



LINN

Inmost Heart
Bach Brahms Busoni Reger

SAMSON TSOY

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SAMSON TSOY piano

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)
arr. Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924)
Chorale Preludes, Op. 122

1. X. Herzlich tut mich verlangen 2:45
2. VIII. Es ist ein Ros entsprungen 2:56

Johannes Brahms
Variations and Fugue on a theme by Handel, Op. 24

3. Aria 0:54
4. Variation I 0:46
5. Variation II 0:42
6. Variation III 0:39
7. Variation IV 0:50
8. Variation V 1:09
9. Variation VI 1:14
10. Variation VII 0:34
11. Variation VIII 0:37
12. Variation IX 1:09
13. Variation X 0:33
14. Variation XI 0:48
15. Variation XII 1:00
16. Variation XIII 1:30
17. Variation XIV 0:38
18. Variation XV 0:42
19. Variation XVI 0:35
20. Variation XVII 0:36
21. Variation XVIII 1:08

- 22. Variation XIX 1:05
- 23. Variation XX 1:26
- 24. Variation XXI 0:56
- 25. Variation XXII 0:48
- 26. Variation XXIII 0:31
- 27. Variation XXIV 0:34
- 28. Variation XXV 0:43
- 29. Fuga 5:41

Johannes Brahms
arr. Ferruccio Busoni
Chorale Preludes, Op. 122

- 30. IV. Herzlich tut mich erfreuen 2:18

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)
arr. left hand Johannes Brahms
Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004

- 31. V. Chaconne 14:15

Johannes Brahms
arr. Ferruccio Busoni
Chorale Preludes, Op. 122

- 32. V. Schmücke dich, o Liebe Seele 2:04
- 33. IX. Herzlich tut mich verlangen 1:33

Johannes Brahms

arr. Max Reger (1873–1916)

Vier Ernste Gesänge, Op. 121

- 34. Denn es gehet dem Menschen 5:12
- 35. Ich wandte mich 4:43
- 36. O Tod, wie bitter bist du 4:31
- 37. Wenn ich mit Menschen und mit Engelszungen redete 5:03

Johannes Brahms

arr. Ferruccio Busoni

Chorale Preludes, Op. 122

- 38. XI. O Welt, ich muss dich lassen 3:10

Total Running Time 76:22

A note by Samson Tsoy

Brahms's music is like a tree – its roots grow deep. This is not merely a poetic metaphor. Perhaps like no other composer, Brahms placed faithfulness to the 'old masters' at the very foundation of his art, sourcing ideas and inspiration from the works of his predecessors. In particular, his intense relationship with Baroque is at the heart of his practice and is evident in most of his works.

I've always admired the constancy and consistency of this approach, which I find both humbling and touching. It fascinates me because, in a surprising way, it blurs the seemingly well-defined roles of composer ('the creator') and interpreter ('the impersonator'). When the creator himself delves so deeply into interpreting someone else's style and works, where is the distinction between the original and a copy?

The essence and meaning of interpretation, the intimate and somewhat poignant role of the interpreter, is at the core of this album. It concentrates specifically on the aspects of Brahms's own exploration and internalization of Baroque, and offers a chance to delve into his very personal and passionate interpretation of the aesthetics and techniques of this period.

I have tried to follow in his footsteps, from the tremendous monument of the Handel Variations to the most singular, almost post-modernist attempt at re-creation, which is Brahms's astonishing note-for-note tracing of Bach's Chaconne.

Perhaps his commitment to musical purity as a source of depth and meaning inspired both Busoni and Reger in translating his last sacred opuses. Supernaturally

organic in these essential piano versions, they feel innermost, inward and immediate. Finding a miraculous balance of dedication and freedom, exploring and exposing one's inner world through communion with the composer's soul imprinted in their works – to me, that is the spiritual wonder of the art of interpretation.

Elevated Echoes: Music by Brahms for piano solo

Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms's esteemed mentor, believed the future should be a 'higher echo of the past', a sentiment the younger composer took to heart. In this artfully designed programme, ideas reverberate across the centuries as Brahms's elaborations of works by two past masters, J. S. Bach and G. F. Handel, are juxtaposed with reworkings of his own music by two later composers, Ferruccio Busoni and Max Reger.

Brahms's *Variations and Fugue on a theme by Handel*, Op. 24, the most substantial work on the recording, clearly illustrates Schumann's maxim. It is based on an eight-bar Aria taken from the B flat major Suite, HWV 434, a piece that appeared in the Handel Complete Edition shortly before Brahms began work on Op. 24. Handel presents his theme with five simple variations, none of which moves outside the home key. Brahms starts in similar vein: his first variation also avoids all accidentals. What's more, the majority of his variations have the same proportions as Handel's slender original, and all but one are in B flat major or minor – an unusual decision for a variation set in the 1860s. However, the scale of Op. 24 is quite different: Brahms provides 25 variations – five times Handel's five, perhaps – capped by a mighty fugue based on a varied form of the original theme. Individual variations show endless invention. Variation 6, for example, contains a sequence of sophisticated canons, while Variation 22 is built on bucolic drones; Variation 19 is a stylized *siciliano* dance, while Variation 13, with its thick doublings and arpeggiated off-beat chords, suggests a Hungarian dance.

Brahms described Op. 24 as a 'haystack', implying separate elements gathered together. However, the way he combines them is far from haphazard. Sometimes variations flow into each other; sometimes a pause is indicated. And the separate

numbers fall into groups defined by mode, motif, metre or character. The result is a carefully crafted sequence of miniatures, not unlike that found in the Fourth Symphony's passacaglia finale.

Though Op. 24 was published without dedication, one of the autographs contains the title 'Variations for a dear friend' – Clara Schumann. Brahms was particularly fond of the set, and even Wagner, who asked Brahms to play the work for him at their only meeting in February 1864, found grudging words of praise, claiming they show 'what can still be done with the old forms by someone who understands how to handle them'.

By 'old forms', Wagner probably meant the process of theme and variations. However, Brahms's approach to the genre was more deeply rooted in the past than that of Schubert or Schumann. In an 1856 letter, Brahms pointed out that earlier composers, unlike his contemporaries, 'strictly preserved the bass of their theme, the real theme, throughout'. A decade or so later, he developed the point: 'With a variation theme, it's nearly always the bass alone that means anything to me. For me, the latter is holy, it's the firm foundation on which I build my inventions. [...] On a given bass, I invent in a truly new fashion, I find new melodies for it, I create.' Brahms directs his correspondent to the 'Goldberg' Variations and the C minor organ Passacaglia for examples of bass-dominated variation technique in Bach.

Curiously, Brahms doesn't mention Bach's Chaconne for solo violin from the D minor Partita, BWV 1004 – for many, the pinnacle in Bach's use of ground bass. However, some years later, in 1877, he wrote an arrangement of the work for Clara Schumann and sent it to her with the following message:

For me, the Chaconne is one of the most wonderful, most incomprehensible pieces of music. On one stave, for a small instrument, [Bach] writes a whole

world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful emotions. Were I to imagine creating or conceiving the piece, I'm quite sure an excess of excitement and shock would have driven me mad. [...] I find there's only one way to produce for myself a very diminished, though approximate and completely pure version of the pleasure created by the piece – by playing it with my left hand alone!

The second complete work on the recording is Max Reger's transcription of Brahms's *Four Serious Songs*, Op. 121. These songs, the last works Brahms was to see through the press, are concerned with death, a theme that had long preoccupied him. Through their deeply pessimistic Old Testament texts, the first three songs suggest a nihilistic view of the afterlife. However, as in many death-related works, Brahms offers consolation in the final number, a setting of a passage from Corinthians I.

Reger's large output includes numerous reworkings of Brahms, for whom he declared the 'most unwavering and heartfelt enthusiasm': alongside the arrangement of the *Four Serious Songs*, we find almost 30 piano transcriptions of solo songs, as well as several orchestrations. The arrangement of the *Four Serious Songs* was written in 1912 in Meiningen, a small town with deep connections to Brahms. Reger had moved there one year earlier, at the invitation of Duke Georg II of Saxe-Meiningen, one of Brahms's most generous patrons. At the start of his tenure, Reger worked with the court orchestra on Brahms's symphonies, a process that was not without controversy: his retouchings of the orchestration scandalized Fritz Steinbach, a former Hofkapellmeister at Meiningen who was regarded as one of Brahms's greatest interpreters.

Reger's approach to the *Four Serious Songs* is remarkably faithful. Where the voice is silent, the piano writing is left untouched. However, incorporating the voice within the accompaniment posed challenges, as the vocal line often falls in

the middle of the texture. Reger's default solution is to move the line up an octave, effectively substituting a mezzo-soprano for Brahms's bass-baritone. Sometimes, as in the second song, relatively few changes were needed. In the first song's middle section, however, fitting the voice into an already busy texture of swirling triplets demanded a more radical solution, and Reger's melody frequently jumps octaves. Heard in isolation, the rapid migration of the vocal part from low bass to high soprano might seem bizarre. Woven into the piano texture, it is entirely persuasive.

The *Four Serious Songs* were composed around the time of Clara Schumann's death in May 1896, and photographs of Brahms from this period show his complexion marked by signs of liver cancer. It is hard to imagine he was unaware of his impending death, even though he maintained a brave face in company. The only major product of his last year – he died in April 1897 – was the posthumously published set of *Eleven Chorale Preludes*, Op. 122, described by critic Sven Hiemke as a 'pendant' to the *Four Serious Songs*. Again, the individual numbers revolve around the theme of death. Many critics claim the Chorale Preludes were Brahms's final compositions, but while the autograph contains the date 1896, stylistic analysis suggests most of the pieces date back to his youth. In most late works, the influence of J. S. Bach is disguised; here it is patent. In particular, Op. 122 reveals techniques borrowed from Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*. The first setting of 'Herzlich tut mich verlangen' opens with the compact, motivically consistent four-voice texture frequently found in that collection, while 'Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele' repeats with Bachian rigour an accompanimental figure derived directly from the chorale.

Busoni, like Brahms, produced a piano transcription of the Bach Chaconne. The two arrangements are often held up as polar opposites – Brahms's version a model of restraint, Busoni's a barnstorming reinvention of Bach's original. However, Busoni, like Reger before him, approached Brahms's last works with enormous

respect. Admittedly, his version of ‘Es ist ein Ros entsprungen’ has a very short introduction, and the first setting of ‘Herzlich tut mich verlangen’ has an optional coda, neither found in Brahms’s original. In general, however, Busoni’s mission was to reimagine the sounds of the late nineteenth-century organ for piano, using octave doublings as the pianistic equivalent of pulling extra stops.

History doesn’t record why Busoni transcribed only six of Brahms’s Chorale Preludes. However, his selection prioritizes movements where sentiment outweighs archaic techniques. ‘Es ist ein Ros entsprungen’ wreathes the chorale melody in so many expressive decorations that an uninformed listener might suspect a freely conceived intermezzo. And the double repeats of ‘O Welt, ich muss dich lassen’, the last of the Chorale Preludes, suggest a slow and poignant departure from the world, with echoes fading into the ether.

Schumann mentored Brahms by example rather than instruction. Brahms offered more practical advice to his one serious pupil, Gustav Jenner, claiming that the best exercise for an aspiring composer was to write variations and songs. The former, he maintained, nurture creativity, while the latter encourage a strong bond between treble and bass, always a compositional priority for Brahms.

As this remarkably varied programme demonstrates, the two genres, variations and songs, bore rich fruit from Brahms’s earliest maturity to his final days.

SAMSON TSOY piano

Lauded for his originality and imagination, pianist Samson Tsoy is making an impact by expanding the borders of classical music with his visionary site-specific programmes, both in conventional concert venues and unexpected, unorthodox spaces. His penchant for discovery has led to a collaboration with acclaimed artist Richard Serra at the Gagosian Gallery Le Bourget, performances of both Brahms piano concerti in one evening with the Philharmonia Orchestra, and of Scriabin's *The Poem of Fire* at a former multi-storey car park in Peckham, London. He was also the first-ever classical musician to perform at the opening of the Munich Security Conference in front of the world's political leaders. Critics have called him 'fearless' (*New Statesman*) and described his performances as 'cosmic' (*The Observer*).

Tsoy is frequently invited to perform recitals and develop storytelling residencies at major concert halls and festivals around the world. He also appears with international orchestras, most recently with London Philharmonic Orchestra and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. He has a strong passion for chamber music collaborations and has partnered on stage with artists such as soprano Elena Stikhina, violinist Alina Ibragimova, cellist Mario Brunello, clarinettist Nicolas Baldeyrou and percussionist Colin Currie.

Tsoy is a regular guest on television and radio, where he speaks about a broad range of interests from music and arts to current affairs. His interviews have been broadcast on the BBC World Service and Radio 4's iconic programme *The World Tonight*. He has also been featured in the *Gagosian Quarterly* in conversation with Lawrence Weschler.

In 2007, as a student, Tsoy met his partner, pianist Pavel Kolesnikov. Despite being polar opposites, they both shared a search for meaningful artistic experiences and started playing as a duo shortly after. Their fascination with the interactions between space and music led to the creation of the Ragged Music Festival in London in 2019, which was nominated for the South Bank Sky Arts Award. The pair's fresh artistic programming and innovative approach attracted a large following to the festival, which has since been produced internationally. Collaborating closely with other venues, Tsoy and Kolesnikov aim to stimulate the flow between architecture, music, and human emotions and thoughts. The Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam hosted their touring edition of the festival for the first time in 2023. The pair's debut duo album was released by Harmonia Mundi in 2024 to great critical acclaim. It was awarded the Diapason d'or and topped the UK classical music chart.

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**Samson Tsoy is deeply grateful to his dear friends David and Galina for
making this recording possible.**



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