Johannes Brahms
Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat, Opus 83

JOHANNES BRAHMS was born in the free city of Hamburg on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He made the first sketches for this work in the late spring of 1878 and completed the score at Pressbaum, near Vienna, on July 7, 1881. After a private tryout of the concerto with Hans von Bülow and the Meiningen Orchestra, Brahms gave the first performance on November 9, 1881, in Budapest, with Alexander Erkel conducting the Orchestra of the National Theater.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANO, the score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

“...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 sevierioris 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 starting point 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 have gotten 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 obbligato” 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 dawnings 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” Scherzi. 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; there are some precedents in Beethoven, to say nothing of Brahms’s own earlier piano concerto, but the excursions from B-flat 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 sweetly charming 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. The first American performance of Brahms’s Piano Concerto No. 2 took place on December 13, 1882, at the Academy of Music in New York; Rafael Joseffy was soloist, with Theodore Thomas conducting the New York Philharmonic Society.

The First Boston Symphony Performance of Brahms’s Piano Concerto No. 2 took place on March 15, 1884, with B.J. Lang as soloist and Georg Henschel conducting. Subsequent Boston Symphony soloists included Carl Baermann (with Wilhelm Gericie conducting), Rafael Joseffy (Emil Paur, Gericie), Adele Aus der Hohe (Gericke), Ossip Gabrilowitsch (Karl Muck, Serge Koussevitzky), Ruth Deys (Muck), Harold Bauer (Muck, Pierre Monteux), Carl Friedberg (Muck), Felix Fox (Monteux); Moriz Rosenthal, Artur Schnabel, Josefa Rosanska, Beveridge Webster, Myra Hess, Frank Glazer, and Leonard Shure (all with Koussevitzky); Arthur Rubinstein (Koussevitzky, Charles Munch, Michael Tilson Thomas), Nicole Henriot (Munch), Claudio Arrau (Munch), Rudolf Serkin (Munch, Erich Leinsdorf), Eugene Istomin (Munch), Sviatoslav Richter (Munch), Leon Fleisher (Monteux); Van Cliburn,
Grant Johannesen, Eugene Indjic, Abbey Simon, and Gina Bachauer (all with Leinsdorf); Clifford Curzon (Henry Lewis), André Watts (Leinsdorf, Roger Norrington, Jeffrey Tate), Vladimir Ashkenazy (William Steinberg), Malcolm Frager and Misha Dichter (Tilson Thomas), Hans Richter-Haaser (Eugen Jochum); Peter Serkin, Maurizio Pollini, and Daniel Barenboim (Seiji Ozawa); Horacio Gutiérrez and Emanuel Ax (André Previn), Gerhard Oppitz (Marek Janowski), Ax again (Bernard Haitink and David Zinman), Nelson Freire (Federico Cortese), Yefim Bronfman (Christoph von Dohnányi), Peter Serkin again (Pinchas Steinberg, James Levine, and Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos), Evgeny Kissin (Levine), Nicholas Angelich (Kurt Masur), Garrick Ohlsson (Asher Fisch), Hélène Grimaud, and Yefim Bronfman again.