CONCERTO No. 1 IN D MINOR FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA, Op. 15

By JOHANNES BRAHMS
Born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg;
died April 3, 1897, in Vienna

On September 30, 1853, a 20-year-old composer and pianist named Johannes Brahms timidly knocked on the door of Robert Schumann's house in Düsseldorf. Schumann had the reputation of being most cordial and helpful to struggling young musicians, and Brahms had in his hand a letter of introduction from no less than the famed Hungarian violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim. Schumann was quick to recognize the stamp of genius on his young visitor. Brahms had scarcely begun playing one of his piano sonatas before Schumann interrupted him so that he could ask his wife Clara to come into the room and hear "such music as you have never before listened to." Clara, who was one of the foremost pianists of her time, was equally impressed. Soon, Brahms, who had spent his wretched boyhood years banging out dance tunes on battered pianos in the lowest dives of Hamburg's red-light district, was taken into the lives of Robert and Clara Schumann and became a member of the intimate circle of world-famous musicians that surrounded them.

Spurred onward by Schumann, Brahms began his first attempt at writing a large-scale work - a symphony. Hearing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony for the first time, however, convinced him that he was not yet ready to tackle such an awesome form. Rather than destroy the score, he transcribed it into a sonata for two pianos, but was still not satisfied. The ideal solution - that he transform it into a piano concerto - came from his friend Julius Grimm. The first performance of the new concerto took place in Hanover on January 22, 1859, with Joachim conducting and the composer at the piano. The premiere was not a success. "The public was wearied and the musicians puzzled," Brahms sadly noted. Even more dismal was the reception accorded to the performance given at the Leipzig Gewandhaus by the same forces five days later. Indeed, it was the worst defeat Brahms ever would experience.

It is little wonder that this concerto was slow to find favor with early audiences, for it is a bold and daring work, both stormy and dramatic and tender and lyrical, and it is filled with youthful passion and relentless power. With it, Brahms produced a truly symphonic work in which the solo instrument and the orchestra are indivisibly joined as equal partners. Through the persistent efforts of its early champions, the concerto finally entered the standard repertory some thirty years after its premiere.

The tempestuous first movement, marked simply *Maestoso*, is a highly complex structure that opens with a lengthy orchestral exposition, as did most classical concertos. This movement is noteworthy for both the very large number of brief themes employed and their relationship to each other. When the piano finally enters, it continues to introduce new materials. Throughout, great demands are placed on the soloist; however, the bravura passages are always expressions of powerful emotions rather than simply being vehicles for technical display.

The second movement, a pensive *Adagio* cast in simple ternary form, is elegiac in character. The main theme is a highly decorated variant of the opening theme of the concerto, and several other themes are derived from the first movement. "I am painting a gentle portrait

of you," Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann in December of 1856, six months after her husband's tragic death. "It is to be the *Adagio*." Clara felt that this movement "has something churchly about it; it might be an *Eleison*."

The final movement, a rondo marked *Allegro non troppo*, is infused with a robust and assertive spirit. It is filled with vigorous syncopations and its texture is richly polyphonic. The main theme of the rondo is really a permutation of the second subject of the first movement. The episodes of the rondo are both large in scale and fully developed. There is a written-out cadenza, after which a coda shifts the tonality from D Minor to D Major and brings the concerto to a brilliant and thunderous conclusion.

-Kenneth C. Viant