

Tchaikovsky & Grieg

Piano
Concertos

Denis
Kozhukhin

Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin

Vassily Sinaisky

PENTATONE



Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

1	Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso – Allegro con spirito	20. 53
2	Andantino semplice – Prestissimo – Tempo I	7. 04
3	Allegro con fuoco	7. 11

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16

4	Allegro molto moderato	12. 46
5	Adagio	6. 14
6	Allegro moderato molto e marcato	10. 12

Total playing time: 64. 37

Denis Kozhukhin, piano

Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin (Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin)

Erez Ofer, concertmaster

Conducted by **Vassily Sinaisky**



Denis Kozhukhin
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These are two of the most popular piano concertos ever composed, two pieces that have been performed and recorded hundreds of times, and yet are still compellingly attractive for every new generation of musicians and music lovers.

Both Tchaikovsky and Grieg had strong ties with their respective motherlands, both were inspired by the folk music of their countries and one can hear this in every note of these works.

For me they represent the most important sides of our existence, such as beauty, contemplation of the natural world and the distinctive resonance of the culture of different lands.

Denis Kozhukhin

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Denis Kozhukhin".

Virtuoso warhorses. Really?

This CD contains the two piano concertos by Grieg and Tchaikovsky featuring the exclusive PENTATONE artist, Denis Kozhukhin. If one were to initially label them collectively as "virtuoso warhorses," then by no means would this be meant disrespectfully. On the contrary. These exceptional concertos rank among the most magical in the piano repertoire and are equally popular with pianists and audiences alike. So far, so good. But a closer look under the brilliantly polished surface definitely reveals features and stylistic elements that require a more detailed differentiation. Were Grieg's solitary and Tchaikovsky's first contribution to the genre perhaps not written primarily with an eye to "pianistic showing off"? Perhaps

more as simple "applause-gatherers," appealing to thrill-seeking audiences? Let's try to get to the bottom of this.

Although in his teens Edvard Grieg had received his basic musical education in piano and composition at the Leipzig Conservatory, throughout his lifetime he retained his status as a Norwegian artist born and bred, which ultimately established his world-wide fame. He did not become embroiled in unedifying imitation, but discovered his own highly personal path; here, he was certainly encouraged by the cultural-sociological changes taking place with regard to the production and reception of music. For centuries, music had been the plaything of the wealthy nobility, but now it was moving into the reach of the emerging middle-class. New works were required for new audiences. And having been born in 1843, precisely as times were changing, Grieg followed

this move with keen insight. "Grieg's work mirrors for us the intellectual upheaval going on in the 19th century, and his own response to this; as well as the make-up of his artistic personality and his determination to achieve originality." (Krellmann). Grieg was in a position to discern new influences, to accept them as innovative and, by immediately combining them with the traditional national styles of composition, to incorporate them and adjust them to his own musical language. This was the only way this specifically Norwegian oeuvre could have come about. We understand from Grieg himself that he perceived his study period in Leipzig to be more a suffocating straightjacket than a creative liberation of his personal individuality. After all, there he was forced to bow to a conservatively classical canon of aesthetics (which were soon to become history).

With the exception of the piano concerto, the fact that Grieg as a composer devoted himself more to the less expansive musical genres is certainly due in part to his failed attempt at a symphony, to which the great Nils W. Gade had egged him on in 1863. The craftsmanship of the work is more than solid; however, it shows no sign of the individuality of Grieg's later style. Less than two years after completing the symphony, the composer pronounced the verdict that it "should never be performed...". Rather, Grieg decided to concentrate in future – inspired by his Norwegian compatriots Ole Bull and Rikard Nordraak – on a new, nationalistic path, by resorting to the rich repertoire of Nordic folk music, and mixing it with his ideas and knowledge of Central-European Romanticism in order to create a unique combination. His subsequent world-wide success proved

him right. And that came about, despite his focus on the more intimate musical genres, thanks to his Piano Concerto.

Grieg composed his only piano concerto in the summer of 1868 at the age of 25. His friend Benjamin Feddersen had rented for him a holiday house in Søllerød (just outside of Copenhagen), where he could devote himself to his creative work without being disturbed. Grieg used Schumann's Piano Concerto as a model for his three-movement concerto.

Not only did he take over the key of A minor and the cascading, captivating beginning of the first movement, other similarities can also be observed in the details of the movements. Nevertheless, Grieg developed a work based on Schumann's model that demonstrates his already mentioned, new Nordic sound, in particular thanks

to the "Grieg motif" – a frequently

deployed sequence of descending octaves, sevenths, and fifths – which he borrowed from the traditional Norwegian folk music. In the first movement, Grieg narrates a number of small and varied stories, which are set out in an extremely differentiated manner, with intricately chiselled instructions regarding both tempo and style of playing. Thus, he transforms the initially powerful main theme into something that is almost lyrical. By means of an extended melody in the strings, the short middle movement evokes an image of the harsh and lonely Norwegian landscape. Most particularly in the final movement, the Norwegian flavour is expanded even further; here, Grieg uses the rhythm of the spring dance "Halling" over quint basses. Being less strictly elaborated and rather more free and well-nigh rhapsodic, the work feels more like a

fantasy for piano and orchestra than a concerto. This is not a musically empty virtuoso concerto, glammed up with simple effects without any claim

to autonomous, musical art; on the

contrary, the pianistic demands are on

a par here with the musical demands

of the composition. Here, Grieg has

penned a concerto with symphonic aspirations.

And Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto in B flat minor? The virtuoso warhorse par excellence? In November 1874, Tchaikovsky began work on the concerto, but it caused gave him quite some problems. No wonder, up until then piano music had been of secondary interest only to him.

"Basically, I am inflicting violence upon myself by forcing my brain to come

up with piano passages," he told his brother Anatol during the course of

the composition. Thus, even before

completing the work, Tchaikovsky decided to seek professional advice from a pianist. On Christmas Eve 1874, he played the new concerto for his friend Nikolai Rubinstein, the principal

of the recently founded Moscow Conservatoire. He wanted Rubinstein,

an excellent pianist, to advise him

on technical issues in particular.

However, the evening turned into a disaster. After an initially icy silence,

Rubinstein roared his contempt for the work, declaring the themes to be hackneyed, clumsy, awkward, and not worthy of improvement. Next came allegations such as "feeble concept," and even worse – that Tchaikovsky had committed plagiarism. And anyway – the work was unplayable. If Tchaikovsky expected him to play the work in public, then it would have to be completely rewritten, apart from two or three pages. This deeply stung the insulted and humiliated composer. "I am no

longer a stupid boy, indulging in an attempt at composition; I do not need lessons from anyone." Without further ado, Tchaikovsky then dedicated the concerto to the German pianist Hans von Bülow, who was full of praise for the work, and was later the soloist at its triumphant première in Boston in 1875.

Now, one could quite simply tear into Rubinstein, describing his behaviour as the typical pedantry of a hardline conservative, who simply failed to recognize Tchaikovsky's genius. But is there truly nothing to Rubinstein's accusations, which appear so harsh at first glance? He found fault mainly with three aspects: the piano passages, or rather their technical implementation; the weak and not highly original (thematic) concept; and the work as a whole. In fact, some of the solo passages – which, moreover, are entirely

swamped by the collective power of the orchestra – are considered to be unnecessarily demanding by more than just a few pianists. As regards thematic invention, it must be said that the truly rousing main theme of the first movement has its origins in a Ukrainian folk song, the "Song of the Blind." In the middle movement, a melody (disguised as a waltz) from the then popular French chanson "Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire" can be heard; and Tchaikovsky uses yet another Ukrainian melody as a volatile main theme in the finale. So during that Christmas Eve in 1874, some of Rubinstein's criticism – let's just forget his harsh tone for a moment! – was thoroughly justified; however, his conventional and conservative attitude did not permit him to recognize that Tchaikovsky had attained new heights in creating a well-balanced relationship between solo piano and orchestra. Here, Tchaikovsky portrayed a "struggle

between two equal forces," as he informed his patron, Nadezhda von Meck. For although his Piano Concerto No. 1 is indeed virtuoso and extremely challenging for the soloist, as far as its symphonic aspirations are concerned – and here it is very similar to Grieg's concerto – it ranks far above all other virtuoso concertos of his time. It is a work full of suggestive power and charisma that exerts a tremendous pull on the listener from the very first bars, casting its spell with tremendous effect. Here, the alternation of vital impulsivity and expressive melancholy, the sensitive dialogue between soloist and orchestra, the increased emphasis on expression of the huge first movement are just as impressive as the short, concentrated middle movement. The almost brutal hymnic development of power with the recurring rondo-like main theme, played "con fuoco," brings the work to a triumphant conclusion.

Denis Kozhukhin, Piano

Denis Kozhukhin was launched onto the international scene after winning First Prize in the 2010 Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels at the age of 23. Born in Nizhni Novgorod, Russia, in 1986 into a family of musicians, Denis Kozhukhin began his piano studies at the age of four with his mother. As a boy, he attended the Balakirev School of Music where he studied under Natalia Fish. From 2000 to 2007, Kozhukhin was a pupil at the Reina Sofía School of Music in Madrid learning with Dimitri Bashkirov and Claudio Martinez-Mehner.

Upon graduating, he received his diploma personally from the Queen of Spain and was named best student in his year and twice best chamber group

with his own Cervantes Trio. After his studies in Madrid, Kozhukhin was invited to study at the Piano Academy at Lake Como where he received tuition from amongst others Fou Ts'ong, Stanislav Yudenitch, Peter Frankl, Boris Berman, Charles Rosen and Andreas Staier. He completed his studies with Kirill Gerstein in Stuttgart.

Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, San Francisco Symphony, Vienna Symphony, Philharmonia and Philadelphia Orchestras.

and Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos) have contributed to shaping the orchestra into a flexible ensemble that experienced the vicissitudes of German history during the 20th century in a particular way. Since its foundation, the RSB has been particularly interested in contemporary music, inviting major composers to conduct or to perform as soloists in their own works. These

have included Paul Hindemith, Sergei Prokofiev, Richard Strauss, and Igor Stravinsky, as well as, more recently, Krzysztof Penderecki, Peter Ruzicka, and Jörg Widmann.

The RSB is especially attractive to young conductors on the international music scene. Already, Andris Nelsons,

Kristjan Järvi, Yannick Nézet-Séguin,

Vasily Petrenko, Jakub Hrůša, Alain Altinoglu and Alondra de la Parra

have been invited to guest-conduct.

Additionally, exemplary concerts of film

Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin

The Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin (RSB) dates back to the first days of music-broadcasting on the German radio in October 1923, and has since sustained its position amongst the leading orchestras in Berlin and other radio orchestras throughout Germany. From 2002 to 2015 Marek Janowski was chief conductor and artistic director of the RSB. Vladimir Jurowski has been named as his successor. Previous chief conductors (including Sergiu Celibidache, Eugen Jochum, Hermann Abendroth, Rolf Kleinert, Heinz Rögner,

music take place regularly under guest-conductor Frank Strobel.

The collaboration with Deutschlandradio, the main shareholder of the ROC GmbH Berlin to which the RSB belongs, has born rich fruit on CD. Starting in 2010, together with PENTATONE, great effort was put into the live recording of the Wagner cycle: the 10 SACDs have subsequently triggered a world-wide reaction.

Other activities in which the orchestra is involved include special concerts for family and children, in which the musicians often take a very personal interest, as well as guest performances in the major national and international concert halls, which have taken place over the past 50 years. In addition to regular tours in Asia, the orchestra also performs in European festivals and other Germany music centres.

Vassily Sinaisky, Conductor

Vassily Sinaisky is one of the great Russian conductors schooled in the tradition of Musin and Kondrashin and has a distinguished pedigree as both an operatic and symphonic conductor. From 2010 to 2013, he was Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, where he conducted many acclaimed productions.

Vassily Sinaisky's international career was launched in 1973 when he won the Gold Medal at the prestigious Karajan Competition in Berlin. Soon after he was appointed Chief Conductor of the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, a post he held from 1976 to 1987. He then became Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic.

Sinaisky has worked as a guest conductor with orchestras such as the Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, London Philharmonic, Berlin Radio Symphony, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, NDR Sinfonieorchester Hamburg, Stuttgart Radio Symphony, Czech Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and NHK Symphony, Tokyo.



Vassily Sinaisky
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Virtuose Schlachträsser. Wirklich?

Wenn man die beiden hier vom PENTATONE-Exklusivkünstler Denis Kozhukhin eingespielten Klavierkonzerte von Edvard Grieg und Peter Iljitsch Tschaikowsky zunächst einmal pauschal als „virtuose Schlachträsser“ etikettiert, so ist dies keinesfalls despektierlich gemeint. Im Gegenteil. Diese Ausnahme-Konzerte zählen zu den absoluten Sternstunden der konzertanten Klavierliteratur. Gleichermaßen populär bei Pianist wie Publikum. So weit, so gut. Aber bei einem genaueren Blick unter die glanzvoll polierte Oberfläche entdeckt man durchaus Merkmale und auch Stilmittel, die nach einer genaueren Differenzierung verlangen: Sind

Griegs einziger und Tschaikowskys erster Gattungsbeitrag vielleicht gar nicht primär für die „volle Pranke“ geschrieben? Mehr als rein Beifall heischende, publikumswirksame Reißer? Gehen wir der Sache auf den Grund.

Edvard Grieg, der als Jugendlicher seine grundlegende musikalische Erziehung in Klavier und Komposition am Leipziger Konservatorium erhalten hatte, bewahrte sich zeitlebens seinen Status als norwegischer Künstler. Was letztlich seinen Weltruhm begründete. Er verstrickte sich nicht in ein unerquickliches Epigonentum, sondern fand seinen ganz persönlichen Weg. Dabei sicherlich auch durch den kulturoziologischen Wandel in der Produktion und Rezeption von Musik begünstigt. Die Musik – über Jahrhunderte Spielball des finanzstarken Adels – begab sich

nun in die Arme der aufstrebenden bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Neue Werke für ein neues Publikum waren gefragt. Und diesem Kurs folgte der 1843 direkt in die Zeiten des Wandels hineingeborene Grieg mit feinem Gespür. „Griegs Werk spiegelt für uns die geistige Umbruchssituation im 19. Jahrhundert sowie Griegs Reaktion darauf wider, ferner seine Verfassung als künstlerische Persönlichkeit und seine Zielstrebigkeit in Richtung Originalität.“ (Krellmann).

Grieg war in der Lage neue Einflüsse zu erkennen, diese als neu zu akzeptieren und im Sinne der Findung seiner eigenen Tonsprache durch die Verknüpfung mit nationalen musikalischen Vorlagen sofort wieder zu überwinden. Nur daraus konnte dieses so spezifisch norwegische Gesamtwerk entstehen. Von Grieg selber wissen wir, dass er sein Studium in Leipzig eher als enge Fessel denn als kreative Befreiung der

eigenen Individualität wahrgenommen hat. Musste er sich doch dort einem (kurz vor der historischen Überwindung stehenden) konservativ-klassizistischen Ästhetik-Kanon unterordnen.

Dass Grieg sich mit Ausnahme des Klavierkonzertes als Komponist eher den kleineren musikalischen Formen widmete, hängt sicherlich auch mit seinem gescheiterten symphonischen Versuch zusammen, zu dem ihn der große Nils W. Gade 1863 ermutigt hatte. Das Werk ist handwerklich mehr als solide, weist aber keinerlei Zeichen des später so individuellen Griegschen Stils auf. Keine zwei Jahre nach der Fertigstellung versah es der Komponist mit dem Verdikt „soll niemals aufgeführt werden“... Vielmehr konzentrierte sich Grieg - angeregt durch seine norwegischen Landsleute Ole Bull und Rikard Nordraak - von nun auf einen neuen, nationalen

Deutsch

Weg, indem er auf das reichhaltige Repertoire der nordischen Volksmusik zurückgriff und seine Vorstellungen und Kenntnisse der mitteleuropäischen Romantik mit diesen Vorlagen zu einer einzigartigen Kombination verknüpfte. Sein Welterfolg gab ihm Recht. Und der wurde trotz der Konzentration auf intimere Gattungen eben mit dem Klavierkonzert eingeleitet.

Grieg komponierte sein einziges Klavierkonzert im Sommer 1868 im Alter von 25 Jahren. Sein Freund Benjamin Feddersen hatte ihm in Søllerød in der Nähe von Kopenhagen ein Ferienhaus gemietet, in dem er sich ungestört seiner schöpferischen Arbeit widmen konnte.

Grieg nahm sich für sein dreisätziges Werk Schumanns Klavierkonzert zum Vorbild. Nicht nur die Tonart a-Moll oder der kaskadenartige,

vollgriffige Beginn des Kopfsatzes sind übernommen, bis in Details der Satzfaktur hinein lassen sich Verwandtschaften feststellen. Dennoch entwickelt Grieg auf Schumanns Folie ein Werk, das insbesondere durch das der norwegischen Volksmusik entnommene „Grieg-Motiv“ – eine oftmals verwendete absteigende Folge von Oktave, Septime und Quinte jenen bereits angesprochenen, neuartigen nordischen Ton aufweist. Im Kopfsatz erzählt Grieg viele kleine variierte Geschichten, durch feinzielierte Tempovorschriften und Spielanweisungen extrem differenziert ausgestaltet. So wandelt er das anfangs noch wuchtige Hauptthema geradezu lyrisch um. Der kurze Mittelsatz evoziert durch eine ausgedehnte Streichermelodie Bilder der rauen, einsamen norwegischen Landschaft. Insbesondere im Finale wird dann das norwegische Kolorit noch

stärker ausgebreitet, Grieg verwendet hier den Rhythmus des Springtanzes „Halling“ über Quintbässen. Weniger streng gearbeitet als vielmehr frei und geradezu rhapsodisch wirkt das Konzert fast eher wie eine „Phantasie für Klavier und Orchester“. Dies ist kein musikalisch leeres, durch simple Effekte aufgedonnertes Virtuosen-Konzert ohne autonom-musikalischen Kunstspruch, im Gegenteil, die pianistischen Anforderungen sind den musikalisch-kompositorischen ebenbürtig. Grieg schrieb ein Konzert mit symphonischem Anspruch.

Und Tschaikowskys b-Moll-Konzert? Das virtuose Schlachtross schlechthin?! Im November 1874 begann Tschaikovsky mit der Arbeit, hatte dabei augenscheinlich jedoch größere Probleme. Kein Wunder, Klaviermusik war bis dahin auch nur Nebensache gewesen. „Prinzipiell tue ich mir

Gewalt an und zwinge meinen Kopf, Klavierpassagen auszudenken“, teilte er seinem Bruder Anatol im Verlauf der Arbeit mit. Noch vor der Fertigstellung suchte Tschaikovsky dann berufenen pianistischen Rat. Am Heiligabend 1874 spielte er seinem Freund Nikolai Rubinstein, dem Leiter des erst vor kurzem gegründeten Moskauer Konservatoriums, das neue Werk vor. Der herausragende Pianist Rubinstein sollte ihn vor allem in spieltechnischen Fragen beraten. Das Vorspiel entwickelte sich zu einer Katastrophe. Nach anfänglich eisigem Schweigen brüllte Rubinstein seine Verachtung für das Werk geradezu heraus, erklärte die Themen für abgedroschen, plump, ungeschickt und nicht verbesslungsfähig. Weiter folgten die Vorwürfe „schwache Erfindung“ und noch schlimmer – Tschaikovsky habe abgekupfert.

Und überhaupt – das Werk sei unspielbar. Falls Tschaikovsky ihm zumute, das Werk in der Öffentlichkeit zu spielen, müsse es bis auf zwei, drei Seiten völlig verändert werden. Beim so zutiefst beleidigten und gedemütigten Komponist saß der Stachel tief. „Ich bin kein dummer Junge mehr, der sich in Kompositionsvorversuchen ergeht, ich brauche von niemandem Belehrungen.“ Kurzerhand widmete Tschaikovsky das Konzert daraufhin dem deutschen Pianisten Hans von Bülow, der es in hohen Tönen lobte und 1875 in Boston zur triumphalen Uraufführung brachte.

Nun ließe sich Rubinstein Verhalten ja recht einfach als typische Pedanterie eines konservativen Betonkopfes abkanzeln, der den Genius Tschaikovsky einfach verkannte. Aber ist denn an Rubinstins auf den ersten Blick so harsch erscheinenden Vorwürfen wirklich gar nichts dran?

Er beschwerte sich hauptsächlich über vergessen wir den barschen Ton! – durchaus berechtigte kritische Ansätze bzw. deren technische Umsetzung, die schwache und nicht originäre (thematische) Erfindung sowie das Werk als Ganzes. In der Tat halten nicht wenige Pianisten einige der Solo-Passagen für unnötig anspruchsvoll, die darüber hinaus vom vollen Orchester zugedeckt werden. In puncto thematische Erfindung muss man konstatieren, dass das wahrhaft mitreißende Hauptthema des Kopfsatzes seinen Ursprung in einem ukrainischen Volkslied hat, dem „Gesang der Blinden“. Im Mittelsatz erklingt eine als Walzer verkleidete Melodie aus dem damals beliebten französischen Chanson „Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire“. Eine weitere ukrainische Melodie verwendet Tschaikovsky als sprunghafte Hauptthema im Finale. Rubinstein hatte also an jenem Heiligabend 1874 –

Melancholie, der feinfühlige Dialog zwischen Solist und Orchester, die gesteigerte Ausdrucksemphase des gewaltigen Kopfsatzes sind dabei genauso eindrucksvoll wie der kurze, konzentrierte Mittelsatz. Die fast brutale hymnische Kraftentfaltung mit dem rondoartig wiederkehrenden, „con fuoco“ gespielten Hauptthema bringt das Werk zu einem triumphalen Abschluss.



Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin
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