

With Brahms at the Piano

PIANO Magazine May/June 2000

Q. What are the greatest technical challenges to be addressed?

KUERTI. Crazy leaps, stamina, double-notes, and subtle dynamic control at both ends of the volume spectrum!

KUERTI. And there are other examples too, like the end of the first movement exposition in the B-flat Concerto. The left hand leaps could have been made easier without any loss of effect – but honour demands that one try to play them as written. I wonder whether that's really a question of 'noblesse oblige' – or is there a touch of masochism involved? But we may do well to take our role model from the Greeks, who painted the hidden, back parts of their statues, 'because the Gods see everywhere.'

Q. Brahms doesn't prepare one for fast repeated notes or Lisztian tremolandos.

KUERTI. And he certainly doesn't feature octave passages as much as many of the romantics did, or straight out velocity – and when he does, they are – and *must* be – quite un-Lisztian in character.

Q. How idiomatic is his piano writing? Is there any truth in the claims, often made, that his writing is unpianistic and stodgy?

KUERTI. I think it would be a great loss if all composers wrote 'idiomatically' for the piano, because that's part of each one's special character, just as much as the harmonic language and other stylistic qualities. But even within Brahms, there's a great deal of variety. While he *is* often thick and heavy, there are also wonderfully transparent and *leggiero* pieces, such as the Intermezzo Op. 119 No. 3 and some of the *Handel Variations*.

Q. How important is rubato in the performance of Brahms's music? Can one play it in strict tempo without detracting from its musical essence?

KUERTI. *Nothing* worth playing should be played in 'strict tempo'! Even computers reading out a text have learned to vary the pace a little. As with any composer, there are of course some works that by their nature need to keep the pace very uniform, to reinforce a hypnotic *ostinato*, as for example, the last movement of the G Major violin sonata. But in fact, Brahms is continually putting in indications for tempo changes within movements, which is a good indication that he probably expected some flexibility.

Q. Are there any problems for the performer in Brahms's structures?

KUERTI. Sometimes – not very often – Brahms's structures can sound fabricated. To prevent that from happening is a challenge. I've noticed that a mediocre performance, especially of the symphonies, leaves me wondering why this music is played so often, while an outstanding one *answers* the question. The development of the B-flat Concerto, first movement, is an example of Brahms at his most contrived. Its short, spouting, double-note passages, some ascending,

others descending, try to develop the piano's opening arpeggio, on the principle that everything must be related, re-used, and refurbished. Unfortunately, this passage which sounds so natural and effortless in its original form, is terribly difficult to make convincing in its new incarnation. The same is true of the transformation, in the same section, of the fourth bar of the movement into a tedious, dotted pattern. Some musical material is best left in its pure state, I think. The compulsion to develop every scrap of every motive should occasionally be repressed. The greatness of most of the work is confirmed by the extent to which it mitigates such dubious moments which, in a good performance, pass by without doing any damage to our enjoyment.

Q. Many pianists seem to equate Brahmsian drama with fast tempos.

KUERTI. It seems to me that the discrepancy of tempos among different performers is greater in Brahms than in any other composer. I've heard, for example, the Intermezzo Op. 119, No. 1 played at tempi that differ by a factor of 3! (I side pretty close to the slowest on this one). The first movements of the Second Symphony and of the F minor Piano Sonata can display differences that come close to a factor of two. In general, I think most of us – including myself – probably play Brahms faster, not slower, than he himself envisaged.

Q. What guides your choice of an edition from which to play?

KUERTI. It's true that Brahms has been tampered with a little less than most other great composers, but it should be warned that the Sauer edition is quite bad, with many small but significant changes. The reprint of the complete works should be very reliable. Henle, International, Universal and others are likely to show very few differences.