

English

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 2 in B Flat op. 83 (1878-81)

Brahms' first piano concerto had plunged him into a state of deep crisis. His "Seven Years' War" lasted from 1854 to 1861, and he still cursed his completed work.

But now, in 1881, he happily announced a new success. In a letter dated 7 July, Brahms wrote to Elisabeth von Herzogenberg: *I want to tell you that I have written a tiny little piano concerto with a little wisp of a scherzo. It is set in B flat – I am afraid I have used this otherwise good source of milk too often and too much.* If we consider Brahms notorious shyness of big and pompous words, we can read an almost tender pride here. So here we have a rare case where Brahms, otherwise his own harshest critic, tells us that his piano concerto op. 83 had turned out well. And after its premiere in Vienna, critic Eduard Hanslick observed: *Brahms' Christmas gift to the people of Vienna this year is a gem of a concerto. The Concerto in B Flat is - in a more stricter sense than alleged of the other concertos - a major symphony with an obbligato piano.* This concerto type does not aim to display the pianist's virtuosity but to integrate it sensibly into the symphonic fabric. The mature Brahms never subjects his formal - and very logical - construction to academic constraints. This is clear from the very start of the first movement with its prelude-like opening, the famous dialogue between horn and piano.

"A little wisp of a scherzo" indeed Brahms calls his second movement titled *Allegro appassionato*. It is not entirely by coincidence that Brahms mentions this movement in the quoted letter. And by adding it to the traditional three-movement concerto form, he formally turns the scherzo into a legitimate symbol of the "symphonic piano concerto". While the "good milk of B flat major" prevails in the other movements, this *Allegro appassionato* is in D minor, the same key as the unfortunate first piano concerto, the finale of which Brahms quotes in this movement. And by contrasting the D minor key with an organ point-like B flat in the fourth bar, Brahms seems to tell us, "Look how I have fulfilled my promise". Right after completing his first piano concerto he had written to Joseph Joachim: *"...my second should sound completely different!"* Twenty years later he had worked on making this dream come true and, in this light, the following passage also makes sense: *"With this work I intended to show how the artist must cast off all passions to swim in the purest ether with conscious bacteria."* (This letter to Emma Engelmann is also dated 7 July 1881; so Brahms must have had an unusual lot to say about opus 83 that day).

After this dramatic scherzo, Brahms sets a lyrical *Andante* as a second centre. This movement is striking for the contemplative tranquillity of the piano, while an impression of improvisational musing prevails. The solo cello sings a melody with the first notes taken from Brahms' song with the meaningful title *Immer leiser wird der Schlummer* (Ever Quieter Grows My Slumber). And if played in the specified tempo (which occurs lamentably rarely, although the score specifies exact metronome counts!), it is one of those rare moments only Johannes Brahms in his romantic sensitivity could come up with: the development of a beautiful melody borne and gently swinging in a field of tension between contrasting measures.

This lyrical intimacy has consequences for the further development of the concerto: By influencing the final rondo it divides the concerto into two parts with entirely different moods. One outward sign of this is a highly unusual instrumentation effect: the trumpets and timpani are abandoned after the scherzo. So, if the finale, aptly titled *Allegro grazioso*, still shines, this is due to its radiant charm. Brahms comes up with ever new couplets in this rondo, and the special challenge for the soloist is not to blindly storm away but - what is a lot more demanding - to present the most difficult figures in the most delicate way.

Brahms dedicated his second piano concerto to Eduard Marxen, "his true friend and teacher" in the firm belief of presenting him with a masterpiece.

Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856)

Fantasy in C Major op. 17 (1836-39)

"*Sonate, que me veux-tu?*" - this equally famous and provoking question posed by Bernard de Fontenelle in 1768 is still a popular topic for discussions of musical aesthetics today. Pierre Boulez dedicated an essay to it on the topic of his third piano sonata, a rambling *work in progress* with a dense network of allusions. Robert Schumann also contemplated this question. After having composed three piano sonatas, he declared: "For the remainder it would seem, however, that this form has completed its lifecycle but this is simply the order of things and we should not go on repeating the same for centuries but should strive for novelties. So let us write sonatas or fantasies (what's in a name?) but not forget the music and implore the rest from our genius."

Of course, it had not escaped Schumann's notice that some of Beethoven's piano sonatas had already abandoned the classic progressive form. And there were lessons to be learnt from these *sonate quasi una fantasia*, they offered space for extramusical ideas, or like in Beethoven's op. 110, for forms taken from vocal music. Hence, Schumann could definitely have continued to compose "fantasy sonatas".

In 1842 he explained why he became increasingly adverse to this: "*The audience is reluctant to buy, publishers reluctant to print, and composers are reluctant, perhaps for inner reasons, to compose such old-fashioned stuff.*" Seven years before that he was still of a different opinion. When Franz Liszt was collecting for a Beethoven monument, Schumann thought of contributing a "Grand Sonata for the Pianoforte". The first sketch already showed that it was full of programmatic ideas. "Ruins – Trophies – Palms" were the headings of his movements. While the composing process had been unusually long (from 1835 to 1838), unexpected difficulties now emerged which only partly had something to do with the search for the right genre designation until he finally called it a "Fantasy for the Pianoforte". And then emotional turmoil replaced the original plan of a tribute to Beethoven by biographical motifs. The following had happened: After a temporary separation from Clara in 1836 he agonised for a reunion, which - hardly surprising for Schumann - changed the design of the fantasy. At the end of the first movement we now find fragments from Beethoven's song *An die ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved), which do not sound as if they had been added belatedly but are rather a logical conclusion of the first movement's thematic and formal development. This is linked by an unbelievably harmonious device. Only at the end of this expansive movement does the C major chord appear in its basic position for the first time! In retrospect this explains why the following quote from Schlegel appears under the heading of the Fantasy:

Through all the music
of our earth's colourful dream
a quiet note is heard
by those who strain their ears.

The formal structure of this first movement is a far cry from all the traditional models. The exposition, for example, has been replaced by a peaceful interlude titled "In the tone of a legend". "The first movement of Schumann's Fantasy in C major", writes Charles Rosen, "... is finally the triumph of the musical fragment. Schumann himself was convinced that his talent had found its most powerful expression in this movement, and it is definitely his most successful, most original attempt with a major form ...The first movement of the fantasy reveals the aesthetic of the simple fragment in a magnified form with a pull and energy you find nowhere else."

Despite all the paradigmatic changes in the composing process the Fantasy in C Major remained a tribute to Beethoven. For this it is not even necessary to verify the numerous quotations from Beethoven - a popular pastime of Schumann aficionados. But even the most resourceful buffs have been unable to nail down the allusion to the 7th Symphony that Schumann had mentioned in a letter to publisher Kistner. In contrast, Charles Rosen identified a fragment from the 5th Piano Concerto; Brigitte François-Sappey describes in her immensely readable account that Schumann not only alludes to the *Missa Solemnis* but also plays with a quote from *Fidelio*, thereby bringing Florestan, his romantic alter ego, into play.

The second movement maintained its "triumphal arch" character up to the latest version. In his fiction of a musical parliament Schumann placed the Beethovenites on the left, to be recognised by their Phrygian cap, the symbol of the French revolutionaries. While the movement reminds us of the speedy marches of the French revolutionary armies, the final coda with its acrobatic leaps is definitely composed for Clara's pianist fingers.

"Slow and solemn, softly throughout" says the heading of the finale. Schumann made the most comprehensive revisions on this part since the very first sketches. In 1838 the original title is again modified from "Palms" to "Star Constellation". Again referring to the original idea of a Beethoven monument, this heading is of course associated with mythical transfiguration, transporting the hero to the night skies. Schumann composed an unusually expressive nocturne: a worthy ending to this *fantasia quasi sonata*.