Saturday, August 17, 8pm

THE NORMA AND JERRY STRASSLER CONCERT

FRANÇOIS-XAVIER ROTH conducting

BRAHMS
Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat, Opus 83
  Allegro non troppo
  Allegro appassionato
  Andante
  Allegretto grazioso
  KIRILL GERSTEIN
  \{ Intermission \}

SCHUMANN
Symphony No. 2 in C, Opus 61
  Sostenuto assai—Allegro ma non troppo
  Scherzo: Allegro vivace; Trio I; Trio II
  Andante espressivo
  Allegro molto vivace

Piano by Steinway & Sons – the Artistic Choice of Tanglewood

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat, Opus 83


“...and a second one will sound very different,” wrote Brahms to Joseph Joachim, rendering a report on the disastrous reception in Leipzig of his First Piano Concerto. More than twenty years would pass before there was “a second one.” They were full years. Brahms had settled in Vienna and given up conducting and playing the piano as regular activities and sources of livelihood. Belly and beard date from those years (“clean-shaven they take you for an actor or a priest,” he said). The compositions of the two decades include the variations on themes by Handel,
Paganini, and Haydn; the string quartets and piano quartets (three of each), as well as both string sextets, the piano quintet, and the horn trio; a cello sonata and one for violin; the first two symphonies and the Violin Concerto; and, along with over a hundred songs and shorter choral pieces, a series of large-scale vocal works including the *German Requiem*, the Alto Rhapsody, the *Song of Destiny*, and *Nänie*. He was resigned to bachelorhood and to never composing an opera. He had even come to terms with the fact that at the beginning of the century there had been a giant called Beethoven whose thunderous footsteps made life terribly difficult for later composers. To the young Brahms, Beethoven had been inspiration and model, but also a source of daunting inhibition. Fully aware of what he was doing and what it meant, Brahms waited until his forties before he sent into the world any string quartets or a first symphony, both being genres peculiarly associated with Beethoven. In sum, the Brahms of the Second Piano Concerto was a master, confident and altogether mature.

For the University of Breslau to call him “*artis musicae severioris in Germania nunc princeps*” in its honorary degree citation of 1879 was to take a firm anti-Bayreuth political stand, but at least in that central and northern European musical world where opera was thought of as either transalpine triviality or as the province of that dangerous vulgarian Dr. Richard Wagner, the stature of Johannes Brahms was clearly perceived.

In April 1878, Brahms made what was to be the first of nine journeys to Italy and Sicily. His companion was another bearded and overweight North German who had settled in Vienna, Theodor Billroth, an accomplished and knowledgeable amateur musician, and by profession a surgeon, a field in which he was even more unambiguously “princeps” than Brahms in his. Brahms returned elated and full of energy. His chief task for that summer was to complete his Violin Concerto for Joseph Joachim. He planned to include a scherzo, but dropped the idea at Joachim’s suggestion. He had, however, made sketches for such a movement after his return from the South, and he retrieved them three years later when they became the basis of the new piano concerto’s second movement.

The year 1881 began with the first performances of the *Academic Festival* and *Tragic* overtures, and there were professional trips to Holland and Hungary as well as another Italian vacation. In memory of his friend, the painter Anselm Feuerbach, he made a setting of Schiller’s *Nänie*, and then set to work on the sketches that had been accumulating for the piano concerto. (By this time, Brahms had established a regular pattern for his year: concentrated compositional work was done during the summers in various Austrian or Swiss villages and small towns, each visited for two or three years in a row and then dropped, while winters were the season of sketches, proofreading, and concerts). On July 7 he reported to his friend Elisabet von Herzogenberg, perhaps his closest musical confidante of those years, that he had finished a “tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo.” Writing on the same day to the pianist Emma Engelmann, he is not quite so coy, though Billroth was sent his copy with a remark about “a bunch of little piano pieces.”

The measure of Brahms’s sureness about the work is to be found in his singling it out for dedication “to his dear friend and teacher Eduard Marxsen.” Marxsen, to whom Brahms had been sent by his first teacher, Otto Cossel, as a boy of seven, was born in 1806 and had studied with Carl Maria von Bocklet, the pianist who had played in the first performance of Schubert’s E-flat trio, and his orchestral version of Beethoven’s *Kreutzer* Sonata was widely performed in the 19th century. Brahms’s devotion lasted until the end of Marxsen’s life in 1887. The choice of the B-flat concerto as occasion for the long-delayed formal tribute to his master is surely significant:
not only was the piano Marxsen’s instrument as well as his own, but Brahms must have felt that he had at last achieved what had eluded him in the wonderful D minor concerto, namely the perfect fusion of inspirational fire with that encompassing technique whose foundations were laid in those long-ago lessons in Hamburg.

It was the last work Brahms added to his repertory as a pianist, and for someone who had long given up regular practicing to get through it at all is amazing. After the premiere, Brahms took the work on an extensive tour of Germany with Hans von Bülow and the superb Meiningen Orchestra: Leipzig resisted once again, but elsewhere the reception was triumphant. People tended to find the first movement harder to grasp than the rest, and almost universally a new relationship between piano and orchestra was noted, phrases like “symphony with piano obligato” being much bandied about. With respect to the latter question, it is mainly that Brahms knew the concertos of Mozart and Beethoven better than his critics and was prepared to draw more imaginative and far-reaching conclusions from the subtle solo-tutti relationship propounded in those masterpieces of the classical style.

Brahms begins by establishing the whole range of the solo’s capabilities. The piano enters with rhythmically cunning comment on the theme sung by the horn. This is poetic and reticent, though there is also something quietly assertive in the way the piano at once takes possession of five-and-a-half octaves from the lowest B-flat on the keyboard to the F above the treble staff. When, however, the woodwinds and then the strings continue in this lyric vein, the piano responds with a cadenza that silences the orchestra altogether. But this cadenza, massive and almost violent though it is, settles on a long dominant pedal and demonstrates that its “real” function is to introduce, as dramatically as possible, an expansive and absolutely formal orchestral exposition. Perhaps the greatest moment, certainly the most mysterious and original, of this magisterial movement is the soft dawning of the recapitulation, the horn call and its extensions in the piano being now gently embedded in a continuous and flowing texture, an effect that suggests that the opening of the movement should be played not as an introduction in a slower tempo, but as the real and organic beginning. When all this occurs, you remember the piano’s earlier eruption into the cadenza, and the contrast now of the entirely lyrical continuation is the more poignant for that memory. One tends to think of this concerto as essentially declamatory and as the quintessential blockbuster, but the expression mark that occurs more often than any other is “dolce” (followed in frequency by “leggiero”!).

Beethoven had to answer tiresome questions about why there were only two movements in his last piano sonata, and now Brahms was constantly asked to explain the presence of his “extra” Scherzerl. He told Billroth that the first movement appeared to him “too simple [and that] he required something strongly passionate before the equally simple Andante.” The answer half convinces: simplicity is not the issue as much as urgency and speed. Long-range harmonic strategy, particularly with respect to the Andante to come, must have had a lot to do with Brahms’s decision. The contrast, in any event, is welcome, and the movement, in which one can still sense the biting double-stops of Joachim’s violin, goes brilliantly.

The first and second movements end in ways meant to produce the ovations they got at their early performances (and how priggish and anti-musical the present custom that indiscriminately forbids such demonstrations between movements). From here on, Brahms reduces the scale of his utterance, trumpets and drums falling silent for the remainder of the concerto. The Andante begins with a long and famous cello solo,* which, like its oboe counterpart in the Adagio of the Violin Concerto, becomes increasingly and ever more subtly enmeshed in its
surroundings (and thus less obviously soloistic). The piano does not undertake to compete with
the cello as a singer of that kind of song. Its own melodies stand on either side of that style, being
more embellished or more skeletal. The key is B-flat, the home key of the concerto and thus an
uncommon choice for a slow movement, the most famous precedent being Brahms’s own
earlier piano concerto, but the excursions within the piece are bold and remarkable in their
effect. For an example, it is its placement in the distant key of F-sharp that gives the return of the
cello solo its wonderfully soft radiance.

The finale moves gently in that not-quite-fast gait that is so characteristic of Brahms. A touch of
gypsy music passes now and again, and just before the end, which occurs without much ado,
Brahms spikes the texture with triplets.

MICHAEL STEINBERG

Michael Steinberg was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1976 to
1979, and after that of the San Francisco Symphony and New York Philharmonic. Oxford
University Press has published three compilations of his program notes, devoted to symphonies,
concertos, and the great works for chorus and orchestra.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)
Symphony No. 2 in C, Opus 61

*First performance:* November 5, 1846, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Felix Mendelssohn cond. *First
BSO performance:* December 1881, Georg Henschel cond. *First Tanglewood performance:*
August 7, 1947, Leonard Bernstein cond. *Most recent Tanglewood performance:* August 6,
2017, David Zinman cond.

Schumann suffered a physical breakdown attributed to overwork in 1842 and a much more
serious one in August 1844. The second time his condition was ominous: constant trembling,
various phobias (especially the fear of heights and of sharp metallic objects), and, worst of all,
tinnitus, a constant noise or ringing in the ears, which made almost any musical exercise—
playing or composing—impossible.

It was not the first time Schumann had been prey to depression so severe that he was unable to
work (he had already suffered bouts of “melancholy” in 1828, October 1830, much of 1831,
autumn 1833, September 1837, and at various times in 1838 and 1839), but this time the
depression was accompanied unmistakably by serious medical indications. It was also doubly
unwelcome because of the several extraordinarily good years, filled with prolific composition,
that he had enjoyed following his marriage to Clara Wieck in 1840; he may even have thought
that conjugal felicity had cured his emotional problems. But 1844 was the worst year yet; this
time, even with his beloved Clara always at hand to help, he could not overcome his depression.
Writing music was out of the question; it took weeks even to write a letter. His recuperation took
over a year, during which he composed virtually nothing. Then in 1845 he directed his energies
toward a thorough study of Bach and composed some fugal essays. But the first completely new
large composition after his breakdown was the Symphony in C, published as Opus 61 and
labeled second in the series.

Much of Schumann’s music is intensely personal in ways more specific than simply reflecting the
composer’s emotional state. Listening to many of his pieces is like reading a private letter or an
intimate diary. He delighted in ciphers and codes, often (in his earlier years) encoding the name or
hometown of a sweetheart into his music. After he met Clara, the secret messages were directed to her. But with the exception of one passage in the last movement, the Second Symphony is remarkably “classical” in conception, devoid of any apparent literary program or inspiration. If anything, it is inspired by a purely musical source, the heroic symphonies of Beethoven, in which a subdued mood at the opening resolves through heroic struggle to triumph at the end.

More than any of his other symphonies, the Second reveals a progression of mental states reflecting the composer’s own life. Three years after its composition he wrote to D.G. Otten, the music director in Hamburg, who had inquired about the work, to say:

I wrote my symphony in December 1845, and I sometimes fear my semi-invalid state can be divined from the music. I began to feel more myself when I wrote the last movement, and was certainly much better when I finished the whole work. All the same it reminds me of dark days.

The opening slow section does suggest “dark days” despite the presence of the brass fanfare in C major. Schumann purposely undercuts the brilliant effect of that opening motto with a chromatic, long-breathed phrase in the strings that contradicts one’s normal expectations of either joy or heroism. And in the Allegro, the sharply dotted principal theme affects a heroic air, but the chromatic secondary theme denies any feeling of conquest. The development provides an elaborate treatment of all the motivic material presented thus far and ends with an almost Beethovenian power in the return to the recapitulation.

Perhaps it was the high emotional level of the first movement that caused Schumann to put the scherzo second, thus allowing a further release of energy before settling down to the lavish lyricism of the Adagio. The scherzo is officially in C major, like the opening movement, but the very opening, on a diminished-seventh chord (which is brought back again and again), belies once more the qualities we normally expect of C major; this scherzo is no joke. The basic ground plan is one of Schumann’s own invention, elaborated from Beethoven’s Fourth and Seventh symphonies, in which the main scherzo section comes round and round again in double alternation with the Trio. Schumann’s innovation is to employ two Trios; the second of these has a brief fugato with the theme presented both upright and upside down—a reminder of Schumann’s Bach studies earlier in 1845. The motto fanfare of the first movement recurs in the closing bars to recall the continuing and still abortive heroic search.

The Adagio, though delayed from its normal position as the second movement, is well worth waiting for. Here the passion of the musical ideas, the delicacy of the scoring, and Schumann’s masterful control of tension and release create a high-voltage sense of yearning. The songlike theme is of an emotional richness not found elsewhere in the symphony, a soaring-upward of large intervals (sixth, octave) returning in a pair of sequential descending sevenths that suggest Elgar before the fact.

The last movement has always been the most controversial. Tovey called it incoherent, and partisans have both attacked and defended it. Schumann himself insisted that he felt much better while writing it and that his improved condition was reflected in the quality of the music. The movement certainly projects an affirmative character; the second theme, derived from the emotional melody of the third movement, briefly attempts to recall the past, but it is overwhelmed by the onrush of energy. The most unusual formal aspect of the movement is the fusion of development and recapitulation, ending in the minor key. An extended coda is therefore necessary to motivate a confident ending—and in this case the coda is almost half the length of
the movement! Now, for the first time in this symphony, we may be intruding on one of Schumann’s private messages: we hear an elaborate coda-development of a totally new theme, one used earlier by Schumann in his piano Fantasie, Opus 17; it had been borrowed, in its turn, from Beethoven’s song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (“To the distant beloved”), where it was a setting of the words “Nimm sie hin denn diese Lieder” (“Take, then, these songs of mine”). In the *Fantasie*, Schumann was unmistakably offering his music to Clara; here, too, it seems, he is offering the music to her, though now the void that separates him from his “distant beloved” is no longer physical but psychological.

The very ending brings back the fanfare motto from the first movement in an assertion of victory, but this victory, unlike Beethoven’s in the Fifth Symphony, is a triumph of will power, almost of self-hypnosis. Schumann could not foresee, when he finished Opus 61, that the truly “dark days” still lay ahead.

STEVEN LEDBETTER

Steven Ledbetter was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1998.

Guest Artists

François-Xavier Roth

Making his Tanglewood debut leading two concerts this weekend, conductor François-Xavier Roth has been general music director of the City of Cologne since 2015, leading both the Gürzenich Orchestra and Opera. He is principal guest conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra and the first-ever associate artist of the Philharmonie de Paris. Mr. Roth’s reputation for inventive programming, his incisive approach, and his inspiring leadership are valued around the world. He works with leading orchestras including the Berlin Philharmonic and Staatskapelle, the Munich Philharmonic, and the Royal Concertgebouw, Boston Symphony, and Zurich Tonhalle orchestras. In 2003 he founded Les Siècles, an innovative orchestra performing contrasting and colorful programs on modern and period instruments, often within the same concert. With the LSO this season he led programs of Ravel, Bartók, and Scriabin and, in the latest of his “LSO Futures” series, explored the current sound-world of Philippe Manoury with the UK premiere of the composer’s *Ring*. With the Gürzenich Orchestra he featured Rhenish composer Robert Schumann and explored works that disrupt and reconceive traditional orchestral forms. Mr. Roth continued his focus on Manoury with the premiere of *Lab. Oratorium*, the third of a trilogy of his works commissioned by the orchestra, which they also brought to Hamburg and Paris. With the Gürzenich Opera, he led new productions of Strauss’s *Salome* and Offenbach’s *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*, commemorating the bicentenary of the latter composer’s birth in Cologne. The season also saw his return to the Berlin Philharmonic and appearances with the NDR Elbphilharmonie, Montreal Symphony, Bavarian Radio Symphony, and Cleveland orchestras, as well as the San Francisco Symphony. His recording of Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloé* with Les Siècles won the 2018 Gramophone Award for Orchestral Album of the Year; his recent recordings of Debussy and Berlioz with Les Siècles and of Mahler’s Symphony No. 3 with the Gürzenich Orchestra have been widely acclaimed. With the Festival Berlioz and Les Siècles, he founded the Jeune Orchestre Européen Hector Berlioz, a unique orchestra-academy with its own collection of period instruments. Mr. Roth and Les Siècles devised “Presto!,” a television series for France 2, attracting three million
weekly viewers. The Gürzenich Orchestra’s “Ohrenauf!” youth program has received a Junge Ohren Produktion Award. A tireless champion of contemporary music, Mr. Roth has been conductor of the groundbreaking LSO Panufnik Composers Scheme since 2005. For his achievements as musician, conductor, music director, and teacher, he was created a Chevalier of the Légion d’honneur. François-Xavier Roth made his BSO debut leading subscription concerts in April 2014, subsequently returning for subscription programs in January 2016, March 2017, and, most recently, for two subscription weeks in January 2018, leading music of Méhul, Mozart, Beethoven, Webern, Bartók, and Stravinsky.

Kirill Gerstein

Pianist Kirill Gerstein’s natural versatility and curiosity have led him to explore a wide range of repertoire ranging from Bach to Adès. Following his world and New York City premieres this past March of Thomas Adès’s Concerto for Piano and Orchestra with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, he gave the work’s European premiere with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, again with the composer conducting. Messrs. Gerstein and Adès also performed the composer’s In Seven Days with the London Philharmonic and Los Angeles Philharmonic and gave duo-recitals in New York and Boston. In 2018-19, Mr. Gerstein also performed with the London Symphony Orchestra under Sir Mark Elder, in China with the Shanghai and Guangzhou symphony orchestras, with orchestras throughout Europe and the United States, and in São Paulo, Brazil. Other appearances included recitals in London, Stuttgart, Lisbon, Singapore, Melbourne, and Copenhagen, and chamber music concerts with the Hagen Quartet, Veronika Eberle, and Clemens Hagen in Lucerne. Festival appearances have taken him to Salzburg, Verbier, Lucerne, Edinburgh, Tanglewood, the Proms in London, and the Jerusalem Chamber Music Festival. Mr. Gerstein’s recording of Scriabin’s Prometheus: The Poem of Fire with the Oslo Philharmonic and Vasily Petrenko was reissued in fall 2018. His live recording on Myrios Classics of Busoni’s Piano Concerto with Sakari Oramo conducting the BSO and the men of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus was released this past March. Other releases include Tchaikovsky’s First, Second, and Third piano concertos with Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic; Liszt’s Transcendental Etudes; “The Gershwin Moment,” and a recital disc of works by Schumann, Liszt, and Knussen. Kirill Gerstein was brought up in the former Soviet Union and moved to Boston at age fourteen to become the youngest student to attend the Berklee College of Music. He studied with Solomon Mikowsky in New York, Dmitri Bashkirov in Madrid, and Ferenc Rados in Budapest. His honors include the Gilmore Artist Award, which provided funds for him to commission works from Timo Andres, Chick Corea, Alexander Goehr, Oliver Knussen, and Brad Mehldau. A committed educator, he has taught at the Stuttgart Musik Hochschule and, from autumn 2018, as part of the Kronberg Academy’s Sir András Schiff Performance Program for Young Artists. Kirill Gerstein made his debut with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in July 2010 at Tanglewood and his BSO subscription series debut in November 2012. Last summer he was the BSO’s Koussevitzky Artist at Tanglewood, where he performed with the BSO, the Boston Pops Orchestra, the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, and in duo-recital with Thomas Adès. His most recent BSO appearances were this past March, in the world premiere of Thomas Adès’s BSO-commissioned Concerto for Piano and Orchestra.