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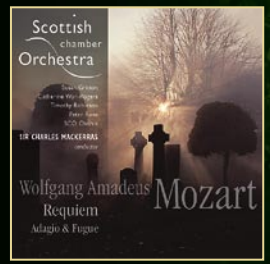
– CKD 216 (SACD) –



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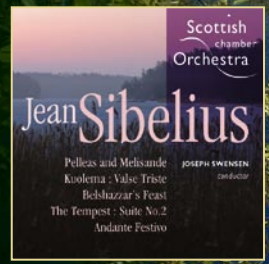

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Scottish chamber Orchestra

JOSEPH SWENSEN
conductor / violin

Johannes Brahms

Violin Concerto
Hungarian Dances

Scottish chamber Orchestra

Johannes Brahms (1833-97)

Violin Concerto in D major Op.77

1. *Allegro non troppo* 2.22
2. *Adagio* 2.06
3. *Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace*

Hungarian Dances

4. *No.1 in G minor* **(orch. Brahms)** 5.54
5. *No.8 in A minor* **(orch. Gal)** 5.54
6. *No.19 in B minor* **(orch. Dvořák)** 5.54
7. *No.2 in D minor* **(orch. Hallen)** 5.54
8. *No.18 in D* **(orch. Dvořák)** 5.54
9. *No.9 in E minor* **(orch. Gal)** 5.54
10. *No.21 in E minor* **(orch. Dvořák)** 5.54
11. *No.20 in E minor* **(orch. Dvořák)** 5.54
12. *No.3 in F* **(orch. Brahms)** 5.54
13. *No.6 in D* **(orch. Schmeling)** 5.54
14. *No.7 in A* **(orch. Schmeling)** 5.54
15. *No.10 in F* **(orch. Brahms)** 5.54
16. *No.17 in F#* **(orch. Dvořák)** 5.54
17. *No.5 in G minor* **(orch. Schmeling)** 5.54

Joseph Swensen and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra would like to dedicate this CD to Donald and Louise MacDonald

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Background

In the 1850s Johannes Brahms encountered two Hungarian violinists, Eduard Reményi and Joseph Joachim, both of whom were to have a profound impact on the direction of his musical career. Reményi was one of the many Hungarian exiles who had ended up in Hamburg while en route to America in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution. A gifted violinist, who had studied at the conservatory in Vienna, he was particularly renowned for his virtuosic performances of the wild and excitable music that was played by Hungary's Romani gypsies in coffee shops and bars across central Europe. This music was widely believed to be the indigenous folk music of Hungary. It was actually, however, an amalgam of various Hungarian styles, interpreted by the gypsies to create a distinct genre that sounded decidedly exotic to Western ears. The style enjoyed enormous popularity in the nineteenth century, and was seized upon by composers such as Weber, Schubert, Liszt and Brahms, whose spirited evocations of the music can be seen in their numerous *style hongrois* compositions.

Reményi and Brahms often played together in Hamburg, Brahms improvising piano accompaniments to Reményi's Hungarian dances and, in 1853, the two embarked on a concert tour of North Germany. They made an odd couple, Reményi's theatrical nature providing a stark contrast to the shy and earnest young German and, unsurprisingly, they went their separate ways midway through the tour. Before they parted company, however, Reményi introduced Brahms to his fellow compatriot, Joseph Joachim. Like Reményi, Joachim was an enthusiastic champion of Hungarian gypsy music. However, he approached composing and performing with a gravitas that was much more suited to Brahms's outlook. The more experienced Joachim took Brahms under his wing immediately, introducing him to the Schumann circle and offering him endless compositional

advice. The pair studied counterpoint together, played Bach together, and quickly laid the foundations for what was to become a lifelong friendship and musical partnership.

The Works

Brahms wrote the **Violin Concerto** Op.77 in the summer of 1878 while holidaying in the idyllic setting of Pörtschach in the Styrian Alps, the place where, a year earlier, he had written his Second Symphony. Immediate parallels can be drawn between the two works: both are in D major, have a first movement in triple time with a triadic first subject, and are pervaded by the new-found self-confidence and inner calm that manifested itself in Brahms's writing following the completion of his long-awaited First Symphony.

The Concerto was written specifically with Joachim in mind and, as soon as the violin part was finished in August 1878, Brahms sent it to his friend writing, "Now I'll be satisfied if you say a word, and maybe write in a few: difficult, uncomfortable, impossible, etc." Joachim happily stepped in as advisor, and over the next few months made numerous suggestions regarding violin figurations, bowing and orchestral textures. The pair corresponded repeatedly over the work until its premiere in Leipzig on New Year's Day in 1879, and Brahms continued to tinker with it until its eventual publication in October 1879. Characteristically, although eager for advice, Brahms was not always willing to take Joachim's proposals on board, and often did not make the alterations suggested by the latter. Nevertheless, the resulting product represents a masterful display of violin writing inspired by the integrity of Joachim's style. The violinistic qualities of the Concerto were not, however, universally recognised when it first appeared. Josef Hellmesberger, after conducting the premiere of the work, famously remarked that it was a Concerto "not for, but against the violin", an attitude that was undoubtedly a reaction to the unprecedented symphonic scope of the work. Reflecting Brahms's, and indeed Joachim's respect for their Germanic musical heritage, the Concerto builds on the legacy of the violin concertos of

Beethoven and Mendelssohn, reconciling the nineteenth-century demand for virtuosity with the intellectual rigour required of the symphony.

The first movement is conceived in an utterly symphonic manner, involving a grand scale orchestral exposition and an elaborate working out of the thematic material in the solo part. Yet the movement is pervaded by a sense of warmth that belies its compositional intricacies, and moments such as the waltz-like elaboration of the second subject, when it is first taken by the solo violin, exude a cheerful contentment reminiscent of the Second Symphony. Brahms declined to write a cadenza for the movement, leaving this task to Joachim instead. Alternative cadenzas have since been composed by the likes of Busoni and Tovey. However, Joachim's cadenza, which can be heard on this recording, appropriately remains the most popular.

Each of the three movements of the Concerto reveals a different dimension of Brahms's multi-faceted compositional persona and, if the first movement epitomises Brahms the symphonist, it is Brahms the song composer who emerges in the lyrical second movement. Written to replace the two middle movements he had originally sketched out for the Concerto, this "feeble Adagio", as Brahms described it to Joachim, contains some of the composer's most intimate writing. The movement is built on a gentle melody, the beauty of which lies in its simplicity. The melody is stated first by solo oboe, accompanied by a rich blend of woodwind, and is then treated to a stream of seamless variations by the solo violin.

The final movement of the Concerto, an exuberant *Rondo alla Zingarese* (Rondo in the Hungarian style), draws on Brahms's love of Hungarian gypsy music. Clearly an homage to Joachim who had written a finale in the *style hongrois* for his own Hungarian Concerto of 1861, Brahms managed to immerse himself far deeper in the style than his Hungarian friend. The bravura virtuosity of the solo violin part is very much in the gypsy spirit, and the movement exudes an enormous energy, impelled by

restless dotted rhythmic figures and syncopations. It contains an extended coda in which the rondo theme is transformed into a high-spirited Hungarian-style march, providing a fitting climax to the Concerto.

Although Brahms's earliest arrangements of the **Hungarian Dances** date back to the 1850s, no doubt resulting from his partnership with Reményi, it was not until 1869 that the first ten dances were published by Simrock in an arrangement for piano duet. The piano duet was the ideal medium for domestic consumption and, unsurprisingly, given the popularity of the *style hongrois*, the dances met with immediate success. Eager to build on their popularity, Simrock persuaded Brahms to arrange a number of them for orchestra, and subsequently his orchestrations of Nos. 1, 3 and 10 were published in 1874. A further set of dances was issued in 1881, again in an arrangement for piano duet, but Brahms did not orchestrate any more of the dances. This task was undertaken instead by some of his most dedicated supporters, most notably by Antonín Dvořák, who orchestrated Nos. 17-21, and claimed that the dances exerted a direct influence on his own Slavonic Dances.

Brahms described himself as the arranger rather than composer of the dances and tellingly published both sets without opus number. Yet there has been considerable debate about the origins of the various melodies and Reményi went so far as to level accusations of plagiarism at Brahms. Brahms undoubtedly learned some from the latter and probably picked up others in coffee shops in Hamburg and Vienna. He did, however, also compose a number of the tunes himself; according to Joachim, he wrote Nos. 11, 14 and 16. The Dances contain a kaleidoscope of Hungarian colours, ranging from the plaintive parallel thirds and sixths that open the sixth dance to the florid ornamentations in the seventh. The *Verbunkos* features prominently in dances 1-10. A recruiting dance played by gypsies for the Hungarian army, the *Verbunkos* and its more formalised derivative, the *Csárdás*, alternate slow sections called *lassan* with faster *friska* sections.

The *lassan* sections tend to be majestic and dignified, and often characterised by a strong dotted rhythmic figure, such as that found in the opening section of dances 1, 5 and 8. The contrasting *friska* sections contain lively virtuosic music, rife with cross rhythms and syncopations. Ubiquitous in these sections is the characteristic *alla zoppa* ('limping') rhythm, a short-long-short rhythmic figure that Brahms uses extensively in the faster sections of his dances.

The issue of authenticity is one that raises its head repeatedly with regard to the *style hongrois*. Was Brahms aware that the style was not indigenous to Hungary? Probably not. However, even if he had known, it is unlikely that he would have been too concerned. When doubt was shed on the authenticity of his favourite collection of folk songs, he wrote to Philip Spitta: "Not a folk tune? Fine, so then we have one more cherished composer," an attitude he would almost certainly have taken with his beloved Hungarian Dances.

Elaine Kelly, February 2004

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Photo of the SCO by Paul Hampton, The Picture House UK
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SCOTTISH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

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The Scottish Chamber Orchestra is internationally recognised for its innovative approach to music-making and programme planning. Formed in 1974 with a commitment to serve the Scottish community, it is also one of Scotland's foremost cultural ambassadors. The Orchestra performs throughout Scotland, including an annual tour of the Highlands and Islands, and appears regularly at the Edinburgh, St Magnus and Aldeburgh Festivals and the BBC Proms. Its busy international touring schedule has recently included the USA, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, Sweden and Hong Kong.

The SCO's dynamic relationship with Principal Conductor Joseph Swensen continues to develop and, with both Swensen and Conductor Laureate Sir Charles Mackerras, the Orchestra pushes the boundaries of conventional chamber orchestra repertoire, performing symphonic works which were written for smaller orchestras than those usually heard performing them today. The SCO has an impressive catalogue of recordings, including - in partnership with Sir Charles Mackerras - six Mozart operas and a Grammy-nominated set of Brahms symphonies.

The Orchestra enjoys close relationships with many leading composers, including Composer Laureate Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Affiliate Composer James MacMillan. The SCO also collaborates with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra in a programme of joint commissions from Sally Beamish and Karin Rehnqvist.

The SCO has led the way in the development of music education, with a unique programme of projects providing workshops for children and adults across Scotland.

This CD is the fourth in a series of recordings which the Orchestra is producing in partnership with Linn Records, involving both Principal Conductor Joseph Swensen and Conductor Laureate Sir Charles Mackerras.

1st VIOLIN	Bradley Creswick *guest leader,* Ruth Crouch *assistant leader,* Greg Lawson, Iain King, Fiona Stephen, Ian Bone, Susan Henderson, Rosemary Henbest
2nd VIOLIN	Claire Sterling, Fiona Alexander, Rosemary Ellison, Robert McFall, Niamh Lyons, Jacqueline Norrie, Roddy Long, Ulrike Fenner
VIOLA	Sophie Renshaw, Simon Rawson, Brian Schiele, Steve King
'CELLO	Luca Franzetti, Kevin McCrae, Su-a Lee, John Davidson
BASS	Nicholas Bayley, Adrian Bornet, May Halyburton
FLUTE	Alison Mitchell, Elisabeth Dooner, Laura Bailie
PICCOLO	Elisabeth Dooner
OBOE	Robin Williams, Mary James
CLARINET	Maximiliano Martín, Ruth Ellis
BASSOON	Meyrick Alexander, Alison Green
HORN	Robert Cook, Harry Johnstone, Paul Klein, Andrew Saunders
TRUMPET	Peter Franks, Shaun Harrold
TROMBONE	Nigel Cox, Mark Boyd
BASS TROMBONE	Brian Lynn
TIMPANI	Caroline Garden
PERCUSSION	Ian Coulter, Martin Willis, John Poulter

Joseph Swensen *conductor / violin*

Joseph Swensen has rapidly established himself as one of the most exciting talents to have emerged from amongst today's younger generation of conductors. He has been the Principal Conductor of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra since 1996 and was Principal Guest conductor of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales from 2000-2003.

Swensen is a regular guest conductor with many of the world's major orchestras including the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, the Hallé, the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Other appearances include the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Real Orquesta Sinfónica de Sevilla, London Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Academy of St Martin in the Fields and Gothenberg Symphony Orchestra. Together with the SCO, Swensen has entered into a series of recordings with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra for Linn Records. The first disc – *Mendelssohn Violin Concerto and Symphony No 3* – featured Swensen as both conductor and soloist.

Swensen's highly successful career as a solo violinist began whilst he was a student at the Juillard School, and this continued until 1991 when he decided to devote himself entirely to conducting. He appeared regularly as soloist with many of the world's great orchestras and was a BMG exclusive recording artist. In recent years he has returned occasionally to the violin concerto repertoire, playing and directing concertos with orchestras with whom he enjoys a particularly close relationship as a conductor.

Born in 1960 of Norwegian and Japanese descent, Joseph Swensen lives in Copenhagen with his wife and children. Joseph Swensen plays on a 1715 Stradivarius on loan from a patron of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.