

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Opus 15
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Maestoso

Adagio

Allegro non troppo

This early work began life as a piano sketch for a symphony and had things worked out differently would certainly have been Brahms Symphony No. 1. What was wrong with it? Was anything wrong with it? Is there anything wrong with the concerto we have left? Many have tried to outline the historical and musical 'storm' this piece has undergone and I am not certain that there are finite answers to anything.

A storm of disapproval greeted the first performance in Leipzig, reminiscent of the disgraceful partisan opposition leveled at Wagner's *Tannhauser* by the Jockey Club of Paris. Then there is the criticism from Brahms' long time supporter and advisor Joachim about the unmanageable orchestral writing of the opening. There is the irrepressible tendency of brilliant piano writing to break through even though the original dream is clearly symphonic in dimension. Did one medium lose to the other? Then there is the question of Beethoven. Was Brahms so awestruck by Ludwig's legacy that he was unable to present his first symphony to good effect? His style of writing, though in the romantic vein, is pristinely classical in conception and his heroic forebears would have noticed the homage. Twenty-one when he started work on this piece, was it his youth that gave him the "gall" to attempt his first symphony in D minor - a key still resounding in all ears from Beethoven's Ninth? Much of this hypothesis must have contributed to his withdrawal from firm symphonic ground and worse for us, prevented him from presenting his 'real' first symphony for another twenty-two years when he was forty-three. Well, as a "card-carrying member of the Brahms party" -, I am not at all convinced that this work was ill founded, or that the end result is less than formidably superb.

The gigantic arch of this work is immediately apparent in the opening. There have been few opening statements - Beethoven's Fifth comes to mind - that have so immediately and utterly laid out a battle plan, scattering opposing forces. Brahms' genius emerges before the wider world for the first time from these opening bars and then weaves a colossal tapestry of form, content, drama, structure and melody all so interchangeably and simultaneously present that it is clear that this is no "half-baked" junior attempt at writing. There are difficulties throughout the first movement of making the piano part sufficiently sonorous and orchestral (listen for the famous octave trills) and allowing the symphonic pressures of the orchestral part to play accompanist. These are not Brahms' problems, as much as they are our challenges to convey this monumental canvas.

The Adagio has been referred to as the Requiem for Robert Schumann, Brahms' mentor. Schumann had had a difficult personal struggle and the words of the 'Benedictus qui venit...' that Brahms underscored to the opening bars was inspired by the horrendous day when Schumann, hoping to end it all, threw himself into the Rhine. There emerges from this movement, in my opinion, a musical language of 'blessing and healing' that is uniquely Brahms'. If one listens carefully one can hear this magical presence in many of his major works, especially in the moments just before the return of the main theme. The Allegro is a romping rondo - or 'round'. The brilliant theme and its many different executions (listen for the exquisite, if short lived, orchestral fugue) lead like a juggernaut to the tumultuous D major ending that is joyful, thankful and majestic all at once. The parallels with Beethoven's ninth are never far away.