

BRAHMS Piano Quartet No. 2, op. 26 (orch. Woods) • Kenneth Woods, cond; English SO • NIMBUS 6364 (Streaming audio: 49:14) <https://www.naxosmusiclibrary.com/catalogue/item.asp?cid=NI6364>



Arnold Schoenberg orchestrated the first of Brahms's two piano quartets, so why not give a similar treatment to the second? That's the *prima facie* argument for this new version from American cellist and conductor Kenneth Woods. He didn't look to Schoenberg for inspiration, however; rather the opposite: "I actually have never warmed to his eccentric, and, to me, often vulgar and un-idiomatic take on Brahms' opus 25."

Schoenberg let fly with his instrumentation, adding a humorously incongruous xylophone to the whirling Hungarian gypsy finale, while Woods has leaned toward the atmosphere of Brahms's symphonies and two early Serenades, in keeping with the sunny mood of Piano Quartet No. 2. The Second Serenade also shares the key of A Major; it is also fairly close in opus number (op. 16) to the two piano quartets, both of which appeared in 1861, the year Brahms turned 28. The program notes remark on the dramatic contrast between the *Academic Festival* and *Tragic Overtures*, which are opp. 80 and 81, forming a parallel with the stormy nature of the First Piano Quartet and its immediate successor, the lyrical, at times serene Second.

Also taken into account is the score's kinship with Schubert, which contemporaries commented upon at the time. The first and fourth movements have long-breathed melodies one could call Schubertian, and the quartet as a whole, at almost 50 minutes, became Brahms's longest chamber work. He was also a co-editor of Schubert's collected works, and at a time when the late chamber masterpieces were all but unknown, he made a close study of Schubert's chamber music in the 1850s. In his orchestration Woods has kept tabs on these factors, but at times his instrumental colors diverge from Brahms's, as in the opening statement, without strings, given to a quartet of horns (this was the first idea, in fact, that came to Woods when he first envisioned his orchestration in 2008).

The slow movement, marked *Poco adagio*, is darker and moodier than anything in the two Serenades, however, and Woods suitably employs growling trombones. The Scherzo and Finale are chiefly colored by light woodwind and string writing. Because anyone familiar with the four symphonies will recognize where Woods is directly echoing Brahms's orchestration, he is actually more successful at replacing the piano than Schoenberg was. We feel firmly and authentically in Brahms's sound world. The primary parallel, to my ear, is with the Second Symphony and the Serenades mentioned above.

Every listener will have to decide whether this score needed an orchestration or benefits from one, and I'll admit to approaching this release, and its short timing, with skepticism. But I came away feeling that Woods has done something both enjoyable and idiomatic. Since 2013 he has been principal conductor of the English Symphony Orchestra (in the U.S. Woods leads the Colorado MahlerFest). The ESO was new to me, but it plays well here. The professional ensemble is based in Worcester in the English West Midlands and grew out of the better-known English String Orchestra founded by William Boughton in 1978.

Nimbus's recorded sound is all that it should be, as are the program notes and the extended essay by Woods on his orchestration. Warmly recommended. **Huntley Dent**