourth Symphony, is evident here, though the tone here is more declamatory. This is among Brahms' profoundest and most powerful songs.

Wenn ich mit Menschen (Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels) marks a significant departure from the first three songs. The theme of St Paul's sermon is charity, but the Lutheran Bible translates the original "caritas" as "liebe" (love, not charity) and here Brahms clearly exults in love as the only quality which can surpass the power of death. The song begins with striding rhythm and impressive grandeur but St Paul's text warns against spiritual emptiness. ("I would be like sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal") An *adagio* section in B major brings tender lyricism, with dolce triplets in the accompaniment. The contrast here makes the grandeur of the opening section seem relatively hollow. A return to the principal key of E flat, with the faster tempo of the opening, eventually leads to the triplet-accompanied, achingly beautiful and serene close (*Sostenuto un poco*). Apparently, in *Wenn ich mit Menschen* Brahms drew upon music from earlier songs which, it has been suggested, were linked with his feelings of unrequited love for Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, a pianist who had briefly studied with Brahms.

While compiling this disc, Julian Bliss and James Baillieu looked for something less predictable. Julian has arranged other songs including some by Rachmaninov, but for this Brahms CD the performers chose the Four Serious Songs because of their dark, death-related character, also because they date from just after the two clarinet sonatas.

The only difference in the melodic line is the upward octave transposition. Among other instrumental arrangements of these songs is one recorded by the great cellist Daniil Shafran.

The second of the Opus 120 sonatas begins with a suave melody in a leisurely tempo ("*amabile*" = amiable or pleasant). In this generally restrained and lyrical movement the mellower, more resigned aspects of the composer's late period prevail. In the development section Brahms generates some brief turbulence but the movement ends with a wistful coda marked *tranquillo*. Brahms' duo-sonatas generally have taxing piano parts and that of the *Allegro appassionato* central movement, ardent and heroic, is particularly demanding. Indeed the equality of the two instruments throughout the clarinet sonatas is striking. The opening section eventually relaxes, giving way to a serene middle section (marked *Sostenuto, ma dolce e ben cantando*) with a broad, spacious melody. The finale, a set of variations, is based on a theme of innocent character, almost like a folk-song, but of unusual 14-bar length. Of the five variations the first three are lyrical and elegant – Variation 2 exploiting the chalumeau register of the clarinet - but they also become increasingly florid. Variation 3 (marked *grazioso*) has twenty-four notes to the bar, neatly dovetailed between clarinet and piano. Variation 4 returns to quiet and stillness, before a change of tempo for Variation 5 – an incisive *Allegro* in 2/4 including some robust cross-rhythms. Brahms' two sonatas remain the outstanding contributions to the clarinet/piano repertoire, while viola-players are equally grateful for these major works. Brahms judiciously adapted both clarinet and piano parts for the alternative viola versions.



JULIAN BLISS

Julian Bliss is one of the world's finest clarinetists, excelling as a concerto soloist, chamber musician, jazz artist, masterclass leader and tireless musical explorer. He has inspired a generation of young players as creator of his Conn-Selmer range of affordable clarinets and introduced a substantial new audience to his instrument. Julian started playing the clarinet aged four, going on to study at the University of Indiana and in Germany under Sabine Meyer, turning professional aged twelve.

In recital and chamber music he has played at most of the world's leading festivals and venues, including Gstaad, Mecklenburg Vorpommern, Verbier, Wigmore Hall (London) and Lincoln Center (New York). As a soloist, he has appeared with a wide range of international orchestras, including the São Paulo Symphony, Chamber Orchestra of Paris, Auckland Philharmonia, the London Philharmonic and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras.

Album releases receive rave reviews from critics, record of the week spots and media attention. Recent projects include multiple jazz albums with the Julian Bliss Septet, Mozart & Weber Quintets with the Carducci String Quartet; Schubert's *Shepherd on the Rock* with Christopher Glynn (piano) and Sophie Bevan (soprano); Steve Reich's *New York Counterpoint*; Mozart and Nielsen's concertos with the Royal Northern Sinfonia; a piece for clarinet & string quartet by David Bruce, *Gumboots*, and a recital album of Russian and French composers with American pianist, Bradley Moore.

Julian has also arranged pieces for clarinet and piano, notably Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata Op. 19, the third movement of which has been set as a grade 6 piece on the new London College of Music clarinet syllabus.

julianbliss.com



JAMES BAILLIEU

Described by The Daily Telegraph as 'in a class of his own' James Baillieu is one of the leading song and chamber music pianists of his generation. He has given solo and chamber recitals throughout the world and collaborates with a wide range of singers and instrumentalists including Benjamin Appl, Jamie Barton, Ian Bostridge, Allan Clayton, Annette Dasch, Lise Davidsen, the Elias and Heath Quartets, Dame Kiri te Kanawa, Adam Walker, and Pretty Yende. As a soloist, he has appeared with the Ulster Orchestra, English Chamber Orchestra, and the Wiener Kammerphonie.

James Baillieu is a frequent guest at many of the world's most distinguished music centers including Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Vancouver Playhouse, Berlin Konzerthaus, Vienna Musikverein, Barbican Centre, Wiener Konzerthaus, Bozar Brussels, Pierre Boulez Saal, Cologne Philharmonie, and the Laeiszhalle Hamburg. Festivals include Aix-en-Provence, Verbier, Schleswig-Holstein, Festspillene i Bergen, Edinburgh, Spitalfields, Aldeburgh, Cheltenham, Bath, City of London and Brighton Festivals.

An innovative programmer, he has curated many song and chamber music festivals including series for the Brighton Festival, Wigmore Hall, BBC Radio 3, Verbier Festival, Bath International Festival, and Perth Concert Hall.

James Baillieu was prize winner of the Wigmore Hall Song Competition, Das Lied International Song Competition, the Kathleen Ferrier and Richard Tauber Competitions, and was selected for representation by Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) in 2010 and in 2012 received a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship and a Geoffrey Parsons Memorial Trust Award. In 2016 he was shortlisted for the Royal Philharmonic Society Outstanding Young Artist Award.

James Baillieu is a Professor at the Royal Academy of Music, a coach for the Jette Parker Young Artist Program at the Royal Opera House, a course leader for the Samling Foundation, and is head of the Song Program at the Atelier Lyrique of the Verbier Festival Academy. He also is International Tutor in Piano Accompaniment at the Royal Northern College of Music. Highly sought after for masterclasses worldwide, recent sessions of learning have brought him to the Aldeburgh Festival, Cleveland Institute of Music, Metropolitan Opera Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, Friends of Chamber Music, Portland, Oregon, Vancouver Academy of Music, Canada, and to the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

james-baillieu.com

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Producer & Editor – Nicholas Parker
Recording Engineer – Mike Hatch
Recording Assistant – Tom Lewington

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