

## **BRAHMS String Sextets Nos. 1 and 2 • Qrt Sine Nomine; Nicolas Pache (va); François Guye (vc) • CLAVES 50-1410 (77:26) - Fanfare Review**

Although it's been some time in the making, the Lausanne-based Quatuor Sine Nomine here joins the Amadeus, Bartók, Leipzig, and Verdi Quartets—I don't think I'm forgetting anyone—in completing a recorded cycle of Brahms's chamber music without piano. The "Quartet without a Name"—so designated, as its publicity cites, "to symbolize the constant endeavor of devoting one's efforts to composers and the performance of their works"—recorded the quartets and the quintets in the 1990s, the former being reviewed by Robert McColley in *Fanfare* 18:1 and the latter by Bernard Jacobson in 21:4. Both reviews were positive, although McColley felt that the then recently released version by the Alban Berg Quartet surpassed the reading of the quartets; no great shame in that. Despite the passage of 20 years, there has been only one personnel change: violist Hans Egidi replaced Nicolas Pache in 2002. In a nice touch, though, Pache rejoins the quartet, now as guest second violist, for these 2014 versions of the sextets.

The Quatuor may not have a name *per se*, but Claves does give us the names of its members: Patrick Genet and François Gottraux, violins; Egidi, viola; and Marc Jaermann, cello. They are joined here by violist Pache and Swiss cellist François Guye.

Last issue, when I reviewed the SACD of these two works by the Concertgebouw Orchestra Soloist Ensemble, I complimented the group on its ensemble, balances, tempos, and textures; the approximately two extra minutes in the present versions are due largely to greater expansiveness in the second and fourth movements of the B $\flat$ -Major First Sextet, and in the slow third movement of the G-Major. Both versions work well, and both groups observe all the repeats.

There are many felicitous moments in these performances: the true *pianissimo* at m. 33 of the G-Major, for example, and Jaermann's soaring cello in the second theme. First violinist Genet sounds sweet throughout. Tempos are more relaxed than in the taut 1993 traversal of the quartets; it's hard to say whether this is due to the passage of time or to the fact that the sextets are intrinsically less intense than the quartets. I haven't heard the Sine Nomine's recording of the quintets. Claves's sound is excellent. The English notes are cogent; for some reason Claves commissioned a different author for notes in each of the three languages (French, German, English). The G-Major is placed first on the CD.

I'm going to have to find room on my shelves for this CD in addition to the Concertgebouw version and those of the Nash and Academy of St Martin in the Fields Ensembles. This one's a keeper. **Richard A. Kaplan**

## MusicWeb REVIEW

### RECORDING OF THE MONTH

#### Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897)

String Sextet No. 2 in G major, Op.36 (1865) [39:89]

String Sextet No. 1 in B flat major, Op.18 (1860) [37:35]

Quatuor Sine Nomine; Nicolas Pache (viola); François Guye (cello)

rec. 9-11 February 2014, Théâtre Populaire Romand, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland

**CLAVES CD50-1410** [77:26]

I was very enthusiastic when this CD was released as I have recently acquired the Sine Nomine's five CD Schubert string quartet cycle on Cascavelle (VEL 3115). This impressed me a great deal and should be heard by anyone wanting a first-class recording of these works.

Here Sine Nomine turn their hands to two masterpieces of the chamber repertoire, Brahms' two String Sextets. During Brahms' lifetime, the string quartet and the symphony were two genres which had reached their peak of achievement in Beethoven. To escape comparison, Brahms avoided the string quartet until later, and turned his attention to the string sextet, which up to that time had only found a champion in Luigi Boccherini. By adding an extra viola and cello to the basic string quartet, he could realize a lush richer sound, with a wider range of textures. The music displays bold, audacious modulation and skilful development.

The Op. 18 Sextet is youthful Brahms at his best. Composed in four movements, the outer ones are expansive and scored in classical forms. Curiously, in the first and fourth movements, the opening theme is ushered in by the cello, and both similarly employ pizzicato at the end. The second movement is a set of variations in D minor and the theme, dark and world-weary, is introduced on the viola. There follow five variations and an exquisite coda. The composer arranged this movement for solo piano in 1860. The Scherzo is of a strongly accented rustic character. The finale is an expansive Rondo of sunny, upbeat disposition. I find the first Sextet more melodious and extrovert than the second.

The String Sextet No. 2 in G major, Op.36 is set in a more serious vein. It is more abstract and intellectual, and less popular generally than the first. It certainly took more effort when I first came to these works many years ago. It doesn't reveal its secrets as easily, and is less reluctant to let you into its more complex world. I now find it the more satisfying of the two. The opening melody of the first movement is certainly not as ear-catching as its Op.18 equivalent. There's a certain degree of reserve, restraint and mystery to it. In this movement, the composer brought

closure to a failed relationship with Agathe von Seibold, whom he had met in 1858. He seemed to lack the ability to commit himself in relationships, which led to the affair ending unhappily; he remained single for the rest of his life. He wove the letters of Agathe's name into the second theme of this opening movement, afterwards declaring to a friend 'I have freed myself from my last love'. There follows a Scherzo, which has a delightful, lyrical melody over a pizzicato accompaniment. This eventually leads into a dance theme. The third movement adagio tells of an ardent surging passion, building up to a climax of emotional intensity. The finale ends the work with a nervous, restless energy.

The success of the present recording lies, to a great extent, in the differing approach the players take to two emotionally contrasting works - the more extrovert Op. 18, and the more inward Op. 36. Whilst some recordings I have heard have not really tackled the problem of the dense textures, sounding at times congested, with lack of instrumental detail and clarity, the Sine Nomine, together with the Claves' engineers, have overcome the problems. This produces an airier, transparent sound and a satisfying range of tonal colour. These players have these works at their fingertips and, like any good ensemble, the musicians listen and respond sensitively to each other. These are well-considered, idiomatic readings showing care with phrasing and dynamics. The acoustic is flattering and conveys warmth, richness and intimacy.

I listened to this new release side-by-side with two others. The Raphael Ensemble's [Hyperion](#) recording (CDA66276) has garnered many positive reviews over the years, yet I find their take on these works far from ideal. Taped in an over-resonant acoustic the players are recessed and the performance is less than engaging. The ASMF (CHAN 9151) are captured in considerably brighter and more vivid sound. This enables much of the instrumental detail to become more apparent. Everything about the recording ticks all the right boxes. I would now add this marvellous Claves recording as a pleasing alternative to the Chandos.

The acoustic of the Théâtre Populaire Romand confers a warm and sympathetic ambience. Balance between the individual instruments is ideal and this allows the sometimes thick textures to be transparently conveyed with definition. It puzzles me why the Sextets have been placed in reverse order as I would have preferred a chronological sequencing. This is a very minor problem for the listener and can be easily rectified.

Conveniently packaged in a slim digipak, with booklet handily attached to the back cover, this constitutes an aesthetically pleasing presentation. Informative notes on the works themselves and the performers are in French, German and English. Like all successful recordings this release has left me with a hunger for more. I'd now like to explore their recordings of the composer's quartets and string quintets.

**Stephen Greenbank**

**Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897)**

String Sextet No. 2 in G, Op. 36 [39:38]

String Sextet No. 1 in B flat, Op. 18 [37:47]

Quatuor Sine Nomine; Nicolas Pache (viola); François Guye (cello)

rec. 2014, Théâtre populaire romand, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland

**CLAVES 50-1410** [77:25]

Hot on the heels of the Alexander String Quartet's wonderful [Brahms quintets/sextets double album](#), here's another superb recording of the two sextets. These early works combine the young composer's large-scale ambition with his budding lyrical voice. Ensembles usually make a choice about what to emphasize. The Quatuor Sine Nomine opt for the expansive and this really lets the music's gorgeous melodies sing. They're even slower and more immersive than the Alexanders.

The amiable nature of this music makes a bad performance difficult to imagine but take note, here, of the laid-back approach the quartet takes to the Sextet No. 2's scherzo, and how successful it is. The First Sextet's slow movement, a theme-and-variations, has more drama than anything in the second piece.

The Quatuor Sine Nomine are a superb group, and they have a track record of successful collaborations with François Guye. You might remember their Schubert String Quintet, the adagio of which stretches out to a haunting 16:35. You might know the quartet's advocacy of Dora Pejačević ([review](#)). I didn't know the violist Nicolas Pache until now but he also fits in flawlessly and the players really are six equals.

My colleague Stephen Greenbank made this a Recording of the Month, and his enthusiasm is totally justified. Between the playing, the sonics and the packaging, with its wonderful reproductions of old maps, this is a first-rate production and a great way to refresh your love for early Brahms.

**Brian Reinhart**