

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born 7 May 1833 in Hamburg; died 3 April 1897 in Vienna

Concerto No. 1 in D minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 15 (1854-1859)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Hanover, 22 January 1859; Royal Theater; Orchestra of the Royal Theater; Joseph Joachim, conductor; Johannes Brahms, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 9 February 1940; Syria Mosque; Fritz Reiner, conductor; Eunice Norton, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 46 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds and trumpets in pairs, four horns, timpani and strings

In 1854, Brahms set out to produce a symphony in D minor as his first major orchestral work, and, to that end, he sketched three movements in short score. The first movement was orchestrated, but Brahms was not satisfied with the result, and he decided to transform his short score into a sonata for two pianos, but this still did not fulfill his vision — the ideas were too symphonic in breadth to be satisfactorily contained by just pianos, yet too pianistic in figuration to be completely divorced from the keyboard. He was quite stuck. In 1857, the composer Julius Otto Grimm, a staunch friend, suggested that his 24-year-old colleague try his sketch as a piano concerto. Brahms thought the advice sound, and he went back to work. He selected two movements to retain for the concerto and put aside the third, which emerged ten years later as the chorus *Behold All Flesh in The German Requiem*. Things proceeded slowly but steadily and only after two more years of work was the Piano Concerto No. 1 ready for performance.

The Concerto's stormy first movement is among the most passionate and impetuous of all Brahms' works. This movement follows the Classical model of double-exposition concerto form, with an extended initial presentation of much of the important thematic material by the orchestra alone ("first exposition"). The soloist enters and leads through the "second exposition," which is augmented to include a lyrical second theme, not heard earlier, played by the unaccompanied piano. The central section of the movement begins with the tempestuous main theme, a Romantic motive filled with snarling trills and anguished melodic leaps. The recapitulation enters on a titanic wave of sound, as though the crest of some dark, brooding emotion were crashing onto a barren, rocky shore. The lovely second theme returns (played again by the solo piano), but eventually gives way to the foreboding mood of the main theme.

The *Adagio* is a movement of transcendent beauty, of quiet, twilight emotions couched in a mood of gentle melancholy — of "something spiritual" in Clara Schumann's words. Above the first line of the conductor's score, Brahms penciled in the phrase "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini" — "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." This reference, really an informal dedication, is to his friend and mentor Robert Schumann, often addressed by his friends as "Mynheer Domine," who died while Brahms was working on the Concerto. Such an overt association of his music with definite sentiments was highly unusual for this circumspect composer, and he later crossed out the Latin phrase. The emotion of deep tranquility, however, remains.

The finale, perhaps modeled on that of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3, is a weighty rondo. Its theme is related to the lyrical second subject of the opening movement by one of those masterful strokes that Brahms used to unify his large works. Among the episodes that separate the returns of the rondo theme is one employing a carefully devised fugue that grew directly from Brahms' thorough study of the music of Bach. After a brief, restrained cadenza, the coda turns to the brighter key of D major to provide a stirring conclusion to this Concerto, a work of awesome achievement for the 26-year-old Brahms.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda