

New, and Old, Masters

BRAHMS: *Quartets No. 1 in G minor**; *No. 2 in A*; and *No. 3 in C minor*.
SCHUMANN: *Quintet in E flat*. *Artur Rubinstein, piano*; with the *Guarneri Quartet* (Arnold Steinhardt and John Dalley,* violins; Michael Tree, viola; and David Soyer, cello). RCA stereo, LSC 6188, \$17.39 (three discs).

The death recently of Wilhelm Backhaus at eighty-five broke one of the last links binding living artists to direct contacts with Brahms and his circle. But there remains Rubinstein, who, if he did not enjoy, as Backhaus did, the privilege of a meeting with the great Johannes, was reared, musically, by Joseph Joachim (one of the third B's closest associates, as well as a youthful collaborator with Schumann). However, this should surprise no one, for Rubinstein has links with everyone, reaching back on the other side of the literature to Chopin.

All this is highly relevant to this project, an awaited and greatly welcome successor to the Brahms Quintet in which Rubinstein joined his young colleagues of the Guarneri ensemble for their first recorded labor of love (RECORDINGS REPORTS II, SR, Sept. 30, 1967). From the power and passion they poured into that performance, one had half an expectation that, appropriate as it was in that place, the combustible qualities of youth and age might cause the same kind of conflagration in the early quartets, where it would be less appropriate.

Not a bit of it. The special distinction of the performances of the two early quartets is the glowing patina of mellowness that is spread over them by the new, and old, masters. From which participant this or that fine point was projected and polished is not only unidentifiable but unimportant. All one can say is that Rubinstein's recording of the G-minor (with Messrs. Onnou, Halleux, and Maas of the bygone Pro Arte) was the greatest of its time (1933), before two of his present colleagues were born, and if they have come along to sharpen fine points with him, it's all to the good.

None of this should suggest fencing or dueling for debating as well as musical points, but rather that in Steinhardt, Dalley, Tree, and Soyer, he has colleagues well worthy of his steel. How they can coexist as equals in refinement is evident in the A-major's Scherzo, in which Brahms passes back

and forth among the foursome custody of one of the longest, most subtle melodic phrases he ever invented. Regardless of which player has it at which moment, it emerges intact, unruffled, and meaningful, through the final recurrence in which Brahms spins it out with a closing commentary of his own particular vocabulary. And is that Rubinstein's hum, so with it is he in the finale? If so, it is the first time in a millennium of listening to his records that the vocal has joined the instrumental. (A belated flowering of the Rudolf Serkin or Glenn Gould in him, perhaps.)

Notable, too, is the transition in weight and volume the group summons for the C-minor Quartet, which may, in many respects, be considered the greatest of the three. And it is a group transformation, not merely a buildup in the piano sound conditioned by Brahms's exploitation of richer tonal register and chordal combinations than he had dealt with in the works of Opus 25 and Opus 26. At times, one almost has the impression that he is echoing the wide-spaced writing of Beethoven's late keyboard works—and enriching the example by filling the space in between with string sound. When they get into the kind of writing Brahms was capable of doing in the Andante of this quartet, the response to the richness and intricacy of the written patterns is re-creative art at its most life-giving.

The "troika principle" on which the Schumann quintet was coordinated into a three-disc package is no more productive of unmitigated pleasure than any other shotgun marriage. Of the four works, only one starts at the outside edge of the disc, and that is the very first (No. 1 in G minor). Each of the others is spread over at least two discs, and the A-major starts midway on Side 2, continues on Side 3, and ends on Side 4. Whether this is worth the inclusion of an extraneous work (of which the discriminating buyer may well prefer another version) is dubious. In this particular case it is compounded by a performance that embodies all the artifices of the quartets, but treats the great and durable quintet most gingerly, in an anti-jubilant spirit which—for my taste in Schumann—is clearly in conflict with the joy and vitality that resounds in it. The recording is splendid, as is that of the quartets.

—IRVING KOLODIN.