Brahms

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 & SIX PIANO PIECES OP. 118

Francesco Piemontesi

GEWANDHAUSORCHESTER · MANFRED HONECK

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

	Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 15*	
1	I. Maestoso	22. 16
2	II. Adagio	13. 21
3	III. Rondo. Allegro non troppo	12. 09
	Six Piano Pieces, Op. 118	
4	No. 1, Intermezzo in A minor	1. 47
5	No. 2, Intermezzo in A Major	5. 15
6	No. 3, Ballade in G minor	3. 14
7	No. 4, Intermezzo in F minor	2. 43
8	No. 5, Romance in F Major	3. 51
9	No. 6, Intermezzo in E-flat minor	5. 51
	Total playing time:	70. 38

** Live recording*

Francesco Piemontesi, piano
Gewandhausorchester Leipzig
Manfred Honeck, conductor

Many years ago, I performed Brahms' First Piano Concerto in a smaller town in Denmark — not least because of the excellent orchestra, but above all because of a conductor whose musical personality fascinated me: Leif Segerstam. We did not know each other at that point and, in fact, only met at the first rehearsal. Not much was said. Segerstam stepped onto the podium and began conducting immediately, eruptive, full of energy. Over the first orchestral tutti, he called out to the musicians in his powerful baritone voice: "The creation of the world!" Sitting at the piano, I was almost taken aback by the sheer, almost brutal force of musical energy that was unleashed there. How was I supposed to respond to this? How could one stand up against it?

Today I think Segerstam's image was remarkably accurate. Of course, the "creation of the world" is not depicted in any literal, onomatopoetic sense here. But the music does have something elemental about it: no elegant classical opening, no courtly exposition, but rather an eruptive orchestral impact. The timpani sound like tectonic shocks, the lower strings move in vast waves, and above them the brass chords break in like forces of nature. It does not sound like something artfully constructed, but rather like matter coming into being. The piano does not appear as a virtuosic hero, but rather as a thinking, feeling, ordering consciousness within this vast sonic world — perhaps as a symbol of the tension between human being and nature, individual and fate, spirit and chaos.

Brahms' First Piano Concerto has often been described less as a concerto than as a symphony with obbligato piano, or even as a symphonic drama with piano soloist. To realise this interpretation with an orchestra such as the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig is in itself a privilege. Manfred Honeck adds something special to this Brahmsian "Genesis": elegance, transparency, and a long symphonic breath.

In contrast to the concerto's monumental opening, Brahms often strikes me as being shaped by a distinctly North German form of reserve. Yet it is precisely from this restraint that a peculiar intensity emerges — a particular honesty and intimacy.
One can sense this, for example, in the second movement, or also in the Piano Pieces Op. 118. This music feels to me profoundly soulful and communicative, yet at the same time as something not necessarily intended for the concert hall. Rather, one gains the impression of a personal dialogue with Brahms himself.

Of course, this music can be shared with an audience. But at its core, it does not need an audience in the same way as virtuosic showpieces, which are essentially written for moments of public impact. The longer I play Brahms, the more I feel that his music does not seek to impress, but to be true.

Francesco Piemontesi

Johannes Brahms hesitated for a long time before writing a piano concerto. The work did not begin as one; rather, it gradually found its form. What started as the idea for a symphony became a sonata for two pianos, and only later developed into a concerto for piano and orchestra. This long process shaped the character of the piece. It feels symphonic in scope, with the piano not standing above the orchestra but speaking alongside it. Rather than serving merely as a display of virtuosity, the solo part is woven into the larger musical fabric. For this reason, Brahms' First Piano Concerto holds a unique place in the repertoire and is often experienced as the central, defining work of a concert evening.

The first movement begins with an extended introduction that immediately sets a serious and powerful tone. The music unfolds with a sense of weight, yet it continually opens into more lyrical and expressive passages. While Brahms often sounds intense and inward, there are also moments that feel lighter, almost dance-like. These contrasts are essential to the character of the piece, revealing its emotional range and depth. The influence of Ludwig van Beethoven can be clearly felt, particularly in the scale and dramatic tension of the movement.

For me, the second movement is one of Brahms' most intimate creations. It carries an almost sacred atmosphere. Above the main melody, Brahms wrote the words "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini", which lend the music a quiet, liturgical sense of devotion. It is possible that he once imagined this material as part of a Mass. The movement unfolds calmly and introspectively, with a gentle, singing quality that invites reflection rather than display.

The third movement brings a clear change of character. It is shaped by a dance-like impulse and has a lively, playful energy, driven by a strong and unmistakable rhythm. At the same time, it does not lose its depth. Bright, animated passages alternate with more dramatic moments, creating a sense of tension and release. Compared to the first movement, it may seem lighter in scale, yet its strength and seriousness remain. In Brahms, even joy has weight; it feels earned rather than effortless. The finale does not simply celebrate, it moves toward resolution, toward a sense of balance and reconciliation. As throughout the concerto, piano and orchestra meet as equals, sharing the musical argument.

Brahms' First Piano Concerto can be heard as a journey through a wide emotional landscape. It is, in many ways, a symphony for piano and orchestra – one that moves between intensity and play, revealing its richness through both power and subtlety.

Manfred Honeck

The force with which Johannes Brahms presents himself as a composer in his First Piano Concerto is extraordinary. It is music born of a dramatic struggle for existence: here, a young man of twenty-six seeks to assert himself as an author with immense expressive power, to raise his own voice — one that is to remain unmistakable and never again be overlooked. Yet here, too, is an individual striving to regain sovereignty over his own life in the aftermath of a biographical shock.

If one follows Joseph Joachim, a close friend of Johannes Brahms, the first motif of the concerto arose "as a consequence of the news of Robert Schumann's suicide attempt (his leap into the Rhine): a kind of mighty shudder." On 27 February 1854, the composer Robert Schumann had thrown himself into the Rhine in Düsseldorf. He was rescued and subsequently admitted himself voluntarily to the psychiatric institution at Endenich near Bonn.

His wife, the pianist Clara Schumann, was left behind with five children, pregnant with the sixth.

Only a few months earlier, on 30 September 1853, Johannes Brahms had made the acquaintance of Robert Schumann and Clara Schumann, and had received effusive encouragement. In his final essay as a journalist, Robert Schumann hailed the young Brahms as the new messiah of music history. His wife perceived the twenty-year-old as "sent, as if by God Himself". A formidable burden for someone who, apart from three piano sonatas and a handful of songs, had as yet composed nothing. Yet it also brought an immense surge in public recognition. And now, scarcely five months later, this most important patron sought to take his own life. Brahms' relationship with the Schumanns must have been one of painful intensity: encouragement and the pressure of expectation, friendship and horror at the clinical madness of his friend, a sense of

responsibility and an incipient love for his friend's wife.

Brahms, however, succeeds in giving artistic form to his condition of strain. In the first movement, the piano enters after the orchestral introduction with an quaver motif in the right hand, in which the old Baroque figure of the suspiratio lives on — a gesture of weeping and sighing. These very sighs return in the slow movement, now in crotchets. Here, they take on a consoling quality: the pain begins to dissolve. The time signature, too, remains the same in both movements: six-four. Brahms has often been criticised for not altering either the metre or the tonic — D — between the two movements. Yet in so doing, he suggests that what wounds us and what soothes us spring from one and the same source. The closeness of those we love renders us vulnerable. By shaping this vulnerability, Brahms at once works through it, and is no longer merely driven by it.

Johannes Brahms wrestled for a long time with his First Piano Concerto. Initially, only two months after Robert Schumann's suicide attempt, he conceived a sonata for two pianos, which he had played to him at the end of May by Clara Schumann and his friend Albert Dietrich. It contained a slow movement from which the second movement of *Ein deutsches Requiem* is said later to have emerged: "Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras" ("For all flesh is as grass") — a further indication of the original Requiem character of what would become the piano concerto. Yet as early as 19 June, Brahms wrote to Joseph Joachim: "In truth, even two pianos are not sufficient for me."

With the assistance of his friend Julius Otto Grimm, Brahms reworked the sonata into a symphony. Grimm possessed considerably greater experience in orchestration than Brahms; yet the weighty, bass-heavy piano writing in Grimm's *Abendbilder*, Op. 2, also made a perceptible impression on him.

From February 1855 onwards, however, it became clear to Brahms that the symphony would have to become a piano concerto.

The grimly majestic opening of the concerto, with its timpani roll over the tonic D, reminded the critic Eduard Hanslick, at the first Viennese performance, of Ludwig van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. One of the final pieces of advice given by Robert Schumann — who was keen that Brahms should compose for large orchestra without delay — was that he should recall the openings of Beethoven's symphonies and create something comparable.

Johannes Brahms engages with this weight of expectation in a complex manner: he indeed triggers the reflex of "Beethoven", yet his theme begins immediately in the "wrong" key — B-flat Major instead of D minor. In the subsequent shift of the thematic opening to A Major, intervals of tension emerge — such as the augmented second and the diminished seventh — which we recognise from another great piano concerto: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Piano Concerto in C minor, K. 491, a work Brahms regarded as among the finest of its kind.

At the same time, many passages in the piano writing reveal Brahms's close familiarity with the organ works of Johann Sebastian Bach, and his appreciation of their intensifying sequential patterns over sustained bass notes as a means of musical drama. Thus, while Brahms outwardly submits himself to comparison with Beethoven, he signals to the informed listener that his gaze extends much further back into musical history.

Formally, the proximity to Ludwig van Beethoven is most pronounced in the finale, whose structure is modelled on the concluding movement of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, Op. 37. Yet the principal

theme, with its Hungarian syncopation, is entirely Brahms' own. In his lifelong affection for that people whom he himself — without pejorative intent — referred to as "Gypsies", there lies an implicit plea for a way of life: to be without homeland or shelter, yet free. This symbolic break into detachment, embodied in a "Hungarian" rondo, represents a further attempt to come to terms with a biographical catastrophe born of excessive closeness.

Between catastrophe and escape stands the second movement, which Johannes Brahms described as a portrait of Clara Schumann, and which bears, at the head of the manuscript, the words: "Benedictus, qui venit in nomine Domini." Much speculation has arisen as to Brahms' intended meaning. The most plausible explanation is that offered by Siegfried Kross, namely that this quotation from the Mass refers to the novel *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr* by E. T. A. Hoffmann, in which the protagonist, Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler, flees the intolerability of life by retreating to a monastery whose portal bears precisely this inscription. Brahms himself referred to himself at that time as "Johannes Kreisler junior".

Although the concerto met with failure at its second performance on 27 January 1859 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Johannes Brahms held it in high regard. He revised it once more and performed it himself as pianist on no fewer than thirty-five occasions in public concerts; as a conductor, he also presented it several times with soloists such as Clara Schumann, Hans von Bülow, and Eugen d'Albert.

Between the First Piano Concerto and the Six Piano Pieces, Op. 118, lie thirty-four years. If the concerto is a work of departure — tragic though that departure may be — then the piano pieces are works of farewell. The composer prepared them for publication in the summer of 1893

in Bad Ischl, though several may have been conceived earlier. The impassioned, impetuous Intermezzo in A minor shares with the piano concerto the striking feature of beginning in the "wrong" key of the submediant, namely F Major, before the surging motion subsides into the minor at the close. The Intermezzo in A Major is among Brahms' great works of consolation; in its F-sharp Major middle section, he even quotes — set as a canon — the passage "Ich will euch trösten" from his *Ein deutsches Requiem*.

The Ballade in G minor once more takes up the defiant, Nordic tone of the Ballades, Op. 10. In the exquisite middle section of the Intermezzo in F minor, we encounter impressionistically delicate chords akin to those in the slow movement of the concurrently composed Clarinet Sonata in F minor, Op. 120 No. 1. The Romance in F Major, with its chordal writing and weighty six-four metre, may be understood as a late recollection of the slow movement of the First Piano Concerto. The Intermezzo in E-flat minor belongs among the darkest and most desolate works Brahms ever composed. Its unison opening theme evokes the *Dies irae* — the Day of Judgement — from the Latin Requiem Mass. Diminished chords in the bass undermine any sense of harmonic foundation; the canonic treatment of the theme in the upper voice proves only one thing: even the utmost strictness offers no longer any support. Here, four years before his death, Brahms seems to have arrived at the conviction that music itself had no future. His friend Eduard Hanslick described these final pieces as "a breviary of pessimism."

Jan Brachmann

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