

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Igor Stravinsky

Born June 18, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.

Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments

Stravinsky began this piano concerto in the summer of 1923 and completed it on April 21, 1924; he was the soloist at the first performance, conducted by Serge Koussevitzky, on May 22, 1924, in Paris. The orchestra consists of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, and double basses. Performance time is approximately twenty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Stravinsky's Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments were given at Orchestra Hall on January 30 and 31, 1935, with Jane Anderson and Jean Williams as soloists (the work was performed twice; once before and once after intermission) and Eric DeLamarter conducting. Stravinsky himself conducted the work at Orchestra Hall on November 7 and 8, 1940, with Jane Anderson as soloist. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on March 3, 4, 5, and 8, 2005, with Pierre-Laurent Aimard as soloist and David Robertson conducting. The Orchestra has performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival only once, on July 10, 1993, with Peter Serkin as soloist and Libor Pešek conducting.

Stravinsky would offer a handful of ways to define the word "concerto" before his career was over. This work for piano and winds was the first, and it was followed by pieces that look back as far as the eighteenth-century concerto grosso and others that help us to hear the original meaning of the word (from the Italian *concertare*, to join together, and the Latin *concertare*, to fight or contend) in new ways.

In this work, Stravinsky joins a solo piano and a wind orchestra, and both choices deserve comment. The sound of winds alone, unsweetened by strings, was a characteristic Stravinsky sonority in the early 1920s (the Symphonies of Wind Instruments is the first important example). His urge to write for the piano was new—ignited, perhaps, by transcribing three movements from *Petrushka* for Artur Rubinstein in 1921. Stravinsky found the combination of piano and winds logical and apt. "Strings and piano, a sound scraped and a sound struck, do not sound well together," he wrote, ignoring the achievements of Mozart and Beethoven, among others. "Piano and wind, sounds struck and blown, do."

This concerto was written for Serge Koussevitzky's Paris concerts, and when the score was nearly finished, the conductor suggested that Stravinsky play the solo himself. Stravinsky got into shape by spending long, happy hours with Czerny exercises. He was in fine form at the premiere, in May 1924, but his mind began to play tricks: "After finishing the first movement," he recalled,

and just before beginning the Largo which opens with a passage for solo piano, I suddenly realized that I had completely forgotten how it started. I said so quietly to Koussevitzky, who glanced at the score and hummed the first notes. That was enough to restore my balance and enable me to attack the Largo.

Despite this episode, Stravinsky enjoyed playing his own music, and he continued to perform the concerto, retaining exclusive performance rights for five years. But things did not always go smoothly. "Another time," he recalled,

while playing the same concerto, I suffered a lapse of memory because I was suddenly obsessed by the idea that the audience was a collection of dolls in a huge panopticon. Still another time, my memory froze because I suddenly noticed the reflection of my fingers in the glossy wood at the edge of the keyboard.

Every one of Stravinsky's concertolike works both borrows and departs from tradition; this one takes as its backbone the classic layout in a three-movement, fast-slow-fast pattern. The first movement also is conventional in overall shape: it begins with a somber introduction for the winds; the piano enters boisterously to launch the body of the movement with fast and aggressive music that is persistently percussive and driven. The winds are forever indebted to the piano for ideas, and a sense of drama develops as material is transformed by the exchange. The gestures of eighteenth-century music—of Bach and Scarlatti in particular—tease the listener's ears, but on closer inspection, every measure bears the unmistakable stamp of Stravinsky's own hand.

The piano opens the second movement with a stately melody over the steady progression of heavy, left-hand chords. Like much memorable music, it is strikingly simple; one wonders how the composer could have forgotten it, even in a terrible moment of stage fright. After a rhapsodic cadenza, the tone changes; the piano launches a livelier new section, and—after another brief cadenza—leads without pause into the final Allegro. The pace of the third movement is relentless; the piano often dominates, and there is scarcely a measure to which it does not contribute. The writing throughout—for both piano and winds—is brilliant and vigorous. Just before the end, the music stops short (victim to another memory lapse?), then the piano quietly repeats a single chord in different rhythmic patterns. The concerto seems to start over again, from the top, but, with a parting glance at the dolls in the panopticon, all is recovered and the piano chases the orchestra to the final chord.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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