

Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897)

VARIATIONS

CD 1

1-12	Variations on an Original Theme in D major, Op. 21 n°1	14'51
13-29	Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann in F sharp minor, Op. 9.	20'40
30-56	Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel in B flat major, Op. 24	29'36
	Total time:	65'07

Irakly AVALIANI, piano

Conservatoire of Clamart, France, July 2004
Piano Steinway: Jean-Michel Daudon
Recording, editing and mastering: Sebastien Noly (Sonogramme)
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What a strange idea, to write a text to accompany my Brahms disc. The text should be brief and pertinent, but the more I work on it, the more the four page text seems to be turning into a lengthy tome on musicology. It is impossible for me to say all I want without boring the music lovers who only read the titles because the rest they know already. One doesn't buy the Brahms Variations to accompany a candle-lit dinner! For this reason, I decided to publish just selected extracts from my "journal", which allows me to take ideas at random without any particular order or pretension to a particular style of writing.

21 May 2004

"... Yet another book on Brahms. It is absolutely astounding the number of books that have been written and continue to be written on the lives of composers (in particular the great) which bear no resemblance to their actual lives.

The legend started by Kalbeck, which says that the young Johannes accompanied his monster of a father, night after night, to the worst port-side brothels of Hamburg, brought tears to the eyes of an entire generation of readers. In fact, Johannes, in perfect innocence, led a peaceful life in one of the most prestigious private schools and kept company with the best piano teachers of his city. Certainly his father was not very, very rich, but still... And how about the myth of Beethoven living in misery? The reality was that he did not shrink from managing his affairs and receiving gifts - he had other things to do!"

VARIATIONS ON AN ORIGINAL THEME IN D MAJOR, OP. 21 N° 1.

"...To realize that we are one with the Creator, as Beethoven did, is a wonderful and awe-inspiring experience. Very few human beings ever come into this realization and that is why there are so few great composers or creative geniuses in any line of human endeavour. I always contemplate all this before commencing to compose. This is the first step. When I feel the urge I begin by appealing directly to my Maker and I first ask the three most important questions pertaining to our life here in this world - whence, wherefore, whither?

I immediately feel vibrations that thrill my whole being. These are the Spirit illuminating the soul-power within, and in this exalted state, I see clearly what is what is obscure in my ordinary moods; then I feel capable of drawing inspiration from above, as Beethoven did.... Those vibrations assume the forms of distinct mental images, after I have formulated my desire and resolve in regard to what I want - namely, to be inspired so that I can compose something that will uplift and benefit humanity - something of permanent value. Straightaway the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God, and not only do I see distinct themes in my mind's eye, but they are clothed in the right forms, harmonies and orchestration. Measure by measure, the finished product is revealed to me when I am in those rare, inspired moods... I have to be in a semi-trance condition to get such results - a condition when the conscious mind is in temporary abeyance and the subconscious is in control, for it is through the subconscious mind, which is a part of Omnipotence, that the inspiration comes. I have to be careful, however, not to lose consciousness, otherwise the ideas fade away.... Then the ideas which I was consciously seeking flowed in upon me with such force and speed, that I could only grasp and hold a few of them; I never was able to jot them all down; they came in instantaneous flashes and quickly faded away again, unless I fixed them on paper. The themes that will endure in my compositions all come to me in this way. It has always been such a wonderful experience, that I never before could induce myself to talk about it... "

Talks with great composers by Arthur M. Abel

Brahms to J. P. Simrock, July 1861:

"...I have included two volumes of Variations that are not too difficult, not as difficult as my previous works... I have given them several times to my young lady pupils and find them completely accessible even for amateurs."

He was talking about the Variations Op 21 N° 1 and N° 2, both of which are extremely difficult and complex. It seems strange that Brahms says he gave them to amateurs, but J. P. Simrock was his editor and he did not want to frighten him.

8 August 2004

"... Oddly enough, not much has been written about this work, which is one of the most profound and remarkable intensity. Here, Brahms is in complete equilibrium, his interior world opening out towards the universe without fear, without reserve, just to accept and merge with it. I don't know how he did it: once again, analysing the music explains nothing; the means used here are so simple that they escape us. How then to interpret such a masterpiece? The least deviation of style and you risk falling into the most banal romantic sentimentality."

5 March 2002

"... He called them the "Philosophical Variations". From the first note the demands are evident: Brahms never underestimates his interlocutor."

VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF ROBERT SCHUMANN IN F SHARP MINOR, OP. 9

"... 30 September. Herr Brahms of Hamburg." Private diary of R. Schumann.

30 September 1853: Brahms introduced himself to Robert and Clara with the manuscripts under his arm. The conquest was instant and Robert put himself, with all his well known fervour, at the service of this prodigious talent.

28 October 1853: Schumann published an article in the "Neue Zeitschrift für Musik" dedicated to Brahms in which he hailed him as "the new Messiah", welcomed him into his circle of friends in Düsseldorf, recommended him to his editor in Leipzig, and introduced him to concert promoters. We can only admire the unselfish generosity of the Master, something extremely rare.

17 December 1853: Brahms gave a concert at the "Gewandhaus" in Leipzig. Despite the different opinions of the "clans" who supported Schumann, Mendelssohn and Liszt, his success was dazzling. Propelled by Schumann's exuberant enthusiasm, it took Brahms just three months (!) to establish himself in the world of music. From now on, his name was given the same importance as Bach, Beethoven and Schubert. Brahms was just 20 years old.

27 February 1854: Schumann began having hallucinations and hearing voices, and tried to commit suicide by throwing himself into the Rhine.

4 March 1854: Schumann was admitted to a clinic in Eendenich, where he was to die two years later.

11 June 1854: Clara gave birth to her seventh child, named Felix in memory of Mendelssohn. The child's godfather was Johannes, who took this occasion to dedicate his Variations Op. 9 to Clara.

2 June 2004

"... No book dedicated to Brahms tells us more than Johannes himself in his "Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann". Careful listening allows us to reconstruct almost day by day his evolution between September 1853 and June 1854. This was a determining period for the young Brahms: the understanding and support of Robert Schumann gave him the means to progress freely along his chosen path. As for his relationship with Clara, she was to determine his future emotional life. These Variations express the admiration he felt in the presence of the genius of Schumann together with the sadness that his declining health aroused; the wonder tinged with hopelessness incited by the radiant presence of Clara and the impossibility to reach this ideal, which continue to evade him. All this with the sincere purity of a soul only 20 years old. Nowhere in these Variations does his dream – so subtle, so fragile – ever develop into a true passion and it remains nothing more than a sigh held back.

The Variations are dedicated to Clara, but we constantly feel the shadow of Robert, who was soon to pass away."

28 November 2003

"... It is a favourite subject of musicologists, writers and even psychoanalysts: but the story of the pianist shared between a suicidal husband locked in a psychiatric asylum and a young and handsome composer who is not able to reach a decision, takes on an entirely different aspect if we give these three protagonists the names of Clara, Robert and Johannes.

In my former life in Moscow, I came across a letter from Clara in a huge monthly musicology magazine called "Sovietskaia musika"(in Russian, of course) in which well after Robert's death, Clara proposed to Johannes that they should at last combine their lives, and the courteous reply from Johannes reassuring her of his faithful friendship to the end of life (that of Clara, I suppose). I have since tried to re-discover these letters, but in vain...

Brahms was perfectly aware of his talent, this treasure he had been given. He knew that he had to assume the responsibility for it. All his life he would shun other commitments, devoting himself entirely to music, his music. It is probably for this reason that he paid his women, money absolving him from any further responsibility. The rest doesn't concern us Do we really need to delve further into this tedious research? To learn what? Countless interpretations of this wonderful friendship expose everything except, no doubt, the truth. The answer is here, in Brahms' music."

6 March 2002

"...For the theme, Brahms had chosen "Albumblatt" in F sharp minor, Op. 99 by Robert Schumann, where the bass has echoes of the Impromptus Op. 5, composed in 1833 by Robert on a theme of Clara Weick (with a bass suggested by Schumann). Each Variation treats the theme magnificently and with mastery astonishing for a composer only 20 year old. Arnold Schoenberg believed that in this work Brahms approached perfection. The first three Variations "attacca", immediately give us a more than convincing example of this.

Another "Albumblatt" in B minor by Schumann is used by Brahms for Variation 9, which is perhaps the pinnacle of the whole work. The "Kreislerien" character of this light and romantic piece is completely transformed by the global context without changing any notes. Preceded by the funereal death knell of Variation 8 (where one already senses the gloomy atmosphere of Ravel's "Gibet", which would captivate our

senses 54 years later), Variation 9 resembles a chilling wind whistling among the gravestones.

Fortunately Brahms follows it with Variation 10, which refers us back to Clara and in which is concealed, as if by chance, Clara's theme used previously by Robert for his Impromptu Op. 5 with the bass... (see above).

The final pages (Variation 15 and 16) are composed in F sharp major. This shimmering tonality becomes unrecognisable in the hands of the young Johannes. Never before him has any composer achieved such profundity nor such solemnity in the key of F sharp major, with the exception perhaps of Robert Schumann in his Romance Op. 28 no.2.

The bass theme, doubled in octaves, (Clara always present) leads us directly into the abyss of Robert Schumann's suffering. We see the decline of his mind. Then, time ceases..."

13 May 2004

"... Brahms would write other series of Variations, but it is in Op. 9 that he discovers the wonderful path that would lead him onto his Intermezzi and allowed him to express all the finesse and richness of his being."

21 April 2003

"...But finally, what a strange idea to offer the woman he admired above all a piece so gloomy on the occasion of the birth of her child? "

VARIATIONS AND FUGUE ON A THEME OF HANDEL IN B FLAT MAJOR, OP. 24

J.Brahms to Breitkopf &Härtel, 25 march 1862 :

"...Most esteemed gentlemen!

Since I am in the process of publishing a new work which is particularly dear to me, I don't want to neglect to offer it to you for publication.

They are 25 Variations and Fugue on a theme by Händel (price 15 Friedrichdors). Perhaps you have become acquainted with them through a performance of Frau Dr Schumann.

I would take the liberty of sending you enquiries of this kind more frequently, were it not that modes reticence in a youthful composer is natural, in view of the splendid, fine activity of your firm, and that doubly so with me who, moreover, harbours to fear that you have all to little confidence in my talent.

Should I be mistaken in this, and should it by chance be suitable and agreeable to you, and were I now and then simply to notify you of works ready to be printed, that would naturally give me particular pleasure. < ...>

Looking forward to your kind answer, I remain with particular respect,

Your devoted

Johs Brahms"

Breitkopf & Härtel expressed themselves happy to hear from Brahms, greatly interested in and willing to consider all offerings, but unable to hide the disappointing sales of his works so far. They bemoaned the recent state of music publishing, and wondered how many engraved plates the Variations would require. After seeing the manuscript they returned it with regrets; Brahms was asking far too much money, they would have to sell 1000 copies just to recover their costs, and " - we mean you

no harm to saying so - but of that there is no chance ".

J.Brahms to Breitkopf & Härtel, 14 avril 1862 :

" Most esteemed gentlemen:

Once again I take the liberty of writing to you regarding my Variations. I would not so quickly like to relinquish my wish to see this, my favourite work, published by you. Therefore, if it is primarily the high honorarium that prevents you from taking on the work, I will be pleased to let you have it for 12 Friedrichdors or, in case this also seems altogether too high, for 10 Friedrichdors.

I hope very much you do not conclude that I chose the initial honorarium quite arbitrarily.

I consider this work to be much better than my earlier ones, and also more practical and therefore easier to distribute, so that with this in mind, I judged the honorarium I requested to be quite appropriate. < ...>

Looking forward for your kind reply with the greatest esteem,

Faithfully

Johs Brahms "

Breitkopf & Härtel agreed to Brahms's lowest bid, and paid him 10 Friedrichdors.

28 January 2002

"... Op.24 forms, with Bach's Goldberg Variations and Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, an unequalled triptych. Even Schumann in his Symphonic Variations didn't reach this pinnacle of faultless balance constructed with absolute mastery. Here we see Brahms in total possession of his powers. The psychological context in this work is less complicated. Handel's theme is extremely simple and perfectly symmetric. (Bach and Beethoven also chose very simple themes).

At first sight it seems impossible: 25 Variations on Handel's Air from "Lessons", nicely formed without too much character, composed for the daughters of the Prince of Wales. Immediately the first Variation hurls us into the intense universe of Brahms, forming a bond across more than a century separated the two composers. The 2nd, polyphonic, and the two that follow, very different, reveal the limitless creative force of Brahms, who was still not yet 30 years old. Until the last, the 25th Variation, the tension never lets up; the variety of temperament, style and technical skills is dazzling.

And to bring an end to this overwhelming torrent, there remained just one last resource: the Fugue. This sublime Fugue, with the subject contained in two bars and using only 5 notes, is one of the most exultant not only of Brahms but of all that have ever been composed for the piano. With the simplest of means, Brahms achieves at the conclusion of this Fugue the resonance of a full-scale symphony orchestra! Magisterial!"

5 September 2004

"... The breathtaking success changed nothing in Brahms' character. He remained always reticent, reserved and silent, with the features of a dreamy angel. His calm strength and balanced attitude allowed him to make his way through life while keeping secure his interior world."

Irakly Avaliani

Translated by Adrien Metcalfe, Sheila and David Llewellyn

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.