

Grieg's Piano Concerto

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Rebel: *Chaos from Les Éléments*

This early French master had an uncanny gift for translating the theatrical into sound. His aptly named *Chaos* depicts the creation of the world in bold dissonances that convey the disorder that preceded creation.

Grieg: Piano Concerto

Though strongly influenced by Schumann's piano concerto, Grieg's ravishing piece is rich with Norwegian melodies and rhythms. The quintessential romantic concerto, it features rhapsodic Chopinesque figuration in the slow movement and a vigorous Norwegian dance in the finale.

Brahms: Symphony No. 2

Often called Brahms' "Pastoral," this symphony exudes the dappled sunshine and glorious vistas of the Alpine summer. Unexpected motives like the opening cello gesture play an important role. The joyous and bubbly finale is also a virtuoso study in counterpoint.

REBEL: "Chaos" from *Les Éléments*

JEAN-FÉRY REBEL

Baptized: April 18, 1666, in Paris, France

Died: January 2, 1747, in Paris

Composed: 1737

World Premiere: Undocumented, but probably in Paris, 1737.

NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 7 minutes

The Rebels (pronounced Ruh-BELL) were one of Baroque France's great musical dynasties. Beginning with Jean-Féry's father, Jean (1636–92), members of the family served among the king's musicians and in the royal opera for more than a century. This was France's golden age. Music flourished under Louis XIV and Louis XV, who between them reigned from 1643 to 1774. Jean-Féry's sister Anne-Renée was a singer in Jean-Baptiste Lully's operas and married the composer Michel Richard de Lalande. Rebel's son François (1701–1775) was a violinist, theorbist, conductor, composer and opera director who would succeed his father in the prestigious Les Vingt-quatre Violons du Roy string orchestra.

Jean-Féry Rebel was trained as a violinist and harpsichordist. He came to Lully's attention in his teens and was able to study violin and composition with the King's powerful master of music. Beginning in August 1705, Rebel was a member of Les Vingt-quatre Violons du Roy, eventually becoming the ensemble's conductor and leader in 1715, and chamber composer to the king.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Rebel did not gravitate to opera. His sole opera was not a success; however, his secular music was enormously successful. He wrote a considerable amount of chamber music and is significant as one of the first composers of sonatas in France. With dance music, however, he was in his element. He was a pioneer in writing choreographed program symphonies independent of stage works like operas. *Les Elémens* is a celebrated example. It originated as a dance suite portraying the universe's creation via the ancient Greek elements of earth, air, fire and water. At age 71, Rebel appended this first movement to depict the chaos preceding creation. His shattering dissonances were revolutionary for the time. In places they could easily be mistaken for music composed two centuries later.

IN THE COMPOSER'S WORDS

Rebel was keenly aware how daring his approach was to his Biblical topic. His description of the opening segment of *Les Elémens* follows:

The introduction to this Symphony is Chaos itself; that confusion which reigned among the Elements before the moment when, subject to immutable laws, they assumed their prescribed places within the natural order. This initial idea led me somewhat further. I have dared to link the idea of the confusion of the Elements with that of confusion in Harmony. I have risked opening with all the notes sounding together, or rather, all the notes in an octave played as a single sound. To designate, in this confusion, each particular element, I have availed myself of some widely accepted conventions. The bass

expresses Earth by tied notes which are played jerkily. The flutes, with their rising and falling line, imitate the flow and murmur of Water. Air is depicted by pauses followed by cadenzas on the small flutes, and finally the violins, with their liveliness and brilliance represent the activity of Fire. These characteristics may be recognized, separate or intermingled, in whole or in part, in the diverse reprises that I have called Chaos, and which mark the efforts of the Elements to get free of each other. At the seventh appearance of Chaos these efforts diminish as order begins to assert itself.

The balance of *Les Eléments* (not performed this weekend) consists of nine individual segments that are liberally sprinkled with dances, revealing the work's origins as a dance suite:

Air pour les Violins: "La terre et l'eau" ("Earth and Water")

Chaconne: "Le feu" ("Fire")

"Ramage" ("Bird Songs"): L'air

"Rossignols" ("Nightingales")

Loure: "La chasse" ("The Hunt")

Tambourins I and II

Sicilienne

Rondeau: "Air pour l'amour" ("Aria for love")

Caprice

Instrumentation: flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns, trumpets, strings and continuo.

GRIEG: Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 16

EDVARD GRIEG

Born: June 15, 1843, in Bergen, Norway

Died: September 4, 1907, in Bergen

Composed: 1868–69, revised repeatedly through 1907.

World Premiere: April 3, 1869, in Copenhagen. Edmund Neupert was the soloist; Holger Simon Paulli conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1929–30 season. Percy Grainger was the soloist; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 30 minutes

For most of the 19th century, Germany was the center of the musical world. Aspiring performers and

composers from all over Europe went to Germany to pursue their education. That was the case for Norway's celebrated musical son, Edvard Grieg. At age 15, his family sent him to study at the Leipzig Conservatory. Leipzig was a particularly celebrated city for music: Bach, Mendelssohn and Schumann had all lived and worked there.

Though Grieg was not happy in Leipzig, he became immersed in the city's vibrant musical culture. Before returning permanently to Norway, he also spent time in the Danish capital of Copenhagen. There, the most influential composer was Niels Gade, who had worked in Leipzig for many years and was close friends with Mendelssohn. Thus the German influence on Grieg was strengthened.

Beginning in the 1860s, however, he became interested in the folk music of his homeland. Thenceforth his music took on an increasingly Norwegian slant. Today, Grieg is regarded as the most important composer that Norway has produced, and the father of Norwegian nationalist music.

In spite of his celebrity in his homeland, his international reputation rests primarily on this piano concerto. As its low opus number indicates, it is a relatively early work, completed when the composer was only 25. The concerto is Grieg's largest orchestral work and the last piece that he wrote in the Austro-Germanic style he had learned in Leipzig. After the concerto, Norwegian folk music influenced all his music. The concerto was thus a turning point.

Even if that were not the case, however, Grieg's Concerto would be a marvel. Along with Robert Schumann's piano concerto (also in A minor), with which it is frequently compared, Grieg's masterpiece holds court as the quintessential romantic concerto. His biographer John Horton calls it "the most satisfying and successful of Grieg's attempts at composing in the larger traditional forms, and the one that is generally agreed to be the most complete musical embodiment of Norwegian national Romanticism."

Grieg acknowledged that he had studied Schumann's piano concerto carefully before embarking on his own. Like Schumann's concerto, Grieg's opens with a dramatic flourish for the soloist. He also follows Schumann's lead by dispensing with the extended orchestral passage preceding the piano entrance (called a double exposition), an approach that is familiar in Mozart's piano concertos.

Grieg's concerto has several distinct and contrasting theme groups, including a completely new melody that

oboes and bassoons introduce in the coda. The pianist's cadenza dazzles with romantic passagework in a heroic style.

After all the dust kicked up by the first movement, Grieg's Adagio settles things down. Muted strings introduce the music, joined first by bassoon, then upper winds, before the soloist enters. Grieg's piano writing and harmonies in the opening pages are reminiscent of the delicate filigree in Chopin; so too are his harmonies. This slow movement takes us on an extraordinary and passionate journey.

The finale gives us the most prophetic glimpse of Grieg's Norwegian voice, which he would adopt for the balance of his career. Characterized by strong rhythmic profile and a fiery, pagan spirit, this movement is a *halling*, a Norwegian folk dance that Grieg used in several other compositions.

A switch to a relaxed and lyrical section takes romantic liberties. Indeed, the tempo changes have a great deal to do with the dramatic tension that makes the finale so effective.

Because he was the soloist at the premiere in 1869, Grieg undoubtedly sought opportunities for display. This flashy concerto did much to establish Grieg's international reputation. He continued to revise the orchestration until the last years of his life, with special attention to the brass and woodwind parts. We hear the 1906–07 revised version.

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings and solo piano.

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: summer 1877

World Premiere: December 30, 1877, in Vienna. Hans Richter conducted the Vienna Philharmonic.

NJSO Premiere: 1937–38 season. Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 40 minutes

Alpine paradise

“So many melodies fly about that one must be careful not to tread on them.” So wrote Johannes Brahms to friends in Vienna during the summer of 1877. His rapturous observation was prompted by the beautiful mountain village of Pörtlach am Wörthersee in the province of Carinthia. His picturesque surroundings gave rise to the melodious Second Symphony. Brahms enjoyed Pörtlach enough to return for two additional summers, producing along the way three major works of strikingly similar spirit: the D-major Symphony, Op. 73 (1877), the D-major Violin Concerto, Op. 77 (1878), and the G-major Violin Sonata, Op. 79 (1879).

Of the three, the Second Symphony is perhaps the most amazing, not because it is better than the other two, but because it is so different from what preceded it. Brahms labored over his First Symphony for two decades. Always his own most severe critic, he waited until he had reworked musical material, forging it into a form that met his own high standards. Consequently, the First Symphony reflects musical ideas—and internal struggle—dating back as early as 1854.

Floodgates opened: composing with ease

By contrast, the Second Symphony unfolded naturally and rapidly, ready for its premiere barely more than a year on the heels of its predecessor. It is as if the floodgates were opened; the next symphony poured out of him with fluid grace. Once Brahms had cleared the hurdle of that first major orchestral work, ideas streamed forth from him—and such ideas! “This music is all rippling streams, blue sky, sunshine and cool green shadows. How beautiful it must be at Pörtlach!” exclaimed the composer’s friend Theodor Billroth upon hearing the new symphony played through at the piano.

Brahms’ ‘Pastoral’ Symphony

Often called Brahms’ “Pastoral,” the symphony overflows with the dappled sunlight and exquisite natural beauty of the Austrian alps. It is nearly devoid of the tension and tragic struggle that permeate the First Symphony. Eduard Hanslick, the powerful Viennese critic, spoke of its “untroubled charm.” Yet the symphony is not without urban sophistication. Author Michael Musgrave has written: “The Second Symphony opens in the world of the symphonic waltz, as made familiar in Vienna by Johann Strauss Jr.”

Confounding us further, Brahms expands his orchestra to include trombones and bass tuba in three of the

four movements. Their brassy presence is belied by the tenderness and intimacy of his music. Brahms biographer Karl Geiringer has noted: “The whole atmosphere of this work is reflected in its instrumentation, which is more delicate, more translucent, and definitely brighter than that of the First Symphony, the pastoral flutes, oboes and clarinets receiving particularly prominent parts.”

The seductive power of waltzes

The first movement is in gentle, swaying triple time. While not unprecedented in a symphonic first movement (Mozart’s No. 39 and Beethoven’s “Eroica” are the most famous examples), triple time was still unusual for an opening movement in Brahms’ day. Far from apologizing for it, he emphasized it with a frankly waltz-like second subject, closely related to his beloved Lullaby. Though it has dramatic moments, notably a fugal development section, the first movement firmly establishes an aura of benign geniality that prevails for most of the symphony. The coda includes a dreamy horn solo, one of those delicious scoring details that rewards careful listening.

Spotlight on cellos and low brass

The rich key of B major provides the backdrop for a rare hint of darkness in this predominantly sunny symphony. Brahms’ slow movement, *Adagio non troppo*, begins with a luscious, expressive cello melody. Though the cellos relinquish the melody at its second statement, they reclaim it several times and retain a high profile throughout the movement. Surprisingly, Brahms emphasizes the darker sound of the lower instruments by retaining timpani, trombones and bass tuba in his scoring; frequently they remain silent in slow movements.

A transitional passage switches meter from 4/4 to 12/8, ushering in a contrasting middle section in B minor. Clouds temporarily obliterate the sunshine before a poignant oboe solo reintroduces the cello melody of the beginning.

The Schubert connection

Timpani and low brass disappear in the *Allegretto grazioso*. More an intermezzo than a scherzo, this gentle movement rocks gracefully between major and minor modes, recalling similar ambivalence in Schubert. Its two intervening trio sections (one in 2/4, the other in 3/8), have a sprightlier character, but they still draw their melodic motives from the *Allegretto*. Both trios include some fine woodwind passages.

Contrapuntal *tour de force*

Brahms the contrapuntist is in rare form in the finale, applying virtually every technique in the imitative book. After a bright start for strings alone, he takes maximum advantage of the episodes in this sonata-rondo for ingenious contrapuntal feats. Canon and inversion, augmentation and diminution, fugato: all are incorporated with consummate skill. The sunshine of the first movement is definitively restored, with a healthy dash of Haydnesque exuberance thrown in for good measure.

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, timpani and strings.