

BUILDING A LIBRARY

90-93FM **BBC** RADIO 3

Brahms CLARINET QUINTET

CONTINUING THE SERIES BASED ON RADIO 3'S 'BUILDING A LIBRARY',
COLIN LAWSON COMPARES THE AVAILABLE VERSIONS ON CD OF
BRAHMS'S INCOMPARABLE CHAMBER-MUSIC MASTERPIECE



COMPOSER
Johannes Brahms
WORK
Clarinet Quintet in
B minor, Op. 115
WRITTEN
1891

IN 1891 THE 57-YEAR-OLD BRAHMS WAS PERSUADED TO ABANDON HIS projected retirement by the magnificent playing of the Meiningen clarinetist, Richard Mühlfeld. He wrote the Clarinet Trio and Quintet during that summer, followed three years later by the two Clarinet Sonatas. Though Brahms apparently preferred the blend of clarinet with piano rather than strings, his Clarinet Quintet won immediate and unassailable popularity. Clara

Schumann was an early enthusiast and wrote to Brahms, 'It is a really marvellous work, the wailing clarinet takes hold of one; it is most moving. And what interesting music, deep and full of meaning! Less than a decade after Brahms's death in 1897 his biographer Florence May was already waxing lyrical about its autumnal quality and 'its tone of gentle, loving regret which pervades the four movements'. Of course the Clarinet Quintet is still universally regarded as one of Brahms's very finest achievements.

It's worth remembering that towards the end of the 19th century the clarinet's position in chamber music had been in quite a sorry state, despite its prominence within the Romantic orchestra. It was scarcely included in any truly integrated chamber music in the century after Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, and in the late 1880s *Grove's Dictionary* lamented: 'Wind instruments are now out of fashion for concert playing, and one seldom hears anything on such occasions but the piano and the violin, instead of the pleasing variety which used to prevail with so much advantage to art.'

I can warmly recommend as first choice a long-time favourite clarinetist of mine, the Canadian player **JAMES CAMPBELL** in partnership with the Allegri Quartet on Cala. Campbell's playing displays an admirable flexibility and a finely controlled vibrato,

and his controlled sonority always serves the detail of Brahms's musical argument. The Adagio second movement, in many ways the work's heart and soul, inspires a range of emotion from these players which would alone make this disc worth buying. Throughout the music, they produce a delectable balance of momentum and poise within ensemble playing which is by turns dramatic, seductive and serene. **BB**



TOP CHOICE

James Campbell (clarinet,
above); Allegri Quartet
Cala CACD 1009 ££

AKG LONDON