

# BRONFMAN PLAYS BRAHMS

George Gershwin and Kurt Weill have more in common than you might think. They were virtual contemporaries, born just two years apart. Both died young: Gershwin at 38, Weill at 50. Both had major successes in popular music but were keenly interested in serious concert music as well. And, as Music Director Jacques Lacombe points out: “Weill worked with Ira Gershwin on the musicals *Lady in the Dark* and the operetta *The Firebrand of Florence*. They also collaborated on a film score, so there is a Gershwin/Weill family connection.” This weekend’s program pairs early works by each of them on the first half.

Following intermission, Yefim Bronfman is the soloist in Brahms’s mighty Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15. By coincidence, it is another comparatively early composition by a master in the making. “We chose to begin the program with two works that open the ears,” says Lacombe. “You want to finish with a great masterpiece.” The Brahms fulfills that goal admirably.

### **Lullaby**

#### **George Gershwin**

**Born September 26, 1898 in Brooklyn, New York**

**Died July 11, 1937 in Beverly Hills, California**

In 1956, the American writer David Ewen offered the following assessment of Gershwin’s Lullaby: “The quartet provides evidence that Gershwin was already making notable progress in part writing, in tasteful harmonization, and in grateful writing for the four strings.”

Three decades later, Edward Jablonski's 1987 biography glossed over the piece as "a harmony study for string quartet." Joan Peyser's 1993 biography was equally dismissive:

As early as 1919 Gershwin composed Lullaby, a string quartet. It showed no evidence of contrapuntal technique or sophisticated writing for strings. Lullaby was all substance and idea, a hauntingly beautiful, melancholy little piece.

Whom are we to believe? How could they write about the same work and produce such divergent descriptions?

Lullaby, which we hear in a transcription for string orchestra, was one of Gershwin's two essays in chamber music, and his only piece for string quartet. His other concert works—those outside the realm of Broadway musical and popular songs—are mostly for orchestra (*Cuban Overture*, *An American in Paris*) or orchestra with piano solo (*Rhapsody in Blue*, *Concerto in F*), plus a handful of piano pieces. Lullaby predates virtually all of them.

In 1919, the year he turned 21, Gershwin was already making a name for himself on Broadway. His first full score, *La La Lucille*, opened that year and ran for more than 100 performances. He had not yet attempted any "long hair" music, despite a childhood interest in the musical classics; nor had he undertaken formal study of counterpoint. When he wrote Lullaby, he was studying harmony with the Hungarian composer Edward Kilenyi in New York, which supports Jablonski's assessment of the piece as a harmony study.

Rather than poking holes in this unassuming piece because of any purported lack of technical polish, we will do better to accept it at face value. Lullaby is a single movement of about 11 minutes' duration, in basic three-part form. Its lilting, tango-like rhythm provides a gentle underpinning to Gershwin's sultry, bluesy melodies. Utterly devoid of pretense, this lullaby is intended for adults: less likely to put us to sleep than to help us unwind at the end of a stressful day.

*Timing: approximately 8 minutes.*

## **Symphony No. 1, “Berliner”**

**Kurt Weill**

**Born March 2, 1900 in Dessau, Germany**

**Died April 3, 1950 in New York City, New York**

For a generation that came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, the aural memory of Bobby Darin singing “Mack the Knife” is iconic. Kurt Weill’s song has an extraordinary lineage. Though its other legendary interpreters range from Ella Fitzgerald to Arthur Fiedler, it originated in *The Threepenny Opera*, Weill’s 1928 collaboration with Bertolt Brecht. Such compositions are among Weill’s most well known.

### **The other side of Kurt Weill**

He was also a composer of serious music. Many of his concert works remained unpublished, and consequently unperformed, for decades. This occurred, in part, because Weill’s radical politics and Jewish roots landed him on a Nazi blacklist in the early 1930s. After he and wife Lotte Lenya fled Germany in March 1933, friends hid or suppressed the scores he left behind.

### **Communism, expressionism and political danger**

The “Berliner” Symphony is a case in point—and therein lies a story. In November 1920, Weill wrote to his parents that a young poet, Johannes Becher, had asked him to write music for a play. Becher was a German Communist Party member with expressionist leanings. His post-World War I writings advocated antiwar sentiments and revolutionary social reform in Germany. The drama he proposed to Weill, *Arbeiter, Bauern, Soldaten* (*Workers, Farmers, Soldiers*), set forth an idealized vision of a model society, with a surprisingly religious subtext; the play’s eventual subtitle was *Der Aufbruch eines Volkes Zu Gott* (*A People’s Awakening to God*).

The play was not produced and Weill never completed the incidental music, but he drew heavily on sketches for it when he embarked on his first symphony several months later. He inscribed the symphony’s title page with an epigraph from Becher’s play.

With the rise of Nazism, Becher and his opinions became dangerous. German friends of Weill removed the title page from the score in 1933, lest the Nazis find and destroy it. The manuscript disappeared for a quarter century. After its rediscovery in 1957, seven years after Weill's death, Wilhelm Schüchter conducted the Norddeutsche Rundfunk Symphony Orchestra in the first performance.

Weill composed the symphony in spring 1921, shortly after he had joined the composition master class of Ferruccio Busoni. At the time, Busoni was a European titan with enormous influence as a pedagogue. Weill soon became a favorite pupil of the Italian-born master. Busoni believed in expanded tonality, as opposed to the abandonment of it, and he stressed the discipline of counterpoint. In that sense, he influenced Weill, but Busoni did not directly supervise his young protégé on this project.

### **Wrestling with Wagner**

At age 21, Weill was still finding his voice. He despised Wagner's lush textures and subliminal eroticism. Rebellious against such perceived excesses, Weill sought objectivity and harsh realism in music. Still, he was heir to the rich Viennese symphonic tradition, and inevitably the imprint of some predecessors and older contemporaries found their way into his language. Early Schoenberg, Max Reger and Franz Schreker come to mind. Gustav Mahler's influence is most evident in the orchestration, particularly in the way Weill contrasts unusual groups of single instruments in quasi-chamber style. The small groups have almost deliberately combative or incongruous sonorities, juxtaposed with sudden switches to full orchestra.

From a structural standpoint, the symphony's most noteworthy influence is Liszt. Weill telescopes multiple sections into one extended movement. Liszt pioneered this approach in his piano concerti and in the Sonata in B Minor; Schoenberg adopted the same format in his First Chamber Symphony. Another Lisztian technique is thematic transformation. The slow introduction that opens Weill's symphony sets forth two principal themes. One consists of descending pairs of fourths; the other is an ascending motive, also constructed of fourths. From these two motives almost all else arises in the symphony.

### **Spiritual core**

The emotional core is an *Andante religioso*, which is associated with Becher's hope for an end to war. Later, a wind chorale—first for oboe, clarinet, bassoons, then expanding to horns, flutes and trombone—underscores the spiritual element and the hope for the Promised Land. A workers' march flanks the chorale. Bells peal at triumphant moments, but the closing chords in C minor send an ambiguous message.

For listeners who only know Weill through his Brecht collaborations and popular song, the “Berliner” Symphony will come as both surprise and revelation. The music has hard edges. Its dissonance is almost relentless, even in quiet moments. This symphony reveals Weill as an earnest, idealistic and very serious composer.

*The score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), oboe, two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, side drum, glockenspiel, triangle, tam tam, cymbals, bass drum, four deep bells and strings. Timing: approximately 22 minutes.*

### **Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15**

**Johannes Brahms**

**Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany**

**Died April 3, 1897 in Vienna, Austria**

### **High standards**

History is filled with incidents in which great musical works were misunderstood by their audiences. Few composers have escaped the onslaught of critical abuse, although Johannes Brahms was relatively fortunate. When he was but a lad of 20, Robert Schumann hailed him as the heir to Beethoven. Conscious of the burden attached to such lavish praise, Brahms was stringently critical of his own compositions, destroying many early pieces.

As a result, his first published works are of an astonishingly high quality, and Brahms clearly

deserved the acclaim they earned for him. But even he had a stumbling block, an intensely bitter experience with one of his works that wounded him deeply. The year was 1859, the piece was the Piano Concerto in D Minor, and its premiere was probably the worst setback of his entire career.

Brahms began work on the concerto in 1854. In its original conception, it was to have been a symphony, a tribute to Schumann, who had attempted suicide in February 1854 and was thereafter incarcerated in a mental asylum in Endenich. Not yet comfortable with the possibilities of full orchestra, Brahms sketched the piece as a sonata for two pianos. In that form, he showed it to Schumann's wife Clara; her absorption in Brahms' extraordinary music, whose quality she instantly recognized, was one way in which she mitigated her grief about her husband's declining health. The slow movement, a sarabande-like funeral march, later found its way into *A German Requiem*; the balance of the two-piano work evolved into the First Piano Concerto. Brahms completed the score in 1858. The lengthy gestation period reflects the trouble the piece gave him.

### **An inauspicious premiere**

It is well known that Brahms did not publish a symphony until 1877, when he was 44. Like the Serenade, Op. 11, this First Concerto was one of his "exercises" in preparation for a symphony. In the process, he forged a daring partnership between keyboard and orchestra that was completely different from the expected virtuosic display. Unfortunately this departure from the norm confused audiences and even angered critics. The concerto was disastrously received at its first performances in Leipzig. The press lambasted Brahms, accusing him of having written a symphony with *obbligato* piano part. The *Signale* called it: "... three-quarters of an hour of laboring and burrowing, of straining and tugging ... Not only must one take in this fermenting mass; he must also swallow a dessert of the harshest dissonances and most unpleasant sounds."

Brahms was nonchalant in his correspondence with the violinist Joseph Joachim, writing: "At the rehearsals it met with total silence and at the performance (where hardly three people raised their hands to clap) it was regularly hissed. But all this made no impression on me. I quite enjoyed the

other music.”

Despite his casual dismissal of the performance, he was deeply hurt. Six years elapsed before the concerto was acclaimed as the masterpiece he knew it to be.

What was so off-putting to Brahms' German listeners in 1859? The most likely explanation is that Brahms did not adhere to the Mendelssohnian-Chopinesque model of fleet, pianistic wizardry and gossamer melodies. His solo part is big, and very difficult, but not in the traditional virtuosic sense. The piano functions independently of the orchestra in terms of its melodic material, especially in the first movement. But basically piano and orchestra are cast as equals rather than opponents, and the piano is fully integrated into the massive orchestral texture.

### **Portrait of Clara Schumann**

The first movement has been called “the trills movement.” Its vivid two-handed trills are a *leitmotif* that emphasizes the work's dramatic, tragic character. The sweeping melodies in 6/4 meter contribute to its majesty. Brahms's slow movement has historically been construed as a Requiem for Robert Schumann; more likely it is a tribute to Schumann's widow. In a December 1856 letter about the concerto to Clara, Brahms wrote, “I am also painting a lovely portrait of you; it is to be the *Adagio*.” Coming from the 19th century's greatest champion of absolute music, it is an uncharacteristic and revealing allusion to programmatic content.

He concludes his concerto with a feisty, masculine rondo that was also the last portion of the concerto to be composed. The heroic struggle so dominant in the opening movement gives way to a freer, less agonized spirit. A glorious D major coda leaves no doubt that the internal conflict has been satisfactorily resolved.

*Brahms scored the concerto for woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo piano and strings. Timing: approximately 42 minutes.*