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## Brahms' Prima Donna

Bernard Portnoy

*Woodwind Magazine*, March 1949

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There is no greater reward an instrumentalist can receive than a wave of approval from a conductor or bravos from sincere newspaper critics. When an instrumentalist knows his work is appreciated, his confidence is maintained. This commendation alone gives a musician a lift, so that it is not too difficult to imagine the inspiration he receives when he is asked by the leading composer of his time to play a private audition to exhibit his entire repertoire. There is a case where an invitation from a composer who has not written anything for a year despite his musical influence heretofore, results in the composer's renewed creativity to the extent of adding an entire period to his supposedly closed brilliant career. Moments like this, many of us may never experience.

Here, we concern ourselves with the influence upon Johannes Brahms of the "greatest player on any wind instrument known to him": Richard Mühlfeld.

Born in Germany in 1856, Richard Mühlfeld started his career as a violinist with the Meiningen orchestra (1873). His approach to the clarinet did not come till three years later (1876). According to biographers, Mühlfeld had no instructor on the clarinet and was self-taught. Of course, this can leave a great deal of room for discussion. We cannot, however, concern ourselves with this aspect because this is the extent of the information available to us. That Brahms was inspired by such a musician to add to the clarinet repertoire a Quintet, Trio and two Sonatas, is reason enough to inquire further into the history of this association.

The Meiningen orchestra, which in those days was under the very capable direction of Hans von Bulow, consisted of a mere 50 performers, yet was built to a wonderful unit "which was able at any time to perform the most important works of the repertory without a conductor, and, if need be, without music."

The festivals given in Meiningen, very similar to the Bayreuth festivals, attracted many notable musicians. In November of 1881, Brahms was invited by Bulow as the guest of Duke George of Saxe Meiningen, to listen and to perform his Second Piano Concerto during their Brahms series. The friendship between the Duke and Brahms grew very strong from their first meeting. Brahms' visits to Meiningen, after this time, were frequent.

From now on Meiningen was the "main stronghold of Brahms propaganda in Germany." The Meiningen court orchestra became the accepted voice for the performance of Brahms' works under Bulow and his successor, General Music-Director Fritz Steinbach. It was not until 1891, some ten years later that we find Brahms' admiration of the performances of Mühlfeld, resulting in the determination to write for his instrument. Up to this time he had not included the clarinet in any of his Chamber Music.

Brahms had shown a particular favoritism for the clarinet in his symphonies and serenades, which, by the way, were completed before the meeting with Mühlfeld. He loved the blending quality the instrument had to offer. "Its three registers, each strongly characterized and each appealing potently to the musical nature of the mature Brahms." The roundness and clarity of the upper register, the mysterious hollowness of the middle register and the dark sober chalumeau register. "Finally, the extraordinary flexibility and smoothness of utterance peculiar to this instrument, make available not only such impassioned gypsy-like recitatives as those of the Adagio of the Quintet, but the neat dovetailing of intricate figuration between the piano and clarinet so

fascinating in the finale of the E flat Sonata. No wonder the clarinet opened to Brahms what is virtually a new vein in his genius."

Mühlfeld had gained quite a reputation for his solo performances of Weber and Mozart concertos. The master, who had many opportunities of listening to Mühlfeld's wonderful tone and execution, now found himself interested to such an extent that he asked for the above mentioned private recital with only himself as audience.

It is not at all surprising when we learn from the Brahms-Clara Schumann Letters that Brahms thought the art of clarinet playing had deteriorated to a great extent. He felt that as far as the Vienna orchestras' needs were concerned, clarinetists did fairly well. It was in the capacity of solo work that they gave no real pleasure. When we consider how Brahms responded to the clarinet despite his conception of the clarinetists of his day, we understand his burst of enthusiasm at his discovery of such a clarinetist as he thought Mühlfeld to be.

The products of this great musical attraction came forth in close order. During his annual residence at Ischl, the Trio, opus 114 in A minor for pianoforte, clarinet and violin- cello and the Quintet, opus 115 in B minor were written. These works were performed from the manuscripts before the Duke's court on November 24, 1891 by the Joachim Quartet which was considered one of the most famous of its day. The Trio was played by Brahms, Mühlfeld and Hausmann; the Quintet by the Joachim Quartet plus Mühlfeld.

Two sonatas for clarinet and pianoforte, the last works of Chamber Music composed by Brahms, were completed during the summer of 1894, and towards the end of September, Mühlfeld arrived at Ischl to try them with the composer. The first private performance took place very soon afterwards, when the two artists played them before the ducal circle of Meiningen at the palace of Berchtesgarden.

As for the reception the Quintet received when it was performed by these artists, we quote from Fuller-Maitland: "This dialogue between the violin and the clarinet cannot be forgotten by any who had the happiness of hearing the Quintet interpreted with Joachim and Mühlfeld in these parts. The clarinetist seemed to express in the pianissimo phrase the inmost secrets of the human heart in a mood of passionate rapture; one thought, as he played, that the smallest touch more must end in exaggeration; yet when Joachim took up the phrase he put even more into it than Mühlfeld had done, and yet kept it entirely within the picture and within the bounds of truest art." Florence May, another biographer, describes one of the early performances by the same players, at which Brahms was present. "My place," she writes, "was only two or three away from his, and so situated that I could see him all the time the work was being played. He wore an unconscious smile, and his expression was one of absorbed felicity from beginning to end of the performance."

At another occasion Mühlfeld and the Kneisel Quartet played the Quintet for Brahms and a few friends including Steinbach and Nikisch, which elicited the following comment from a pupil of Clara Schumann: "When they had finished playing this heavenly work, we were all so moved that nobody found a word to say. But Nikisch fell on his knees before Brahms, and that exactly expressed our feelings."

Steiner, an obscure clarinetist of his day, was the first to play the Quintet in Vienna with the Rose Quartet. At a gala dinner, following this performance, Brahms accompanied by Mühlfeld and Steiner settled himself between the two clarinetists to the despair of the beautiful ladies. As Steiner was a stranger, the master treated him with special distinction, to prevent his feeling embarrassed in the presence of the famous Mühlfeld whom he liked to introduce whimsically as "Fraulein von Mühlfeld, my prima donna."

Brahms' numerous letters to Clara Schumann concerning Mühlfeld's artistry and the musicals given in her presence led the great pianist to appreciate the clarinetist fully. In a letter to Brahms, she wrote: "I must write you a line after having at last heard your exquisite quintet. What a magnificent thing it is and how it moves one! The adagio is most affecting, and how wonderfully interesting is the middle movement. But words are inadequate to express what I feel! And the man played so wonderfully, he might have been specially created for your works. I marveled at his profound simplicity and the subtlety of his understanding." On many occasions thereafter, Clara Schumann had the pleasure of playing the Sonatas with Mühlfeld.

Knowing the difficulty that clarinetists have with tuning, the following excerpt from another letter to Frau Schumann from Brahms seems amusing: "And now I have to tell you about something which will cause us both a little annoyance. Mühlfeld will be sending you his tuning fork, so that the grand piano with which he is to play may be tuned to it. His clarinet only allows him to yield very little to other instruments. In case your piano differs very much in pitch and you do not wish to use it for this purpose, perhaps Marie will sacrifice herself and allow her grand piano to be tuned to Mühlfeld's fork?"

In a brief way, we have related the story of the meeting and mutual influence of two great musicians, one very well known, the other comparatively obscure. Such acclaim as Mühlfeld received might bring about a wave of questioning among present day musicians. But one must remember that we are not concerned with a comparison of clarinet players, but with one individual who swayed Brahms to such a degree that we clarinetists have benefitted with the rest of the musical world.

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Bernard Portnoy is Instructor, Juilliard School of Music; Former Instructor, Curtis Institute of Music; Former Solo Clarinetist, Philadelphia and Cleveland Orchestras.

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