

The Chopin piano concertos are simply beautiful to hear, whether from a seat in the audience or from a seat on the stage. I especially love the second movement of the Piano Concerto No. 2 and always wish I could see the performer's hands!

ERIK DYKE, NCS DOUBLE BASS

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 21

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

BORN March 1, 1810, in Zelazova Wola, Poland; died October 17, 1849, in Paris

PREMIERE Composed 1829-1830; first performance March 17, 1830, Warsaw, with the composer as soloist

OVERVIEW

Chopin's chosen medium was the piano as a solo instrument. In his late teens, he tried to combine the piano with the orchestra, creating in addition to the two piano concertos the Variations Op. 2, Fantasia Op. 13, Concert Rondo Op. 14, and the Grand Polonaise Op. 22. But he was uncomfortable with the medium, and after age 20, he never again wrote for a large ensemble. In all these works, the orchestral scoring is so light that during the 19th century, it was fashionable to re-orchestrate and "improve" it. Be that as it may, Chopin probably intended the orchestra to serve as a delicate background for the soloist, especially since he himself was known to have had a rather light touch; heavy orchestration would have drowned him out.

The F-Minor Concerto, although listed as No. 2, was the first composed but the second to be published. As was so often the case with composers in the Romantic era, the inspiration for the concerto came as a response to unrequited love. The object of his ardor was a voice student at the Warsaw Conservatory. But by the time the concerto

was published six years later, he had long forgotten her and dedicated it instead to his pupil, Countess Delphine Potocka, a gifted singer and close friend.

The concerto was received enthusiastically at the premiere, but Chopin had his doubts as to whether the audience actually understood it: “The first Allegro... received, indeed, the reward of a ‘Bravo,’ but I believe this was given because the public wished to show that it understands and knows how to appreciate serious music. There are people enough in all countries who like to assume the air of connoisseurs!”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Chopin was gifted and innovative in his use of harmony and phrase structure. The concerto capitalizes on all the qualities that were to catapult him to fame in Paris. It opens in a gruff mood, followed by a more lyrical second theme introduced by the solo oboe. When the piano enters in a standard double exposition, it inserts its own second theme before taking up the oboe theme. In a major departure from true development as understood by Beethoven, Chopin’s music never argues; rather, his development could be described as a commentary on the themes and on what had gone on before. His customary tendency is to embellish and decorate the piano line.

The slow movement is intense and lyrical, with the ornamentation of the main theme gradually becoming an integral part of it. With its seemingly endless, fluid lines, elaborate ornamentation, and recitative-type passages, this movement has led scholars to compare Chopin with the contemporaneous Italian bel canto style of opera composer Vincenzo Bellini, whom Chopin greatly admired.

The finale is a rondo in which the third episode is in the rhythm of a mazurka. The mazurka became one of Chopin’s signature rhythms, an expression of his nationalistic feeling. It originated as a Polish folk dance in triple meter from the Mazovia district near Warsaw.

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, bass trombone, timpani, strings

Symphony in Three Movements

IGOR STRAVINSKY

BORN June 17, 1882,

in Lomonosov, Russia; died April 6, 1971, in New York City

PREMIERE Composed 1942-1945; first performance January 24, 1946, by the New York Philharmonic, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

Commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, the Symphony in Three Movements had probably the longest gestation of any of Igor Stravinsky's works. He began it in April 1942 and worked on it in fits and starts until August 1945.

There is an austerity, even violence (particularly in the outer movements) that suggests the larger world events around which Stravinsky composed the symphony. Given the composer's tendency over his lifetime to discuss his own music, it is natural to want to hear in his own words something about the background of his works. But Stravinsky was an off-the-cuff self-commentator, his remarks more readily reflecting his mood at the time of the interview than at the time of composition. He originally said that the symphony was written "...under the impression of world events. I will not say that it expressed my feelings about them, but only that... they excited my musical imagination." On a later occasion, he added some specific and detailed impressions that supposedly influenced the music, but that sound too much like explanations after the

fact. He also added that “The symphony is not programmatic. Composers combine notes. That’s all.”

According to Robert Craft — whose extensive published conversations with the composer during the 1960s have driven scholars into veritable minefields of misinformation — Stravinsky claimed that the first movement was “inspired by a war film, this time of scorched-earth tactics in China.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony is replete with Stravinsky’s signature rhythmic complexity. It opens with a brutal fanfare, followed by a series of themes that have more of a rhythmic than melodic profile. The middle part of the first movement, however, is more thinly scored — with solos for violin, oboe, and flute — before a return to the opening violence.

According to the composer’s friends, the first movement was envisaged originally as a symphonic work with solo piano (although not a true concerto), and the piano still plays a major role in the movement.

Many years after the fact, Stravinsky admitted that the second movement originated from the suggestion from his neighbor, the novelist Franz Werfel, that he compose the music for the film made of Werfel’s novel *The Song of Bernadette*. Like all of the composer’s movie projects, this one came to naught as Hollywood opted for blander and sweeter music. It may explain, however, the prominent role of the flute and harp in this movement, as well as the fact that the emotional tone hardly suggests world events of the early 1940s.

The second movement opens with a simple melody for solo flute, accompanied by harp and pizzicato lower strings. There follows a series of subtle changes in mood, all of them featuring solo flute and solo oboe, before a return to a variation on the opening melody. A short interlude leads directly to the finale.

The finale opens with a heavy, strident fanfare that the composer later explained as his reaction to newsreels and documentaries of goose-stepping Nazi soldiers: “The

square march beat, the brass band instrumentation, the grotesque crescendo on the tuba, these are all related to those abhorrent pictures..." The march leads to a static fugue, in which the piano and harp have a prominent voice. The symphony concludes with an extensive, fast coda.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, three clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, strings

Symphony No. 35 in D Major, K. 385, "Haffner"

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

BORN January 27, 1756, in Salzburg; died December 5, 1791, in Vienna

PREMIERE Composed 1782; first performance March 23, 1783 at the Vienna Burgtheater, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

In 1771, Mozart was hired by the orchestra of the new Archbishop of Salzburg, Hieronymus Colloredo, beginning a running war between the two that lasted nearly a decade. Colloredo valued the exceptional talents of the Mozarts — both father and son — but was domineering and controlling. Wolfgang bridled under Colloredo's rigid rule, escaping Salzburg whenever he could to tour Europe — openly, but unsuccessfully, seeking a better job.

In 1776, Mozart received a commission from the family of Salzburg's former mayor, Sigmund Haffner, for a large serenade to be played at his daughter's wedding (known today as the Haffner Serenade, K. 250). The family was pleased, and in the

summer of 1782, a year after Mozart finally moved to Vienna to seek his fortune as one of Europe's first freelance musicians, they commissioned a similar work to celebrate Haffner's elevation to the aristocracy. Busy with his own wedding and the staging of his opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, Mozart dragged his feet but finally — after his father's constant nagging — sent the Haffners a new work.

Half a year later, while planning for a series of concerts in Vienna, Mozart asked his father to return the manuscript. He removed the opening and closing marches and the repeat of the first movement's exposition, rewrote the minuet, and added flutes and clarinets to the outer movements, repackaging it as *Symphony No. 35*. Destined to become a perennial favorite, the symphony was likewise a great success at the sold-out concert of its premiere; even the emperor applauded heartily, giving the young composer a gift of 25 ducats — although Mozart, ever in a financial pinch, had hoped for more.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

One of the attractions of this symphony is its sheer beauty of melody and lucidity of construction. The opening movement dispenses with the customary slow introduction, launching right into a “statement – response” theme; the first phrase is brash and angular, the second is subdued. The famous “Haffner” theme reappears in ingenious transformations. It dominates the entire movement despite the brief appearance of the contrasting second theme and a closing theme.

The *Andante* is in the typical ternary (ABA) form that reigned for slow movements — although with variations — from the Baroque through the 19th century. Mozart creates a particularly long, multi-sectioned theme, and provides an only mildly contrasting middle (B) section. His repeat of the A section contains no variation, probably because he felt that the melodic grace and complexity of the theme did not call for “gilding the lily.”

One of the distinctions between Mozart and Haydn is that the former nearly always wrote elegant, courtly minuets, while the latter made his sound like country dances. In this symphony, however, Mozart musters the full orchestra for a heavy minuet. The trio, for strings alone, is more graceful.

In the brief finale, a hybrid rondo-sonata form complete with two contrasting themes, Mozart pulls a few surprises with some asymmetrical phrasing, unusual key modulations, and a coda that takes off sounding as if it might be a new development. With the exception of the Andante, the symphony capitalizes on contrasting dynamics, which, with its Haydnesque minuet, strongly suggests the influence of the older composer.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings

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