

## For Your Listening Pleasure

Brahms' shorter large-scale choral/orchestral works are well-served among available recordings, though they are often inconvenient to collect as they often serve as fill-ups for longer works.

There are four excellent recordings that contain both *Nänie* and *Schicksalslied* on a single disc. Herbert Blomstedt's performance with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and Chorus also includes the *Alto Rhapsody* (Jard van Nes, mezzo), *Begräbnisgesang*, and *Gesang der Parzen* (London 430 281-2). Sterling singing and playing are hallmarks of this disc, one of the SFS's best ever. The chorus sings with passion, warmth, precision, excellent blend, and a dynamic feel for declamation of text. There is more attention to the architecture of phrase in this recording than on any other—both on micro and macro levels. This is emotional, colorful, seductive, and engaging Brahms—outstanding!

Among his conducting students, it is often said that “[Helmut] Rilling is thrilling” — and this is readily apparent in his recording of both *Nänie* and *Schicksalslied* with the Gächinger Kantorei Stuttgart and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart (Hänssler Classic CD 98.122). These are burnished, glowing, expansively molded performances with sensuous choral singing and sterling orchestral playing (the opening soprano entrance in *Nänie* is to die for!). Also on the disc are Brahms' *Gesang der Parzen* and *Vier Gesänge für Frauenchor*. Highly recommended, though a little less convenient to obtain as it often needs to be imported from Europe.

Gerd Albrecht conducts the Danish National Choir/DR and Danish National Symphony Orchestra in a disc that includes both *Nänie* and *Schicksalslied* as well as Brahms' *Triumphlied* and *Ave Maria* (Chandos CHAN 10165). The performances are breathtakingly clean, and ensemble execution is precise — but oddly, *Nänie* feels slower than the 13:22 timing would indicate, and *Schicksalslied* definitely feels lighter and less weighty than the other recordings on this list (e.g., 14:52 compared with Blomstedt's reading that clocks in at 17:11). Stunning Chandos sound, as one would expect.

Robert Shaw's recording of *Nänie* and *Schicksalslied* is also coupled with the *Alto Rhapsody* (Marilyn Horne, mezzo—wow!), and *Gesang der Parzen* (Telarc CD-801760). Clean, well-shaped, and with all the polish that one expects from Shaw's work. An excellent choice that offers a great *Alto Rhapsody* as part of the package. The only caveat is the recorded sound of the chorus, which is set somewhat distantly in the sound stage relative to the other recordings on this list.

Among recordings that include this quarter's repertoire as fill-ups, Abbado's version of *Nänie* is warm and expansive (Deutsche Grammophon 435 349-2). The main work on the disc is a great performance of Brahms' 4th Symphony, and one also gets Brahms' *Haydn Variations* as a bonus. The Rundfunkchor Berlin sings with a winning blend of emotion and technical precision. The recorded sound is forward and brilliant but with no lack of warmth—though with a strong sense of “podium perspective” as opposed to “back-in-the-house perspective.”

German conductor Klaus Tennstedt passed away the same year the Stanford Symphonic Chorus last performed Brahms' *Schicksalslied* —1998, and his recording is a wonderful testament to his compelling musical vision. This *Schicksalslied* is used as filler in a two-CD set (for the price of one: EMI 7243 5 69518 2 2) with Brahms' 4th Symphony (Jochum conducting) and *Ein deutsches Requiem* (Tennstedt conducting, with the fabulous Jessye Norman and Jorma Hynninen as soloists). The choral tone of the BBC Symphony Chorus is bright—sometimes on the edge of disconcertingly so, especially in the sopranos and tenors, but the attention to phrase and dynamics is convincing and dramatic—some of the hushed passages are magical. Be advised that *Ein deutsches Requiem* is split between the two discs—not ideal, but only a slight annoyance for such a terrific performance. This recording is technically no longer in the EMI catalog, but can still be found on-line.

Sawallisch's recording of *Schicksalslied* coupled with Brahms 4th Symphony and the *Academic Festival Overture* is an attractively budget-priced entry (EMI 7243 5 69857 2 8). Though the Ambrosian Singers are not always the most polished, there is still fine singing here.