Sonata for piano and clarinet op. 120 no. 1  Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)  
in f minor

i. Allegro appassionato
ii. Andante un poco Adagio
iii. Allegro grazioso
iv. Vivace

The two Brahms Sonatas op.120 are a bizarre phenomenon. Their composition constituted part of an unexpected phase of creativity after a proposed retirement and a surprising attitudinal volte-face toward the capacities of such instrumentalists at large; they inhabit an equally prime position in the repertory of an instrument other than that for which they were originally written; and their authenticity as Brahms's own works is altogether questionable. These aspects of the Sonatas add to the intrigue and interest necessary in research of their composition; to play any piece without a grounding in the context of its composition is a compromise to the communication of the composer's intentions, and, in the case of the Sonatas, folly.

That Brahms gave us his last chamber works is the consequence of particularly good fortune. He had intended to end his career in 1890 with the Viola Quintet Op. 111 in G major, but was inspired by his encounters with Richard Muehlfeld during his visits to Meiningen as guest of the Duke. Muehlfeld, originally a violinist with the Meiningen Orchestra, began playing the clarinet in 1876, three years after his employment. Although Muehlfeld's status as performer remained relatively obscure, Brahms found himself particularly attracted to his artistry, and reneged not only on his proposed retirement, but also on his attitude to clarinet playing, which, he declared unashamedly in a letter to Clara Schumann, he believed to have deteriorated greatly, and although sufficient for orchestral playing, was certainly inadequate for solo exposition. This new friendship and its resultant volte-face induced three equally successful chamber works featuring the clarinet: Trio op. 114 in a minor, Quintet op. 150 in b minor, and the two sonatas, op. 120 no. 1 in f minor, and no. 2 in E flat major.

In their original instrumentation, the Sonatas occupy a respectable position within the clarinet repertory. Arguably, their significance within the viola canon is equally great, if not greater; for, while Romantic Sonatas for viola and piano of true profundity are extremely few, their clarinet counterparts exist in abundance. It is for this reason that the questionable authenticity of the viola transcriptions should be a particular source of interest for performers.

It appears that Brahms had followed the request from the publishers at Simrock for a version for viola and piano with little enthusiasm or meticulousness. Communications with his violinist friend Joseph Joachim in 1894 indicate greater interest in creating a violin and piano transcription - which, to date, is rarely performed. Come submission day, the viola version was incomplete, and close observation of the manuscripts reveals Brahms's corrections of the parts procured by William Kupfer under Simrock's employment as uncharacteristically haphazard. That the viola part was riddled with minor alterations, unidiomatic of Brahms's transcriptions of the clarinet parts of the
Quintet and Trio which he copied verbatim, merely renaming them 'viola' parts, adds to suspicions of the origin of the Sonata transcriptions. Similarly, that the piano parts were left untouched, resulting in the compromise of voice leading in various passages (see Creitz 2003), runs counter to Brahms’s compositional idiosyncrasies, implying a systematic lack of interest in the rejuvenation of these final works.

It falls therefore upon the violist to decide upon the most appropriate rendition of the clarinet sonatas. The difference in range between viola and clarinet, and in the technical capacities available to string and woodwind instruments, have given rise to myriad schools of performance, each propounding their series of editorial conclusions as closest to Brahms's intentions with almost dogmatic adamance. These, however, seem to miss the point. Since Brahms seemingly paid so little attention to the transcription of his beloved works, and even less so to correcting the attempts of others, it should remain at the discretion of the violist to produce his or her own interpretation of the original piece - a distinctly unique experience for each performer.

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