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MAX BRAGADO-DARMAN *Music Director*
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CONCERT 2 PROGRAM NOTES

by Alicia Mastromonaco ★

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791) PIANO CONCERTO NO. 27 IN B-FLAT MAJOR, K. 595 (1791)

Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's final piano concerto is not only a beautiful piece, bursting with Mozart's lyricism and inventiveness, but it also illuminates elements of Viennese concert life in the late eighteenth century. In Mozart's Vienna, professional orchestras as such did not exist as they do today. Some nobles employed a court orchestra of musicians who would play private concerts for their patrons. If a musician not associated with a specific court wanted to perform a concert, he (for it was usually a "he") could organize a benefit concert for himself. Mozart organized many benefit concerts during his short life, but Vienna experienced several changes to the concert culture in the 1780s, and by the summer of 1788 he had not only stopped writing piano concertos, but did not announce or perform in any concerts for three years. It was not until his friend and clarinetist, Joseph Bähr, asked him to play at a benefit concert that Mozart composed what would become his final piano concerto; K.595, in B-flat Major. The performance, in March of 1791, would be Mozart's final performance as a soloist.

This work is a lyrical concerto, full of Mozart's operatic inclinations, almost chamber-music-like. The middle movement in particular is drawn from a song that Mozart composed around the same time in January 1791. The lyrics, "*Komm, lieber Mai, und mache/Die Bäume wieder grün...*" ("Come, lovely May, and make/ The trees green again..."), by Christian Adolf Overbeck, connote a rebirth of sorts, a child-like attention to natural beauty, and a zest for the coming months after Mozart's protracted illness from which he had just recovered.

Mozart was a true keyboard virtuoso, and included elements of both musical fireworks and lyrical simplicity for connoisseur and lay listeners in his audiences. His twenty-seventh piano concerto is not exactly a showpiece in the conventional sense. The piece sounds more like a conversation between the orchestra and soloist, rather than a vehicle for the soloists' technical virtuosity. As with Brahms's first piano concerto, the composer challenged audience expectations by giving them a piece that did not fit entirely with what they expected, but prioritized the composition above virtuosity. The era of composer-performers who would compose works to perform themselves was changing. Today, it is relatively uncommon for composers to perform their own compositions. Possibly because they are too difficult for anyone but virtuoso musicians to play, or because classical music has become increasingly specialized. Regardless of the reason, we can be grateful to Joseph Bähr for including Mozart in his benefit concert.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897), PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN D MINOR, OP. 15 (1858)

Johannes Brahms was famously terrified of composing a symphony with the immense shadow of Beethoven looming over his compositional imagination. He did not premiere his first symphony until he was well into his forties, and even then, one of the most common criticisms (one Brahms was keenly aware of), was that the symphony sounded as if it were Beethoven's tenth symphony. Brahms's fear of composing a symphony stems from his belief that no piece could measure up to Beethoven's masterpieces, and in 1870 exclaimed, "I shall never compose a symphony! ...You have no idea how someone like me feels when he hears such a giant marching behind him all the time." This burden was not that of a young unknown composer, but one who had been launched to fame by the well-known composer and music critic, Robert Schumann. Schumann was an ardent supporter of Brahms, and introduced the young composer to the musical world in 1853, when Brahms was only twenty years old. In his *Neue Zeitschrift für Music* (New Magazine for Music), Schumann wrote, "There inevitably must appear a musician called to give expression to his times in ideal fashion; a musician who would reveal his mastery not in a

gradual evolution, but like Athene would spring fully armed from Zeus's head. And such a one *has* appeared; a young man whose cradle Graces and Heroes have stood watch. His name is *Johannes Brahms*, and he comes from Hamburg, where he has been working in quiet obscurity...Even outwardly he bore the marks proclaiming: 'This is a chosen one.' Sitting at the piano he began to disclose wonderful regions to us. We were drawn into even more enchanting spheres." This famous passage was an introduction that many composers could only dream of, but for Brahms, it set a bar that he was not sure he could ever achieve.

Brahms's fear of not living up to the public's symphonic expectations is important to note because Brahms composed several works that could have been, or even were, symphonies before the composer's trepidation forced him to alter them into other genres. His first piano concerto is one such piece. The work was originally conceived of as a symphony, and a sonata for two pianos, before Brahms finally reworked it as a piano concerto.

The piece puzzled listeners at its premier, prompting audiences to question what a concerto was supposed to be. Was a concerto a vessel for the virtuoso soloist to dazzle and awe the audience with musical pyrotechnics as had become the norm in the nineteenth century, in the style of composer-performers Paganini and Liszt? Or, was it a conversation between soloist and orchestra, not intended to peacock the virtuosity of the performer, but rather to display the compositional prowess of the creator? Brahms was not the first to pose this musical query; Mozart does something similar in his final concerto, the other piece on this program, by making the concerto less flashy and more chambermusic-esque. But mid-nineteenth-century audiences had come to expect a level of brilliance and virtuosity from composer-soloists, and so the different style that Brahms presented them with at his performance of the premiere was puzzling, to say the least. As Brahms biographer Jan Swafford asserts, the expectation of a nineteenth-century piano concerto was "virtuosic brilliance, dazzling cadenzas, not too many minor keys, not too tragic." Swafford continues, "To the degree that these were the rules, the D minor Concerto violated every one of them."

The first private performance of the concerto in Hannover, conducted by Brahms's dear friend, the violinist and conductor Joseph Joachim, with Brahms himself at the piano, received a polite response. However, five days later, when the piece was premiered in Leipzig with Julius Reitz conducting the Gewandhaus orchestra, the audience found the piece hardly appealing. Nonetheless, the concerto has today become one of the standard piano works.

Brahms changed many of audiences' expectations of concertos, and of symphonic literature in general. By looking at the past, reimagining and drawing from the now-canonical works of composers like Beethoven and Mozart, Brahms saw his work as part of the historical lineage of the great composers before him, and used his compositions as an opportunity to not only play a masterful work as a soloist, but to provide an intricate and powerful composition that was as complex as it was beautiful. ★



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Alicia has played with the Monterey Symphony since 2007. She is also a member of the Carmel Bach Festival and Marin Symphony. A San Francisco native, she began her music studies at age seven on the piano, and took up the horn after switching from the trumpet in her middle school band program. She earned Bachelors of Music

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