

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### **Bernard Rands**

Born March 2, 1934, Sheffield, England.

Currently resides in Boston, Massachusetts, and Chicago, Illinois.

### **Cello Concerto No. 1**

Rands composed this cello concerto in 1996, on a commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra for the seventieth birthday of Mstislav Rostropovich, to whom it is dedicated. The first performances were given by Rostropovich and the Boston Symphony, with Seiji Ozawa conducting, on April 3, 4, and 5, 1997, at Symphony Hall in Boston. The orchestra consists of three flutes, two alto flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, two harps, piano, timpani, percussion (vibraphone, marimba, xylophone, glockenspiel, tubular bells, bongos, triangle, medium and large tam-tams, bass drum, almglocken), and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-seven minutes.

Concertos are often written for a particular performer. Sometimes that player is the composer himself, writing for his own instrument—Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Brahms, Bartók, and Stravinsky, for example, all composed piano concertos which they introduced themselves. Many concertos were written for virtuoso soloists—Brahms's Violin Concerto was composed for Joseph Joachim and Elgar's for Fritz Kreisler; Copland's Clarinet Concerto was designed with Benny Goodman in mind; Ravel's Left-Hand Piano Concerto was written on a commission from Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm in World War I.

Like Britten's Symphony for Cello and Orchestra and Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto, this cello concerto by Bernard Rands was composed for Mstislav Rostropovich, one of the most formidable performers of our time. An essential part of the great concerto tradition, of course, is that each of these works, inspired and to some extent shaped by the skills of one performer, will be conquered and championed by others—transforming it from an occasional piece to part of the living repertory. And so it is with this week's performances of Rands's nine-year-old concerto, which is receiving its Chicago Symphony premiere in the hands of Johannes Moser, who grew up in a musical world already dominated, at least for aspiring cellists, by the great Russian (Rostropovich made the cover of *Time* magazine only months before Moser was born).

This cello concerto, commissioned to honor Rostropovich's seventieth birthday in 1997, is the first "traditional" concerto in Rands's large catalog of works, which includes significant, highly regarded pieces of vocal, orchestral, and chamber music dating back to 1960. Rands was born into a working-class family in the coal-mining community of Sheffield, England, and developed his serious, no-nonsense work ethic regarding composition early on. "My father got up and went to work every morning," Rands once told an interviewer, "and I believe I have to do the same." (It's still his habit to rise before dawn and put in a "full day's" work by noon.) Before turning to composition, he earned a degree in literature from the University of Wales. (These two interests came together when he began to set texts to music, as in *apókryphos*, which was premiered by the Chicago Symphony in 2003.)

As a composition student of Reginald Smith Brindle in the 1950s, Rands became fascinated with the lyrically inclined serial music of the Italian composer Luigi Dallapiccola. Rands went to Italy in 1958 to study not only with Dallapiccola, but also with Luciano Berio and Roman Vlad. In the early 1960s he attended the composition classes of Pierre Boulez and Bruno Maderna at Darmstadt. (Less than a decade later, Boulez and the BBC Symphony Orchestra commissioned three works from him.) In 1966 Rands was awarded a Harkness International Fellowship that brought him to the United States; he spent a year at both Princeton and the University of Illinois. He returned to England to teach at York and at Oxford, but immigrated to the United States in 1975 and became a citizen in 1983. Within a year, this new U. S. citizen had won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for his song cycle for tenor and orchestra, *Canti del Sole*

(Songs of the sun), the second in a set of three cycles—the others are the *Canti Lunatici* (Songs of the moon) of 1982 and the *Canti dell'Eclisse* (Songs of the eclipse). Rands also won the 1986 Kennedy Center Friedheim Award for *Le Tambourin*, Suites 1 and 2. (The music is related to an opera, long in progress, about the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh). His chamber opera *Belladonna* was commissioned and premiered by the Aspen Music Festival for its fiftieth anniversary in 1999 (the first act was performed by the New York City Opera in 2003).

In this country Rands has taught at the California Institute for the Arts, the University of California at San Diego (where he founded the contemporary performing ensemble SONOR), Boston University, and the Juilliard School of Music. In 1988 he was named Walter Bigelow Rosen Professor of Composition at Harvard University, a position he still holds today, and in 1989 he began a seven-year tenure as composer-in-residence of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Rands has won awards and fellowships from the Guggenheim, Koussevitzky, and Fromm foundations; the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters; and the National Endowment for the Arts. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2004.

Although this is Rands's first cello concerto, it isn't his first piece for solo cello and orchestra: *Hiraeth*, an extended work for the same combination, composed in 1987 and based on a Welsh folk song, also plays a role in the last movement of this score. Rands opens his concerto with a bold orchestral paragraph that builds to the entrance of the cello. The soloist's immediate job is to unify—and reconcile—the various musical ideas the orchestra has introduced. The entire first movement continues the process of discussing and reexamining the work's essential ingredients. Once involved, the cello is rarely silent, and Rands writes music that tests the instrument's range—both of notes and of expressive capability.

In the second movement, *Fantasia*, the cello and orchestra seem to inhabit separate musical worlds—Rands suggests, without ever actually recalling, the powerful drama of confrontation between piano and orchestra in the slow movement of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto—or in the middle movement of Bartók's Third. Here Rands opposes the strings' stubbornly dotted rhythms with the more rhapsodic unfolding of the cello line. Finally the cello manages to incorporate the dotted figure into its own musical thoughts. But at the end of the movement, when the strings "are seduced into sharing the cello's rhapsody," as Rands puts it, "as if with a despondent 'too little, too late,' response, the cello sinks to its lowest depths to echo its murmurs of the movement's opening."

The last movement is a song (*canzone* is Italian for song) based on the Welsh folk tune *Hiraeth*. Rands casts his finale as a theme with nine variations. As he explains:

The opening of this movement comes closest to anything in the work resembling a cadenza. The cello, maintaining the rhapsodic mood of the second movement, explores the folk song theme. Somewhat analogous to an Indian raga, this is done in an ever-accumulating elaboration and complexity, but always leaving the characteristics of the original theme present and clearly audible.

In the cello's opening "cadenza," into which other instruments gradually enter, the solo line gathers momentum—both the density of notes per measure and the tempo increase—as it leads toward the first of the variations. These nine examinations of the Welsh theme also vary material from the earlier movements. The overall design is complex and varied, moving back and forth from faster to slower tempos, from "tranquillo" to "giocoso" [playful], from the spare textures of the first variation to the orchestral outburst in the seventh (the cello sits this one out). Rands marks the ninth variation an epilogue; it is slow, majestic, and serene.

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

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