Milwaukee Symphony
Musical Journeys
WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS
Episode 8 Notes

JOHANNES BRAHMS
Born 7 May 1833; Hamburg, Germany
Died 3 April 1897; Vienna, Austria

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83

Composed: 1878-1881
Premiere: 9 November 1881; Budapest, Hungary

> Honored Master,
> I beg you to forgive my delay in thanking you for so kindly sending me your Concerto. Frankly speaking, at the first reading this work seemed to me a little gray in tone; I have, however, gradually come to understand it. It possesses the pregnant character of a distinguished work of art, in which thought and feeling move in noble harmony.
>
> With sincerest esteem, most devotedly,
> Franz Liszt

Brahms made his first sketches of the Piano Concerto No. 2 in the spring of 1878, following his first trip to Italy. He put it on the back burner, though, to work on the Violin Concerto, Op. 77. It wasn't until the summer of 1881, following a second trip to Italy, that the master completed the concerto – in the village of Pressbaum, near Vienna. The work was premiered in Budapest on 9 November of that year, with the composer as soloist.

Chronologically, Brahms's Op. 83 falls between the second and third symphonies. It dates from about the same time as the *Academic Festival Overture*, *Tragic Overture*, Violin Sonata No. 1, Piano Trio No. 2, the piano works of Op. 76 and Op. 79, and the choral/orchestral *Nänie*, Op. 82. In other words, the second piano concerto finds the 48-year-old composer at the height of his creative powers, celebrating previously undreamed-of accomplishments. Brahms dedicated the concerto to Eduard Marxsen, his piano teacher during his childhood days in Hamburg. As boys, both Johannes and Fritz Brahms had taken lessons from Marxsen, who – recognizing the family's financial straits – never charged them for his services.

Brahms chose an unconventional four-movement structure that enlarges the piece to symphonic dimensions. (In a letter to his friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, Brahms coyly referred to Op. 83, one of the most sizable works in the concert pianist's repertoire, as "a tiny little concerto with a wisp of a scherzo.") A solo horn opens the lengthy first movement, followed by a cadenza for the soloist that leads to the Allegro non troppo's exposition. The stormy development segues to the final statement of the opening theme, with a brilliant maestoso coda.

The Allegro appassionato is the aforementioned scherzo, set in D minor. This "wisp" is fiery and tragic, though, not the playful joke we might expect; a brief trio in D major offsets the movement's overall darkly passionate aesthetic. Following all this fervor, the serenity of the Andante, back in the friendly home key of B-flat major, is made all the more telling. The cello's tender solo calls to mind the melody of a song Brahms would write several years later, "Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer" (Ever softer grows my slumber); the piano expands on this in a quiet solo passage. Although the central section is more restless, the overall effect of the movement is of quiet introspection. In form, the cheerful B-flat major Allegretto grazioso is a rondo. It is indeed graceful, but quickly evolves into lively virtuoso passages for the soloist. There are no trumpets and drums here, there is no *sturm und drang*, only youthful energy and ease, with the piano and orchestra sharing equally in the rousing, radiant conclusion.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born 8 September 1841; Nelahozeves, Bohemia
Died 1 May 1904; Prague, Bohemia

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Opus 95 "From the New World"

Composed: 1892-93
First performance: 16 December 1893; New York, New York

At the behest of Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, Antonin Dvořák came to this country from his native Bohemia in the autumn of 1892. Mrs. Thurber, the wife of a New York millionaire wholesale grocer – and self-appointed cultural maven – had invited the composer to become the director of New York City's National Conservatory of Music. His arrival was planned to coincide with celebrations marking the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America. Mrs. Thurber's conservatory operated on philanthropic principles, and she held the purse strings. For a yearly salary of $15,000, Dvořák was expected to give lessons in composition and instrumentation to the most talented students three days a week, and on the other three days to rehearse the choir and orchestra. Since Thurber wanted a figurehead rather than an administrator, Dvořák was expected to be available for business consultations with her, if called upon. (By 1895, a homesick Dvořák was back home for good, contentedly surrounded by his family and again teaching composition at the Prague Conservatory.)

Dvořák spent his 1893 summer holiday with his family in Spillville, Iowa – in a Czech community where he could relax with his own countrymen and be free of the constant need to speak English, a language he never really mastered. Just prior, he had put the finishing touches on his E minor symphony – better known as "From the New World." Publication was expedited when the composer's good friend Johannes Brahms offered to correct the proofs. Its Carnegie Hall premiere, conducted by Anton Seidl, was a huge success. When the Symphony No. 9 was first presented in Vienna (1895), Brahms sat with Dvořák in the director's box. "I have never had such a success in Vienna," the composer later stated.

The "New World" Symphony also generated lengthy discussions as to whether the composer had appropriated Bohemian, Native American, or African-American themes as the basis for his new work. Dvořák eventually felt compelled to settle the matter by flatly denying that any folk music was used verbatim in the symphony. "I tried to write only in the spirit of these national American melodies," he explained.

For many concertgoers, this Symphony is so beloved and so well-known that little explanation is needed. Here, however, are a few highlights to listen for:

I. The melancholy introduction – some claim this depicts Dvořák's homesickness, others think it evokes the wide, open spaces of the American West – is soon shattered by the vigorous horn theme that outlines an E minor chord. This motif will reappear in the other three movements. Later comes a melody that suggests to some listeners "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

II. The Allegro molto ended decidedly in E minor. The well-known Largo is in D-flat major. Dvořák employs seven sonorous chords that take us there seamlessly. William Arms Fisher wrote the words "Goin' Home" to the famous English horn melody. It is said that Dvořák chose that instrument over the clarinet because its timbre reminded him of the vocal color of Harry T. Burleigh – the great African-American collector and arranger of spirituals, and a student of Dvořák. Near the movement's end, the motto theme loudly reasserts itself, but the English horn restores calm and the Largo ends very softly, with double basses alone.

III. According to Dvořák, the music of the scherzo was inspired by the feast and dance of Pau-Puk Keewis in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Song of Hiawatha." A motif from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony introduces the dance.

IV. A powerful brass theme opens the Allegro con fuoco; a gentler clarinet melody soon follows. By re-introducing the principal themes of the previous three movements early in the development section, Dvořák is later able to seamlessly combine them into a brilliant climax. Listen: You'll even hear the stately chord progression that opened the Largo.

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.