



CHAN 6621(2)

Romantic Piano Concertos

Brahms
Piano Concerto No. 1

Mendelssohn
Capriccio brillante

Schumann
Piano Concerto

Saint-Saëns
Piano Concerto No. 2

Israella Margalit piano
London Symphony Orchestra
London Philharmonic Orchestra

Bryden Thomson

CHANDOS
COLLECT

Romantic Piano Concertos

COMPACT DISC ONE

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 15* 48:12
in D minor

- | | | | |
|---|-----|------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I | Maestoso | 22:41 |
| 2 | II | Adagio | 13:44 |
| 3 | III | Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo | 11:47 |

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 4 | Capriccio brillant, Op. 22* 10:50 in B minor Andante – Allegro con fuoco |
|---|---|

TT 59:20

COMPACT DISC TWO

Robert Schumann (1810–1856)

Piano Concerto, Op. 54† 34:17
in A minor

- | | | | |
|---|-----|-------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I | Allegro affettuoso | 16:59 |
| 2 | II | Intermezzo: Andantino – | 6:23 |
| 3 | III | Allegro vivace | 10:53 |

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)

Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 22† 24:16
in G minor

- | | | | |
|---|-----|-------------------|-------|
| 4 | I | Andante sostenuto | 11:32 |
| 5 | II | Scherzando | 5:45 |
| 6 | III | Presto | 6:57 |

TT 58:40

Israëla Margalit piano
London Symphony Orchestra*
London Philharmonic Orchestra†
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Romantic Piano Concertos

Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 1

Brahms's First Piano Concerto was premiered in Hanover on 22 January 1859, with the composer as soloist under the direction of Joseph Joachim. The new work was received indifferently by the audience, who genuinely failed to understand a concerto in which soloist and orchestra were virtually equal partners. The second performance, given five days later in Leipzig, caused an uproar, the music being booed and hissed at regular intervals. Despite this unpromising start it has established itself as one of the most celebrated concertos of the nineteenth century.

The origins of the Concerto date back to a Sonata for Two Pianos written in 1854, part of which Brahms rewrote and orchestrated the following year, with the intention of using it as the basis for a symphony. What eventually emerged, however, was the first movement of the D minor Concerto. If its anguished mood and sense of struggle owe something to Beethoven, then the generosity of its thematic material suggests the influence of Mozart, in particular his D minor Piano Concerto, K. 466, which similarly introduces the soloist with material that is both new and in complete

contrast to the preceding orchestral introduction. The first movement contains no less than five themes of structural importance, so it is little wonder that Brahms had so much trouble with its construction. He constantly revised it, until such was the integration of the soloist's part with the orchestra that he dispensed with the customary solo cadenza altogether.

If, as has been suggested, the agonized opening of the first movement was written in direct response to Robert Schumann's nervous collapse and attempted suicide in 1854, then the elegiac calm of the central *Adagio* was clearly inspired by Brahms's feeling for Schumann's wife, Clara. In December 1856 the composer had admitted to her in a letter that the second movement was written particularly with her in mind. A further clue to the origins of this movement is provided by the heading 'Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini', which Brahms erased from the final score. Some commentators have suggested that this movement may have begun life as part of a Mass which was later discarded. Others have noted a further connection in that Robert Schumann was known by his closest friends as 'Mynheer Domini'.

The dramatic opening of the Rondo finale recalls the mood of the first movement, but with material that is both more classical in outline and economical in expression. It is symptomatic of this tighter control that the contrastingly lyrical episodes, two of Brahms's finest melodic inspirations, are well contained. The supreme confidence of this music shows little sign of the many drastic revisions that were made to achieve this new concision of style, for it was in this work that the most crucial formative influences in Brahms's life, both musical and personal, finally found artistic expression and were synthesized into a musical structure of symphonic proportions.

Mendelssohn: Capriccio brillant

Early in 1832, exactly twenty-seven years before the first performance of the Brahms Concerto, Mendelssohn was convalescing in Paris after contracting cholera towards the end of a long and exhausting European tour. He was never particularly at home in the French capital and it was the excited anticipation of his return to England that inspired him to write the *Capriccio brillant* in just two days. The premiere took place in London in May 1832 with Mendelssohn at the piano, and such was the enthusiasm of the audience that the piece had to be immediately encores to further cheers and general approval.

The *Capriccio* opens with a beautifully

poised *Andante* in B major, followed by a stormy sonata-form *Allegro con fuoco*, written very much in the style of his recently completed First Piano Concerto, with typically scintillating scale and arpeggio figurations. Indeed, the whole piece is written with a deftness of touch that fully encapsulates Mendelssohn's neo-classical propensity for lightness and clarity of texture.

© Julian Haylock

Schumann: Piano Concerto

Few compositions are held in greater affection than the Schumann Piano Concerto. Its success is perhaps partially explained not only by a rare lyrical charm and inventiveness but by the union of a taut, if superficially free, structure with a rich vein of poetry. Virtually monothematic, there is also great variety of mood, and Florestan (the man of action) and Eusebius (the dreamer), – two of Schumann's most dearly cherished fictions – are in constant dialogue, opposition and accord. Once described as 'a genius struggling with the angel of tradition', Schumann daringly opts for a positively Lisztian form of melodic recreation rather than classical development. The listener's sense of successful links and transplants, for example, is memorably reinforced by the principle subject's transmutation into a melting A flat episode

where Eusebius is at his most magically communing and introspective, the rhythm of his speech subtly altered and sifted to suggest a pensive yet restless and questing nature. Less elaborately but no less remarkably, the second subject is simply the first, deftly changed into the relative major.

The first movement started life in 1841 as a *Fantasie*, and the second and third movements were born in 1845, their umbilical cord still firmly attached to their parent. The opening outburst (an inspiration for the later theatrical flourishes that commence both the Grieg and Rachmaninov First Piano Concertos) is countered by one of Schumann's most assuaging melodies, already alive with rhythmic variety within itself and ripe for constant offshoots and variations. These include a cascading, foam-crested *animato*, volleys of octaves and an impassioned transformation of the principle theme, plangently and radiantly harmonized. The calming of such a heated argument is one of many masterstrokes and reminds us that this is essentially a musician's concerto rather than a superficial pyrotechnical alternative. Past gladiators of the keyboard who rejoiced in note spinners such as Spohr or Ries must have been sadly disappointed by a work in which even the cadenza is strong, dignified and relatively restrained.

The *Intermezzo*'s child-like simplicity is quintessential Schumann, the gentle patter of

its principle subject contrasted by the cello's heart-easing melody, a far cry from *Gemütlichkeit* or the complacency inseparable from inferior examples of German romanticism. This magical interlude closes with a cyclic reappearance of the Concerto's opening theme, and horns, combined with the piano's phantom trail of fifths, provide a remarkable transition to the finale's ebullient curtain-raiser. Music of a refined energy and brio, the *Allegro vivace* is an idealization of waltz rhythm and includes a second subject in E major syncopated to suggest that 3/4 has become 3/2. Such devices are part and parcel of a teemingly inventive imagination which also provides enough awkward hair-pin bends to remind the pianistically unwary that the Schumann Concerto is technically as well as poetically demanding.

Saint-Saëns: Piano Concerto No. 2

Unlike the Schumann Concerto, Saint-Saëns's Second Piano Concerto is unapologetically virtuosic and glitters with a wholly French wit, sophistication and style. Written and performed within three weeks it is a monument to Saint-Saëns's phenomenal facility, journeying with typical aplomb from Bach to Offenbach. The piano's opening and canonic ascent bursts with startling rapidity into a blaze of Lisztian rhetoric before the orchestra announces the first theme based on

a *tantum ergo* by Saint-Saëns's teacher Gabriel Fauré. This is of exceptional quality though the halting, charmingly terraced second subject, double note elaboration and impassioned declamation that follow are a far cry from Fauré's serene and subtly complex genius. A storming development and an unusually ambitious and inclusive cadenza proceed to a hushed apotheosis of all that has gone before (virtuosity recollected in tranquillity, if you like) and the traditional and emphatic end in no way erases one's sense of an imaginative daring with which Saint-Saëns is rarely credited.

All seriousness or mock-seriousness is resolved in the *Allegro scherzando* which elevates Mendelssohnian, elfin dexterity to a new and sparkling height. The galumphing second subject, set within such an aerial and scintillating context, is an outrageous surprise and quickly sets the seal on the music's

immediate and understandable popularity. With a sly echo of the timpani's opening rhythm the soloist concludes the music's fanciful flight with a delicate *leggerissimo* spray of arpeggios before joining the orchestra in two quick-silver grace notes; a Puckish and insouciant farewell.

The final whirlwind *tarantella* may betray the speed with which it was written yet, like the second movement, it will set even the least susceptible heads nodding and feet tapping. The swinging minim chords at the close are a bold, resourceful stroke and so is the breathless race of events, something clearly designed to leave everyone – and particularly the pianist – breathless but elated. Few concertos tingle with such irresistible *joie de vivre*, or show how levity can become elevated to such a seductive virtue.

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Jack Mitchell

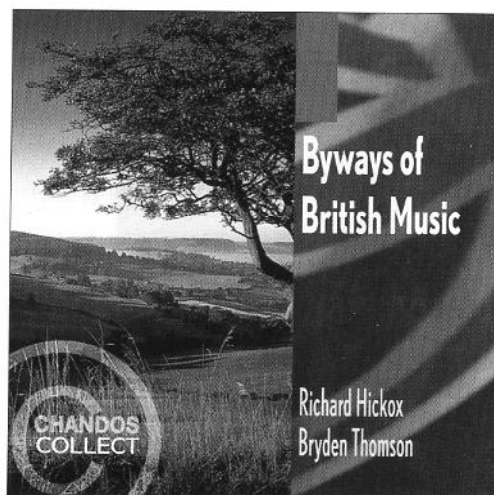
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ROMANTIC PIANO CONCERTOS - Margalit/LSO/ LPO/Thomson



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