

ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF  
(February 27th, 1984)

WALTER KLIEN (Piano)

There is much about the Berg of the *Sonata, Op. 1* and the Brahms of the *Fantasiën, Op. 116* that sets the two apart from one another even though there is little more than a decade between the composition of the two works.

In 1892, Brahms was almost at the end of his creative and physical life. In 1906, Berg was twenty one years old, a pupil of Schoenberg's and at the threshold of his creative work. The *Piano Sonata, Op. 1* stands at the gateway to tonal ambiguity; with one foot rooted in the lush chromaticism of its heritage, it nonetheless points firmly towards the horizon of atonality and the tone row. Brahms's music, on the other hand, is a distillation of all the romanticism that has gone before it, pointing, if anything, sideways at the world of Mahler.

Walter Klien was clearly very much in tune with the emotional ethos of Berg and he presented a superb performance of that early Berg sonata; a performance that in its care for the rhapsodic gesture and the magical moment reminded the listener that the life of the younger composer did, after all, overlap with that of the elder. And it was immediately afterwards in the playing of Brahms at almost his tersest and smallest scale, that the pianist reached the culmination of the recital with a beautifully poised account of the *Fantasiën*. From the turbulent opening *Capriccio* onward the reservedly impassioned, rhapsodic mood swept the listener along in an almost seamless musical experience.

From the *Eight Pieces, Opus 76* onwards, the later piano music of Brahms, shorn of the excesses and pomposity — a sort of musical garrulousness — of his larger scaled, symphonic works, has always seemed to me to be amongst his most intriguing and stimulating compositions. This aspect of the intriguing, of the half-light and of the yearning for times past was most beautifully captured during Klien's loving playing of the arching, gentle song of the *Intermezzo in E major* (No. 4 of the set) and he brought it to a magical close with a final, barely perceptible left hand chord that was beautifully weighted.

Only the sound of chattering and the wiff of cigarette smoke from the control booth of the auditorium marred the experience.

The first half of the recital had been a little more problematical. The first work had been Bach's *Partita in C minor, BWV 826* which was performed in a grand manner with dynamics that varied not at all from *mf* and at tempi that seemed identical for each movement. There was little inflection of the music and little to find of interest in the proceedings.

This was followed by a performance of Mozart's *Sonata in A major, K331*. The limpid, gentle aria-like style of the opening was continued throughout so that the interpretation was lovely to listen to but dainty in scale. The pianist made the work toy-like with dynamics that ranged (in terms of the piano's capability) from *p* to *mf*. This had the effect of reducing the emotional power of the music to something more decorative and dandified. Even the porcelain Turks of the last movement seemed like toy Balkan soldiers although they nonetheless made a pretty effect.

The pitifully small audience, which seemed to number about a hundred souls in the vast cavern of the hall, suggests again — there have been other instances of poor attendance — that the Welsh may not be all that musical — only in love with the notion of being musical. In view of the less than bountiful subsidy situation these days, one cannot blame a management for wishing to fill the Hall as often as possible with wornout, often second rate music and performers in order to pay the bills. Doubtless it is soon going to be a case of use it or loose it where the future of chamber music in St. David's Hall is concerned.

It is not difficult to see how easy it is to slip into a situation of catering solely for baying, indiscriminate audiences. But the truth is that art is all about discrimination and the exercise of insight and taste, and the modern world, no more than that of the past, continues to breed a lack of quality, a lack of intellectual stimulation and a love of the known, the comfortable and the undemanding, unthinking mediocre. Empty auditoria and a society concerned with balancing the books shows how easy it is to succumb to the pressures which lead to a continuation of this situation.

Given that so many people wish to limit their experience (how many who attend chamber music concerts also listen to rock music?) it is no wonder that so many are unable to discriminate between the qualities of musical experiences. Given the empty auditorium, it will be little wonder when those who do care will no longer be given the opportunity.

IFAN PAYNE.