SIR ANDRÁS SCHIFF, conductor and piano

J.S. BACH PIANO CONCERTO IN F MINOR, BWV 1056
[Allegro]
Largo
Presto
SIR ANDRÁS SCHIFF

BEETHOVEN PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN C, OPUS 15
Allegro con brio
Largo
Rondo: Allegro scherzando
MR. SCHIFF

{INTERMISSION}

BRAHMS VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY HAYDN, OPUS 56A

BARTÓK “DANCE SUITE”
Moderato—
Allegro molto—
Allegro vivace—
Molto tranquillo—
Comodo—
Finale: Allegro

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donated to the orchestra by Michael L. Nieland, M.D., in loving memory of Mischa Nieland, a member of the cello section from 1943 to 1988.

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The Program in Brief...

The Hungarian-born pianist Sir András Schiff leads Bach’s F minor keyboard concerto and Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 1 from the keyboard on the first half of this concert, and conducts Brahms’s Haydn Variations and Bartók’s Dance Suite from the podium for the second half. The three-movement F minor concerto is one of several Bach completed during the 1730s for use by Leipzig’s Collegium Musicum. Most of these pieces are transcriptions for harpsichord of concertos for violin, oboe, or other melodic instruments, some by Bach himself, dating from as many as two decades earlier.

Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 1 dates from early in his career, when he was in his twenties and first presenting himself as both composer and performer. Although he was still under the influence of Mozart and Haydn—the latter was his teacher for a short time—his adventurous and distinctive voice is evident even in his early works. Though published first, the C major concerto actually post-dates the B-flat concerto (No. 2, Opus 19), so is a bit more adventurous, individual, and self-assured. Unexpected introspection, with extended minor-key episodes against the airy home key of C, gives the work a touch of emotional depth that balances the virtuosic sparkle required of the soloist.

Linking Beethoven’s teacher with his greatest successor is Johannes Brahms’s Variations on a Theme by Haydn, the last major orchestral work Brahms wrote (1873) before finally finishing his long-awaited Symphony No. 1. The Haydn Variations are based on the “Chorale St. Antoni,” which Haydn—who may not have written the theme itself—used in a divertimento for wind ensemble. In the Haydn Variations, Brahms emphasizes contrast and change while deploying a catalog of contrapuntal and orchestral techniques. Following the theme and the eight variations, the finale is a grand summing-up in the form of a passacaglia, itself a series of shorter variations based on a portion of the theme’s harmonic progression.

An outstanding pianist and composer as well as a pioneer of the field of ethnomusicology, Béla Bartók collected and studied folk music, especially that of his native Central Europe, and frequently incorporated its elements into his own works. Like Dvořák’s popular Slavonic Dances, Bartók’s Dance Suite displays its folk-music colors boldly. Fulfilling a commission for works celebrating the 50th anniversary of the unification of Buda and Pest, he wrote the Dance Suite in 1923 while completing his intensely modern ballet score The Miraculous Mandarin. Bartók appropriately chose to evoke the region’s folk music in a work aimed squarely at a public audience. The folk-music-like themes, though, were invented by the composer and represented what he called “idealized peasant music.” Beyond its musical substance, the wide-ranging ethnic and national stylistic origins of the Dance Suite were a defiant refutation of the increasing call for ethnic purity in Central Europe in the 1920s.

Robert Kirzinger
JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH was born in Eisenach, Thuringia, in central Germany, on March 21, 1685, and died in Leipzig on July 28, 1750. His F minor keyboard concerto, BWV 1056, dating from the mid-1730s, is evidently a transcription of an earlier concerto, now lost, for either oboe or violin, probably in G minor. The first performance of this concerto likely took place soon after its completion as part of the concerts of the Leipzig Collegium Musicum, of which Bach was director.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO KEYBOARD PART (here played on piano), the score of the F minor concerto, BWV 1056, calls for a string orchestra—first and second violins and violas—plus continuo, played here by cellos and basses.

The genre of the concerto as we know it—a work combining a single or multiple solo instruments with a larger ensemble—only began to solidify in the late 1600s, although the term, the origin of which isn't quite clear, had been in use for some time. The genre initially developed in Italy; the first important concertos for solo instrument and ensemble—as well as the first to appear in print, in the 1690s—were those by Giuseppe Torelli (1658-1709). A generation later, Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741), one of the great violinists of his age, published his solo concerto collection *L’estro armónico*. These works established the concerto as a medium in which the soloist or soloists were clearly the center of attention, their parts demanding virtuosity and independence radically distinct from the humbler music of the ensemble. Vivaldi’s works are the model for the concerto tradition passed down to us today, through Mozart and Brahms to Stravinsky to Dieter Ammann. Even if that model is explicitly rejected, it’s still the precedent composers must reckon with.

Upon its publication in Amsterdam in 1711, *L’estro armónico* quickly made its way throughout Europe, becoming enormously influential in the process. Johann Sebastian Bach transcribed for solo harpsichord or organ many of Vivaldi’s concertos (as well as those of other composers) as a way of assimilating the best models of the age. Much of this self-education took place in Weimar, where Bach was employed from 1708 to 1717. The six *Brandenburg* Concertos, completed by 1721, were a culmination of these efforts, in which Bach synthesized and invented a variety of approaches to the combination of single or multiple soloists with ensembles of various sizes. With the *Brandenburg* Concerto No. 5, Bach is said to have written the first concerto for keyboard and ensemble, in which the harpsichord, instead of its usual role as a member of the continuo accompaniment, is given a virtuosic obbligato part throughout, as well as an extended cadenza.

When Bach took up the post of Kantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig in 1723, he could devote less time to “pure” instrumental music. His Leipzig duties included writing music for Sunday services, church feast days and special services, and other special occasions, such as weddings and funerals. In his first two years he composed two complete church-year cycles of cantatas, each cycle comprising more than sixty works. He completed two more cycles by 1729, and a fifth by the 1740s. In addition, he had overall responsibility for the music programs of Leipzig’s four principal churches, involving four choruses of boys drawn from the boarding
students of the Thomasschule. He was ultimately responsible for the boys’ education as well as their musical training.

Although by their very nature the cantatas are primarily vocal works, for the sake of musical and dramatic variety Bach employed a variety of approaches to style and genre within these multi-movement pieces: chorales and other settings for full chorus, arias and recitatives for one or more solo voices sometimes paired with an obbligato solo instrument, purely orchestral movements, and even concerto movements for an instrumental soloist with ensemble. Among the latter type can be found several that are transcriptions of earlier Bach works—for example, the organ concerto that appears in the cantatas nos. 29, Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir, and 120a, Herr Gott, Beherrscher aller Dinge, originated as the Preludio of the composer’s Partita in E for solo violin. Another such movement is the opening Sinfonia for oboe solo, strings, and continuo from the 1729 cantata Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe. The source of that movement is also the basis for the Adagio of the F minor keyboard concerto, BWV 1056, one of a group of concertos for one or more keyboards with orchestra that Bach completed in the mid-1730s.

After half a decade of near-total immersion in cantatas and Passions, in 1729 Bach became director of Leipzig’s Collegium Musicum, a society of professional and amateur musicians founded by Georg Philipp Telemann in 1704. The society gave weekly concerts—Wednesdays outdoors during the summer, Fridays at Gottfried Zimmermann’s coffee house during the winter months—that were serious, and entertaining, events open to the public. In addition to music by other contemporary composers, these concerts of course included works by Bach himself, among them the Coffee and Peasant cantatas, chamber music, and concertos. Many, even most, of these pieces were written expressly for performance by the Collegium. Much of this music, too, served pedagogic ends: Bach used them as training tools for his students, among them his own sons. Most of the group of harpsichord concertos for solo or multiple harpsichords with orchestral accompaniment that Bach produced at this time are presumed to have been first performed by Bach and his sons in Collegium concerts.

Strange though it is to realize, the accompanied keyboard concerto as developed by Bach in the 1730s was virtually a new compositional genre. Vivaldi’s famous concertos were typically for solo or multiple “melody” instruments—violin, cello, mandolino, oboe, bassoon. As suggested above, the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto is considered the prototype of the concerto for keyboard and ensemble, but Bach didn’t explore its possibilities during his first years in Leipzig except in a few cantata movements. After becoming director of the collegium, he returned to the idea, but most of these “new” concertos were in fact reworkings of earlier concertos—Vivaldi’s and his own—for melody instruments. The concerto for four harpsichords, BWV 1065, is a reworking of a piece by Vivaldi for four violins and orchestra, for example. The concertos for solo keyboard and accompaniment, BWV 1052–59, and those for multiple keyboards and accompaniment, BWV 1060–64, are evidently based on earlier solo concertos by Bach himself (excepting BWV 1061 for two keyboards and accompaniment, derived from a piece for two unaccompanied keyboards).

Most of those earlier works, probably dating from Bach’s years in Weimar and Cöthen (1708–1721), are now lost; for some, their origin as works by Bach is still in question. (Also, Bach scholar Christian Wolff has suggested that in dating the concertos on limited evidence, scholars have been “rather generous” to this early period.) Bach’s process for transcribing the works to their new settings is fairly clear from comparisons between the handful of extant earlier concertos
and manuscript copies of the Leipzig-era keyboard concertos. He first wrote out the original solo part verbatim, then made changes, some of them extensive, to make it work for the harpsichord, including filling in the left-hand parts. Sometimes transposition—raising or lowering the key—was necessary to accommodate the harpsichord’s range. In cases where no original version has been found, scholars use details of pitch range and melodic figuration to try to determine the original instrument. A very wide melodic range would suggest violin or cello, a narrower compass recorder or oboe. Modern musicologists have reverse-engineered convincing, performable versions of presumed source works; Wilfried Fischer’s reconstructions (with an “R” appending the BWV number, e.g., BWV 1052R) were included as part of the New Bach Edition, the most complete representation of the composer’s catalog.

Opinion is divided about the origin of the F minor keyboard concerto, BWV 1056. The accompanied oboe solo movement from Cantata 156 mentioned above has led to the supposition that the entire concerto was for oboe solo, while some scholars have suggested that the first and third movements came from different concertos altogether; a further possibility is that the original was a violin concerto. A further interesting detail is that the first two measures of a c.1716 G major flute/oboe concerto (TWV 51:G2) by Bach’s friend Telemann, the leading German composer of the day, are identical (except for key) to the first two bars of the Largo middle movement of the F minor concerto. Did Bach write a movement of the now-lost original concerto around the same time that Telemann wrote his? We don’t know; we do know this is just one of many instances of musical sharing between the two composers.

The F minor concerto is in three short movements: fast (no tempo marking), slow (marked Largo in one version, Adagio in another), fast (Presto). The opening movement features a thematic idea shared by the piano and orchestra; by itself, the piano “echoes” the end of each phrase. To the relatively square, two-beat theme are contrasted the expansive, triplet-based solo excursions. The slow middle movement in A-flat major is justly famous for its singing, ornamented melody and its expressive excursions into minor keys. Ensemble accompaniment is sparse. The Presto finale, in 3/8 meter, features a rising theme with a syncopated detail throwing the meter off balance. The second half of the theme, predominantly falling, inverts and balances the first half, and the violins’ phrase-ending echoes complement the soloist’s in the first movement.

Robert Kirzinger

Composer/annotator ROBERT KIRZINGER is Associate Director of Program Publications of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

THE FIRST BSO PERFORMANCE OF BACH’S F MINOR KEYBOARD CONCERTO took place on January 2, 1918; Ruth Deyo was solo pianist, and Karl Muck conducted. Since then, the only other complete BSO performances were at Tanglewood: Alexander Borovsky under Serge Koussevitzky for a 1945 “Bach/Mozart” Festival; Lukas Foss under Charles Munch in 1959; Seymour Lipkin with Munch in 1960; and Foss again as both soloist and conductor in July 1990. The most recent Tanglewood performance was given by Angela Hewitt with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and Richard Tognetti in August 2005 in Ozawa Hall.
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. According to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, he composed his C major concerto in 1795 and gave the first performance on December 18 that year in Vienna; but earlier sources hold that the concerto was written probably in 1796-97, completed in 1798, and premiered during Beethoven’s visit that year to Prague. He evidently revised the score somewhat before its publication in 1801. Beethoven himself wrote three different cadenzas for the first movement at a later date, presumably after 1804, judging by the keyboard range required.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANO, the score calls for an orchestra of one flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Beethoven’s career was intimately bound up with the keyboard, from his teens as an organist and budding virtuoso to his years as a composer/pianist in Vienna, and even beyond that, after encroaching deafness put an end to his performing. In later years, almost stone-deaf, Beethoven still played alone and sometimes for friends, extemporizing brilliantly as in the old days, when by then he could not hear a note he played. His fingers could still find the music in his inner ear.

So pervasive was the piano to Beethoven that we have to remind ourselves that he was part of the first generation to grow up playing the instrument, which had only recently replaced the harpsichord and was evolving rapidly. Haydn and Mozart came up playing the harpsichord and only later arrived at the piano. As musicians tend to be, Beethoven was critical of the competition. “Putsch, putsch, putsch,” he said of the flashy new virtuosos, “and what does it all mean? Nothing!” He heard Mozart perform, he said, and the man was a harpsichordist. He didn’t know how to play the piano: no legato, no singing style. Part of his implication was that Mozart didn’t really know how to write for the piano either.

On one hand this is familiar musicianly complaining about the rivals. On the other hand, in his terms, Beethoven was right. From the beginning the piano was his frame of reference, and for a long time performing was the better part of his income. The consummate professional, he paid minute attention to finding new and idiomatic ways of playing and composing for the piano. Meanwhile he was an adviser to piano manufacturers, who listened to what he said. Mostly what he told them was, Make your pianos bigger and stronger. His music said the same thing. As soon as an instrument appeared with higher notes he used them, and the force of his conceptions demanded louder and richer instruments. Érard in Paris and Broadwood in England sent him pianos, hoping he would be pleased and endorse them.

In other words, as performer as well as composer, Beethoven looms large in the development of the modern instrument, in its playing and composing technique, and in its design. All that, in turn, is another symptom of the Beethoven approach to everything musical: a solid grounding in technique and tradition, but no less a relentless pushing of envelopes.

If you were a virtuoso in Beethoven’s day, a prime bread-and-butter medium was the concerto, and to his programs Beethoven often added solo improvisations. He was celebrated for the power and velocity of his playing, the brilliance of his ornaments including triple trills, but above all...
for the fire and imagination of his extemporizing. Years before his music started to define the rising Romantic temperament, that wild and passionate spirit was prophesied in the music that flowed directly from his mind to his fingers.

Thus while the hoary division of Beethoven’s work into Early, Middle, and Late periods persists, one of the many caveats to that pattern is that when it came to his own instrument the piano, the Middle started early: the authentic Beethoven voice appears first in works including the piano sonatas and piano trios. It was in the last years of the 18th century, when he was composing the startling and prophetic piano trios of Opus 1, that he wrote the C major concerto with one foot in the past and the other in the future.

Even then Beethoven was often ill, but otherwise his life in those years was quite pleasant. He was a hot young virtuoso and composer playing in the best salons, and had not yet been forced to confront the specter of deafness. In the pattern familiar to Mozart and most composer/performers, as a soloist Beethoven needed to have a fresh concerto in his repertoire, written to strut his particular stuff. For that reason he didn’t publish his early piano concertos right away; they were for his own use, and he tinkered with them from performance to performance. When one concerto had lost its novelty he wrote another, and only then published the old one.

The Piano Concerto No. 1 in C was written after the Second in B-flat, and thus numbered because the C major was published first. The B-flat major concerto had a long and rambling gestation, starting in Bonn before he came to Vienna. In that period Beethoven was preoccupied with polishing his craft, mastering one genre after another. With one concerto already under his belt, however, he pulled together the C major in a relatively short time, probably in 1795. That year a visitor to his flat found Beethoven, miserable with colic, with four copyists stationed in the hall, writing the finale two days before the premiere. The final version of the concerto is a score from 1800. Shortly after, Beethoven declared that he was unsatisfied with everything he’d written and intended to make a new beginning. Soon followed the epochal Symphony No. 3, *Eroica*.

If the opening of the C major concerto shouts some, it does not entirely shout *Beethoven*. It’s a military march, a fashionable mode in concertos of the time. The music begins softly, at a distance, in a stately *dah, dit-dit dah* figure; with a *forte* the parade is upon us. The martial first theme is followed by a lyrically contrasting second; the gesture is expected, the music attractive but impersonal. But the key is Beethovenian: a more highly spiced E-flat for a second key rather than the conventional G, a kind of harmonic move that will become a lifelong Beethoven thumbprint. The soloist enters not on the main theme but with something new—lyrical, quiet, and inward, which alerts us that the agenda of the soloist and the orchestra are not quite the same. In fact, for all the flamboyant passagework, the soloist never plays the martial main theme. The essential voice of the soloist breaks out above all in the middle, at the onset of the development: a suddenly rich and passionate, shrouded, almost minorish E-flat major section, in sound and import entirely Beethoven.

The first movement ends with a conventional martial fervor, and the second movement commences in A-flat major with a Largo version of the work’s opening rhythmic motto: *dah, dit-dit dah*. But this movement picks up the mood of the middle of the first movement—atmospheric and introspective, gradually passionate. Again we hear that strangely shadowed major. The main
theme has a noble simplicity; the orchestral scoring is rich, warm, and touching; the piano garlands familiar from Classical slow movements are here not precious and galant so much as atmospheric and introspective. Here as elsewhere, the slow movement provides some of the most moving and fresh music in early Beethoven. In the searching coda there is a striking and soulful duet between piano and clarinet.

So where does this story lead us? A first movement in which the orchestra is militant and the soloist tending more to thoughtful and expressive. A second movement where the latter qualities take over. Then, fun and games.

All Beethoven’s concerto finales are rondos, and rondo finales were supposed to be light, rhythmical, quirky, with lots of teasing accompanying the periodic return of the rondo theme. Beethoven plays that game to the hilt, but pushes it: his rondo theme goes beyond merely folksy to a rumbustious, floor-shaking barn dance. For an added fillip, we’re not sure whether the main theme begins on an upbeat or a downbeat, so the metric sense gets amusingly jerked around. On its last appearance the rondo theme enters in the wrongest of wrong keys, B major, before getting chased back to the proper C major. The contrasting sections are largely given to brilliant virtuosity. The middle section features a jovial and jokey tune in A minor, perhaps to parallel the minorish major in the middle of the first movement.

For a telling last touch, just before the flashy last cadence there is a brief turn to lyrical and touching. That’s been the undercurrent all along of this concerto that on the surface purports to be militant and exuberant and more or less conventional, but also has an inner life prophetic of much Beethoven to come.

Jan Swafford

JAN SWAFFORD is a prizewinning composer and writer whose books include “Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph”; “Johannes Brahms: A Biography”; “The Vintage Guide to Classical Music,” and “Language of the Spirit: An Introduction to Classical Music.” An alumnus of the Tanglewood Music Center, where he studied composition, he is currently working on a biography of Mozart.

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF BEETHOVEN’S PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 was given on March 19, 1857, by pianist Franz Werner with Frédéric Ritter and the Philharmonic Society at the Music Hall in Cincinnati. B.J. Lang was soloist in the first Boston performance on January 16, 1868, in a concert of the Harvard Musical Association, Carl Zerrahn conducting.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE OF THE CONCERTO was a single performance led by Emil Paur in Cambridge on December 12, 1895, with pianist Marie Geselschap, after which the BSO did not play the work again until February 15, 1932, with Serge Koussevitzky conducting and soloist Robert Goldsand. Subsequent Boston Symphony performances have featured Shirley Bagley (Koussevitzky conducting), Leonard Bernstein (conducting from the keyboard), Ania Dorfman and Sviatoslav Richter (Charles Munch), Claude Frank (Erich Leinsdorf and, later, Stanislaw Skrowaczewski), Rudolf Serkin and Jerome Lowenthal (Max Rudolf), Christoph Eschenbach (Seiji Ozawa), Misha Dichter (Michael Tilson...
Thomas), Emanuel Ax (Edo de Waart), Malcolm Frager (Klaus Tennstedt), Serkin again (Ozawa), Justus Frantz (Eschenbach), Eschenbach again (doubling as soloist and conductor), Alfred Brendel (Hiroshi Wakasugi and, on several later occasions, Ozawa), Rudolf Firkušný (Jesús López-Cobos), Maria Tipo (Robert Spano), Radu Lupu (Mariss Jansons), Richard Goode (Ozawa), André Watts (Alan Gilbert), Murray Perahia (Bernard Haitink), Gianluca Cascioli (Roberto Abbado), Lars Vogt (Andrey Boreyko), Piotr Anderszewski (Robert Spano), Imogen Cooper (Gustavo Dudamel), Leif Ove Andsnes (David Zinman), Lang Lang (Charles Dutoit), Yefim Bronfman (Christoph von Dohnányi), Rudolf Buchbinder (the most recent subscription performances, with Andris Nelsons in November 2017), and Yuja Wang (the most recent Tanglewood performance, also with Nelsons, on July 15, 2018).
JOHANNES BRAHMS was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. From sketches made in spring 1873 or perhaps late 1872, he composed these variations originally for two pianos, in the form now known as Opus 56b, in May, June, and early July 1873. The first hint of the orchestral version came in a letter of September 4, 1873, to his publisher, Fritz Simrock, from whom he had also requested a supply of orchestra manuscript paper on September 1. The idea of orchestrating the variations perhaps occurred to him only after trying out the two-piano version with Clara Schumann on August 20 in Bonn. In any event, Brahms sent Simrock the orchestral score on October 4, with a letter that attaches Haydn’s name to the work for the first time; previously Brahms had referred to the piece as “Variations for two pianofortes” and “Variations for orchestra.” Brahms himself led the first performance on November 2, 1873, at a Vienna Philharmonic concert. The earliest documented public performance of the two-piano version was one given by Hans von Bülow and Charles Hallé in Manchester, England, on February 12, 1874.

BRAHMS’S “HAYDN” VARIATIONS IN ITS ORCHESTRAL FORM calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, triangle, and strings.

As few of his works do, the twenty minutes of Brahms’s Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn reveal the far-ranging richness of his art and the contradictions within his work and his temperament: the mastery and the insecurity, the conservatism and the innovation, the patience and the boldness. They also exemplify his way of sounding the depths of tradition within a singular personality.

As a craftsman, by his full maturity Brahms essentially had no weak suits. But he did have chronic uncertainties, and some of those turned around the orchestra. After his discovery by Robert Schumann at age twenty and the largely unearned fame that followed, Brahms set out on the kind of ambitious orchestral projects that Schumann had prophesied for him. Within days of Schumann’s breakdown that landed him for the rest of his days in an asylum, Brahms drafted a massive two-piano sonata that bogged down; he tried without success to turn it into a symphony, then detached the first movement and made it into the opening of what became the Piano Concerto No. 1. That concerto consumed years of his life, partly because he was struggling with the orchestra, a medium he found daunting at the time, and with which to some degree he ultimately remained insecure.

It took Brahms years to recover from Schumann’s prophecy and find his feet again as a creator. Given his personality and his abject worship of the past, it was inevitable that his creative path was going to be within the forms and genres of the past—piano sonata, string quartet, piano trio and quartet, symphony, theme and variations, and the like, all of which Richard Wagner and his followers had declared to be dead and buried. Franz Liszt wrote that Brahms represented “the posthumous school” of composition.

It was in that context of a growing divide between one group of composers looking backward for inspiration, and those around Wagner declaring themselves “the music of the future,” that Brahms began patiently to master the old musical genres, one by one: piano trio, piano
variations, and so on. The genre he avoided for decades was the symphony. Beyond that, for years his output for the orchestra was slim—there were no independent pieces between the two orchestral serenades (in D major and A major) of 1858-59 and the Haydn Variations of 1873.

From early on, Brahms had a unique voice. His harmonies and melodies were in their way conservative, placed within traditional forms, but they were still unmistakable. Nobody was more systematically eclectic than Brahms, yet nobody ever had a more distinctive stylistic signature, and he had it from early on. The exception to that pattern was his handling of the orchestra. From the beginning he was in the habit of consulting with friends who had more experience with scoring. With the early orchestral works including the First Piano Concerto, that friend was the violinist and composer Joseph Joachim.

Famously, Brahms carried his first symphony on his back for over fifteen years before finishing it. Part of the reason was fear: he knew it was going to be compared with Beethoven, and that haunted him. He also refused to finish a symphony before his handling of the orchestra was as distinctive as everything else in his style.

The Haydn Variations began with a bit of serendipity. In 1870 a friend showed him a jaunty little piece attributed to Haydn called “Chorale St. Antoni,” scored for pairs of oboes and horns, three bassoons, and the archaic serpent. It had an interesting quirk: in defiance of the regular four-bar phrasing of the Classical period, this piece began with two five-bar phrases. The piece struck him as a good subject for variations, but beyond that he came to conceive it as an independent set of variations for orchestra—something that had essentially never been done before. Here we find Brahms’s mingled conservatism and innovation, and how they worked together. Experts later decided that the piece was not in fact by Haydn, but that is neither here nor there. For Brahms the presence of Haydn was not just practical, it was talismanic, a connection to the giants of the past whose threatening footsteps he always heard around him.

He began cautiously by drafting the variations for two pianos, published as Opus 56b, but by the time the piano version was done the goal was the orchestra. With the music essentially composed, there remained the final hurdle of shaping his orchestral voice, a step he needed to take before he could go on to finish not only the Variations but his First Symphony. Whether consciously or not, the Haydn Variations became his bridge to the symphony. He had become close to the conductor Hermann Levi, who became his new orchestral adviser. In spring 1873 he began visiting Levi in Munich for reasons sociable and practical.

What he ended up with in the Haydn Variations was a piece that was at once unique and utterly bound up in tradition, a set of character variations whose styles at various times conjure up Baroque, Classical, and Romantic voices, climaxing on a passacaglia unmistakably recalling Bach. Meanwhile it was an ideal scoring study for him: the ten movements—the theme, eight variations, and finale—required ten distinct orchestral environments.

The theme begins largely in the winds, close to the original wind chorale, the contrabassoon filling in for the extinct serpent. That high-Classical wind sound will be a kind of covert presence throughout the piece, and for that matter a lingering spirit in Brahms’s orchestral voice from now on. In the flowing first variation, we hear for the first time the mature Brahms orchestral sound: rich octaves in the strings, rippling string figuration, massive tuttis with full winds and brass. That striking change of timbral effect from the theme to the first variation is a leap from the 18th
into the 19th century, and from history into himself. We hear history happening before our ears. Brahms has arrived, finally, as a master composer for the orchestra.

By “character variations” we mean a work in which each segment conjures up a particular kind of traditional piece. In all styles of variations going back through Beethoven and Haydn and Bach, the essential idea is to take a bit of material, the theme, and transform its elements into contrasting segments of music which at the same time form an overall shape and direction. In the Haydn Variations the constants are the bass line of the original theme, and other bits and pieces of it, including its eccentric phrasing and its stern repeated notes—which can also be ironic repeated notes. In the third variation, which moves from lush full scoring to instruments used delicately and soloistically, we hear for the first time the Brahmsian thumbprint of integrating chamber-like effects within orchestral music. The liquidly expressive variation IV is contrasted by the vivace scherzo of the next variation. Then comes a stretch of robust hunting horns followed by a delicious lyrical siciliana.

The finale is laid out, once again, in an archaic form, a passacaglia, meaning variations over a repeated bass figure. It builds slowly to a grand finish that for a moment digresses into a magical music-box moment glittering with piccolo and triangle. This movement profoundly based on tradition is at the same time the most original in the piece, the first set of variations to conclude with a “ground-bass” movement. There in a nutshell you have Brahms, who in looking backward for his inspiration remained ultimately true to himself, and in that way again and again inspired the future.

Jan Swafford

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of Brahms’s “Haydn” Variations in its version for orchestra was likely the one given by Theodore Thomas and his orchestra in Boston on January 31, 1874.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE of the “Haydn” Variations was on December 6, 1884, with Wilhelm Gericke conducting, subsequent BSO performances being given by Arthur Nikisch, Emil Paur, Willy Hess, Karl Muck, Max Fiedler, Otto Urack, Ernst Schmidt, Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitzky, Richard Burgin, Charles Munch, Ernest Ansermet, Erich Leinsdorf, Eugene Ormandy, Aaron Copland, Seiji Ozawa, Mstislav Rostropovich, Kurt Masur, Edo de Waart, Dennis Russell Davies, Bernard Haitink, Christof Perick, André Previn, Daniele Gatti, Andrey Boreyko (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on August 21, 2004), Christoph von Dohnányi, and Andris Nelsons (the most recent subscription performances, in January 2015).
Béla Bartók

“Dance Suite”

BÉLA BARTÓK was born in Nagyszentmiklos, Transylvania (then part of Hungary, now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania), on March 25, 1881, and died in New York on September 26, 1945. He began the “Dance Suite” in Budapest in April 1923 and completed it in Radvány that August. The first performance took place on November 19, 1923, in Budapest, with Ernő Dohnányi conducting the Philharmonic Society Orchestra.

THE SCORE OF THE “DANCE SUITE” calls for two flutes, two piccolos, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, celesta, harp, piano, timpani, two kinds of side drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, chimes, and strings.

Bartók was already in his forties when he received his first commission for a composition. (All his earlier work had been composed “on spec,” in the hope that someone would perform it.) The commission came from the Budapest City Council for three works—one from each of the leading Hungarian composers of the day (Zoltán Kodály and Ernő Dohnányi were the other two), to write a piece in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of the cities of Buda and Pest, facing one another on opposite banks of the Danube, into the metropolis of Budapest. At the celebratory concert it was Kodály’s Psalmus Hungaricus that was the great hit; Bartók’s piece did not go well (he blamed lack of sufficient rehearsal time). But at a performance in Prague a year later under Václav Talich, the audience demanded—and got—an immediate encore.

Bartók was a pioneering ethnomusicologist, and folk music, especially that of Hungary, was a constant influence on his own compositions throughout his life. In the Dance Suite, he took considerable pains to write music that might appeal to the general public, devising the work as a collection of dance-type movements in the styles of many the areas where he had collected folk music, though without ever actually quoting folk tunes, but instead creating musical gestures in the various folk styles. The work is constructed in six sections played without pause. A ritornello passage, heard initially at the end of the first movement, recurs at the end of the second and fourth movements as well as within the finale.

Bartók identified the first section as Arabic in character, and it also shows some melodic links to his ballet The Miraculous Mandarin, which he had begun much earlier but did not complete in its final version until after finishing the Dance Suite. The ritornello is pastoral in sound with its dreamy, muted violins and later the clarinet. Bartók described the vigorous second section as Hungarian; it is dominated by the interval of the minor third, which shows up particularly in sliding trombones, a sound that immediately recalls the Mandarin. A harp glissando brings in the clarinet for the ritornello again.

The third dance, a rondo introduced by the bassoon, is one that Bartók thought of as the alternation of “Hungarian, Rumanian, and even Arabic influences,” an Allegro vivace movement that suggests bagpipe drones (the bagpipe is a nearly universal folk instrument, by no means restricted to Scotland). Next comes a mysterious night scene of Arabic character, with unison woodwinds sounding the exotic melody and muted string sounds creating the atmospheric effect.
The fifth section is short, mostly an assertion of a rhythmic idea. This idea, at a much faster tempo, also begins the finale. This is the most elaborate movement, including quotations from most of the earlier sections of the work, and ending in the high spirits entirely suitable to the celebratory purpose for which it was written.

Steven Ledbetter

STEVEN LEDBETTER was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1998.

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCES OF BARTÓK’S “DANCE SUITE” were given by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra with Fritz Reiner conducting on April 3 and 4, 1925.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES OF THE “DANCE SUITE”—the BSO’s first of any music by Bartók—were conducted by Serge Koussevitzky on November 12 and 13, 1926, subsequent BSO performances being led by Ferenc Fricsay, David Zinman, Kazuhiro Koizumi, Charles Dutoit (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on August 22, 1998), and Iván Fischer (the most recent subscription performances, in April 2003).
Guest Artist

Sir András Schiff

Sir András Schiff is world-renowned as a pianist, conductor, pedagogue, and lecturer. Music critics and audiences alike continue to be inspired by the masterful and intellectual approach he brings to each masterpiece he performs. Born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1953, Sir András studied piano at the Liszt Ferenc Academy with Pál Kadosa, György Kurtág, and Ferenc Rados, and in London with George Malcom. Recitals and special cycles, including the complete works of Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, and Bartók, constitute an important component of his work. Having collaborated with the world’s leading orchestras and conductors, he now focuses primarily on solo recitals, appearances doubling as both soloist and conductor, and exclusive conducting projects. During his fall 2019 tour of North America, Sir András conducts and plays with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, pairing concertos by Bach, Beethoven, and Haydn with Brahms’s Variations on a Theme by Haydn and Bartók’s Dance Suite. He is joined by violinist Yuuko Shiokawa for an all-Mozart program opening New York’s 92nd Street Y season. Recitals in his spring 2020 tour include all-Beethoven programs in Chicago and at Carnegie Hall celebrating the composer’s 250th birthday, as well as performances throughout Canada and the United States. Mr. Schiff’s chamber orchestra, Cappella Andrea Barca, founded in 1999, encompasses international soloists, chamber musicians, and friends. Together they have appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Lucerne Festival, and the Salzburg Mozartwoche. Forthcoming projects include a tour of Asia and a cycle of Bach’s keyboard concertos in Europe. Sir András enjoys close relationships with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Budapest Festival Orchestra, and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. In 2018 he accepted the role of associate artist with the latter ensemble, complementing his interest in performing on period keyboard instruments. He has established a prolific discography and since 1997 has been an exclusive artist for ECM New Series and its producer, Manfred Eicher. Highlights have included the complete Beethoven piano sonatas recorded live in Zurich, solo recitals of Schubert, Schumann, and Janáček, and J.S. Bach’s partitas, Goldberg Variations, and Well-Tempered Clavier. His most recent two-disc set of Schubert sonatas and impromptus was released in spring of 2019. Sir András continues to support new talent, primarily through his “Building Bridges” series, which gives performance opportunities to promising young artists. He also teaches at the Barenboim-Said and Kronberg academies and gives frequent lectures and master classes. His book, Music Comes from Silence, a compilation of essays and conversations with Martin Meyer, was published in 2017 by Bärenreiter and Henschel. Sir András Schiff’s many honors include the international Mozarteum Foundation’s Gold Medal (2012), Germany’s Great Cross of Merit with Star (2012), the Royal Philharmonic Society’s Gold Medal (2013), a knighthood for Services to Music (2014), and a doctorate from the Royal College of Music (2018). This week’s concerts mark Sir András Schiff’s first appearances with the BSO since 2008. He made his BSO debut at Tanglewood in July 1983 with Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-flat, K.271, followed by his subscription series debut in April 1988 with Mozart’s C minor piano concerto, K.491, subsequently returning to Tanglewood for Grieg’s Piano Concerto in 1985 and Mozart’s D minor piano concerto, K.466, in 1987, and to Boston for subscription performances of Bartók’s Piano Concerto No. 2 in February 1989; Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4 in April 1999; and Bartók’s Piano Concerto No. 3 in March 2008, his most recent appearances with the orchestra.