

## Season Finale with Zhang & Bronfman

### ONE-MINUTE NOTES

**Brahms: Second Piano Concerto.** A sublime French horn theme introduces this concerto, floating unsupported without the orchestra, and a great musical drama ensues. The scherzo is a total change of pace: passionate, impetuous and hefty. The slow movement showcases a gorgeous cello solo, while the finale is permeated by Brahms' sense of humor—sometimes subtle, sometimes uproarious, always delicious.

**Shostakovich: Fifth Symphony.** In the mid-1930s, Shostakovich used this symphony to help regain political favor. His angular, severe opening gesture suggests the harshness of life in Soviet Russia. The scherzo relieves that tension, introducing a whisper of warmth. Triumph after struggle prevails in the mighty finale.

### **BRAHMS: Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83**

#### **JOHANNES BRAHMS**

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

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

**Composed:** 1878–81

**World Premiere:** November 9, 1881, in Budapest, with the composer as the soloist. Alexander Erkel conducted the orchestra of the National Theater.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1944–45 season. Frieder Weissmann conducted; Gyorgy Sandor was the soloist.

**Duration:** 46 minutes

If anyone needed convincing that French horn was Brahms' favorite orchestral instrument, the opening to the Second Piano Concerto would clinch the argument persuasively. Dreamy and effortlessly beautiful, the unsupported horn melody sets the stage for one of the 19th century's greatest musical dramas, with simplicity and majesty. Much of this first movement is a paean to the horn, which returns with its transcendent theme at key points in this monumental first act of the drama. Its poetic interaction with the piano floats into our consciousness, providing us with faith that clear skies will ultimately prevail over the tempests that follow. Brahms' writing for the horn is both loving and knowledgeable. As musicologist Bernard Jacobson has written: "Brahms' use of a single instrument [horn] places all the emphasis on the intensely personal poetry of unsupported horn tone, and this is borne out by the continued association of the theme with the instrument later on at two of the most magical moments in the movement."

No less remarkable is the obbligato role that Brahms provided for principal cello in the third-movement Andante. Again, the idea of poetry in sound leaps to mind. For this intimate, private music, Brahms features the warmest and most human-sounding of the string instruments, endowing it with a part that is prized as one of the choicest cello solos in the entire orchestral literature.

### **Pianist as the dominant stripe in an orchestral fabric**

Where does the piano fit into this? Isn't this supposed to be a piano concerto, after all? What was Brahms up to? For one thing, he treasured his orchestra. By 1881 he was in his late 40s, an experienced orchestral composer who fully understood his players and their potential. Second, he conceived of the piano as an integral and closely-woven component of the orchestral fabric. Third, he had a gift for capturing an unexpected chamber-like moment, a brief subplot, amid the complex larger drama of this very large, decidedly symphonic composition. Horn and cello are merely the most outstanding examples of his orchestral favoritism and glorious attention to detail in the Second Piano Concerto; there is also, for example, a delicious chamber-like role for the two clarinets in the slow movement.

## **Majesty, struggle and Olympian drama**

Brahms began sketches for the B-flat concerto in 1878 after his first Italian journey. It grew to enormous proportions. The concerto has a majesty and struggle that place it in a category all its own. Serenity reigns, despite Olympian drama that rages fiercely through the first two movements.

The piece requires a major piano virtuoso with stamina, physical strength and mature metaphysical insight. Its technical challenges are formidable, with huge chords, a variety of demanding passage work in octaves, thirds and sixths, a complex musical texture and highly sophisticated rhythmic patterns, especially in the finale.

### **TWO TREACHEROUS, GLORIOUS SOLOS**

The orchestra takes no back seat in this concerto. Brahms' writing is demanding and rewarding for the full ensemble, with particularly rich parts for horn and cello.

Brahms loved the horn and wrote great horn parts for all his symphonies and concertos. The beginning of the Second Piano Concerto is particularly treacherous, however, because the principal horn is completely unsupported: out there all alone. Horn players like to jest that if you can play the opening solo, you can sit back and enjoy 40 minutes of some of the greatest music ever written.

Brahms uses that glorious theme throughout his opening movement. Later on, he allocates a secondary solo—but still a substantial one—to the third horn. This time, it is based on the same theme pitched a fifth higher. Because of special moments like those, the horn parts in the Second Piano Concerto are rewarding for the entire section.

In the slow movement, principal cello joins the piano for an eloquent duet—but not until after its own extended solo to introduce Brahms' gorgeous melodic material. The movement is legendary among cellists, and it is a common requirement on auditions for a principal position.

In performance, cellists take great pleasure in playing it. After the sprawling grandeur of the first movement and the storm of the second, the intimacy of this Andante is magical. The cello has this glorious interaction, first with the principal oboe, then with the piano soloist. In an otherwise oversize work, this movement comes across as tender and personal. It is almost as if Brahms had inserted a piece of chamber music in the midst of his concerto.

The French horn and cello sections keep busy throughout the concerto, but their special moments linger in the memory along with the majestic piano part.

### **'A tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo'**

The day he completed the manuscript, July 7, 1881, Brahms wrote to his friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, calling his most recent accomplishment “a tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo.” The massive first movement—so peaceably introduced by solo horn—is followed by a tempestuous scherzo that breaks from tradition and emphasizes the symphonic character of this concerto. Where the opening movement expands sonata form to its very limits, the scherzo compresses it. Explosive fury propels this movement, whose tempo marking, *Allegro appassionato*, recalls the romantic passion of Brahms’ youthful compositions. The central Trio, in D major, bursts through the thunderous storm clouds like a joyous ray of sunlight. Ultimately, the storm returns.

A lilting rondo tinged with Hungarian flavor closes the concerto. Brahms’ witty and graceful finale is a maze of rhythmic games. He toys with cross-rhythms and phrases that regularly travel across bar-lines, resulting in an ongoing ambivalence between duple and triple meter. Trumpets and drums have no place in this gracious movement. As Peter Latham has observed, “for the sustained lightness and brilliance of this music there is only one model—Mozart.”

*Instrumentation: woodwinds and trumpets in pairs, four horns, timpani, strings and solo piano.*

## SHOSTAKOVICH: Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

### DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

**Born:** September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg, Russia

**Died:** August 9, 1975, in Moscow, Russia, USSR

**Composed:** April–July 1937

**World Premiere:** November 21, 1937, in Leningrad. Yevgeny Mravinsky led the Leningrad Philharmonic

**NJSO Premiere:** 1966–67 season; Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

**Duration:** 44 minutes

Shostakovich was the greatest symphonist of the 20th century. His contribution is important not only because he left 15 examples (more than any other symphonist of his stature), but also because they are musically so substantive. There are striking parallels to Beethoven in Shostakovich's career. Among the most startling is the role that a Fifth Symphony played in each of their output. In both cases, the Fifth is considered to be a pivotal work, one that delineated a major shift in his music.

Shortly before his Fifth Symphony's premiere, Shostakovich wrote: "The theme of my symphony is the development of the individual. I saw man with all his sufferings as the central idea of the work, which is lyrical in mood from start to finish; the finale resolves the tragedy and tension of the earlier movements on a joyous, optimistic note."

Listeners who know Beethoven's Fifth will immediately sense a kinship. Beethoven's symphony deals with the struggle against Fate, in which man emerges triumphant in the finale. Another factor the works have in common is their unification by a concise musical motto that recurs in almost every movement. In Beethoven's, it is the famous "fate knocking at the door" that opens the symphony; in Shostakovich's, it is an anapest (short–short–long) rhythm.

Shostakovich wrote his Fifth Symphony on the heels of a major musical and political setback: Joseph Stalin's adverse reaction to Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and his subsequent attack

in *Pravda* in January 1936. The following year, 1937, was the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution. Shostakovich composed his Fifth Symphony for that occasion. He sought to convince Stalin's cultural ministers that he was committed to Soviet ideals and philosophy. With this symphony, Shostakovich responded successfully to Stalin's political directive for music with a mission. He composed, as it were, a Soviet symphony. This was the piece that won governmental approval, becoming Shostakovich's passport to official "rehabilitation" and putting him back in official good graces.

The symphony also did a considerable amount to build Shostakovich's reputation outside the Soviet Union. And yet, in spite of its surface compliance with the party line, it is still music of passion and heartfelt emotion, managing to be personal without sacrificing power.

Musicians and political analysts have debated for decades whether Shostakovich sold out to political pressure or acquiesced so that Stalin's minions would leave him alone to compose what lay deep within his soul. Either way, he left posterity a great orchestral masterpiece in the Fifth Symphony. Its musical substance contributed to its acclaim by audiences worldwide, regardless of any overt or implicit political message.

While the two outer movements have become the Fifth Symphony's best-known segments, the inner two better reflect Shostakovich's emerging style. The scherzo, a quasi-Schubertian country dance tinged with Mahlerian satire, shows the dry, sardonic side of Shostakovich's personality to perfection. And the slow movement, a showcase for the string section, embodies the tragedy and poetry inherent in the human condition. The Fifth Symphony is usually regarded as the window looking into Shostakovich's middle period, but its music has such consummate maturity that it more than foreshadows the rich masterpieces that would follow during and after the Second World War.

*Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, piccolo clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, two harps, bells, xylophone, celeste, piano and strings.*

