

**BRAHMS String Quintets No. 1 & 2 • Uppsala Ch Soloists • DAPHNE 1045 (52:26)**

Did you ever put on a CD that turned out to be far *better* than you expected it to be? I admit it seldom happens, but in this case it did. These five musicians, all members of the Uppsala Chamber Orchestra, are so used to playing with each other in that context as well as in chamber music, are so attuned to each other from their daily work that thinking, feeling, and phrasing together comes as easily to them as falling off a log. (Not that I recommend their falling off a log...it's just a figure of speech.) To name them, they are Bernt Lysell, Klara Hellgren, Susanne Magnusson, Nils-Erik Sparf and Erik Wahlgren. Hellgren is strictly a violinist, Magnusson a violist and Wahlgren the cellist, but the other two flip-flop roles in these two works, Lysell playing first violin in the first quintet and second viola in the second, Sparf playing second viola in quintet 1 and lead violin in quintet 2.

Their tone as an ensemble leans towards the lean side, which I tend to prefer in Brahms anyway. His late-Romantic style tends towards undue sentimentality and mushiness when played by musicians with too warm or gooey a sound. Here, however, the Uppsala Soloists are like Mama Bear: their approach is "just right," employing the proper amount and style of portamento to give the music flow and character without making it sound too syrupy. Their attacks are crisp but never brusque, and they always seem to know exactly how to play each movement so that the musical progression makes sense but does not override a feeling of discovery at each turn of phrase. They add, alternately, lilt, lyricism and drama to this music. In a word, they are splendid, and they bring a fine "edge" to this music that propels it when needed.

For those not familiar with these string quintets, they are among Brahms' most original and restless works. Though ostensibly set in four-movement form, there are constant tempo and mood shifts within each movement, keeping one on the edge of your seat as you listen. All of it is tonal, the rhythms are not particularly difficult, and yet there is something really striking about each of these eight movements. The music does not develop in typical Brahmsian style, but rather flits from section to section and mood to mood, catching the listener up in its whirlwind of sound. In short, they are captivating and exciting pieces.

I cannot praise this disc highly enough. This is, surely, one of the surprises (so far) of 2013. **Lynn René Bayley**