

lished artist who, throughout a lengthy career, has won numerous competitions and has made frequent appearances with the world's leading orchestras, conductors, and chamber groups. He has also recorded the complete piano sonatas of Beethoven and the complete piano works of Brahms, though for some inexplicable reason neither he nor his recordings are that well known in the US.

Violist Pierre-Henri Xuereb, on the other hand, was a name new to me, though his bio states that he was William Primrose's last student, and that he studied at Juilliard and Boston University, after which he was invited by Pierre Boulez to join the Ensemble Intercontemporain. Xuereb has recorded for a number of leading labels, and now teaches viola at the Paris Conservatoire.

Brahms, as you've now been told repeatedly, originally wrote these two viola sonatas for clarinet, but put his personal stamp of approval on their alternate versions. They are very late Brahms, a final tribute to clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, with whom Brahms played the sonatas on September 23, 1894, at the Villa Soletalp in Berchtesgaden. The music is deeply reflective, sorrowful, and longing, but then so is much else that Brahms wrote. So what else is new?

I wish I could be a bit more enthusiastic about this release, because the works are very well played and nicely recorded, but Xuereb draws from his viola the kind of thin, astringent, nasal sound that is not to my liking. When I listen to these sonatas played on viola, what I want to hear is that rich chocolaty mocha sound—you know, Robert Frost's "the woods are lovely, dark and deep"—that kind of sound. Technically, Xuereb's execution is beyond reproach—and perhaps it's not even his fault that his instrument speaks with the voice it does—but in the upper reaches of the A string, especially, his tone is pinched and strained. De Groote, of course, having recorded Brahms's complete piano works, is perfectly tuned in to the composer's moods, but there's not much he can do to soften his partner's more strident moments.

The two songs of op. 91, *Gestillte Sehnsucht* and *Geistliches Wiegenlied*, are among Brahms's most drop-dead gorgeous creations, and they would be a most welcome bonus if Miomira Vitas's alto were more closely suited to the character of the music, and if her intonation did not more than occasionally wander off pitch. Her voice strikes me as more mezzo-soprano than true contralto. Like Xuereb's viola, it doesn't have sufficient darkness, depth, or weight to convey the sense of late autumn longing that suffuses these songs. Though only a minor inconvenience, Talent does not provide texts or translations; and, in one of the more truly peculiar redactions of musical nomenclature I've yet to encounter, they designate the two songs "Sonatas for Alto, Viola, and Piano." I suppose that makes Schubert's *Shepherd on the Rock* a sonata for soprano, clarinet, and piano. Actually, given its length and ternary form, it probably comes closer to fitting the bill than do these Brahms songs.

There are many fine recordings of the viola sonatas without the two songs. But if you want these works as coupled here, I still favor a CD from the German label Bayer (100 037), with violist Ulrich Koch, pianist Sachito Nakamura, and alto Gabriele Preiser. **Jerry Dubins**

BRAHMS *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann. Variations on an Original Theme. Variations on a Hungarian Song. Variations in d. Variations on a Theme by Handel* • David Korevaar (pn) • IVORY 74004 (78:23)

David Korevaar is not a name new to me or to recording. I had the pleasure in *Fanfare* 28:2 (Nov/Dec 2004) of reviewing his Koch release of solo piano works by Lowell Liebermann, and in my personal collection I have a very fine Centaur CD of piano quartets by Saint-Saëns and d'Indy with the Prometheus Piano Quartet, of which Korevaar is the pianist. He has also recorded both books of Bach's *WTC*. My high expectations for this latest Brahms disc were not disappointed. I can also tell you up front that the original master for this CD was recorded direct to the SADEiE Artemis 24-Bit High Resolution digital workstation, and the sound is incredibly lifelike. The upper partials, especially, ring true with that sense of "being there" concert-hall realism.

Theme and variations play an important role in Brahms's music, and not just in his solo keyboard works. As you can see from the above headnote, the Variations in D Minor is a transcription of the variations movement from the B \flat Major Sextet. And the last movement of the Fourth Symphony, as is well known, is a chaconne, which is a set of variations built over an eight-bar chord progression. On the present CD, Korevaar gives us approximately half of Brahms's variations-based

works for solo keyboard, the other major works being the *Paganini Variations* and the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, heard more often in its orchestral version. It is hoped, therefore, that Mr. Korevaar will grace us with a follow-on companion to the current disc containing the composer's remaining variations works.

I've had occasion in the past to observe that the *Schumann Variations* is Brahms's own *Waldszenen*. In comparison to the *Handel* and *Paganini* sets, the Schumann-based piece is, in the main, a reflective and tranquil piece, though occasional outbursts of virtuoso display intrude upon the solitude. The theme itself is derived from Robert's *Bunte Blätter*, op. 99, but Clara is quoted too, most notably in the tenth variation.

The two sets of variations comprising op. 21 make for an odd couple. The *Variations on an Original Theme*, op. 21/1, is a substantial work lasting nearly 17 minutes. Its diminutive mate, the *Variations on a Hungarian Song*, op. 21/2, barely exceeds seven minutes, and Brahms seems to lose interest in his material quite a bit sooner than that.

Though presented to Clara on her birthday in 1860 as a piano piece by Brahms himself, the D-Minor Variations belongs properly to the 1859 String Sextet, op. 18, for which it was composed as the second movement. As beautifully as Korevaar plays it, there is no way a solo piano can differentiate the sonorities of the strings, or spawn the maelstrom that engulfs this music like some huge driving wind that sweeps away everything in its path.

The 1861 *Handel Variations and Fugue*, op. 24, may well be Brahms's crowning achievement in the solo keyboard variations genre. Paradoxically perhaps, though the theme itself does come from a Handel keyboard suite, the following variations and fugue suggest closer connections to Couperin and Bach than they do to Handel. In this repertoire, Korevaar finds himself among some very lofty company, going back to legendary artists such as Benno Moiseiwitsch, Egon Petri, Rosalyn Tureck, and Solomon. Among my own personal favorites have been Mikhail Rudy on EMI, Emanuel Ax on Sony, and Leon Fleisher, also on Sony. The last named is available in a specially priced two-disc set containing both of Brahms's piano concertos. I continue to recommend Fleisher's performance of the First Concerto as my all-time first choice.

Other fine versions of the variations notwithstanding, Korevaar more than just holds his own. He is a very fine pianist and an exceptional musician. That, coupled with some of the very best engineered and recorded piano sound I have heard, make this new release highly desirable and recommended.

Jerry Dubins

BREL *Quatre chemins de la mélancolie* • Daniel Brel (bandoneón); *Le Poème Harmonique* • ALPHA 509 (61:47)

There's not much more I can tell you about Daniel Brel than that he was born in 1950, he plays the bandoneón, and this release features a cycle of 16 short works he has written to perform with an early-music ensemble. One can't help but wonder if he bears any relation to his namesake Jacques. Perhaps this shortage of information is deliberate, calculated to let the music speak for itself. If so, the strategy works. This music snuck up on and delighted me, because it's hard to classify and beautifully written. Since Brel plays Piazzolla's instrument, you'd expect tango to be a major component of these works, but it's only one point in a spectrum of influences, which include waltz, French *chanson*, chromaticism in the style of Fauré, a *boulevardier* sensibility that touches on *Les Six*. What remains strongest in my memory after a couple of listenings is: (1) the extreme scrupulousness of the writing, where every note is carefully calculated to make beautiful harmonic progressions; (2) a genuine tunefulness, leaving one humming certain melodies long after hearing them; and (3) the original but natural mix of the accordion's sound with the transparent plaintiveness of the viols and theorbo—the latter a type of lute. It seems that one increasingly standard marker of the post-modern aesthetic condition is to place familiar elements in unusual or even contradictory contexts: as a result, we perceive them freshly. In Brel's case, this instrumental hybrid ensemble works, not just because it's previously untried, but because the timbres of the instruments blend in an entirely natural manner, as though they were acoustically designed to do so.

While the pieces are organized into four sets of four (shades of various "Seasons" pieces), it's