

CD REVIEW 124

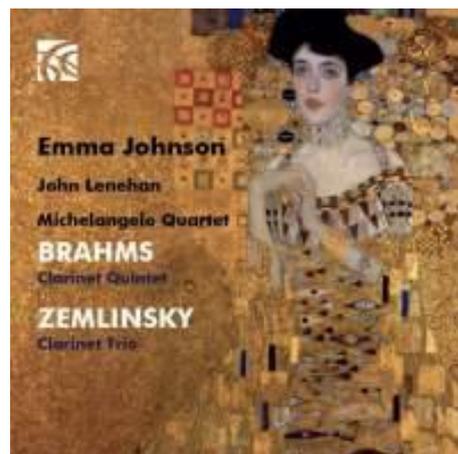
EMMA JOHNSON

Brahms Clarinet Quintet in B minor Op 115,

Zemlinsky Clarinet Trio Op 3

Emma Johnson (clarinet) Michelangelo Quartet, John Lenehan (piano).

Nimbus Alliance NI6310 (67.15) (DDD)



There is no doubt about the wonderful playing of Emma Johnson who has travelled the world giving immense pleasure to audiences with her performances. Neither should there be any doubt about the quality of the Brahms Quintet which is also universally admired and deservedly so.

The beauty in this performance is ravishing, the phrasing impeccable and the music flows mercurially. The engineers have produced an excellent sound quality as well.

One cannot fault the performance but the works does present problems. The first movement is marked allegro but it is not. Allegro means quick and lively and this movement is not that. One thinks of Haydn allegros which are quick and lively. The Brahms is leisurely and, if one depends on a metronome, allegro usually begins at crotchet equals 120 and I have seen scores with crotchet equals 63.

Nonetheless, this opening movement is in Brahms' mellow mood and is divertingly beautiful. The soloist produces a gorgeous sound in every register of the clarinet.

I am not altogether in agreement with Ms Johnson's written notes. She says that Brahms admired Schubert whereas Walter Nieman's biography of Brahms refutes that.

The second movement Adagio-Piu lento continues in this mellow leisurely style and so the first two movements, lasting 24 minutes or so, lacks contrast and tension which many feel are essentials in music. The short third movement begins Andantino and leads to a presto non assai which gives us some welcome contrast but Brahms' music contains deep emotions and is not 'gymnastic' writing. The leisurely introspection returns in the final marked Con Moto and, if you are looking for fireworks or virtuosity, you will not find it. What you have is a continual canvas of controlled music written from the heart.

The Zemlinsky dates from 1896 and is in the usual three movements fast, slow, fast. He had just met Brahms and some will therefore consider his work was influenced by Brahms who recommended this Trio to Simrock to be published. The opening allegro is often exciting and has a glorious melody and this contrast you will not find in the Brahms.

Ms Johnson believes the central slow was influenced by Brahms. That may be, but the beauty of this movement is unlike the beauty in Brahms since the Zemlinsky has a glowing intensity. The dialogue between the clarinet and cello is moving and has been likened to the love between a man and a woman. Zemlinsky was later to have an affair with Alma Schindler who married Mahler and the sleeve notes referring to Zemlinsky as an ugly dwarf is somewhat unkind and irrelevant. He was a fine composer and does not receive the acclaim he deserves, but is often unfairly maligned.

The finale has a bravura and reveals the composer's individuality although Ms Johnson refers to this as clear homage to Brahms. Even if that is so, the music is unlike Brahms.

An interesting thought does arise. There is some evidence that Brahms may have been pessimistic about the future of music generally. Does this explain the character of his Clarinet Quintet?

Two contrasting works indeed, and a joy for lovers of the clarinet and fine chamber music.

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