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CHAN 8550



Photo: Matthew Ford

NOBUKO IMAI Viola • ROGER VIGNOLES Piano

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BRAHMS
Sonatas for Viola and Piano Op. 120
SCHUMANN
Märchenbilder Op. 113

Chandos
DIGITAL

NOBUKO
IMAI Viola
ROGER
VIGNOLES Piano



JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Sonata in E flat for Viola and Piano Op.120 No.2 (21:27)

- 1 I Allegro amabile (8:41)
- 2 II Allegro appassionato (5:20)
- 3 III Andante con moto (7:15)

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Märchenbilder for Viola and Piano Op.113 (15:56)

- 4 I Nicht schnell (3:27)
- 5 II Lebhaft (4:09)
- 6 III Rasch (2:38)
- 7 IV Langsam, mit melancholischem Ausdruck (5:25)

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Sonata in F minor for Viola and Piano Op.120 No.1 (22:31)

- 8 I Allegro appassionato (8:04)
- 9 II Andante un poco adagio (4:42) [DDD]
- 10 III Allegretto grazioso (4:27)
- 11 IV Vivace (5:03) TT = 60:09

NOBUKO IMAI Viola • ROGER VIGNOLES Piano

Famous viola-players of the past have included J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Dvořák. They all wrote chamber duos for violin and keyboard but, we may suppose strangely, none for their preferred string instrument, the viola — though some used the instrument in concertos, notably Mozart and Berlioz. It seems to have been Schumann, not a string player at all, who first perceived the solo possibilities of the viola in chamber music by composing these *Märchenbilder* or 'Fairytale Pictures', and with the unusually forthcoming viola parts in his concerted chamber works — he was the first composer to take the instrument into the treble clef. Schumann composed the *Märchenbilder* during 1851, his second year as music director at Düsseldorf, dedicating them to Joseph von Wasiliewsky, a sterling violinist whom he had known during his Leipzig years and whom he had recently called to Düsseldorf as principal violin of the symphony orchestra there, which Schumann now conducted. Schumann had recently been composing music for piano and one other instrument — the *Adagio and Allegro* for horn, the *Fantasiestücke* for clarinet, *Three Romances* for oboe, *Five Pieces in Folk-style* for cello (all 1849) and three violin sonatas (1851-2). Wasiliewsky went on to a conductor's post, and in 1858 brought out the first biography of Schumann.

The first of these *Fairytale Pictures* is in D minor, simply headed 'Not quick'. It begins with a dignified melodious introduction that gives way to a more animated phrase involving a decorative scrunch: this almost monopolizes the rest of the piece, though the contour of the introductory theme contrives to assert itself now and then, and finally combines with the scrunchy one. The second *Picture*, marked 'Lively' in F major, is a Scherzo featuring double-stopped thirds and proud dotted rhythms cadencing in triplets. It has two Trio sections, in D minor and B flat major respectively, the Scherzo returning after each one. No.3, 'Fast' in D minor, deals in dancing triplets shared between the instruments as accompaniment to a strutting tune presented fragmentarily, almost like the hymntune in a chorale-

prelude. The central Trio section in B major is more feminine and kittenish in mood, with a winsome tiptoe phrase typical of Schumann. The triplets are resumed.

The last *Fairytale Picture* attains D major in a gorgeous and eloquent outpouring, 'slowly, with melancholy expression', the melody largely proceeding in parallel sixths or thirds where the viola doubles the voice of the piano to particularly sonorous effect. The melody passes into a central episode in F major: here the viola either decorates or doubles the piano's unbroken song which gradually drifts back into D major and completes its unhurried, ecstatic course.

Schumann and Brahms were brought together by their mutual friend, the great Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim for whom both wrote a violin concerto. Brahms and Joachim in their turn had been brought together by the Hungarian virtuoso violinist Eduard Remenyi, just then on a concert-tour with Brahms as his pianist. Brahms and Joachim took to each other at once and submitted their newest compositions to each other for criticism and creative suggestion. Both found this procedure congenial, since Joachim was as formidably expert in the technique of composition as Brahms, and a string-player too, as Brahms was not.

After the G major string quintet Op.111 of 1890 Brahms decided to retire from composition, but a year later he made the acquaintance of Richard Mühlfeld, who had been principal clarinettist of the Meiningen Court Orchestra since 1876. Mühlfeld had played the violin there for three years before that, and acted as sub-conductor too. Brahms was sufficiently inspired by Mühlfeld's artistry to spend his subsequent holiday, on Lake Thun in Switzerland, composing a Trio and a Quintet involving Mühlfeld as chief player. Both were at once acclaimed as masterpieces, and the *réclame* spurred Brahms to new creativity, with a series of short piano solos, including his last and best-loved *Intermezzi*.

Then in 1894, again on holiday, he returned to Mühlfeld's clarinet and

composed these two sonatas which they performed together in Leipzig the following January. Joachim had been shown the scores, and he persuaded Brahms to adapt them for viola and piano, sensible advice, as all music-lovers, even clarinettists, agree: either instrument brings something to the music that the other cannot.

The F minor sonata is the more extensive in range, with its four movements; yet it is compact in form. The *Allegro appassionato* begins austere (the piano's introduction returns as part of the viola's principal subject), but its continuation includes fire and warm serenity. This exposition is rich in ideas and emotional contrasts, and the ensuing development crams a wealth of transformation and key-swerve into quite a brief space before the arrival of the recapitulation which itself involves further changes. The coda begins in bleakness but rises to a last burst of passion before its quiet ending in F major.

The slow movement in A flat unfolds a long, sometimes ornate melody, sparsely and mysteriously accompanied (very little reference to A flat harmony), passing into a more fluent, tonally assured middle section before returning to the first tune which is prolonged in a haunting coda that combines elements of both sections. The *Allegretto* is a genial, dancelike intermezzo, again in A flat, with an ethereal Trio section hovering above, rather than inhabiting the home key of F minor. The Sonata has now, in fact, conquered the sombre aspect of its beginnings and the Finale is in jubilant F major, a high-spirited Rondo with a gracious flowing theme and genial melodious interludes. It ends triumphantly.

The second of these sonatas, in E flat major, makes do with only three movements; this time Brahms does include a Scherzo, and it is placed between two less strenuous movements. The work begins with a serene, rather pastoral sonata-structure, in complete contrast to the 'sonata as drama' principle of the F minor's opening movement. A flash or so of enthusiasm, perhaps even passion, in the development section looks forward to the

Appassionato of the central Scherzo which is set in E flat major, with a Trio section in B major, a favourite key for Brahms and a sumptuous melody for it in the piano's contralto register. The Scherzo storms back, but ends very quietly. The finale this time is a set of variations on a gently ambling six-eight tune. Variations 1 and 2 find alternative versions of the melody, the second involving leaps between two octaves. In Variation 3 the tune is dissolved into filigree, and in 4 it has all but vanished in syncopations. No.5 moves back to E flat minor and *Allegro*, and presents the theme in recognizable shape, though converted into duple time which remains for the *più tranquillo* final variation in E flat major.

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Nobuko Imai studied at the famous Toho School of Music in Tokyo and then at Yale University and the Juilliard School. She is the only violist to have won the highest prizes in both the Munich and Geneva International Viola Competitions and she was formerly a member of the Vermeer Quartet.

She is now established as a distinguished international soloist and, as well as appearing regularly in Holland where she now lives, her career takes her to major cities in Europe, the USA and Japan for engagements with leading orchestras. She has also participated in many festivals, including Marlboro, Casals, South Bank Summer Music, Bath, Cheltenham, Aldeburgh and the BBC Proms. She has made a number of recordings, notably Sir Michael Tippett's Triple Concerto with Colin Davis.

Miss Imai holds teaching posts at the Conservatories in Utrecht and The Hague and is Professor at the High School of Music in Detmold, Germany. She plays an Andreas Guarnerius viola dated 1690.

Roger Vignoles is one of the foremost piano accompanists of today. As partner to some of the world's finest singers and instrumentalists, he now plays regularly in the major musical centres and at festivals.

In recent seasons he has made extensive world wide appearances with Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Elisabeth Söderström and Sarah Walker. Other singers with whom he has appeared include Thomas Allen, Dame Janet Baker, Ileana Cotrubas, Julia Hamari, Anne Howells, Benjamin Luxon, Valerie Masterson, Ruggero Raimondi, Robert Tear and Edith Wiens.

Roger Vignoles is increasingly recognised for his work with instrumentalists, including Heinrich Schiff at Salzburg and Edinburgh Festivals, Nobuko Imai and György Pauk. He has made many recordings, which include Schumann song cycles with Evelyn Lear, Richard Strauss songs with Teresa Cahill and a song cycle by Nicholas Maw with Sarah Walker, all for Chandos.

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