

BRAHMS Symphony No. 1 in c. *Tragic Overture. Academic Festival Overture* • Marin Alsop, cond; London PO • NAXOS 6.110077 (Hybrid multichannel SACD: 72:42)

Stop right here if you're looking for a first-class Brahms First, as opposed to a first-class Furtwängler Brahms First, or Toscanini Brahms First, or Levine Brahms First. The first installment of Marin Alsop's Brahms cycle offers no surprises and little real individuality, but it's a solid representation of the Brahms First in which everything sounds just right and fully alive. This is a meaty performance, trimmed of fat, with a cunning balance of rhythmic tension and elasticity, well-judged transitions, and an eye to each movement's overall shape rather than a fascination with passing details. Alsop takes the first-movement repeat, by the way. The *Tragic Overture* is firm and vigorous despite its broad tempos, and the *Academic Festival Overture* is nicely spirited, if not especially witty.

Alsop keeps the formerly errant London Philharmonic in top form; it's recorded in excellent if somewhat distant "English"-style sound, lacking only the stunning clarity (and higher price) of the best SACD engineering of Channel Classics, PentaTone, and Linn. The conventional CD version is a fine choice for anyone looking for basic reference Brahms; the good use of SACD 5.0 engineering is an incentive for more jaded collectors to part with their money, and not much money at that. **James Reel**