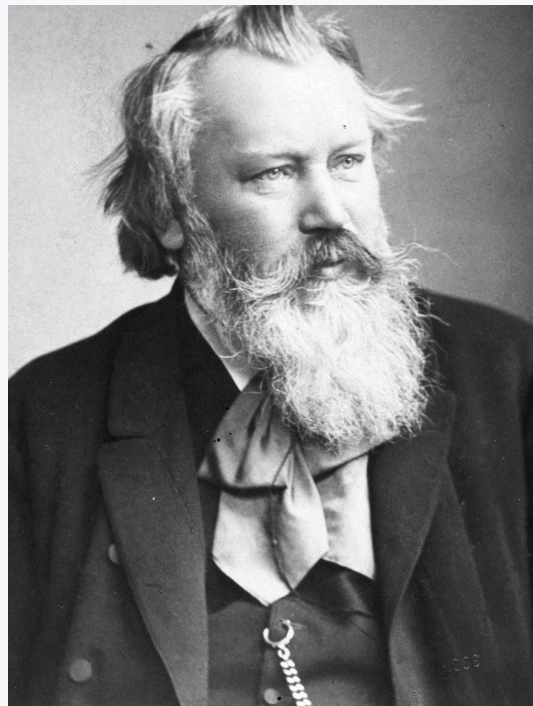




Classics Concert Insights Lecture

Moris Senegor, music aficionado

BRAHMS PIANO CONCERTO #1 (1858)



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1858

“(Brahms’) approach to the piano had something orchestral about it.....Schumann spotted this quality when the obscure twenty year old first ventured to visit him.” Downes

REMINDER ON MUSICAL HISTORY:

- Renaissance & Middle Ages.
- Baroque (1600-1750) - Bach, Handel, Vivaldi.
- Classical (1750-1827) - Haydn, Mozart, early Beethoven.
- Romantic (1827-1900) - Late Beethoven, **Brahms**, Berlioz, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, Mahler.
- 20th Century - Stravinsky, Copland, Bartok.



➤ BRAHMS EARLY BIOGRAPHY (1833-1897):

- Born in Hamburg, Germany.
- As a teenager studied piano with Marxsen; played in dance halls and brothels.
- 1853: Age 20. Musical tour with Remenyi. Met Joseph Joachim, violinist; became a lifelong friend.
- 1853: Joachim introduced Brahms to Robert and Clara Schumann in Dusseldorf. Impressed with Brahms, Schumann became a mentor and father figure to him.
- Schumann published a superlative article about the young Brahms in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.
- 1854: Schumann attempted suicide; committed to an asylum in Endenich, near Bonn.
- Brahms comes to Clara’s aide. Lifelong relationship, love between the two.
- 1856: Robert Schumann dies.
- 1854-58: Gestation period of Piano Concerto #1.
- “The concerto is marked by the turmoil of those years, by Robert Schumann’s madness and death, by Brahms’ love for Clara and hers for him, by their confusion about how to live with their feelings and their retreat from their passion.” Steinberg

HISTORY OF PIANO CONCERTO #1:

- Over a five year span (spring 1854-January 1859) Brahms re-worked the piece from a two-piano sonata, to a symphony, to a concerto.
- On the way, a discarded movement became the funeral march of his later *Requiem* (1867).
- Brahms received much help from Joaquim (especially in orchestration), Clara Schumann and others.
- First performed March 1858 in Hanover with Joaquim conducting, as a reading rehearsal, with an official premiere in January 1859, also in Hanover.
- Performed five days later in Leipzig at the Gewandhaus. This was a fiasco, the audience receiving it with hisses.
- First performance in England by a Miss Baglehole, “*apparently an excellent one*”. Steinberg
- Brahms continued to re-work the piece until 1861.
- First published 1861, piano part only. Full score delayed until 1874.

BRAHMS PIANO CONCERTO #1:

- MOVEMENT 1: Maestoso. Double Exposition Sonata Form, no Cadenza, 6/4 time; D minor.
- MOVEMENT 2: Adagio. Slow movement A-B-A form. 6/4 time; D major.
- MOVEMENT 3: Rondo: Allegro non troppo; Rondo Form with fugato in mid-section. 2/4 time; D minor to D major
- ORCHESTRATION: A small classical era orchestra.

THE CLASSICAL DOUBLE-EXPOSITION SONATA FORM:

- ORCHESTRAL EXPOSITION: Theme I in home key, lyrical Theme II in different key, closing music.
- SOLO EXPOSITION: Instrument may repeat orchestral themes, usually with embellishment, or present its own themes.
- DEVELOPMENT: Orchestra and solo instrument subject exposition material to musical variation.
- RECAPITULATION: Themes return, all in home key; orchestra and soloist share the section.
- CADENZA: Soloist plays alone, displaying the capabilities of the instrument and/or player.
- CODA: Concluding music, usually brief.

BRAHMS PIANO CONCERTO #1, FIRST MOVEMENT:

- ORCHESTRAL EXPOSITION: Four themes (O1-4), but no “authentic” Theme II.
- PIANO EXPOSITION: Piano entry theme (P1); orchestral themes; lyrical Theme II.
- DEVELOPMENT: as expected.
- RECAPITULATION: Themes return but altered, a virtual second development section.
- (NO CADENZA)
- CODA: as expected.

MOVEMENT 1:

ORCHESTRAL EXPOSITION:

- Begins with a dramatic, fortissimo, stormy tune, Theme O1. It appears in two versions, the second even stormier and extended.
- This theme, with its clear sense of catastrophe, according to Joseph Joaquim, reflects Brahms’ state of mind upon hearing Schumann’s suicide attempt in 1854.
- This “suicide” theme begins with a unison D chord. It then moves to different keys, not expected from a first theme.
- There are three main elements to the “suicide” theme: steady tympani beats; a D pedal in the base; tonal instability in the key of B flat, and later a dissonant A flat trill in the extension. *“This bold use of a trill (gives) a fist shaking character to the main theme.”* Botstein
- *“What an opening for a timid young man starting his first orchestral score! Brahms hurls his heavy theme like a thunderbolt.”* Downes
- Two calmer, tragic melodies follow: O2 (D minor) in strings is a rising idea with a unique long-short-long rhythm, repeated and extended; O3 (B flat minor) in strings and winds, an inversion of O2, features the same rhythmic signature. O3 is repeated and extended in a passage that develops its three note idea. Music slows, dynamics drop in preparation for a return of O1.
- Loud tympani roll and four emphatic orchestral chords usher return of suicide theme (O1), still dramatic and loud, stated once.
- A closing theme, O4, follows without interruption, ff, tutti; jagged melody made of pairs of repeated notes.
- Music dies down with repeated two-note fragments of O4; brief transition prepares the piano entry.
- NOTE: despite these four themes, the exposition lacks a “truly Classical”, lyrical second theme.

PIANO EXPOSITION:

- Piano enters with a seemingly new, subdued theme (P1) that is actually a version of the closing theme (O4) melody. This theme is extended by the piano, in an increasingly restless, crescendo passage, building in intensity until piano breaks out into the suicide theme (O1), restated by the orchestra.
- *“The pianoforte enters with no bravura display, but with a touching theme worthy of Bach’s ariosos in St. Matthew’s Passion.”* Tovey
- Using a design common in many first movements of Mozart concerti, the piano has entered with its own theme and it will now review the orchestral themes with embellishment.
- Piano version of O2 is a jagged, staccato, dissonant passage. It is repeated with orchestral accompaniment in an extended, legato, tragic passage that fades.
- Ornamented piano statement of O3 with low strings in accompaniment is followed by an orchestral variation.
- The solo piano now presents a brand new lyrical theme (F major). This is the “true” second theme and grand melody of the movement (Theme II).
- *“The warmth and serenity of this majestic, flowing tune make it the principle counterbalance to the tragic and pathetic character of the other themes.”* MacDonald
- Theme II is in three phrases A, A’ (more embellished and impassioned), B (two note idea, short-long, derived from the opening theme O1)
- A serene woodwind chorale based on the third phrase of Theme II (D major). Strings follow in a stately (*maestoso*) re-statement with piano in accompaniment.
- Extended tranquil passage begins with solo horn statement of third phrase of Theme II with quiet piano accompaniment, followed by piano figurations and a solo violin descent. Horn returns, now sounding distant. Brahms assigned the horn solo to the third horn.
- Nocturne-like passage in high winds with orchestral accompaniment brings the solo exposition to a peaceful conclusion, with a closed cadence and fermata. This will dramatically contrast with what is to follow.

DEVELOPMENT:

- Piano launches into a dramatic, loud, solo passage of double octaves alternating with equally dramatic fragments of suicide theme (O1) in orchestra. These are then developed.
- *“The development begins with an arresting display of octave bravura.”* Steinberg.
- At the onset of development the soloist *“plung(es) us back to D minor with a fusillade of double octaves.”* MacDonald
- Low strings develop O2 motives with piano echoing same tune quietly, in a calmer passage.

- Piano launches an agitated, embellished version of O3, followed by a faster, D major variation of O3 in waltz-like triple time, with strings echoing the piano. A brief harmonic respite from bleak mood.
- O3 further developed in different instrument groups alternating with piano.
- A transitional passage of loud, lightning-like orchestral arpeggios prepares recapitulation.
- Suddenly, the orchestra and piano land on a loud, dramatic D minor chord, announcing recapitulation.

RECAPITULATION:

- Music returns to the beginning of the movement, but with solo piano stating suicide theme (O1) with equal flair and drama, the passage demonstrating well the grand piano as an orchestra onto itself.
- As in the opening, the re-statement of the suicide theme occurs with tympani and bases holding a D pedal, and the melody is in an unexpected key, E major. Orchestra joins in accompaniment in the subsequent phrases.
- NOTE: in a traditional recap section all themes return to the home key (D minor). Aside from the unison D that preceded the suicide theme on piano, there is no such return. This is but just the beginning of a most unusual and original recap section.
- The piano's Bachian entry theme (P1) loudly restated by orchestra (F sharp minor) without interruption. This is then given developmental treatment with orchestra and piano conversing; ends with solo piano variation of the tune.
- In another embellished variation solo piano recaps O3, winds following with their version.
- NOTE: O2 is not recapped. It already received an extended treatment in the development.
- In a remarkable change in mood, solo piano now begins a serene, verbatim restatement of Theme II (D major), the passage cadenza-like.
- Theme II complex proceeds much like the Piano Exposition, with woodwind chorale, maestoso orchestral restatement of the theme, and the horn passage all re-stated verbatim.
- The only difference from Piano Exposition is that the serene, nocturne-like transitional passage at the end is replaced by a much shorter transition on solo piano, with tympani beats. Music is quiet but uneasy. A brief ominous melody in bases prepares for Coda.

CODA:

- Solo piano launches into a loud passage that develops O3 motives, echoing similar music from mid-development.
- Orchestra recalls *suicide theme* (O1) in another loud, dramatic, developmental passage.
- Piano develops O1 motives with loud orchestral chords in repeated jabs as music speeds toward conclusion with a final, sustained, dramatic chord.

“Nearly the longest, and probably the most dramatic symphonic movement since Beethoven.”
MacDonald

COMMENTS ABOUT THE FIRST MOVEMENT:

- Despite his choice of the “old fashioned” Double Exposition Sonata Form, Brahms presents a most unusual first movement that deviates from the Classical Era in many ways.
- Brahms uses Mozart’s late minor-key piano concerti (#20 D minor, #24 C minor) as his model for the double exposition, in the use a dramatic-emotional first theme, a quiet piano that enters with a new melody, embellished piano recitations of the orchestral material, and assignment of a lyric second theme to the piano exposition.
- The development section is brief in comparison with most Romantic Era works. This may be because the early Recap is essentially a second development.
- Brahms’ treatment of Recapitulation is most unusual and represents an extreme departure from the Classical Era norm. The unison D chord heard loudly at the end of development harkens back to the beginning of the movement. Beyond that, none of the recapped music returns in the home key and some (P2, O3) receive developmental treatment.
- In Recapitulation the verbatim recap of Theme II (albeit in the “wrong” key) provides a sense of return home that, according to some scholars, harkens back to the Classical Era.
- While there is no Cadenza in the movement, the piano is assigned many important roles in cadenza-like, solo passages including the initial statements of Theme II in both Expo & Recap, the double octave passage that begins development, the dramatic recap of the suicide theme, and beginning of coda.
- Brahms’ concept of the piano is NOT as an operatic diva, but rather an important, integral element of the overall composition. This has come to be seen as a *symphonic* conception of the concerto.
- The overall mood of the movement alternates between grief/anguish and serenity, the latter represented by the Theme II complex. The lengthy treatment of Theme II and its verbatim reappearance create an expectation that maybe, there will be a “happy ending”. But this is not to be. The Coda plunges right back to the anguished material and ends there.
- The movement harmonically returns to the home key of D minor in the Coda instead of Recap, but this is not perceived as a satisfactory resolution, as it is in other works where a similar delay occurs, e.g. Tchaikovsky Symphonies #2 & 4 first movements.
- The music leaves the listener with the impression that there is no resolution to the grief, reflecting the composer’s state of mind during the creation of the work.

MOVEMENT 2:

A:

- Main theme, a slow, hymn-like melody in strings. It is in three phrases, the first derived from the “suicide theme” (O1) of the first movement. Winds and strings extend last phrase in a chorale like section.
- Brahms inscribed the line, *Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini* (*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*), atop the score of this theme, the words coinciding to the music as if they were lyrics to a song.
- This has caused some scholars e.g. Donald Tovey, to interpret the movement as a requiem for Schumann to whom Brahms often referred as *Mynheer Domini*. Others have seen it as a portrait of Clara Schumann.
- Solo piano presents an embellished version of the theme, its first two phrases; orchestra follows with a hymn-like variation of the third phrase.
- Brief developmental passage on solo piano is followed by a solemn piano-orchestra exchange on theme motives.
- In a somewhat more forceful passage, solo piano presents an embellished version of the last phrase, and brings this section to an end.

B:

- Bassoons present a new melody, chorale-like, that is derived from the first phrase of the theme.
- Solo piano passage based on “A” section material.
- Winds present “B” theme in different keys twice; low strings echo the melody.

A:

- Winds return to “A” theme, first two phrases, strings following with the third phrase. The theme is extended by various wind instruments and orchestra.
- Solo piano returns with a more emphatic variation of the main theme with a D pedal (on horns, cellos, bases), in a loud, resonant passage. “*A rapturous peroration for the soloist.*” Botstein.
- Winds respond with loud third phrase variations, piano in accompaniment with loud figurations.
- Music calms, piano-orchestra exchange on the third phrase returns.

CODA:

- A solo piano passage Brahms marked as *cadenza ad lib*, begins with dramatic trills followed by another emphatic melody – more restrained than the prior *rapturous peroration* -, and ends in more trills.
- Orchestra solemnly recalls its initial presentation of the theme from the beginning of the movement. The music includes solo viola, a rarity in Brahms’ orchestral writing.

- Quiet concluding chords are accompanied by the first tympani beats of the movement, solemn, in A major rather than D major.
- An “amen” cadence, a long musical exhale, accompanied by more tympani beats, concludes the movement.

NOTE: This serene movement provides a respite from the highly emotional rigors of the preceding one. Its tone is ecclesiastic, its message reverential to the Schumanns.

MOVEMENT 3:

A1 - B1 - A2 - B2 – DEVELOPMENT - A3 - CADENZA – B3 - CODA

A1:

- Solo piano states the main rondo theme (D minor), an energetic, syncopated, four-square melody. Orchestra repeats the tune.
- This tune, “*muscular and grimly energetic*,” (MacDonald), is a variation of the grand Theme II from the First Movement.
- Solo piano picks up the last phrase of the A1 tune and extends it in a developmental passage.
- Piano and orchestra re-state the A1 theme together.

B1:

- A quieter, extended tune stated by solo piano, made of repeated, syncopated two-note ideas derived from the A1 theme. Modulates to C-sharp minor.

A2:

- Loud horn calls announce return of A1 theme, its first phrase. Mood upbeat.
- Solo piano responds with virtuosic scales and figurations, then restates the theme, bright and loud
- Ends with an orchestral re-statement of the theme and a closed cadence.

B2:

- Strings state a lyrical variation of A2 theme, followed by solo piano variation.
- Brief string re-statement followed by virtuosic trills in solo piano and another piano variation.

DEVELOPMENT WITH FUGATO:

- A quiet 4-part fugue based on the B theme in strings, once fully established, rises.
- In a homophonic passage winds develop B theme.

- Solo piano develops A theme.
- Brief passage in orchestra developing B.
- Solo piano figurations lead to loud orchestral return to A1(sounds like a recapitulation).

A3:

- A1 theme vigorously stated in orchestra, piano follows with tune from last phrase,
- Another vigorous restatement by orchestra; piano and orchestra share the theme in a loud, fast passage extending it.
- Solo piano states the tune and extends it.
- Horn calls state the first two notes of the A theme; a leading gesture announces a cadenza.

CADENZA:

- After some fast scales and figurations, piano presents a varied version of B theme.

B3:

- Wind & horn chorale on a B variation tails off with solo piano. This is then repeated.

CODA WITH SECOND CADENZA:

- A theme returns in orchestra now march-like. Picked up by piano with extension.
- Orchestra with A theme, piano in accompaniment, in a fast, rising passage.
- More solo piano figurations in what some consider a second cadenza.
- Music rapidly moves to concluding chords.

NOTE: Many scholars have found remarkable similarity between this movement and that of Beethoven's Piano Concerto #3 rondo, in the way the first theme is presented and especially in the exceptional presence of a fugato in the mid-section.

"This daring and sacred and great concerto." Steinberg

"The work's symphonic quality....emerges.....as the most powerful orchestral utterance in German music since Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the same key." Musgrave