

The History in This Program

Almost exactly 55 years ago, Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1 became the subject of one of the most controversial chapters in New York Philharmonic history. Before conducting the concerto on April 6, 1962, then Music Director Leonard Bernstein addressed the audience from the podium. In a prepared speech, he said that he did not agree with soloist Glenn Gould's interpretation, but his faith in the guest pianist was such that he would conduct it anyway. (See "The New York Philharmonic Connection," page 28, for the full remarks.)

Bernstein was a longtime Gould admirer, who had played the pianist's 1955 recording of Bach's *Goldberg* Variations around the house nonstop while his wife, Felicia, was pregnant with their second child, Alexander, that same year. Later, he led Gould in four solo appearances at the Philharmonic between 1957 and 1961. Bernstein especially craved Gould's unpredictability, saying, "He gives me a whole new interest in music."

In early 1962 Gould had called Bernstein from Toronto, excitedly reporting that he'd struck upon an unconventional take on the concerto, with glacially slow tempos in the first and second movements. Bernstein respectfully accepted his friend's vision. He warned the Orchestra about the interpretation ahead of time, imploring them not to "give up" on Gould.

The following year, in a Philharmonic intermission radio interview, Gould insisted that he found Bernstein's speech "full of the best of good spirits and great charm," and that he'd giggled backstage. However, Bert Bial, former bassoonist / contrabassoonist and the Orchestra's longtime photographer, tells a completely different story. He remembers that Gould was "fuming" while Bernstein spoke and even toyed with walking out moments before going onstage. (Gould was already notorious for last-minute cancellations; the musicians had Brahms's Symphony No. 1 on their stands as a substitute, just in case.)

Bernstein was roundly criticized for his pre-performance comments. The deluge of bad press — on top of Gould's already notorious performance tics — caused the Philharmonic to consider cancelling the pianist's scheduled appearance the following season. President David Keiser proffered three possibilities: that Gould remain engaged as scheduled; that the appearance be cancelled; or that he be told to "improve his behavior." Ultimately, a decision was made to go through with the engagement. However, it wasn't to be. Gould bowed out of the performances anyway, citing illness, and he retired from live performance shortly thereafter. Nonetheless, Bernstein retained a special fondness for Gould. He kept a photo of the pianist in his studio and "couldn't bear it" when the pianist, 15 years his junior, died in 1982.

— The Archives

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Gould and Bernstein in rehearsal, in 1959

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15

Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms was the chief acolyte of the conservative stream of musical Romanticism, the movement that was born from the loins of Beethoven and that burst into flower throughout Europe in about 1830. As a young composer Brahms sought out Robert Schumann, one of the first generation of musical Romantics, appearing unannounced on his doorstep in Düsseldorf in 1853. Schumann was hugely impressed by the young man's talent, and on October 28 of that year he published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* an effusive article titled "Neue Bahnen" ("New Paths"), which acclaimed Brahms as a sort of musical Messiah, "destined to give ideal presentation to the highest expression of the time, ... springing forth like Minerva fully armed from the head of Jove."

Brahms fulfilled Schumann's prophecy and became the figure who most fully adapted the models of Beethoven (via Mendelssohn and Schumann) to the evolving aesthetics of the mid- to late-19th century. He did not achieve this without considerable struggle, and, aware of the burden that fell on his shoulders, he was reluctant to sign off on works in the genres that invited direct comparison to Beethoven, such as string quartets and symphonies. He did, however, manage to bring his First Piano Concerto to completion in 1858, and he published it four years later. He would not follow up with his considerably more serene Piano Concerto No. 2 (1878–81) until two further decades had passed.

The Piano Concerto No. 1 is a stormy work of essentially "pure," tumultuous Romanticism, closely related in its expression to Schumann's ideals. This is not surprising in

light of the fact that it was completed only a year and a half after Schumann's death, which followed a suicide attempt and two and a half years of decline in an asylum near Bonn. Lacking his elder to provide counsel, Brahms instead sought a musical confidante in Schumann's widow, Clara, an eminent pianist and close friend. Important support and advice also came from their friend Joseph Joachim, the violinist, who would serve as the first conductor of this concerto.

In 1854 Brahms had written at least three movements of a Sonata in D minor for Two Pianos, one of many of his works that would not be completed but instead would be recycled into a piece for strikingly different forces. By April 1856, some of the sonata's music had morphed into a preliminary version of this

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: completed in early 1858, with some material written as early as 1854

World premiere: January 22, 1859, with the composer as soloist and with Joseph Joachim conducting the Hanover Court Orchestra; the same forces had played a "reading rehearsal" ten months earlier.

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 13, 1895, Carl Bergmann, conductor, Nanetta Falk-Auerbach, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 23, 2015, Susanna Mälkki, conductor, Kirill Gerstein, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 49 minutes

piano concerto (without changing key), and Brahms began sending bits of it to Joachim for his comments. Joachim proved to be a patient and insightful editor and coach, and Brahms took many of his ideas to heart. The composer was characteristically loath to let go of his piece, however, leading the frustrated Joachim to write, “I beg of you, please, for God’s sake let the copyist get at the concerto” — which is what Brahms finally did a couple of months later.

Joachim was then serving as concertmaster at the Hanover Court Orchestra. He mustered his orchestra for a read-through of the new work on March 30, 1858, and then oversaw the premiere ten months later. The premiere was at least politely received, but that was not the case when the concerto was aired in Leipzig five days later, with Julius Rietz conducting the Gewandhaus Orchestra. “No reaction at all to the first and second movement,” Brahms wrote to Joachim, adding,

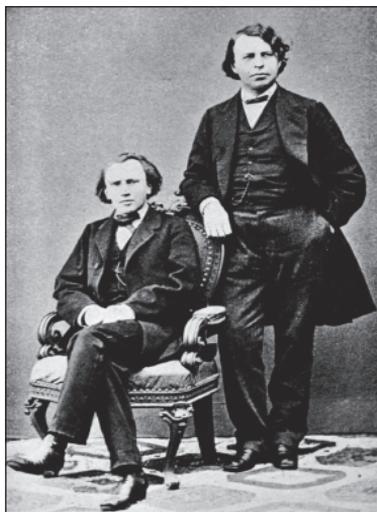
Birth Pangs

In April 1856 Brahms began sending portions of the score of his D-minor Piano Concerto to his friend, violinist Joseph Joachim, whose comments, along with the composer’s responses, provide many details about the work in progress. On December 14 of that year, Joachim wrote to Brahms:

I become more fond of the piece all the time, though certain things don’t altogether convince me compositionally; from page 21 to 24 it’s too fragmentary, not flowing enough — restless rather than impassioned — just as in general, after the significant opening, that wonderfully beautiful song in minor, I miss an appropriately magnificent second theme — I do realize that something commensurately elevated and beautiful in major, something that competes in breadth with the opening idea, must be hard to find — but even these reservations don’t blind me to the glories of the movement.

After the composer sent the finale “just to be finally rid of it” but with a thousand thanks for looking over the first movement “so benevolently and precisely,” Joachim replied on January 12, 1857:

Your finale — all in all I find it really significant: the pithy, bold spirit of the first theme, the intimate and soft B-flat-major passage, and particularly the solemn reawakening toward a majestic close after the cadenza. ... In fact, I even believe that after the impassioned spaciousness of the first movement and the elevating reverence of the second it would make a satisfying close to the whole concerto — were it not for some uncertainties in the middle of the movement, which disturb the beauty and total effect through a certain instability and stiffness. ... A conversation with Frau Schumann led me to think it would be well if you wrote another finale, revision often being more trouble than invention. But that would be a waste of so much that is meaningful in the rondo, and perhaps you can bring yourself back to the point of working with your original impetuosity so as to make these few places over — I’d like that.



Brahms and Joachim, in 1867

At the end, three pairs of hands tried slowly to clap. ... For all that, one day, when I've improved its physical structure, this concerto will please, and a second one will sound very different.

Instrumentation: two flutes (both doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

The New York Philharmonic Connection

On April 6, 1962, Music Director Leonard Bernstein turned and spoke to the audience about the performance they were about to hear of Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1, with soloist Glenn Gould. Bernstein's words were a highly unusual statement of his objections to the guest artist's interpretation, and a plea that audience members listen with open ears:

You are about to hear a rather, shall we say, unorthodox performance of the Brahms D minor Concerto, a performance distinctly different from any I've ever heard, or even dreamt of, for that matter, in its remarkably broad tempi and its frequent departures from Brahms's dynamic indications. I cannot say I am in total agreement with Mr. Gould's conception, and this raises the interesting question: "What am I doing conducting it?" I'm conducting it because Mr. Gould is so valid and serious an artist that I must take seriously anything he conceives in good faith and his conception is interesting enough so that I feel you should hear it, too.

But the age old question still remains: "In a concerto, who is the boss; the soloist or the conductor?" The answer is, of course, sometimes one, sometimes the other, depending on the people involved. But almost always, the two manage to get together by persuasion or charm or even threats to achieve a unified performance. I have only once before in my life had to submit to a soloist's wholly new and incompatible concept and that was the last time I accompanied Mr. Gould. But this time the discrepancies between our views are so great that I feel I must make this small disclaimer.

Now, why, to repeat the question, am I conducting it? Why do I not make a minor scandal — get a substitute soloist, or let an assistant conduct it? Because I am fascinated, glad to have the chance for a new look at this much-played work; because, what's more, there are moments in Mr. Gould's performance that emerge with astonishing freshness and conviction. Thirdly, because we can all learn something from this extraordinary artist, who is a thinking performer, and finally, because there is in music what Dimitri Mitropoulos used to call "the sportive element," that factor of curiosity, adventure, experiment; and I can assure you that it has been an ad-

venture this week collaborating with Mr. Gould on this Brahms concerto. It's in this spirit of adventure that we now present it to you.

For more on the Bernstein-Gould standoff over Brahms, see "The History in This Program," page 25.

— The Editors

Bernstein and the Philharmonic with Glenn Gould in a recording session, ca. 1960

