

After Brahms

3 intermezzi for piano

Composer: Avner Dorman

Year: 2014

Duration: 12 min 30 s

Orchestration: pf

Publisher: G Schirmer Inc

Program Note

“Avner Dorman’s piece is exactly what I had hoped it would be: ingenious, sensuous, powerful. Dorman is a composer whose intelligence and ease of communication I admire deeply. When my brother Gil and I asked him to compose a work based on Jewish themes, he thrilled us with the resulting piece, Nigunim. I didn’t hesitate before asking him to be inspired by Brahms for solo piano.” Orli Shaham

An intermezzo is, by definition, music intended to sit between other things, traditionally covering a scene change in the theatre. But during the 19th century, the label was applied to self-contained instrumental pieces. In the same way that Chopin could offer whole sets of “preludes”, so Brahms composed sets of piano pieces almost exclusively labeled “intermezzo”. When pianist Orli Shaham commissioned Avner Dorman to write a Brahms-inspired work, he chose to write three intermezzos of his own. In naming them “After Brahms” he gave the set a title with a richness of allusion: of influence, of homage and of chronology. (As it happens, in this recording After Brahms also functions as a true intermezzo.) The first of Dorman’s intermezzos is most closed indebted to Brahms. The starting point is Brahms’s Op. 118 No. 1, taking over two independent gestures from Brahms’s piece: the descending melodic phrases in the right hand and the fast rising arpeggio pattern in the left. But above this is an expressive, polyrhythmic melody, and in the middle of the texture Dorman adds a “crawling chromatic line.” Knowing Orli’s personality, her curiosity and depth of interpretation, Dorman felt a

tremendous freedom to load the music with layers, and he speaks with admiration of her ability to bring them all out without obscuring the phrasing of the piece. It's as if she enjoys that there's something in there "banging against Brahms all the time." In his second intermezzo, Dorman looks to Brahms's Op. 119 No. 1. The gesture here is a quiet descending arpeggio motif in which each note is held until the right hand is sustaining a full chord. In contrast with the sense of explosive energy of the first intermezzo, this music seems to melt. Like Brahms, Dorman adopts a simple three-part structure, and as in Brahms, the contrasting central section evokes popular music of the day. For Brahms that might have been a waltz; in his own intermezzo Dorman channels the spirit of 21st-century alt-pop. The first intermezzo has a lot of Brahms, says Dorman. The second has less. "The third has no quotation at all, yet the last sounds the most like Brahms and the first the least. So it's like a journey. The less I quote, the more I can actually be like him. When I quote, I feel like I have to fight him." Rather than quoting, the third intermezzo adopts the signature gestures of Brahms: the continual descending lines, the suspended lyrical inner voices and the variety of expressive cross-rhythms, so typical of his piano idiom, and, above all, an elegiac and introspective character. Dorman came to realize that, "like a cell adapting to fit its environment," his voice had adapted to Brahms's voice in an inadvertent Brahmsian homage. It's no accident that the third intermezzo sounds "more like Brahms" than the first two!

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Avner Dorman

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