



October



'Ravishment is never bought at the expense of a trademark clarity of texture that renders audible each instrumental line'

Richard Osborne applauds Chailly's new cycle of Brahms's symphonies

Brahms

Four Symphonies. Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op 56a. Tragic Overture, Op 81. Academic Festival Overture, Op 80. Liebeslieder Waltzes - selection. Intermezzos (arr Klengel) - Op 116 No 4; Op 117 No 1. Hungarian Dances - No 1; No 3; No 10. Symphony No 1 - Adagio (first performance version)

Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra / Riccardo Chailly
Decca © 478 5344DH3 (3h 54' • DDD)

Leipzig was never especially kind to Brahms. His First Piano Concerto was jeered off the stage there in 1859. Fences were mended in later years – it was in Leipzig that Brahms conducted his own Second Symphony for the first time – but it is a curious fact that during the last century the Gewandhaus Orchestra made virtually no Brahms symphony recordings of distinction. Even Kurt Masur's late-1970s Philips cycle was a flop.

Riccardo Chailly has changed all that. During his eight-year reign in Leipzig, the Gewandhaus Orchestra has become as articulate a Brahms ensemble as any in Austro-Germany. It helps, of course, that Chailly himself is a trusted Brahmsian. As Alan Sanders noted in these columns at the time of the launch of Chailly's RCO cycle in November 1988, his Brahms is 'strong, serious, unidiosyncratic and very directly expressed'.

Chailly belongs to that select group of conductors on record who direct all four

Brahms symphonies almost equally well. Such conductors – Weingartner, Klemperer, Boult, Wand and Loughran in his fine Hallé cycle – tend to belong to the spare-sounding, classically orientated school of Brahms interpretation, a school to which Chailly himself also subscribes.

This is less richly coloured Brahms than you will hear in Berlin or Vienna, though the sound palette is by no means limited. The Leipzig string-playing can be wintry or warm. Yet when violas and cellos ravish the ear in the Fourth's slow movement, the ravishment is never bought at the expense of a trademark clarity of texture that renders audible each instrumental line. The clean, open sound of the orchestra's superb winds also helps aerate textures. The first oboe is outstanding, as are the horns, which happily have not entirely lost their eastern European accent.

In Vienna in the 1880s Brahms symphonies were 'new music', known for the relative astringency of their sound. These Leipzig performances give us a hint of that astringency. Recorded with a fair degree of immediacy in a clean but lively acoustic, it is music-making that provokes more than it soothes.

Back in 1988, Chailly's Brahms was seen as being not especially Italianate. If it wasn't then, it is more so now. His account of the *Haydn* Variations resembles Toscanini's in

the tautness of its argument and its finely adjusted sense of tempo relations within and between variations. In the symphonies, however, the analogy works less well. Where Toscanini in his later years would often harry the music, bending it too much to his will, Chailly's approach is more nearly aligned to Klemperer's, where swift tempi, buoyant phrasing and forward winds are married to strongly drawn lines which move the music unerringly towards its appointed goal.

It is an approach that informs the entire cycle. Weingartner spoke of the First Symphony 'taking hold like the claw of a lion', which indeed it does in Chailly's performance. But, like Klemperer, Chailly brings a similar approach to the first movement of the Second Symphony. The result is a degree of urgency which more pastorally minded Brahmsians might think better suited to the tragic pronouncements of the Fourth Symphony than the 'lion and the lamb' mood of the Second. Yet everything is of a piece. Rarely have I heard so angst-ridden a realisation of the moment towards the end of the first movement where a woodland horn effects an extraordinary dissolution of the germinal D-C sharp-D motif with which the symphony begins. There will be no such controversy about the symphony's two closing movements. It's difficult to imagine them being better done. As to the