

STEREO

MCS 2152

# BRAHMS

**PIANO MUSIC**

**FANTASIAS**

Op. 116 (Complete)

**INTERMEZZI**

Op. 117 (Complete)

**RHAPSODY**

in B Minor, Op. 79, No. 1

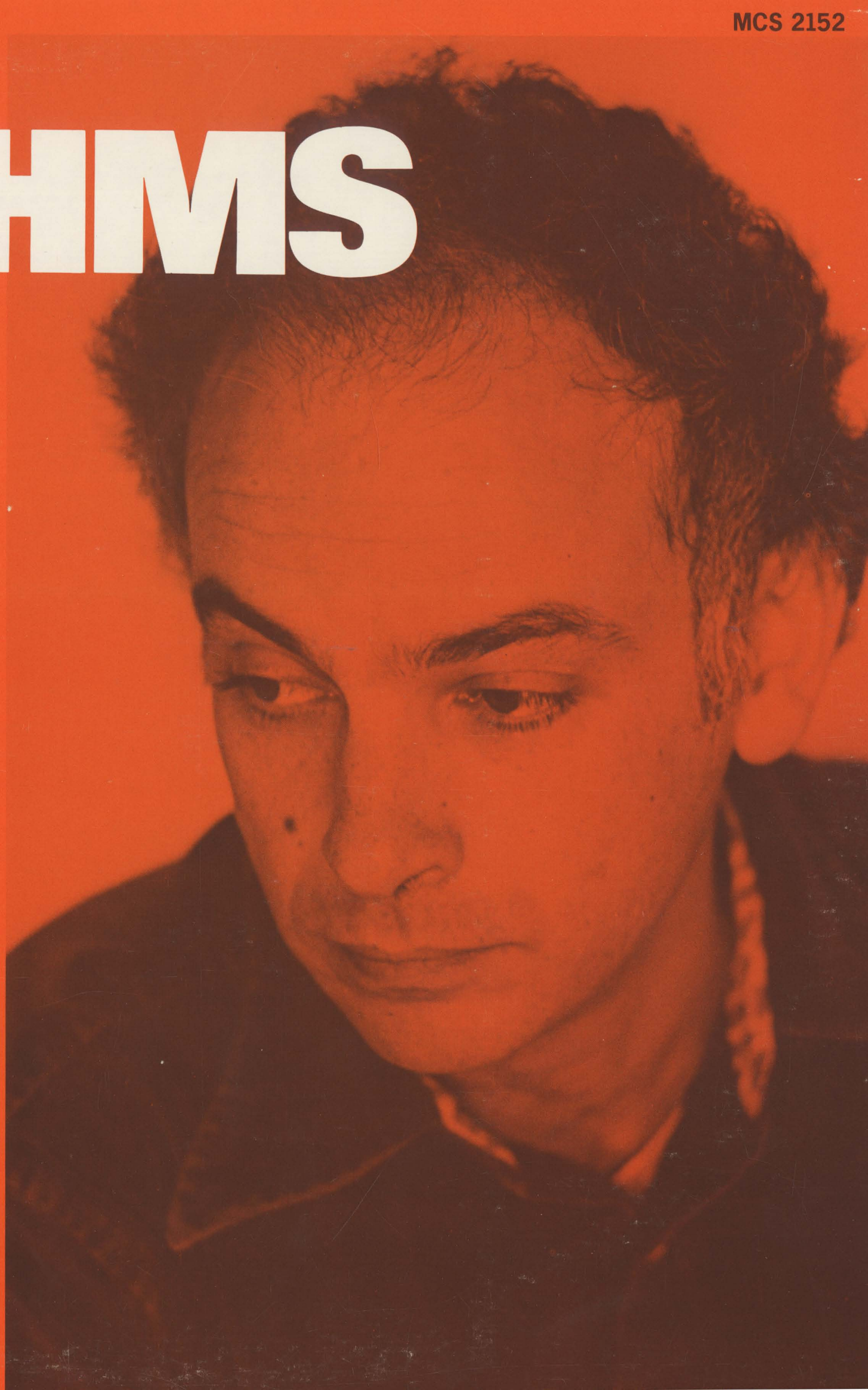
**LUDWIG**

**OLSHANSKY**

PIANIST



DESIGN: EDWARD BUXBAUM



# BRAHMS PIANO MUSIC

Ludwig Olshansky, Pianist

History places Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) at a strategic point in the evolution of romanticism. Critics rank his symphonies with those of Beethoven. His piano music adheres to the traditions of Liszt, Chopin and Schumann. He first gained recognition as a composer with the publication of his three Piano Sonatas in 1853. As with all his creative endeavors, he hesitated to venture into unknown paths and chart new courses. Perhaps this hesitancy, oversensitivity and pre-occupation with self-consciousness accounts for the handful of works he produced for the piano. Two Concertos, two sets of Variations, one on a theme of Handel, the other on a theme of Paganini, five ballades, a set of Fantasias, several Intermezzi and a collection of waltzes, along with the three Sonatas already mentioned, may seem a miniscule amount. But when we remember that his chamber music contains a rich harvest of creations for piano in combination with other instruments, the picture changes and the total becomes somewhat staggering.

The controversy Brahms aroused can be seen from the prevailing divergent views of the time. The conservatives felt he brought romanticism to its peak. On the other hand, the Wagnerites, those supporters of the so-called "music of the future" considered him reactionary. It cannot be denied that traces of baroque and classical elements, reminiscent of Bach and Mozart, infiltrate Brahms' scores. After all, Brahms represents the culmination of an epoch, so he had every right to integrate the styles of previous centuries into the mainstream of his creativity. Viewed in this light, does he not resemble the perennial "man for all seasons"?

The INTERMEZZI, Op. 117 and FANTASIAS, Op. 116, belong to his last productive period and date from 1892. He drew his inspiration for the first intermezzo, in E-Flat Major, from Herder's German translation of a poem, "Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament," found in Percy's Reliques of Ancient Poetry. The intermezzo takes the form of a lullaby sung by Lady Anne in which she laments her betrayal and desertion by her husband. Thoughts of love for her sleeping child dispel her sorrow and she resolves to treasure the blessing she has reaped from her ill-fated marriage. Brahms' instrumental setting captures the sentiments of the poem with a tenderness and pathos that touch the heart.

Commenting upon the third Intermezzo, in C-Sharp Minor, James Huneker observes: "For me, it is the most exotic, and has a flavor of the Asiatic in its naked, monophonic ballade-like measures, an evident narrative of sorrowful mien." Apparently, Brahms based the Intermezzo on a ballad or legend, but whether he derived the source from a poem or used the terms in their musical contexts can merely be conjectured. In both poetry and music, bal-

## Side One

### FANTASIAS, OP. 116

- I. Capriccio in D Minor
- II. Intermezzo in A Minor
- III. Capriccio in G Minor
- IV. Intermezzo in E Major
- V. Intermezzo in E Minor
- VI. Intermezzo in E Major
- VII. Capriccio in D Minor

## Side Two

### INTERMEZZI, OP. 117

- I. Intermezzo in E-Flat Major
- II. Intermezzo in B-Flat Minor
- III. Intermezzo in C-Sharp Minor

### RHAPSODY IN B MINOR, OP. 79, NO. 1

lads and legends have the same purpose, to tell a story. In either case, Brahms appeals to the imagination of the listeners to draw their own conclusions. A lyric strain, tinged with melancholy, underlines the second Intermezzo, in B-Flat Minor.

The FANTASIAS, Op. 116, comprise three Capriccios and four Intermezzi. Contrasting patterns alternate throughout these delicate vignettes which almost constitute a symphony for piano. In the three Capriccios, two in D Minor and one in G Minor, one can detect the conflict and turbulence characteristic of Brahms' youth. Nostalgia, coupled with reflection, pervades the four Intermezzi, A Minor, E Minor and two in E Major.

A 15 year gap separates the composition of the RHAPSODY IN B MINOR, Op. 79, NO. 1 from the FANTASIAS, Op. 116, and INTERMEZZI, Op. 117. Contrary to accepted theories, Brahms' Rhapsodies bear no resemblance whatsoever to those of Liszt. They are neither epic in character, like the ALTO RHAPSODY, or virtuoso pieces, as in the case of the three Rhapsodies for piano. Of these, the RHAPSODY IN B MINOR is by far the longest, molded in three part structure.

It opens with a majestic statement of a heroic theme. After becoming subdued, the theme undergoes several

alterations. A series of progressions leads to the second theme, less energetic than the first, but with a lyrical beauty all its own. Both themes blend in a sequence of contrasts after which the first theme returns to bring the Rhapsody to a close.

Notes by Susan Zisselman

### Some Olshansky Reviews:

"There have been two great recordings of the piece (Schumann's C Major Fantasy)—by Curzon and by Horowitz—and now there is a third, maybe the most satisfying of all, by the young American Ludwig Olshansky . . . Olshansky's secret is his understanding (very rare among young artists) that passion is best expressed as an apparent struggle against control rather than as a wild beating about. The effect is achieved by an equally rare mastery of meter, a harpsichordist's sense of how accents can be stressed or softened by delaying or hurrying, almost infinitesimally, the attack on the next note. The resulting performance conveys a sense of great rhythmic freedom, but is in fact strictly controlled by choices of tempo. Olshansky's Schumann is romantic piano playing at its best, and Monitor has given him an excellent recording, with almost eerily noiseless surfaces!"

Martin Mayer in *Esquire Magazine*.

"Olshansky's Fantasy (Schumann) is a beauty. His performance is one of nobility and total commitment. It radiates warmth continually, yet never approaches sentimentality. I find his way with the piece especially moving after listening to Horowitz' brilliantly pianistic account and Geza Anda's detached performance; both of the latter bring intellect to bear but fail to communicate the passion of one of Schumann's most passionate keyboard works."

S.L. in *High Fidelity Magazine*

"The very early Brahms (Sonata in F Sharp minor, Op. 2) is dedicated to Frau Clara Schumann and is very lovely—filled with portents of the later Brahms. It is beautifully played and realized. Monitor's sound is excellent and there are good liner notes."

William A. Olsen in *The New Records* (Phila.)

"Ludwig Olshansky, a pianist entirely new to me, gives us so dramatically passionate and poignant a performance of the great Schumann Op. 17 Fantasy in C that it doesn't suffer from comparisons with the Ashkenazy and Horowitz versions."

R. D. Darrell "The Tape Deck" (*High Fidelity Mag.*)

Recording Engineer: David B. Hancock

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