



DDD

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BRAHMS MENDELSSOHN

Piano Concertos

Jenő Jandó • Benjamin Frith

Polish NRSO • Slovak SPO

Antoni Wit • Robert Stankovsky



Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg in 1833, the son of a double-bass player and his much older wife, a seamstress. His childhood was spent in relative poverty, and his early studies in music, for which he showed a natural aptitude, developed his talent to such an extent that there was talk of touring as a prodigy at the age of eleven. It was Eduard Marxsen who gave him a grounding in the technical basis of composition, while the boy helped his family by playing the piano in dockside taverns.

In 1851 Brahms met the Hungarian violinist Reményi, who introduced him to Hungarian dance music. Two years later he set out in his company on his first concert tour, their journey taking them, on the recommendation of the Hungarian violinist Joachim, to Weimar, where Franz Liszt held court and might have been expected to show particular favour to a fellow-countryman. Reményi profited from the visit, but Brahms, with a lack of tact that was later accentuated, failed to impress the Master.

Later in the year, however, he met the Schumanns, through Joachim's agency. The meeting was a fruitful one. Schumann detected a promise of greatness in the music of Brahms and published his views in the journal he had once edited, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, declaring Brahms the long-awaited successor to Beethoven.

Brahms had always hoped that sooner or later he would be able to return in triumph to a position of distinction in the musical life of Hamburg. This ambition was never fulfilled. Instead he settled in Vienna, intermittently from 1863 and definitively in 1869, establishing himself there and seeming to many to fulfil Schumann's early prophecy. In him his supporters, including, above all, the distinguished critic and writer Eduard Hanslick, saw a true successor to Beethoven and a champion of music untrammelled by extra-musical associations, of pure music, as opposed to the Music of the Future promoted by Wagner and Liszt, a path to which Joachim and Brahms both later publicly expressed their opposition.

The monumental nature of much of the orchestral work of Brahms is in part a sign of the great pains that went into its construction. His first piano concerto, which made no concessions to contemporary taste, was, it seems, conceived originally as a sonata for two pianos. This then became a symphony, to reach its final metamorphosis as the Piano Concerto in D minor, Op. 15, completed in this form in 1859. The concerto had its first private rehearsals, with Brahms as soloist, in Hanover in 1858, with Joachim conducting. They introduced the work to the public in January the following year to a polite reception. This relative success persuaded Brahms to the more ambitious step of a performance in Leipzig with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, conducted by Julius Rietz, once Mendelssohn's assistant in Düsseldorf and now established in Leipzig in succession to Niels W. Gade. The reaction of the audience to such a demanding work was hostile, with ironic applause from one or two and hissing from many. A well known critic found nothing good to say about the concerto and even less to commend in Brahms's performance as a pianist, at the time his principal means of earning a living.

His later supporter Hanslick, indeed, writing three years later, found that Brahms played more like a composer than a virtuoso, praising his honesty, his interpretative abilities, yet aware of inaccuracies however compelling the

whole performance. A subsequent performance of the concerto in Hamburg met a better reception. In the following years the work gradually won wider acceptance, finding its way early into the repertoire of Clara Schumann, a strong advocate. The concerto is massive in its symphonic conception, described by one contemporary as a symphony with piano obbligato, and clearly posed problems to its first audiences, lacking any trivial or superficial brilliance in its writing and calling for sustained attention over its very considerable length. As the symphonies Brahms was to write might seem an extension of the work of Beethoven half a century earlier, so the first of his two piano concertos seemed to continue and develop the pattern set by Beethoven's Emperor Concerto. In November 1855 Brahms had appeared as a soloist with orchestra for the first time in a performance of that concerto and included Beethoven's Fourth Concerto and Mozart's D minor and C minor Concertos in his concert repertoire at this time. These all had an observable influence on his own writing.

The first movement opens with a feeling of tragic significance, the marked trills adding to its ominous nature, before a gentler element, a foretaste of the second subject, intervenes, followed by a sudden outburst from the orchestra, which returns to its opening mood, hushed only by the entry of the soloist. The pianist succumbs, in turn, to the initial theme with its fierce trills, leading to the second subject, a hymn-like theme announced by the soloist. The material is developed in a section that makes heavy demands on the solo instrument and the recapitulation brings its own surprising shifts of key. The massive first movement is followed by a contrasting slow movement. Over the melody of the Adagio Brahms wrote the words *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini* (Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord), a reference, it is supposed, to his master, Schumann, although he is also said to have identified the movement with Clara Schumann. The liturgical reference was later crossed out, in an attempt, to conceal, perhaps, such an overt display of feeling. A long-drawn theme is played by the strings, the bassoon joining the bass, with the piano adding its own meditation on the melody. As in the first movement, the horns have a characteristically evocative part to play, however brief, while the piano continues its progress towards a new theme. The mood of the opening returns, extended in a cadenza of great serenity. The last movement, a Rondo, has a marked and energetic opening that may remind one of Beethoven, both in his Concerto in C minor and in other final movements, including, even, in some of the keyboard writing, that of the first piano sonata. The rondo form allows the inclusion of a number of contrasting ideas, an F major episode introduced by the piano and developed by the orchestra and a later episode introduced by the violins, but treated contrapuntally, as is the principal theme, before it has gone too far into a purely lyrical mood. A cadenza, marked *quasi fantasia* and using a dominant pedal-point, a sustained note to underpin changes of harmony, a feature characteristic of Brahms, leads to a moving conclusion.

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809 - 1847) **Piano Concerto No. 2 in D Minor, Op. 40**

Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of Moses Mendelssohn, the great Jewish thinker of the Enlightenment, was born in Hamburg in 1809, the son of a prosperous banker. His family was influential in cultural circles, and he and his sister were educated in an environment that encouraged both musical and general cultural interests. At the same time the extensive acquaintance of the Mendelssohns among artists and men of letters brought an unusual breadth of mind, a stimulus to natural curiosity.

Much of Mendelssohn's childhood was passed in Berlin, where his parents moved when he was three, to escape Napoleonic invasion. There he took lessons from Goethe's much admired Zelter, who introduced him to the old poet in Weimar. The choice of a career in music was eventually decided on the advice of Cherubini, consulted by Abraham Mendelssohn in Paris, where he was director of the Conservatoire. There followed a period of further education, a Grand Tour of Europe that took him south to Italy and north to Scotland. His professional career began in earnest with his appointment as general director of music in Düsseldorf in 1833.

Mendelssohn's subsequent career was intense and brief. He settled in Leipzig as conductor of the Gewandhaus concerts, and was instrumental in establishing the Conservatory there. Briefly lured to Berlin by the King of Prussia and by the importunity of his family, he spent an unsatisfactory year or so as director of the music section of the Academy of Arts, providing music for a revival of classical drama under royal encouragement. This appointment he was glad to relinquish in 1844, later returning to his old position in Leipzig, where he died in 1847.

As a boy Mendelssohn had tried his hand at the composition of concertos for one or two pianos, and had also written a concerto for piano and violin. In maturity he was to write two piano concertos, the first of which, in G minor, was composed hurriedly, as he made his way back from Italy, and written down three days before the first performance, on 17th October 1832 in Munich, with the composer as soloist.

The Piano Concerto in D Minor was written for performance at the Birmingham Festival of 1837, where Mendelssohn won further success as pianist, organist, conductor and composer, with the oratorio St. Paul. The writing of the concerto coincided with his honeymoon and it was with some irritation that he found himself obliged to travel to London and to Birmingham, the city for which he was to write the Lobgesang and the oratorio Elijah.

The concerto opens again with the briefest of orchestral introductions, allowing the soloist to make an immediate impression with a dramatic opening passage. The second subject is introduced by the piano, making its way to the expected key of F major. It is the soloist who leads to the B flat major slow movement, where the first theme is entrusted to the orchestra, to be capped by the soloist with material of a more rhapsodic kind. The last movement, as economically scored as the rest of the work, allows the soloist a display of delicate brilliance in music that is thoroughly characteristic of the composer.



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STEREO

DDD

BRAHMS • MENDELSSOHN

Piano Concertos

**Playing
Time**
74:31

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JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op.15

48:51

1 Maestoso

22:44

2 Adagio

13:17

3 Rondo (allegro non troppo)

12:50

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809-1847)

Piano Concerto No.2 in D minor, Op.40

25:35

4 Allegro appassionato

10:18

5 Adagio – Molto sostenuto

7:46

6 Finale: Presto scherzando

7:31

(Tracks 1-3 – Jenő Jandó (piano)/Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra/Antoni Wit; Tracks 4-6 – Benjamin Frith (piano)/Slovak State Philharmonic Orchestra/Robert Stankovsky)

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Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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