

Reinecke:
Bizják, Klenyán, Nagy (Hungaroton) HCD32277 (2005)
Schumann:
D. Brain, Britten (BBC Legends) BBCL4192-2
(1956, rev. Nov 2006)
D. Brain, Moore (Testament) SBT1922 (1952)
Tuckwell, Ashkenazy
(Decca Eloquence) 480 3610 (1974)
Watkins, Brown (Hyperion) CDA67923
(2011, rev. May 2012)

Probably the best work in the entire horn repertoire, and a perfect introduction to chamber music for nervous newcomers, the Brahms Horn Trio has unsurprisingly been recorded countless times. The comparisons listed above are only a sample. This latest version is up there with the best of them. Jasper de Waal was principal horn of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra from 2004 to at least 2012, when this disc was made. The programme is obviously built round him, and although the documentation doesn't confirm it, the disc could be intended as one of the Channel Classics 'First Chairs' series: I reviewed another component, that of bassoonist Gustavo Núñez, in June 2013. His tone is reminiscent of East European players, with a noticeable though engaging vibrato.

The modern valve horn was well known to Brahms, but he maintained a partiality for the old natural horn, memorably dismissing the new instrument (with its labyrinth of extra tubing making a complete chromatic compass available for the first time) as 'a tin viola'. The natural horn may have had a superior tone but its very choice of notes was limited, and all four movements of this Trio have the same tonic, E flat. The elegiac slow movement – like the near-contemporary *A German Requiem* – was inspired by the death of Brahms's mother: Waal and colleagues capture perfectly a level of sorrow, despair and anguish possibly unmatched anywhere else in Brahms save for the piano *Intermezzo*, Op. 118 No. 6, coincidentally also in E flat minor. Other movements go superbly: Candida Thompson dispatches a sometimes ungrateful violin part with flair (E flat is a superb key for horn, far less so for strings), and pianist Frank van der Laar takes at top speed the finale's death-defying leaps over the bar-line at which even Ashkenazy (with Perlman and Tuckwell) paused.

Horn fanciers will rate the Brain versions, father and son, as benchmark performances despite their age. Father Aubrey is on Testament, coupled with Reginald Kell (another legendary player) and the Busch Quintet playing the Clarinet Quintet, or – confusingly, perhaps – in a bargain five-disc Documents box otherwise devoted to performances by son Dennis. Dennis's own version of the Trio, coupled with chamber music and Mozart's Concerto, K407, seems currently available only as a BBC Legends download, though with a much-reissued performance there may be another format I have missed. Modern versions include

David Pyatt on Quartz and William Purvis on Bridge, enterprisingly coupled (as so few versions are) with one of the few other works for the same combination, the Ligeti Trio.

Brahms's preferred natural horn may be heard on Harmonia Mundi's period performance, the stopped notes of Teunis van der Zwart's 1845 Lorenz Waldhorn blending, cooing or rasping to superb effect – with the bonus of Isabelle Faust playing the violin part on the 'Sleeping Beauty' Strad. Conversely, Peter Damm's 'hunting horn' (so billed) on the Berlin Classics box actually sounds indistinguishable from the modern instrument.

Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro*, second on the disc, was in contrast written specifically for the valve horn. Schumann matches its power with a rich piano part, thereby causing balance problems whenever the piece is borrowed (as so often) by cellists. Arranged versions have also been recorded on – in descending order of authority, effectiveness or even advisability – viola, violin, bassoon, clarinet, oboe and alto saxophone! Accompanists bored in slow-moving horn master-classes and idly wondering how the piece would go with orchestra are directed to a two-disc Ansermet box on Decca Eloquence (#80 0078), an all-Schumann compilation that includes, besides the conductor's orchestration of the piece (with the correct solo instrument!), the first two symphonies. With piano accompaniment Dennis Brain may be had, as it were, with either Gerald Moore or Benjamin Britten, no less. Tuckwell's and Ashkenazy's Eloquence disc is all Schumann, as is the Hyperion – among the best of the moderns – with Richard Watkins and Ian Brown.

The disc ends with the substantial (four-movement, 26-minute) Trio in B flat by Carl Reinecke (1824-1910), professor and voluminous composer who also, serendipitously in this programme, conducted the premiere of *A German Requiem*. Readers of a certain age may first have made his acquaintance through his pleasant but mildly soporific Harp Concerto (Nicanor Zabaleta's 1960s recording is still available as a DG Original). Flautists and accompanists will know his pleasant but intermittently soporific 'Undine' Sonata or his pleasant but deeply soporific D minor *Ballade*. Reinecke, like Bruch perhaps, mixed the sound-worlds of Schumann and Brahms, matching them in duration if not memorability. Waal, Hans Colbers and van der Laar are commendably flexible in tempo, though the piece still far outstays its welcome. One should allow for amiable noodling, perhaps – Reinecke was 82 when he wrote it, and the instrumental combination does encourage creaminess rather than spice. The Hungaroton disc is all Reinecke, though fails to include another Trio that may have had such a quality – that for oboe, horn and piano, Op. 188. Op. 274 is certainly an inoffensive listening experience, though not, perhaps, the best start for chamber-music novices.

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