



Program Notes

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By Chris Morrison

“The Three B’s” of music – Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Johannes Brahms – are regarded by many as embodying the pinnacle of what music has to offer. As conductor-pianist Hans von Bülow, who knew Brahms and who originally assembled the triumvirate that is celebrated in this concert, wrote in the 1880’s: “I believe in Bach, the Father; Beethoven, the Son; and Brahms, the Holy Ghost of music.”

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G major, BWV 1048

Born into a family of musicians, Johann Sebastian Bach held several posts in his teens and early twenties as a singer, violinist and organist, during which time he also started to compose his first organ works and cantatas. The main body of his musical life can be divided up into three periods. From 1708 to 1717 he served as court organist and composer for the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar. Later, in 1723, Bach became the Kantor of the Thomas School in Leipzig, where he taught, directed the city’s Collegium musicum orchestra, and composed hundreds of cantatas for the city’s four main Lutheran churches until his death in 1750.

Between the Weimar and Leipzig posts, from 1717 to 1723, Bach was employed by Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen as director of the Prince’s orchestra. After being required to focus on church music in Weimar, Bach leapt at the opportunity to create instrumental works, and wrote a good portion of his orchestral music during these Cöthen years. Among the best known of these works are the six Brandenburg Concertos, named after Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg (brother of King Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia), who in 1719 had commissioned Bach to write some music for his small orchestra. Bach assembled the six works by 1721, calling them simply “Concertos for diverse instruments” as each features a differently constituted orchestra. They were dubbed the Brandenburg Concertos much later by the composer’s biographer Philipp Spitta.

The Concerto No. 3 is scored for three violins, three violas, three cellos, and a continuo of bass and harpsichord. The lively opening movement features plenty of counterpoint, but always in service to the memorable melodies. What Bach intended with the second movement – which consists of just one measure and two chords – is a bit of a mystery. He may have intended those chords to be improvised over, as they frequently are today, or perhaps he was having a bit of a joke. In any case, this unusually short movement leads directly into a propulsive finale full of energy and virtuoso playing by all participants.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

The four notes may be a portent – “Thus Fate knocks at the door!” (as Beethoven himself allegedly told his assistant Anton Schindler). Or they may simply quote a birdsong (the yellow-hammer, according to Beethoven’s student Carl Czerny). They may call to mind “V For Victory” (the four notes, with their similarity to the dot-dot-dot-dash “V” of Morse Code, were used by the BBC to open its broadcasts during World War II). Or they may evoke “the human breast, squeezed by monstrous presentiments and destructive powers” (in a fanciful description by the writer-composer E.T.A. Hoffmann). Or they may simply be four of the most famous notes in musical history, three short and one long, that herald one of the greatest of all symphonic works, Ludwig van Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5.

Beethoven put his first thoughts on this symphony to paper as early as 1804. But he didn’t truly set to work on it until the winter of 1806-7, and only completed it in early 1808. By this time he had quite a backlog of major compositions, and he gathered many of them for a truly momentous concert, in terms of musical riches and sheer length. On December 22, 1808 at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, Beethoven led the premieres of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the Piano Concerto No. 4, and the Choral Fantasy, along with the concert aria *Ah! perfido*, sections from the Mass in C major, and a piano improvisation. Of the performance, over four hours of music prepared with just one rehearsal – presented in an unheated hall in December! – Anton Schindler blandly wrote, “the public was not endowed with the necessary degree of comprehension for such extraordinary music, and the performance left a great deal to be desired.” But the work quickly became part of the standard repertoire, and, as perhaps the first example of the “victory symphony” (in which the music moves from darkness and conflict to ultimate triumph), inspired composers from Berlioz to Tchaikovsky and Mahler.

That famous four-note motive described above suffuses the entirety of the Fifth Symphony’s first movement, one of Beethoven’s most concentrated creations. Even as the violins spin out the movement’s more lyric second melody, the four-note rhythm is heard in the background in the low strings. This first movement is all strife and anger – the forward thrust broken only briefly, but dramatically, by a solo oboe cadenza as the main themes are restated – and ends tersely.

The second movement, a moment of repose (with a hint of the victory to come), is a set of variations on a pair of themes, the first a flowing melody played initially by the cellos, the second an ascending, fanfare-like idea in the brass. The variations become progressively more elaborate, with especially lovely decorations added by the violins to the third variation of the first theme.

Darkness descends again in the tripartite third movement, which begins ominously before the forceful sounding by the French horns of a variant of the opening “Fate” motive. The middle section features the cellos and basses in what one commentator evocatively termed “elephantine gambols.” Pizzicato strings play a creepy version of the opening horn motif, then the strings play a quiet sustained chord over the beat of the timpani – suspense builds, the harmonies start to converge on C major, and a powerful crescendo leads directly into the fourth movement. Opening with a dramatic fanfare from the full orchestra, a sequence of melodies is heard, colored

by the first appearances in the symphony of the three trombones, piccolo, and contrabassoon. These themes are developed for a time before a brief reprise of the main theme of the third movement in pizzicato strings and woodwinds. This is a short interlude, however, before the triumphant restatement of the movement's main ideas and a fast-paced conclusion of remarkable excitement and brilliance.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15

Dedicated to the style and musical values of his important Classical era predecessors such as Beethoven and Mozart, Johannes Brahms also brought to his compositions an expansiveness of form and richness of harmony characteristic of the Romantic period in which he lived. A child prodigy, Brahms earned a living from his teens playing piano in theatres and taverns. Around the age of twenty Brahms met the famous violinist Joseph Joachim in Hamburg, who in turn introduced him to Robert Schumann. Schumann became Brahms' most important mentor, and Schumann's wife Clara became his lifelong friend and closest confidant.

During this early period in his career, in which he was starting work on what eventually became his Piano Concerto No. 1, Brahms had a reputation of being a fine pianist, but hadn't yet established himself as a composer. He was still trying to live up to his description by Robert Schumann in the latter's last article as a music critic, on October 28, 1853, as "one of the elect," "a young man over whose cradle graces and heroes have stood watch." Sadly, it was mere months after this column that Schumann began to suffer from the hallucinations that led to his suicide attempt, commitment to an asylum, and eventual death in July 1856 at age 46.

It was in this highly-charged time in Brahms's life that he started work on a symphony, his ambitions fueled at least in part on Schumann's effusive praise. But he quickly found the task a bit beyond his compositional skills at that time – in fact, he didn't write his official Symphony No. 1 for another twenty-plus years. By 1854 the symphony sketches had been turned into a sonata for two pianos that won acclaim from Clara Schumann but which alternately pleased and displeased the composer. Brahms's friend Julius Grimm was the one who suggested that the sonata be expanded into a piano concerto. The task was a large one, and throughout 1856 and 1857 Brahms was regularly sending drafts and sketches to Joseph Joachim, the famous violinist who, as part of the circle around the Schumanns, had become Brahms's friend and mentor. As late as December 1857 Brahms was writing to Joachim of the concerto that "nothing sensible will ever come of it."

But after considerably more tweaking the Piano Concerto No. 1 was completed and given its premiere in Hanover on January 22, 1859, with Brahms as soloist and Joachim conducting the Hanover Court Orchestra. That performance was mildly well received, but a repeat performance several days later in Leipzig was a disaster. As Brahms recounted in a letter, "No reaction at all to the first and second movements. At the end, three pairs of hands tried slowly to clap, whereupon a clear hissing from all sides quickly put an end to any such demonstration." A few further revisions followed, and it wasn't long before the work started to get the reception it deserved as one of the monuments of the concerto literature.

The first movement begins with forceful timpani and an aggressive opening theme – which returns frequently as a sort of motto throughout the twenty-plus minutes of the movement – that yields quickly to a more lyrical, chorale-like theme. There is a feeling of tension as the tonality seems to be pulled this way and that. After a further elaboration of the opening theme, the piano finally enters with a rhapsodic, richly harmonized new idea. The piano muses over these ideas in a long solo described by Joachim as “magnificent, elevated and beautiful.” As the movement progresses and these themes are developed further, the piano writing varies from delicate cascades of notes to full-throated chords that cut through the rich orchestral fabric. Gentle arpeggios from the piano and horn calls announce the movement’s conclusion, which builds to a final statement of the opening theme with glittering display from the soloist.

A warm and noble theme in the strings opens the second movement. The piano enters with rich harmonies and a hushed mood is created, with a sense of longing in the arc of the melodies. Brahms had originally given this movement a written inscription, “Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini” (“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”). He might have been referring here to Robert Schumann, whom he had often addressed as “Dominus” (in the sense of “Master”). Likewise, in December 1856 Brahms wrote a letter to Clara Schumann in which he wrote of this movement, “I am also painting a lovely portrait of you.” One way or the other, this leisurely, beautiful music had close personal associations for the composer.

Of the forceful third movement, Brahms referred to the “pithy, bold spirit” of the opening theme and the “intimate and soft” nature of the second main melody. About halfway into the movement a contrapuntal, fugue-like section emerges in the strings and winds. A lengthy cadenza for the pianist gives some indication of Brahms’s formidable piano technique. The impressive final minutes of the concerto alternate solo sections for the piano with what Joachim called “awakenings” in the orchestra.