

Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897) - INTERMEZZI

COMPLETE KLAVIERSTÜCKE

CD 1

4 Ballades, op.10

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| 1. | Ballade in D minor. <i>Andante</i> . | 4'25 |
| 2. | Ballade in D major. <i>Andante</i> . | 6'37 |
| 3. | Ballade in B minor. <i>Intermezzo : Allegro</i> . | 3'35 |
| 4. | Ballade in B major. <i>Andante con motto</i> . | 10'07 |

8 Piano Pieces, op.76

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| 5. | Capriccio in F sharp minor. <i>Un poco agitato</i> . | 3'13 |
| 6. | Capriccio in B minor. <i>Allegretto non troppo</i> . | 3'39 |
| 7. | Intermezzo in A flat major. <i>Grazioso</i> . | 2'44 |
| 8. | Intermezzo in B flat major. <i>Allegretto grazioso</i> . | 3'13 |
| 9. | Capriccio in C sharp minor. <i>Agitato, ma non troppo presto</i> . | 3'12 |
| 10. | Intermezzo in A major. <i>Andante con motto</i> . | 4'06 |
| 11. | Intermezzo in A minor. <i>Moderato semplice</i> . | 3'00 |
| 12. | Capriccio in C major. <i>Grazioso ed un poco vivace</i> . | 3'21 |

2 Rhapsodies, op.79

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| 13. | Rhapsody n°1 in B minor. <i>Agitato</i> . | 7'20 |
| 14. | Rhapsody n°2 in G minor. <i>Molto passionato, ma non troppo allegro</i> . | 6'02 |

Total time: 64'38

CD 2

7 Fantaisies, op.116

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| 1. | Capriccio in D minor. <i>Presto energico</i> . | 1'57 |
| 2. | Intermezzo in A minor. <i>Andante</i> . | 3'44 |
| 3. | Capriccio in G minor. <i>Allegro passionato</i> . | 3'22 |
| 4. | Intermezzo in E major. <i>Adagio</i> . | 4'18 |
| 5. | Intermezzo in E minor. <i>Andante con grazia ed intimissimo sentimento</i> . | 3'44 |
| 6. | Intermezzo in E major. <i>Andantino teneramente</i> . | 3'01 |
| 7. | Capriccio in D minor. <i>Allegro agitato</i> . | 2'18 |

3 Intermezzos, op.117

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| 8. | Intermezzo in E flat major. <i>Andante moderato.</i> | 4'26 |
| 9. | Intermezzo in B flat minor. <i>Andante non troppo e con molto espressione.</i> | 4'12 |
| 10. | Intermezzo in C sharp minor. <i>Andante con motto.</i> | 6'05 |

6 Pieces pour piano, op.118

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| 11. | Intermezzo in A minor. <i>Allegro non assai, ma molto appassionato.</i> | 1'41 |
| 12. | Intermezzo in A major. <i>Andante teneramente.</i> | 5'28 |
| 13. | Ballade in G minor. <i>Allegro energico.</i> | 3'17 |
| 14. | Intermezzo in F minor. <i>Allegretto un poco agitato.</i> | 3'02 |
| 15. | Romance in F major. <i>Andante.</i> | 3'55 |
| 16. | Intermezzo in E flat minor. <i>Andante, largo e mesto.</i> | 5'36 |

4 Pieces pour piano, op.119

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| 17. | Intermezzo in B minor. <i>Adagio.</i> | 3'38 |
| 18. | Intermezzo in E minor <i>Andantino un poco agitato.</i> | 4'49 |
| 19. | Intermezzo in C major. <i>Grazioso e giocoso.</i> | 1'31 |
| 20. | Rhapsody in E flat major. <i>Allegro risoluto.</i> | 4'42 |

Total time: 74'48

Irakly AVALIANI, piano

Studio «Guimick», Yerres, France, June 2011

Recording, editing and mastering: Sébastien Noly (Sonogramme)

Piano Steinway: Jean-Michel Daudon

Painting: Masha Schmidt - Photo: Yves Duronsoy

Booklet: Catherine David - Design: Frédéric Bérard-Caseneuve

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JOHANNES BRAHMS

"There are so many melodies floating around, you have to be careful not to walk on them" writes Johannes Brahms to his friend Hanslick during the summer 1878. He has just arrived in Pörtlach in the Carinthian Mountains, one of the summer resorts where he is to compose the major part of his work, especially for piano. No doubt he needs a background of serenity to allow the creative fever to come forth at its best. Inspiration comes in gusts, irregular pulses, and his piano pieces appear in groups of opus, clusters of a moving perfection, bouquets of unusual pieces with ordinary titles (and often inappropriate, according to Claude Rostand, Brahms' biographer) - intermezzi, ballads, rhapsodies, fantasies and Klavierstücke. Flowers for every tonality of the soul, for every season of desire, "lullabies for my grief" says Brahms. Flowers of saving beauty. Multicoloured pieces which give the interpreter a chance to visit the thousand nuances of the *Weltschmerz* of the end of the 19th Century but also a chance to experience wild joy, heroic exaltation, weeping tenderness, and a thousand other thoughts and feelings.

He writes the Ballads of opus 10 during the summer of 1854, while his master and friend Robert Schumann is staying in the hospital after his first fit of delirium. Inspired by a collection of songs by Herder, the ballads spring forth directly from the *Sturm und Drang*, the most mysterious and tragic trend of German romanticism. The son has killed his father, his mother sees blood on his sword and forces him to confess to the crime. Exegetes have contrived to superimpose Herder's poems on the ballads of opus 10, however they are not Lieder and this is no programmatic music. Brahms' genius immediately reaches universalness, transcending the norms of history and geography, far beyond its origins, allowing us to forget the poems of Herder. We no longer feel that these ballads are of "Nordic inspiration," as Claude Rostand has written. For him, in 1958, these words evoked a definite atmosphere, with a special musical style, as opposed to the "Hungarian grace" of other better known works by Brahms.

For us, things are more foggy. We feel no need to be acquainted with Herder's poetry in order to enjoy the rich Brahmsian modulations. We are no longer responsive to this outmoded way of linking music styles with geography. All we know is that Brahms belongs to the tiny constellation of absolute geniuses - Schumann-Schubert-Chopin - which has endowed our culture with its greatest masterpieces. Unlike that of Wagner for instance, Brahms' music hardly seems to us "Germanic", its complex beauty transcends nationalities, languages, and secretly fuels our life experience. We love Brahms for what he has imprinted in our musical memory, in our eardrums, in the secret places of our nervous system. We love Brahms because the more we listen to his music, the more we love it. If the proof of the pudding is when you eat it, the proof of music is

when you love it, in the feelings it arouses in the listener. As my master, the lamented André Bourcourechliev, used to say, "music is not made to express emotions but to give birth to them."

Thus it is in Pörtschach on Lake Wörther, not far from the Dolomites, in a prodigal, buzzing nature that Brahms composes his Opuses 76 and 79. He has just returned from Italy where he has travelled by train, smoking cigars, and visiting from city to city the masterpieces of Renaissance art; he has seen Rome, Naples, Palermo, Taormina, Florence and Venice, he is overflowing with emotions and sensations. All that is left is to compose, and he is ready. He stays in a small two-bedroom concierge's apartment on the ground floor of a house on the edge of town. "The piano wouldn't go up the stairs, it would have been necessary to break the walls," writes Brahms. There, he composes his violin concerto, which immediately reaches the same heights as those by Beethoven and Mendelssohn. At the time, it seems insurmountably difficult to his friend violinist Joseph Joachim who requests some modifications - but today, according to Claude Rostand, it is "a must for any average violinist", so greatly has violin technique improved in a century.

Brahms does not spare his interpreters (even though he himself is an uneven pianist who may bore his audience or enrapture it depending on his mood) and some of his pieces for piano require extreme virtuosity. The Capriccio No. 1 in F sharp minor of opus 76, annotated as "un poco agitato" is classically considered "very difficult." Clara Schumann herself, who loved to play these "lyrical monologues," found it "horribly difficult." For her it evoked a solitary cemetery at night with gusty wind. Perhaps the cemetery where now rested the sweet genius whom they both had loved so dearly, the great Robert Schumann tortured by madness? But immediately after this agitated meditation there comes a striking contrast - the Capriccio No. 2 in B minor fills us with a Schubertian joy, with moments of mad happiness, a joy of survivors, cries from the heart which respond like echoes crossing the sky, while a need for extreme precision makes Irakly Avaliani's fingers bounce like bird's feet, literally making his demiquavers dance in the middle of the key, in the exact right place, little pokes of talon in the heart of the piano, in the flesh of the piano, in the hollow of our ears, and these demiquavers touch our hearts and remind us of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke when he said that "every angel is terrible."

Actually the entire opus 76 is traversed by reminiscences (but not quotes) of Schumann and Chopin, which make it even dearer to us. Nothing surprising, since Brahms happens to be revising at the same time the edition of the complete works of Schumann and Chopin, finding in this task a way to deepen his knowledge of the possibilities of the king of instruments. His friend Theodor Billroth had already noticed that the interpreter is the first witness of this proximity among the three composers, through the pleasure that they bring to experienced hands. About the pieces of Opus 76, Billroth writes: "They fit the hand so comfortably it's a pleasure to

practice them." Irakly Avaliani's playing shows at every instant that he is fully conscious of this unifying pleasure, this holistic hedonism, required by the music itself, where the sensuality of touch determines and enhances the pleasure of listening, where sounds and feelings actually respond to one another, as Baudelaire explained.

That summer Brahms has let his beard grow. The following autumn in Hambourg, during the festival, this flowering beard will be the talk of the town. "It was criticized by many, especially the women, but finally everyone got used to it" writes Claude Rostand with humour. Johannes Brahms has just acquired the iconic beethovenian appearance, which he will retain forever. Only his blue gaze remains the same, a flashing gaze, a child's gaze like a lake of tears in the stern face of the master. It is again at Pörtschach, but the following year, that he will compose the rhapsodies for piano of Opus 79. In them, highly pleased with his friend's fecundity, Billroth finds again "the young, tempestuous Johannes of the prime years." Thus ends by a detour of memory this second blooming, this production called that of "full maturity."

The next works for piano will not see the day until a dozen years later. This will be the third volley, the one containing the great meditations of Op. 116, 117, 118 and 119, those of the "Brahms-essential," to use the expression of Claude Rostand, which burst forth in all their ravishing splendour during the summers of 1892 and 1893. Brahms must have experienced this explosion as a liberation for he has just crossed a desert, a rather depressive period during which he declared that he would not compose any more. Since 1889 this recluse has chosen to spend his vacations at the fashionable resort of Ischl. Johann Strauss is staying in a neighbouring village. Brahms goes to the café to meet his friends and walks off his melancholia on the hills of the Kattergebirge. "In the summer," wrote Claude Rostand, "Ischl is a veritable suburb of Vienna. The court is there, the opera is there, the theatre is there, the stock exchange is there. Everybody is there. And it does seem surprising that our solitary musician enjoyed being there." In 1891, Brahms meets Richard von Mühlfeld, an extraordinary clarinettist whose talent plays a decisive part in the renaissance of Brahms' inspiration during those years. The discovery of the clarinet is his inspiration for a trio and the magnificent quintet opus 115, "a great confession full of tenderness" (Claude Rostand) whose meditative and intimate style announce the last pieces for piano. Is it to the friendship and talent of the clarinettist Mühlfeld that we owe this final bouquet?

Again, a multicoloured flowering with sobs and coaxing, tornados and oracles, caresses, fevers, catastrophes, elegies, melodies which make you want to scream, blows struck by fate on the door to happiness. Notice the disturbing tenderness of the first intermezzo of opus 117, which presents the text of a Scottish lullaby. "Sleep my child, sleep peaceful and wise/It hurts me so to see you cry." One has to go and search for it, with fingers as antennas searching the melody, the intermediate voice, the secret voice that rocks the baby,

well hidden in the network of harmonies. This comforting human voice, Irakly Avaliani made it available in all its naked clarity, through a sort of liquid opacity.

In Brahms' music we often hear the sobs of a child, we hear surges of tenderness, we feel the distress inherent in the human condition, but transfigured, magnified, loved. This always present "pain of the world", this *Weltschmerz*, has nothing strident or gloomy, but persists throughout his music without ever being resolved by an optimistic return to the tonality. This is the signature of Brahms. This pain. Something disconsolate which is expressed by a slight shift, a bifurcation, a smothered cry, a groan hardly heard, a suspicion of dissonance in the most classical chord which creates a sort of imbalance, a dynamic of modulation, an effect of surprise always renewed, and opens up new landscapes more and more varied. Brahms is this magician who makes us believe we are installed in one key whereas we have already (through the harmonies of the left hand - but sometimes the right) slipped elsewhere, into another completely unexpected key, new and conquering, but infinitely sweet to the ear and much more stimulating than the expected resolution would have been.

If Chopin is the master of the voluptuous delay before the tonal resolution, Brahms is definitely the master of the harmonic surprise. These continuous slidings which carry us away are easy to locate, for instance in opus 118, especially in certain fabulous measures of the *Andante teneramente* where this effect of anticipation is very tangible, since tiny harmonic changes transform little by little the beginning theme, finally endowing it with a sort of material gravity. Same thing in the second part of the third Ballad, the dream part of this heroic piece. Organizing the hierarchy of the notes is the core of pianistic achievement. Moreover, with Brahms, the distribution is shrewd. And one must make them heard clearly also, the altered beginnings of phrases, right hand, left hand, in the second intermezzo of opus 117 which unrolls its spirals like a heavenly respiration. Irakly Avaliani gives expression to them with an incredible sweetness which only he possesses, attentive to the way his fingers are placed and lifted after their passage on the key, brushed or struck sharply, hit or clutched, whatever.

What seems obvious while listening to this CD is that for this Georgian pianist the tiniest gesture, the tiniest sound, the tiniest triplet or grupetto imply a deep commitment from the depths of his being. This unity of inspiration, this personal immanence which allows his talent to blossom, is not the result of chance but of a personal choice and a long apprenticeship. At age twenty five, after being trained at the superior music school of Tbilissi and the Tchaikovsky Conservatory of Moscow, and having performed hundreds of concerts, Avaliani noticed that he was no longer making progress. To overcome this blockage, he agreed to entirely reconstruct his technique during an initiation of several years with the Franco-Georgian pianist Ethery Djakeli, excellent interpreter of Debussy - among others - and one of

the spiritual descendants of the famous Marie Jaëll, the founder of an exceptional learning method of which Avaliani has become, along with Albert Schweitzer, Dinu Lipatti, Eduardo Del Pueyo, one of the most illustrious practitioners.

After his previous recordings devoted mainly to Mozart, Chopin and Bach, Irakly Avaliani has chosen to share with us his passion for Brahms, the magician who renews at every instant, measure by measure, our philosophical surprise, witnessing the survival of tenderness and beauty on our brutal planet.

Catherine David

Translated from French by Mary-Louise Gradwohl

Irakly Avaliani was born in Tbilissi, Georgia. He began his musical studies at the Tbilissi High School of Music, then went on to Moscow Tchaikowsky conservatory. After winning the highest awards there, he continued his studies with Ethery Djakeli who introduced him to the work of Marie Jaëll and, over a period of five years, completely reconstructed his piano technique. Today he is one of the few pianists to have explored this path, as did also Albert Schweitzer, Dinu Lipatti and Eduardo Del Pueyo. Irakly Avaliani has lived in Paris since 1989. Irakly Avaliani's recording career, consistently lauded by the music press, has been patroned by Mecenat Group BALAS since 2000.