

Brahms' Second Piano Concerto is a fascinatingly complex work with instrumental textures similar to those of chamber music — and I have the great joy of performing it with one of my oldest friends from childhood, Stephen Hough.

GRANT LLEWELLYN, NCS MUSIC DIRECTOR

Overture No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 23

LOUISE FARRENC

BORN May 31, 1804, in Paris; died September 15, 1875, in Paris

PREMIERE Composed 1834; first performance 1835, in Paris

THE STORY

There are few better examples in the history of music of innate genius, rigorous training, steadfast ambition, and sheer hard work overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles than Louise Farrenc. She was born in Paris in 1804 into a distinguished artistic family — her father and brother were both Prix de Rome-winning sculptors — and started studying piano and music theory at age six. At 15, she broke a significant gender barrier by being accepted into the previously all-male composition class at the Paris Conservatory. Two years later she married Aristide Farrenc, a flutist at the Théâtre-italien, respected teacher, and founder of a music publishing firm.

During the 1830s, Louise Farrenc established an impressive career in Paris as a pianist, composer, and teacher, and undertook several concert tours around the country. She began composing seriously during those years — not just small pieces for piano, but also large-scale chamber and orchestral works, including two piano quintets, two piano trios, a nonet and sextet for mixed ensembles, and sonatas for cello and violin, as well as two overtures and three symphonies, which received notable performances.

Hardly any other significant French composer was then writing such challenging abstract works. In 1842, Farrenc was appointed piano professor at the Paris Conservatory and distinguished herself in that capacity for the next three decades — the only woman to hold such a prominent permanent position at the school during the entire 19th century. When Louise Farrenc died in Paris on September 15, 1875, she was regarded as one of the foremost female musicians of her time.

LISTENING TIPS

Each of Farrenc's two overtures follow a well-crafted and finely orchestrated sonata form. The Overture No. 1 opens with an introduction whose broad gait and noble gravity pay homage to the opening of many of Haydn's mature symphonies. The main theme is swift and agitated; the complementary subject, begun by the clarinet, is lyrical and more relaxed in mood. The development section skillfully weaves the lyrical phrases of the second theme with the restless rhythms of the main theme. After a full stop, the earlier musical ideas return to close this unjustly little-known work of one of the 19th century's most gifted musicians.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings

Symphony No. 4 in C Minor, D. 417, “Tragic”

FRANZ SCHUBERT

BORN January 31, 1797, in Vienna; died November 19, 1828, in Vienna

PREMIERE Composed 1816; first performance November 19, 1849, in Leipzig, August Ferdinand Riccius conducting

THE STORY

Between 1814 and 1816, Schubert worked as a teacher in his father’s school in suburban Vienna. He cared little for the situation and soothed his frustration by composing: he wrote nearly 150 songs, four symphonies, a Mass and other church music, piano pieces, and a half-dozen operettas and melodramas during this time.

The Fourth Symphony was completed in 1816, though it was not premiered until more than two decades after the composer’s death. Sometime after it was finished, Schubert appended the word “Tragic” to the last page. The term may have referred to the composer’s dire financial situation at the time, or to the stormy nature of the first and last movements, or to the powerful, heroic emotions of Beethoven’s compositions he was trying to incorporate into his large instrumental works.

LISTENING TIPS

First movement: The symphony opens with a stern introduction that leads to the bustling main theme, given by the violins when the quick tempo begins; the contrasting second theme is not so much lyrically peaceful as emotionally tethered. A compact development section is based on the stormy main theme. Although it recounts earlier thematic materials, the recapitulation dispenses the movement’s emotional clouds with a final *coda* in a bright tonality, C major.

Second movement: Had Schubert intended this to be a truly tragic symphony, he would not have allowed the second movement to glow with such sweet serenity.

Third movement: The third movement, though marked “Menuetto,” is closer in spirit and technique to one of Beethoven’s rousing scherzos. The theme of the central trio recalls the opening gesture of the first movement.

Fourth movement: The finale resumes the troubled and impetuous motion of the first movement, but the close of the symphony turns to the joyous key of C major — the tragedy, such as it was, transformed to triumph.

INSTRUMENTATION

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

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83

JOHANNES BRAHMS

BORN May 7, 1833, in Hamburg; died April 3, 1897, in Vienna

PREMIERE Composed 1878 and 1881; first performance November 9, 1881, in Budapest, conducted by Alexander Erkel with the composer as soloist

THE STORY

In April 1878, Brahms journeyed to Goethe’s “land where the lemon trees bloom.”

Though he found the music of Italy ghastly (he complained of hearing one opera that consisted wholly of final cadences), he loved the cathedrals, the sculptures, the artwork, and especially the countryside. Spring was just turning into summer during his visit, and

he wrote to his friend Clara Schumann, “You can have no conception of how beautiful it is here.” Still under the spell of the beneficent Italian climate, Brahms sketched themes for his Second Piano Concerto on his return to Austria on the eve of his 45th birthday. Other matters pressed, however, and the concerto was put aside. Three years later, during the spring of 1881, he returned to Italy and was inspired by that second trip to resume composition on the concerto. The score was completed by July.

Whether or not the halcyon influence of Italy can be detected in the music of the Concerto No. 2 is for each listener to decide. This work is certainly more mellow than the stormy First Concerto, introduced more than 20 years earlier. Whether that quality is the result of Brahms’ trips to the sunny south or of a decade of imbibing Viennese *Gemütlichkeit* (geniality) — or simply of greater maturity — remains a matter for speculation.

LISTENING TIPS

First movement: The concerto opens with a sylvan horn call answered by sweeping piano arpeggios. These initial gestures are introductory to the sonata form proper, which begins with the entry of the full orchestra. Of the many ideas presented in the exposition, most are lyrical, but one theme is vigorously rhythmic. The development uses all of the thematic material. The recapitulation is ushered in by the solo horn.

Second movement: It is rare for a concerto to have more than three movements, but the second movement, a *scherzo*, was added by Brahms to provide a contrast within the overall architecture of the work.

Third movement: This movement is a touching nocturne based on the song of the solo cello heard immediately at the beginning. An agitated central section gives way to long, magical phrases for the clarinets that lead to a return of the solo cello’s lovely theme.

Fourth movement: The finale fuses rondo and sonata elements in a style reminiscent of Hungarian Gypsy music.

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings

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