Johannes Brahms – Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany.
Died April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.

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Brahms’s first sketches for this concerto date back to 1854. He completed the work early in 1858 and was the soloist at the first private performance on March 30, 1858, in Hanover, as well as at the first public performance on January 22, 1859, also in Hanover. The orchestra consists of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Brahms’s First Piano Concerto were given at the Auditorium Theatre on March 2 and 3, 1900, with Leopold Godowsky as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on March 20, 21, and 22, 2008, with Evgeny Kissin as soloist and Charles Dutoit conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 31, 1945, with Leon Fleisher as soloist and Leonard Bernstein conducting, and most recently on July 25, 2009, with Peter Serkin as soloist and Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

When Johannes Brahms was twenty years old, he summoned the courage to present himself at the home of Robert and Clara Schumann, the first couple of music. To his relief, the Schumanns were the perfect hosts, and Robert was genuinely overwhelmed once this odd young man—shy, boyish, and nearsighted—sat down at their piano to play his own music.

Schumann was so deeply moved that he came out of retirement as a critic to introduce Brahms to the music world. “Even outwardly,” Schumann writes of that afternoon in September 1853, “he bore the marks proclaiming: ‘This is a chosen one.’
Clara also was impressed, although perhaps it was something else about this tall, delicate man with the flowing blond hair and poetic eyes that caught her attention. Within months, she and Brahms would play duets at that same keyboard, cautiously launching, then more deeply cementing, a relationship that sometimes dared to be more than friendship.

In 1853, Robert and Clara were happily married, the proud parents of six young children (a seventh would arrive the following year), and celebrated musicians. Robert was one of the leading composers of the day, although he was destined to write no more important music. Clara somehow found time to maintain her reputation as a profound and thoughtful pianist while raising the children, and, despite social convention, to compose as well. But in February 1854, Robert suddenly began to suffer miserably from syphilis. Pain alternated with delirium, and he frequently experienced auditory and visual hallucinations. On February 27, while Clara was out running errands, he left the house and threw himself off a bridge into the Rhine. He was rescued by fishermen and taken home, but within the week he was admitted to the asylum in nearby Endenich, where he would die two and a half years later.

This would have been an even more difficult time for Clara if Brahms hadn’t returned to Düsseldorf to be with her. We don’t know for certain what transpired over these months. Brahms went to visit Robert in the asylum periodically, but Clara was not allowed to see him. On Robert’s birthday in 1856, Brahms found him making alphabetical lists of towns and countries. Finally, on July 17, Clara went along with Brahms and, for the first time in more than two years, saw the sad spectacle of her husband. Two days later, Robert Schumann died.

What all this had to do with Brahms’s music was not clear at first. In 1853, when he visited the Schumanns, he had nothing but chamber music and piano pieces to his credit, and during the next four years he didn’t venture into other genres. But Brahms was struggling with the urge to say something grand and important, and he secretly was itching to command the rich resources of a full orchestra. In March 1854, Brahms heard Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony for the first time, and the impact of that still-revolutionary sounding music threw him off track. It would be twenty-two years before he would complete a symphony of his own, although more and more that was what he most wanted to do.

One of the pieces that Brahms and Clara played together during these months of uncertainty was a big sonata for two pianos that he had begun as early as the spring of 1854, shortly after Robert was institutionalized. This music would take nearly four years to find its ideal form; at times Brahms believed his sonata was becoming a symphony, despite the
intimidating shadow of Beethoven, and at others, a concerto in Beethoven’s key of D minor. By now, as he admitted to Clara and wrote to his friend, the celebrated violinist Joseph Joachim, he realized that he needed more than two pianos to satisfy his musical impulses. Brahms continued to struggle with his sonata—parts of it were scored for full orchestra and sent to Joachim for his verdict. One movement was eventually discarded and ended up, considerably reworked, in the German Requiem. In 1857, he wrote to Joachim, “I have no judgment about this piece anymore, nor any control over it.”

What finally emerged from the doubt and difficulty was a big piano concerto in D minor, Brahms’s first major orchestral work. (The two serenades, which date from the same time, are sketches in comparison.) The Hanover premiere, on January 22, 1859, with the composer at the piano, was well received, but the performance in Leipzig a few days later was a disaster. Brahms took it in stride: “I think it’s the best thing that could happen to one—it forces you to collect your thoughts and it raises your courage. After all, I’m still trying and groping.”

The concerto, however, was a mature and fully finished work even then, and although Brahms talked about reworking its structure, in the end he only touched up some details. It is a powerful and dramatic score, and it bears the imprint of Brahms’s grief over Robert Schumann’s breakdown and death, as well as the conflict and the passion of his growing relationship with Clara.

Brahms begins with a menacing timpani roll and a fierce unison theme. There is not only drama in this opening, but also ambiguity, for over the first low D, the strings suggest not D minor, but B-flat major. It will take several pages before Brahms (already a master of long-range planning) unequivocally establishes D minor as the concerto’s presiding tonality. He marks each of the crucial moments in the sonata-form design with something unexpected, so that we not only take notice, but stop and think. For example, the soloist does not begin with the powerful first theme, but instead enters alone, commanding our attention with quiet and eloquent new music. (It is, in fact, not new, but a transformation of the immediately preceding orchestral music.) And when the pianist arrives at F major—the movement’s primary harmonic destination—Brahms introduces a majestic, very expansive truly new theme that he has been saving just for the occasion. (Joachim, who once suggested that Brahms compose a theme that was “appropriately magnificent . . . commensurately elevated and beautiful” at this point, must have been particularly pleased.)
The biggest surprise comes at the most dramatic moment in any sonata-form movement, the start of the recapitulation, when the opening music and the main key are reunited. Here Brahms disrupts our expectations by following the fierce timpani roll on D with the piano entering emphatically in E major, as if the soloist's hands simply landed on the wrong keys. Although this large movement was often shaped by the rhetoric and demeanor of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, each masterstroke here is entirely Brahms’s own.

The glorious, rapt Adagio has been interpreted as either a homage to Robert or an ode to Clara, but in some sense, it is both, with music being every bit as complicated as life. The piano line, by turns meditative, rhapsodic, impassioned, and even aggressive, never resorts to sheer display. (As American pianist William Mason commented after watching Brahms perform, “It was the playing of a composer, not that of a virtuoso.”) The brief cadenza is all the more captivating for being soft and slow.

Joachim enjoyed the “pithy bold spirit of the first theme” of the finale and admired the subsequent “intimate and soft B-flat major passage.” The entire rondo is carried by the immense energy of its main theme, although near the end Brahms makes room for more than one cadenza, followed by what Joachim called “the solemn reawakening toward a majestic close.”

**For the Record**
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Brahms’s First Piano Concerto in 1954 with Artur Rubinstein as soloist and Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA, in 1979 with Lazar Berman as soloist and Erich Leinsdorf conducting for CBS, and in 1983 with Emanuel Ax as soloist and James Levine conducting for RCA.

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