

From Gallagher to Brahms—The Road Taken by Pianist Frank Huang BY JERRY DUBINS

In just the last issue, 40:5, I encountered pianist Frank Huang for the first time in an album of piano works by American composer Jack Gallagher. In that review, I went out of my way to note that this Frank Huang, assistant professor of piano at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, was not the same Frank Huang as the violinist of the same name who had a couple of his albums reviewed in these pages several years ago.

Pianist Frank Huang has toured throughout North America, South America, Asia, and Europe, and has appeared in concert at recital in notable venues that include Weill Hall, Carnegie Hall, Benaroya Hall (in Seattle), the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and Lincoln Center in New York. Huang's concerts have also been featured on radio and television broadcasts in Seattle, Vermont, Chicago, Cleveland, and New York. An avid chamber musician, he has also collaborated with members of the Cleveland Orchestra in recitals. Equally active as a soloist with orchestra, he has performed with the Sammamish Symphony, Northwest Philharmonia, Peru National Symphony, and Wooster Symphony Orchestra.

Now, just one issue after reviewing his Gallagher CD, I find myself chatting with Frank Huang, the pianist, mostly about his latest recording project, a disc of Brahms's piano works on Centaur.

I guess my first question to you is twofold: What road led you from Gallagher to Brahms for your new album, and what informed your choice of the specific works by Brahms you chose to perform?

I actually recorded the Brahms disc before the Gallagher album, but it has always been one of my passions in performing music of our time. Jack Gallagher and I worked as colleagues at the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio from 2011 to 2013; and after discovering that we shared similar passions in music, composers, and performers, Jack asked me to record a disc of his piano music. It was a wonderful collaboration!

Brahms has been one of my all-time favorite composers. I have performed a number of his solo and chamber works during my student and professional years. It was fitting that Brahms would be on my solo debut album. By including works from various stages of his life, I had in mind of showing the evolution of the young, ambitious Brahms to the older, refined composer. In early Brahms—the Sonata No. 1 in C Major and Scherzo in E \flat Minor—we see a young composer trying to make a mark on the musical world. He pulls out all the stops with writing for the pianist of the greatest technical difficulty, but high musical substance. Undoubtedly, he was trying to impress many prominent musicians, particularly Robert Schumann, to get his name recognized. I included the Waltzes, op. 39, on this disc because of the popularity and success that Brahms enjoyed with them during his lifetime. These charming miniatures are wonderful gems and deserved to be heard. Lastly, I strongly felt that the Piano Pieces, op. 119, needed to be included in this album for me to show the drastic transformation of the young, youthful Brahms to the seasoned and distinguished composer. Op. 119 was Brahms's last published piano work and, after spending much of his early years writing large-scale pieces to gain recognition, he shifted to shorter pieces to evoke certain moods. Brahms enjoyed a long and illustrious career—with this disc, it's my hope to show audiences the various compositional styles of this wonderful composer.

I understand that the sonata is a tremendously difficult thing to play, not just in the technical demands it makes on the performer, but in the sheer stamina and staying power it requires. It's such an epic essay. Talk to me about what's involved in learning and preparing to perform it.

I'm glad you appreciate the effort and energy that this piece requires. I first encountered the work when Julian Martin, my teacher at the Juilliard School, suggested that I should learn it. It was such a challenge at first. I remember spending several hours each day practicing the work, and in my lessons with my teacher, he addressed the technical difficulties of the work as well as helping me in producing multiple shades of tone color. Since studying it at Juilliard, I have worked on the sonata with several other notable pianists/teachers—some names that come to mind are Dominique Weber (Conservatory of Geneva, Switzerland) and Robert McDonald (the Juilliard School). Those experiences were especially invaluable in helping me gain a better understanding of the work.

After playing the work for the first time in a school recital, I realized it was one of those pieces that would require more performances for it to “break in.” Since then, I have performed it countless times in concerts, and each time, I'm still astounded at the stamina and the herculean effort it requires of the pianist, particularly the third and fourth movements in succession!

You fill in your program between the sonata and the last pieces with Brahms's Scherzo in E♭ Minor, op. 4, and the 16 Waltzes, op. 39. It turns out that the Scherzo received a higher opus number than the First Sonata, only because it was published later, but from what I understand, the Scherzo was completed in 1851 before Brahms had finished work on the sonata. In terms of content and style then, the Scherzo would seem to belong to the world of the three sonatas, yet there also seem to be echoes in it of some of the dark and menacing scherzos in Beethoven's piano sonatas. I'm thinking in particular of the scherzo-like movement in Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 13 in E♭-Major, op. 27/1, the “Cinderella-sister” to his “Moonlight” Sonata. What are your thoughts about Brahms's Scherzo?

That is a very interesting connection that you point out here—I've never thought of it that way, but it doesn't seem so far-fetched to me. Brahms was known to be a tremendous admirer of Beethoven. He had acquired a rather large collection of his works and even performed several of his predecessor's sonatas in his early years. In his Sonata, op. 1, he even “borrowed” musical ideas from Beethoven's opp. 53 (“Waldstein”) and 106 (“Hammerklavier”) Sonatas. This type of homage, conscious or not, was especially apparent in his later years, particularly in his Symphony No. 1, where many musicians during his lifetime nicknamed it “Beethoven's 10th.” Although Brahms was not shy to show his respect for Beethoven, he was cautious that musicians recognized him as a composer who had his own voice, rather than merely following in the footsteps of his Germanic predecessors. To a group of friends, he even stated: “Gentlemen, I know I am not Beethoven, but I am Johannes Brahms.”

With Brahms's Scherzo, op. 4, I have an additional take. I see striking rhythmic and melodic resemblances to Chopin's Scherzo No. 2. When asked about this possible connection, Brahms stated that he never knew Chopin's scherzos. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine how much of this statement is true. What we do know is that Brahms was known to borrow ideas from other composers. Sometimes, he was more forthcoming about his allusions; at other times, he denied it, possibly in fear of being labeled as a plagiarist. As Igor Stravinsky once famously said, “Good composers borrow, great composers steal.”

The real money-makers for Brahms in his lifetime were works such as his Waltzes and Hungarian Dances, which were popular commercial successes on the domestic music-making

market. In Brahms's day, it wasn't "a chicken in every pot" but a piano in every parlor, and the Waltzes, originally written for piano four-hands, were specifically designed for home entertainment by talented amateur players. Capitalizing on their popularity, Brahms made two arrangements of the original Waltzes, both for piano two-hands, one, an "easy" version, and one, a "difficult" version. I'm sure it's the latter you play on your CD, but can you describe the differences between the "easy" and "difficult" versions?

As you point out, Jerry, Brahms originally published the four-hands arrangement with the idea that amateurs in house concerts would perform it. Being a shrewd businessman and understanding current market trends, he immediately published two solo versions, a "difficult" and "simplified" version. Based on the differences between the two versions, I am inclined to say that Brahms was well aware of the challenges associated with the "difficult" version and intended to make the solo piece accessible to all musicians.

In the difficult version, I believe the composer wanted to present virtuosos, which were on the rise during the 19th century, the opportunity to perform this work in a concert hall. Some of the Waltzes, particularly Nos. 6, 13, and 14, allow the pianist to show virtuosic display with various shifts around the entire keyboard, brilliant passagework, and use of largely spaced chords. But what about the pianists whose skills were greater than that of an amateur, but not quite up to par of a professional? Brahms had an option for those musicians as well. In the simplified version, he shortened the distance between many of the left-hand material jumps—creating greater ease for the pianist to navigate around the keyboard. Also, he adjusted the spacing of many chords, possibly to accommodate those with smaller hands. Something of significance to point out was that Brahms even transposed some of the Waltzes, most notably Nos. 14 and 15, to a different key—most likely to provide greater comfort in all of the demanding passagework.

Brahms lived at a time that saw significant improvements and modernization in piano design and manufacturing. The trend was towards bigger, louder, and faster; and to that end, instruments were enlarged and reinforced with stronger construction materials and sturdier frames. Over-stringing of the bass strings became popular. Keyboards were made to "speak" faster with refinements to escape mechanisms, pedal actions were enhanced, and myriad other tweaks led to pianos of great power. We know that Brahms kept abreast of these developments and embraced them when it came to his big public works, such as his piano concertos, for which he expressed his preference for the latest Steinways that were being built. Interestingly, though, the piano in his own flat, the one he composed on, and the one he turned to for the intimacy of his late piano pieces, was a much older, smaller, and more modest Streicher. I bring this up because in the past year or so, I've received recordings for review of Brahms's piano works played on various pianos of his time, and I'm curious to know what you think of performing Brahms's piano music, not so much on Bösendorfers and other pianos of the 1880s, which for all practical purposes are modern instruments, but on Streichers and pianos dating back to the early 1850s when Brahms was writing his piano sonatas. So much happened to piano design and manufacture in those 30 years. What are your thoughts on this?

This is such an interesting point that you bring up! It is my opinion that the early works of Brahms, particularly his piano sonatas, should be performed on a modern piano. I know some might argue in favor of period instruments for the spirit of "authenticity," but my reasoning is simple. As you mentioned, Brahms stated on several occasions that he preferred modern instruments such as the Bechstein or Steinway in concerts (especially in his later years when he was to perform his piano concertos). He was also known to prefer these pianos even when it

came to performing his early works, which were written before all of the technological and mechanical advancements were in place. Secondly, the writing style of his piano sonatas simply demands the strength and power of a modern instrument. He uses the entire keyboard range and writes largely spaced chords, almost as if he had in mind composing a symphony (Robert Schumann even remarks to this effect upon hearing his sonatas in 1853). As for his more “intimate” works such as Waltzes, op. 39, or his late piano pieces, I definitely think it is worth exploring to perform it on a Streicher and other older instruments. After all, he did mention that he thought Streichers were more suitable for home use. Perhaps recording the four sets of late piano pieces, opp. 116–119, on a Streicher is an idea for a future project.

If I could, I'd like to switch topics now to something else. You teach piano at university level and therefore receive students who, I assume, are already at a fairly advanced level. What are some things you would like students to learn from you at Miami University, and how do you see your role as a professor of piano in teaching future generation of students?

I think that being a musician, especially in the 21st century, can be an arduous pursuit. With a large supply of professional musicians and fewer employment opportunities than before, some practical and realistic considerations will need to be made. Regardless, I hope to encourage my students to promote a discipline that honors creativity and the communication of human expression.

As a professor of piano, I have essentially two responsibilities: 1) to develop and help realize students' creative potentials; and 2) to inspire curiosity. In my lessons, I encourage discussion, exploration, critical listening and analysis, understanding and applying contexts, and problem solving. I achieve this by inquiry-based instruction. Many of my questions are open-ended, and it is my hope that the answers will branch out to additional explorations. I truly believe that the study of music (and the arts) is the never-ending quest of analyzing a work to its microscopic level. Of course, much of this requires relentless hard work, unwavering discipline and passion, and the utmost patience, which are the greatest gifts that one can receive from experiencing the study of the arts.

Fortunately, I have this wonderful opportunity of mentorship at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, which was ranked No. 2 by *U.S. News & World Report* in the category of “Strong Commitment to Undergraduate Teaching.” In this liberal-arts environment, students come in with the burning desire and hunger to learn more. Many of our students are interested in interdisciplinary studies—we celebrate that. And to come full circle: I feel that the underlining goal of what I hope students will achieve at Miami is to take the transferable skills that they learn from music and to apply it throughout their daily lives, regardless of discipline. To me, the study of arts is not just merely vocational training—it is a life-enhancing experience.

Finally, let's turn to future projects. You've gone from Gallagher to Brahms. What's next on your agenda? Is there anything currently in the pipeline? Are you eager to record some of the mainstream concerto repertoire? If so, what in particular?

As I mentioned earlier, I am very interested in performing music of our time. I just finished recording a chamber music album of American women living composers, specifically Jennifer Higdon's *String Poetic* and Lera Auerbach's Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 3. Jennifer Higdon needs no introduction, as I feel that much of her music is lyrical, bright, and generally accessible to audiences—such innovative writing! As for Lera Auerbach, her sonata provides an excellent contrast to the Higdon—tragic, jarring, and angular sonorities written for both violin and piano parts.

I have also been performing Rzewski's monumental piece *The People United Will Never be Defeated!* in concerts lately. Based on the popular Chilean song, composed by Sergio Ortega with lyrics by the group Quilapayún in 1973, *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*, the work is a set of 36 variations for solo piano. This influential work depicts the political protest and turmoil in Chile during the 1970s. I hope to record this fantastic work one day. Other pieces on my "to-learn, perform, and record list" are Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* (Twenty Contemplations on the infant Jesus) and Charles Ives's "Concord" Sonata.

Another creative interest of mine is promoting pieces that are infrequently performed. I just finished recording disc one of a nine-disc set of the complete solo piano works of Nikolai Medtner, who was a younger Russian contemporary of Sergei Rachmaninoff. I am not entirely sure why Medtner's music has fallen through the cracks, but if I had to speculate, I would say that his music might have been overshadowed by Rachmaninoff's popularity. Through my project, however, I aim to provide advocacy for Medtner and his music—he deserves greater recognition from the public!

As for mainstream concerto repertoire, I would love to record both Brahms concertos someday. Both works, especially Concerto No. 2, impose the greatest technical demands on the pianist. Additionally, the piano soloist and orchestra share equal and involved roles in creating an amazing collaboration.

BRAHMS Piano Sonata No. 1. Scherzo in e \flat , op. 4. 16 Waltzes, op. 39. Piano Pieces, op. 119 • Frank Huang (pn) • CENTAUR 3512 (43:42)

It took Brahms 42 years to get from his Scherzo in E \flat Minor of 1851 to his final four piano pieces of 1893, years which saw pronounced changes in compositional style and musical voice, and the creation of countless masterpieces, accompanied, if not motivated by, the pain, sorrow, and bitterness of unrequited love. It took Frank Huang two days in December 2013, and one more day in August 2014, to traverse those 42 years of Brahms's life and to record this program, which includes the composer's first and last works for solo piano. No glossing over of the music is imputed to Huang in this observation. Besides, I'm quite sure that he spent far more time in learning and preparing these pieces, a certainty reflected in our above interview in which he describes his own life's journey as a never-ending quest of analyzing a work to its microscopic level, which requires relentless hard work, unwavering discipline and passion, and the utmost patience.

All of that is manifest in Huang's performances of these works. The battle is joined, as Huang faces off against Brahms's formidable First Sonata, and his conquering of the score is decisive. Of particular note are Huang's clarity of voicing in the music's dense textures and his ability to tame into obedience this sometimes seemingly unruly macho exhibition of Brahms's youth. Also impressive is Huang's deft handling of the sudden dynamic changes and volatile vicissitudes of mood.

The Scherzo in E \flat Minor, as noted in the above interview, is an even earlier work than the sonata. In fact, it's the first piece Brahms composed for solo piano that he felt confident enough to submit for publication, though it was published with a higher opus number in the same year as the sonata, 1854. It's a strange thing, this scherzo, and not just for its key. To the best of my knowledge, Brahms visited E \flat Minor only twice—once in this very first piece and once again in one of his last piano pieces, the sixth and concluding number, the Intermezzo, in the op. 118 set. But beyond the remote key, the gnome-like character of this scherzo is difficult to pin

down. Is it playful and simply mischievous, or does it have malicious intent? Like a good mystery writer, Huang teases us with the evidence, but in the end, bids us to deliver the verdict for ourselves.

If the Scherzo recalls some of Beethoven's similarly conflicted movements, Brahms's Waltzes evoke, with a degree of nostalgia, the world of Schubert's waltzes and *German Dances*. The music is charming, and yet it's tinged with a patina of sadness, which Huang picks up on and communicates with touching effect.

Four numbers make up Brahms's valedictory to the piano, his Piano Pieces, op. 119. The first three bear the title Intermezzo, while the concluding piece stands alone with the title of Rhapsody. One often encounters words like "autumnal" and "introspective" in describing these late pieces by Brahms, leading to an impression of quiet resignation and leave-taking, as if the composer was contemplating his imminent demise in an intimate, private conversation with himself. But I think this impression is misleading. Brahms wrote these pieces sometime between 1893 and 1894. He still had three years to live, and he wasn't yet experiencing symptoms of the cancer that would kill him. In fact, he was still full of life. In 1894, he composed the two clarinet sonatas for Richard Mühlfeld, and the following year he toured a number of German cities with the clarinetist to perform the sonatas. Still not done, in 1896 Brahms led performances of both of his piano concertos in Berlin with Eugen d'Albert at the piano, and then made a 40-hour journey to Bonn to attend Clara Schumann's funeral. Brahms's last efforts at composition, the *Four Serious Songs*, op. 121, and the 11 Chorale Preludes for Organ, op. 122, were also products of 1896. From there, his decline was rapid; 11 months later, on April 3, 1897, he was dead.

The point of this digression is that the Piano Pieces of op. 119 are by no means Brahms's contemplations of his imminently impending death. To be sure, the first Intermezzo in B Minor may convey a feeling of solitude and a mood of sorrowful regret, but the spell is broken by the second Intermezzo in E Minor, which, interestingly, has about it much the same gnome-like mischievous vs. malicious ambivalent character of the early Scherzo. This gnome, however, has been bowed by age and life's hard knocks, and has grown a white beard. The very brief third Intermezzo in C Major—1:30 in Huang's performance—could almost be one of Brahms's op. 39 Waltzes. The composer himself scratched out his original *Allegretto* marking and replaced it with *Grazioso e giocoso*. There's nothing morose or morbid about this piece. This is Brahms imbibing with his friends at the pub and getting a bit giggly and giddy in the process—not the serious and saturnine composer we usually think of. The concluding Rhapsody in E♭ Major may not be on quite the same grand and imposing scale as Brahms's earlier two Rhapsodies, op. 79, but the heroic posture of the music is similar, albeit now more compressed and laconic in expression.

In all four of these pieces, Huang proves himself a Brahms interpreter of penetrating musical insight. Coupled with the precision of a diamond-cutter's technique and a tonal opulence—stunningly captured by Centaur's recording—this is a Brahms recital that's irresistible. **Jerry Dubins**

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I very much enjoyed Frank Huang's disc of music by Frank Gallagher on this label (*Fanfare* 40:5). Here he is in mainstream repertoire, exploring the various sides of Brahms's music from the early op. 1 Sonata through to the late op. 119 Piano Pieces. Assistant professor of piano at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, Huang has a powerful technique that carries all the robustness Brahms demands; but he can phrase eloquently and movingly, too.

The first movement of the op. 1 Piano Sonata indeed contains these extremes. Huang finds real tenderness amidst the muscularity. If the piano recording might have benefitted from more depth and ambiance, one can still appreciate the concentration and refinement of tone in the second movement, a set of variations on the old German folk song *Verstohlen geht der Mond auf*. The move to pure Brahms territory from folksong is beautifully managed, and Brahms's explorations of his material are presented as if freshly penned. Huang seems intent on emphasizing the weight of the scherzo; intriguingly, though, it is his well delivered staccato that carries the *fuoco* (fire) of the movement's indicator. The scamperings of the finale are deftly done, the (many) technical challenges taken in Huang's stride. Competition in this piece is fierce, with Sviatoslav Richter (RCA) and Julius Katchen (Decca, but only available as part of boxes) both unassailable.

The op. 4 Scherzo flickers compellingly in Huang's hands, powered by an internal energy that is unstoppable. Later, quizzical gestures hang in the air, teasingly. Huang plays with a nimble touch that suits the music's flickerings.

Originally written for piano four-hands, the 16 Waltzes, op. 39, were swiftly arranged by the composer for two hands and it is in this version they are presented here. Huang is at his best here, the Second (E-Major) exquisitely voiced, while that fine staccato touch is put to good use in No. 6 (C#-Minor.) Another triumph is the crisp B-Minor (No. 11), while the No. 12 (E-Major) seems to act as a sketch for the elusive world of the late piano pieces. The best-known, the lullaby-like No. 15 (A-Major), is given a sweetly toned and tender performance. The overall impression is of a cohesive set. This is fine Brahms interpretation.

Finally, there comes one of the late sets of Piano Pieces, Brahms's op. 119. The harmonically elusive first Intermezzo (B-Minor) is given with a tissue-delicate touch. Simultaneities are beautifully weighted. The second Intermezzo of the set (E-Minor) contains a waltz in its central section, a nice link back to op. 39 within the context of the present program; Huang allows a certain nostalgia to creep in at this point, which actually works perfectly. The slight of duration No. 3, the Intermezzo in C, finds Huang delivering the fast descending gestures with a perfect touch before the final piece, the Rhapsody in E \flat Major bursts imperiously on the scene. There are audible links between the gestures of this piece and the op. 1 Sonata's first idea, which helps bring Huang's recital nicely together as an entity. Here in this final piece, Huang finds real confidence, brightness, and a true sense of triumph. Again, there is plenty of competition (Gilels is right up there at the top of this pile) but in this instance Huang holds his head high, right up there at the highest level.

This disc works brilliantly as a stand-alone Brahms recital. Huang has all of the technical requirements, and then some. Recommended, particularly for the Waltzes and the op. 119. **Colin Clarke**