

Concerts of Thursday, March 21, and Saturday, March 23, 2019, at 8:00p

Peter Oundjian, Conductor

Benjamin Grosvenor, piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1 in D minor, Opus 15 (1861)

I. *Maestoso*

II. *Adagio*

III. *Rondo. Allegro non troppo*

Benjamin Grosvenor, piano

Intermission

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

***Also sprach Zarathustra*, Opus 30 (1896)**

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1 in D minor, Opus 15 (1861)

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833 and died in Vienna, Austria, on April 3, 1897. The first performance of the D-minor Piano Concerto took place on January 22, 1859, in Hanover, Germany, with the composer as soloist and Joseph Joachim conducting. In addition to the solo piano, the D-minor Concerto is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Approximate performance time is fifty-one minutes.

First Classical Subscription Performance: October 28, 1952, Rudolf Firkušný, Piano, Henry Sopkin, Conductor.

Most Recent Classical Subscription Performances: February 25 and 27, 2016, Peter Serkin, Piano, Robert Spano, Conductor.

“Like Minerva from the head of Kronion”

On September 30, 1853, a shy, 20-year-old Johannes Brahms appeared at the Düsseldorf home of Robert and Clara Schumann. Brahms, who greatly admired Robert Schumann, hoped that the senior and influential composer would assist his own budding musical career.

Brahms played some of his piano compositions for Robert and Clara, both of whom were immediately impressed by the young man's extraordinary talent. During the following month, Brahms visited the Schumanns on an almost daily basis. Then, on October 28, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* published an article by Schumann, entitled “Neue Bahnen” (“New Paths”), in which the author wrote:

I thought....someone would and must appear, fated to give us the ideal expression of the times, one who would not gain his mastery by gradual stages, but rather would spring fully armed like Minerva from the head of Kronion. And he has come, a young blood at whose cradle graces and heroes mounted guard. His name is Johannes Brahms, from Hamburg, where he has been creating in obscure silence...

When he waves his magic wand and the power of great orchestral and choral forces will aid him, then we shall be shown still more the wonderful glimpses into the secrets of the spirit-world. May the highest genius strengthen him for this...His contemporaries salute him on his first journey through the world where wounds may await him, but also palms and laurels; we welcome him as a powerful fighter...

The suggestion that Brahms should focus his talents on symphonic repertoire became even more emphatic a few months later, when Schumann wrote to the eminent violinist, Joseph Joachim: "Is he flying high—or only amongst flowers? Is he putting drums and trumpets to work yet? He must remember the beginnings of the Beethoven symphonies; he must try to do something of the kind. The point is to make a beginning, then the end comes of itself."

On February 27, 1854, Schumann, plagued by hallucinations, plunged into the Rhine. After his suicide attempt, Schumann was admitted to an asylum in Edenich, where he remained until his death at the age of 46, on July 29, 1856.

Brahms, fearful of the inevitable comparisons with Beethoven, did not complete his First Symphony until 1876, almost a quarter-century after the "New Paths" article. However, shortly after Schumann's attempted suicide, Brahms endeavored to fulfill his mentor's grand expectations. In March of 1854, Brahms began to compose a large-scale sonata for two pianos. Brahms then attempted to convert this work into a symphony, orchestrating (with the aid of Joachim and composer Julius Grimm) the sonata's opening movement. Brahms was dissatisfied with the results.

After Schumann's death, Brahms decided to convert the first movement of his proposed symphony into a piano concerto (other music from the uncompleted symphony later became part of the 1868 *German Requiem*). Brahms reworked the symphony's *Maestoso* opening movement, and composed a new *Adagio* and *Rondo* finale. Brahms completed the score of his First Piano Concerto in March of 1858, although he continued to revise the work almost until the moment of its first performance.

"A brilliant and decisive—failure"

Brahms was the soloist, and Joachim the conductor, in the January 22, 1859 Hanover premiere. The audience reception was rather cool, but that proved to be far preferable to the reaction five days later at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. Julius Rietz conducted and Brahms was again the soloist. The audience, confused by the Concerto's epic length and implacable, stormy character, voiced its disapproval. Edward Bernsdorf, critic for the *Signale*, characterized the work as "a composition dragged to its grave...for more than three quarters of an hour one must endure this rooting and rummaging, this straining and tugging, this tearing and patching of phrases and flourishes!"

The following day, Brahms wrote to Joachim:

My Concerto has had here a brilliant and decisive—failure...At the conclusion three pairs of hands were brought together very slowly, whereupon a perfectly distinct hissing from all sides forbade any such demonstration...In spite of everything, the Concerto will meet with approval when I have improved its form and the next one will

be quite different. I believe this is the best thing that can happen to one; it forces one to concentrate one's thoughts and increases one's courage. After all, I am only experimenting and feeling my way as yet. But the hissing was too much of a good thing, wasn't it?

Brahms did revise his First Piano Concerto, and the score was published in 1861. The composer received his vindication four years later, when he played the Concerto at a triumphant Mannheim concert, led by Hermann Levi. Since that time, the eminence of this challenging, magnificent work has remained secure.

Musical Analysis

I. *Maestoso*—The Concerto opens with an orchestral introduction. The stormy principal theme, initially played by the first violins and cellos over thundering timpani, reflects, according to Joachim, Brahms's despair upon learning of Schumann's attempted suicide. The soloist enters, quietly at first, but soon reprises the storm with which the Concerto began. The piano offers an unaccompanied presentation of a noble, *espressivo* melody. A series of *fortissimo* octaves by the soloist initiates the development section. It is the soloist who launches the recapitulation of the movement's tempestuous opening. The coda, again initiated by the soloist, begins softly, but soon reaches its furious climax.

II. *Adagio*—When Brahms first composed the opening melody of the *Adagio*, he wrote over it the words, "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini" ("Blessed is he who has come in the name of the master"), in all likelihood a reference to Schumann, whom the younger composer often called "Mynheer Domini." But it should also be noted that on December 30, 1856, Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann, "I am painting a lovely portrait of you. It is to be the *Adagio*."

The *Adagio* is in A—B—A form. The violins and violas play the serene, principal melody, to which the soloist soon responds. The central episode is slightly more agitated, but the opening section returns, and, after a fully-composed cadenza for the soloist, the *Adagio* ends in hushed reverence.

III. *Rondo. Allegro non troppo*—The soloist immediately presents the vigorous principal theme of the *Rondo* finale. All of the various contrasting sections are ingeniously derived from that main theme. The closing pages feature two fully-transcribed cadenzas. A solo horn heralds the thrilling conclusion of the Brahms D-minor Piano Concerto.

***Also sprach Zarathustra*, Opus 30 (1896)**

Richard Strauss was born in Munich, Germany, on June 11, 1864, and died in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, on September 8, 1949. The first performance of *Also sprach Zarathustra* took place in Frankfurt, Germany,

on November 27, 1896, with the composer conducting the Museums-Orchester of Frankfurt-am-Main. *Also sprach Zarathustra* is scored for two piccolos, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, two tubas, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, orchestra bells, suspended cymbal, chime in E, two harps, organ, and strings. Approximate performance time is thirty-three minutes.

First Classical Subscription Performances: December 15 and 16, 1971, Maurice Abravanel, Conductor.

Most Recent Classical Subscription Performances: June 13-15, 2013, Robert Spano Conductor.

During the years 1895-97, Richard Strauss composed three orchestral tone poems based upon famous literary characters. The first, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* (1895), is a rollicking tour-de-force depicting the exploits of the medieval jokester. The last, *Don Quixote* (1897), is a witty and often affecting musical portrayal of the misadventures of Cervantes's beloved "Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance." Strauss's inspiration for the middle work in this trilogy was of a far different nature—Friedrich Nietzsche's epic philosophic poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*) (1883-5).

"My homage to the genius of Nietzsche"

The protagonist in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is based upon the ancient Persian prophet, also known as Zoroaster. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the prophet leaves the solitude of his mountain refuge to share his wisdom with mankind. During the course of the poem, Nietzsche, in the person of Zarathustra, denounces the very foundations of society—organized religion, democracy, and civilization—he believes inhibit man's ability to reach his greatest potential.

Strauss was first drawn to Nietzsche's masterwork during the composer's preparations for his opera *Guntram* (1894). He began composition of the score on February 4, 1896, and completed the work on August 24 of that year. The composer led the Museums-Orchester of Frankfurt-am-Main in the November 27, 1896 premiere. Prior to the first performance, Strauss provided this brief program:

First movement: Sunrise, Man feels the power of God. *Andante religioso*. But man still longs. He plunges into passion (second movement) and finds no peace. He turns toward science, and tries in vain to solve life's problem in a fugue (third movement). Then agreeable dance tunes sound and he becomes an individual, and his soul soars upward while the world sinks far below him.

Nietzsche, an ardent music-lover and amateur composer, once remarked to his friend, Peter Gast, of *Also sprach Zarathustra*: "I almost believe it belongs among the symphonies." Gustav Mahler quoted a portion of *Zarathustra's* text in his Third Symphony (1896), as did Frederick Delius in *A Mass of Life* (1905).

By contrast, Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* is a purely orchestral representation of Nietzsche's work. From the time of the premiere, commentators have attempted to find a direct relationship between the music of *Also sprach Zarathustra* and Nietzsche's text. Strauss understood the difficulty, perhaps even futility, of attempting a musical depiction of Nietzsche's philosophy. At the time of the tone poem's December, 1896, Berlin premiere, Strauss confessed:

I did not intend to write philosophical music or portray Nietzsche's great work musically. I meant rather to convey in music an idea of the evolution of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of development, religious as well as scientific, up to Nietzsche's idea of the *Superman*. The whole symphonic poem is intended as my homage to the genius of Nietzsche, which found its greatest exemplification in his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Musical Analysis

Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* opens with the famous "Sunrise" Introduction, followed by eight sections, performed without pause. Each has a title taken from a chapter in Nietzsche's book.

I. *Sunrise (Sonnenaufgang)*—Over string bass tremolos, reinforced by the contrabassoon, organ and bass drum, the trumpets play a three-note ascending theme. The orchestra responds with fanfares and thunderous timpani attacks. This episode is twice repeated, with the organ concluding the glorious final statement.

II. *Of the Backworldsman (Von den Hinterweltlern)*—Strauss originally entitled this section *Of the Divine (Von Göttlichen)*. Muted cellos and basses introduce another ascending theme that returns throughout the work. Muted horns intone a portion of the holy chant *Credo in unum Deum (I believe in one God)*. A lovely melody for divided strings builds to a climax and then subsides. An ascending viola passage serves as a bridge to the following section.

III. *Of the Great Longing (Von der grossen Sehnsucht)*—This brief episode presents transformations of the ascending theme from the previous section and the "Sunrise" motif. The organ plays the opening of the *Magnificat*, while the horns reprise the *Credo*. A furious rush of activity leads to the next section.

IV. *Of Joys and Passions (Von den Freuden und Leidenschaften)*—A brief, tempestuous passage finally abates in the closing measures.

V. *Song of the Grave (Das Grablied)*—Echoes of the previous section combine with the “Sunrise” motif and the “Longing” theme.

VI. *Of Science (Von der Wissenschaft)*—The cellos and basses quietly inaugurate an extended orchestral fugue based upon the “Sunrise” motif. The severity of this episode is briefly interrupted before an agitated passage signals the fugue’s return in the following section.

VII. *The Convalescent (Der Genesende)*—The fugue subject is now violently transformed. The tension mounts until the orchestra erupts with a massive C-Major chord. A brief pause precedes a slow, mysterious interlude. Suddenly, there is a flurry of activity. Brass fanfares punctuate swirling wind and string figures.

VIII. *The Dance Song (Das Tanzlied)*—This section presents a waltz in the grand Viennese manner, showcasing a solo violin. The music grows to a voluptuous climax.

IX. *Night Wanderer’s Song (Das Nachwandlerlied)*—For the final episode, Strauss retained the original title of the parallel chapter in the book (Nietzsche ultimately changed it to *The Drunken Song*). The finale opens with a relentless tolling of the bell. The mood calms, leading to the lyrical final section. The closing bars present an eerie juxtaposition of the key of B in the higher-pitched instruments with the key of C in the cellos and double-basses, whose trio of pizzicato notes conclude Richard Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*.