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Richard Mühlfeld

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The Clarinet, Summer 1956

Many clarinet students have become acquainted with the names of many of the former celebrated clarinetists through the study of their solos and methods. Some of these celebrated clarinetists would include Cyrille Rosé, H.E. Klosé, Ernesto Cavallini, Carl Bärmann, and Robert Stark. However, one of the most influential clarinetists in obtaining some of the most beautiful clarinet literature was not a teacher in a conservatoire and he did not write solos or a method. This person was Richard Mühlfeld, who convinced Brahms to write his famous clarinet compositions.

Richard Mühlfeld was born in Salzungen, Germany, on February 28, 1856, the fourth son of a city musician, Leonard M. Mühlfeld. He studied with Büchner at Meiningen, where he lived after 1873. He joined the Meiningen Court Orchestra as a violinist in 1873 but became first clarinetist in 1876. The Meiningen Orchestra did not shine as a bright star among the German orchestras until after 1880, when von Bülow and Steinbach became its conductors.

Johannes Brahms first heard Mühlfeld in recitals in Meiningen. They became friends, and Mühlfeld convinced Brahms to compose for the clarinet. Brahms had chosen to close his creative life with the "Viola Quintet in G Major", Opus III, but was persuaded to reopen it by composing for Mühlfeld. The clarinet compositions opened a new vein in Brahms' genius. The Trio in A Minor, Opus 114, for piano, cello, and clarinet was written in the summer of 1891. It was first heard in Meiningen in November of 1891. The Clarinet Quintet, Opus 115, was also written in the summer of 1891. It was first heard in Meiningen on November 24, 1891, at the Court of Meiningen. The famous violinist Joseph Joachim, for whom Brahms wrote his Violin Concerto, also performed in the ensemble with Mühlfeld. The Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, Opus 120, and the Sonata No. 2 in Eb, Opus 120, were both composed in the summer of 1894, at Ischl and were first performed for the Meiningen Circle at the Palace of Berchtesgaden.

Mühlfeld played on a Bärmann System clarinet. This was a more elaborate model of the Müller-Heckel clarinet of 1845 and was devised by Carl Bärmann in conjunction with Georg Ottensteiner of Munich about 1860. It was for this model that Carl Bärmann wrote and fingered his famous method between 1864 and 1873. The Bärmann System clarinet seems to have been played mainly by Carl Bärmann and Richard Mühlfeld.

Mühlfeld established his solo career playing the Weber concerti and the Brahms compositions. He met with much acclaim, especially in England where he played in the '90's.

We are fortunate in having the account of a present-day eye (and ear) witness of Mühlfeld's playing. In a letter to the editor of *The Clarinet*, the writer had the following remarks concerning the playing of Richard Mühlfeld: "I remember clearly that I thought his tone in the lower register was superb, but I was not nearly so taken with his middle and top registers. He displayed an unusual dynamic range at times, the fortissimos being very powerful, but not often employed, and being only a boy I naturally did not so readily excuse the really very frequent squeaks he made at times, not realizing then (as I did later!!) how often a reed will let one down!! I recall that he did not endeavor to get all the "limelight" in the "Quintet", but obviously considered himself as no greater (or lesser) than the string players. In retrospect, I feel that although he was a musician of first order, his gifts as a player would not strike the present generation as being particularly outstanding."

After Mühlfeld, the clarinet was looked upon not merely as an indispensable member of the orchestra but as an instrument capable of the highest range of expression in solo and chamber music. Richard Mühlfeld's

influence was salutary in stressing the importance of musicianship and interpretation over brilliance of technique and flashy execution.

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