

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

*Composer, Pianist*

(Hamburg, 1832 — Vienna, 1897)

### CONCERTO NO. 2 FOR PIANO IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 83

*Composed: 1878 and 1881*

*Premiered: November 9, 1881 in Budapest,  
conducted by Alexander Erkel with the composer as soloist*

*Duration: ca. 46 minutes*

*Scoring: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings*

#### *Overview*

Brahms was a complex person. The paintings and photographs from his later years show him usually stern, occasionally smiling, but always hidden behind that great hedgerow of beard. He was capable of hurling forth truly bitter insults — he called Bruckner’s works “gigantic snake symphonies” — but he also regularly passed out pocketfuls of candy to the little tots who followed him around Vienna on his daily walks. He loved the simple, comfortable pleasures of plain, abundant food, new wine and well-worn clothes, but composed the most sophisticated music since Beethoven and moved among the highest echelons of musicians and society to dispense it. He could playfully disparage even such a monumental undertaking as this B-flat Concerto as a “tiny, tiny little piano concerto” and “a couple of little piano pieces,” but was at the same time so serious about his work that he became violent over any intrusion while he was composing. One time, for example, a young man who had been trying for years to catch a glimpse of the great master heard that Brahms was working on the second floor of his (Brahms’) vacation retreat. The man commandeered a ladder, climbed to the second story, and silently looked in for a few minutes. Brahms saw the face at the window, stormed over to it, and threw the ladder into the street, with no little harm done to the young man. Before he slammed the window shut, he bellowed curses at the miscreant, and shouted that he was *never* to be disturbed. Brahms was, indeed, a complex person, brimming with seeming contradictions.

The contradictions that marked Brahms’ personal life are reflected in the Second Concerto. This work, “sober, reflective, philosophical” according to Milton Cross, is the largest concerto ever composed in traditional, classical form. (Busoni’s Piano Concerto is half again as long, but its unique, hybrid form, which includes a men’s chorus, puts it out of the running.) Vladimir Horowitz, who played and recorded the Concerto with his father-in-law, Arturo Toscanini, called it the greatest music ever written for piano, yet this majestic work was inspired by two light-hearted, sun-filled trips to Italy.

In April 1878, Brahms journeyed to Goethe’s “land where the lemon trees bloom” with two friends, the Viennese surgeon Theodor Billroth and the composer Carl Goldmark. Though he found the music of Italy ghastly (he complained of hearing one opera which consisted wholly of final cadences), he loved the cathedrals, the sculptures, the artworks and, especially, the countryside. Spring was just turning into summer during his visit, and he wrote to his dear friend Clara Schumann, “You can have no conception of how beautiful it is here.” Still under the spell of the beneficent Italian climate, Brahms sketched themes for his Second Piano Concerto on his

return to Austria on the eve of his 45th birthday. Other matters pressed, however, and the Concerto was put aside. Three years later, during the spring of 1881, Brahms returned to Italy and was inspired by this second trip to resume composition on the Concerto. The score was completed by July. Whether or not the halcyon influence of Italy can be detected in the wondrous music of the B-flat Concerto is for each listener to decide. This work is certainly much more mellow than the stormy First Concerto, introduced over twenty years earlier, but whether this quality is the result of Brahms' trips to the sunny south, or of a decade of imbibing Viennese *Gemütlichkeit*, or simply of greater maturity is a matter for speculation.

### *What To Listen For*

In his biography of the composer, Walter Niemann cited the three most important characteristics of Brahms' concerto style: "the suppression of all display of technical virtuosity by the soloist as an end in itself; the equal footing maintained by the soloist and the orchestra; and the approximation of the concerto to the symphony in intellectual content." (The integration of the piano into the music's texture at the expense of brilliant but vapid passagework stems from Schumann's Piano Concerto.) Eduard Hanslick called the B-flat Concerto "a symphony with piano obbligato." Carl Geiringer viewed the piano part as "that of a chamber-music work, although it demands the technique of a virtuoso." The work requires a pianist not only of stunning technical achievement, but also one of immense physical endurance and impeccable musicianship. The B-flat Concerto is a work large and serious while at the same time hauntingly beautiful in performance and in memory.

The Concerto opens with a sylvan horn call answered by sweeping arpeggios from the piano. These initial gestures are introductory to the sonata-allegro form proper, which begins with the robust entry of the full orchestra. A number of themes are presented in the exposition; most are lyrical, but one is vigorously rhythmic. The development uses all of the thematic material, with one section welded almost seamlessly to the next, a characteristic of all Brahms' greatest works. The recapitulation is ushered in by the solo horn, here given a richer orchestral accompaniment than on its earlier appearance.

It is rare for a concerto to have more than three movements. The second movement, a scherzo, was added by Brahms to expand the structure of this Concerto to a symphonic four movements. The composer's biographer Max Kalbeck thought that the movement had originally been intended for the Violin Concerto but that Brahms, on the advice of Joseph Joachim, for whom the piece was written, had eliminated it from that work. In key and mood, it differs from the other movements of the Concerto to provide a welcome contrast in the overall architecture of the composition.

The third movement is a touching nocturne based on the song of the solo cello heard immediately at the beginning. (Brahms later fitted this same melody with words as the song *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* ["My Sleep Grows Ever More Peaceful"].) An agitated central section gives way to long, magical phrases for the clarinets which lead to a return of the solo cello's lovely theme.

The finale fuses rondo and sonata elements in a style strongly reminiscent of Hungarian Gypsy

music. The jaunty rondo theme is presented without introduction. It is carefully and thoroughly examined before two lyrical motives are presented. As a study in the way in which small musical fragments may be woven into an exquisite whole, this rousing movement is unexcelled.

Donald N. Ferguson summarized the mood of this wonderful product of Brahms' maturity: "There is no extravagance of joy, but rather a keen sense of well-being, expressed in phrases unimaginable by any but the deeply experienced."

## **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

*Composer, Pianist*

(Bonn, 1770 — Vienna, 1827)

### **SYMPHONY NO. 6 IN F MAJOR, OP. 68, "PASTORAL"**

*Composed: 1807-1808*

*Premiered: December 22, 1808 in Vienna, conducted by the composer*

*Duration: ca. 44 minutes*

*Scoring: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, two each of horns,  
trumpets and trombones, timpani and strings*

#### *Overview*

There is a fine and often fluid line that separates program and absolute music. Usually composers intend their work to be heard either with some extra-musical reference or as a universe unto itself, but Beethoven tried to link both worlds in his "Pastoral" Symphony. This work, with its birdcalls and its horncalls, its thunder, wind and rain, its peasant dances and babbling brooks, is decidedly and lovably programmatic. Yet the composer insisted that the Symphony is "more an expression of feeling than painting" — that it is more pure, abstract emotion than naïve imitations of various familiar country noises. It is, in truth, both.

The extra-musical associations of the "Pastoral" Symphony run far deeper than its imitations of nightingales and rainstorms. Actually, there are at least three layers of "meaning" here. The first and most obvious of these three is the evocation of natural noises, but this was only a point of departure for Beethoven into the second degree of reference in this work, since these woodland sounds were simply the external manifestations of what was, for him, a much deeper reality: that God was to be found in every tree, in every brook; indeed, that God and Nature are, if not the same, certainly indivisible. It was into this pantheistic philosophy that Beethoven retreated when his deafness became profound. As he grew increasingly alienated from the world of men, he sought and found refuge in Nature. "How happy I am to be able to wander among the bushes and grass, under trees and over rocks; no man can love the country as I love it," he rejoiced. He sought to voice his essential belief in the divinity of Nature in this Sixth Symphony, just as he sought in the Ninth Symphony to express another of his fundamental ideas: the hope for universal brotherhood. The second layer of meaning in this work is, in the words of Basil Lam, "not that it is merely descriptive, but, in the broadest sense, religious."

The third plane on which the "Pastoral" Symphony exists is heavily influenced by the other two.

This third layer, the purely musical, reflects the stability, the calm and the sense of the infinite that Beethoven perceived in Nature. “Oh, the sweet stillness of the woods!” he wrote. The style in which he chose to cast this work has about it a certain noble simplicity, an uncluttered directness of expression that implies the balm that Nature must have been for the composer’s troubled soul. Missing from the Sixth Symphony are the dramatic contrasts and profound emotional journeys of the contemporaneous Symphony No. 5. Instead, each movement combines a singularity of mood with a deep, quiet spiritual satisfaction to create a sense of massive grandeur, of infinite continuity, as though Beethoven had unearthed music that had always existed as part of the rocks and hills he loved so much. It is from this deep core of the music that Beethoven derived the unusual formal device of a fifth movement, a departure from the four-movement symphonic standard that had been the norm since Haydn’s early works of nearly a half-century earlier. This inserted movement depicts a storm through the thunderous rumblings of the basses and timpani, the lightning flashes of the piccolo and the gusts of the trombones. More than simply a contrast to the surrounding movements, this section serves as a foil to set the tranquility of the rest of the Symphony into bold relief. “The Darkness Declares the Glory of the Light” has here become music. The “Pastoral” Symphony, the most gentle and child-like work that Beethoven ever composed, grants us not only a deeper understanding of the great composer, but also, through his vision, a heightened awareness of ourselves and the world around us.

#### *What To Listen For*

Beethoven gave each of the five movements of the “Pastoral” Symphony a title describing its general character. The first movement, filled with verdant sweetness and effusive good humor, is headed *The Awakening of Cheerful Feelings at the Arrival in the Country*. The violins present a simple theme which pauses briefly after only four measures, as though the composer were alighting from a coach and taking a deep breath of the sparkling, fragrant air before beginning his brisk walk along a shaded path. The melody grows more vigorous before it quiets to lead almost imperceptibly to the second theme, a descending motive played by violins over a rustling string accompaniment. Again, the spirits swell and then relax before the main theme returns to occupy most of the development. To conclude the first movement, the recapitulation returns the themes of the exposition in more richly orchestrated settings, a common practice in the 19th-century symphony. It is worth noting that the textural figuration Beethoven supplied for this movement, and for most of this Symphony, contributes an aura of relaxed yet constant motion to the music. Indeed, the “background” throughout this Symphony is of unfailing interest and is as important as the themes in defining the sylvan character of the music. There is a fascination in listening to these inner voices, of perceiving the multiple planes of the texture, an experience comparable in the visual world to discerning the play of light and shade in the layers of foliage of a great tree or spying a darting fish beneath the shimmering surface of a rushing stream. There is even one extended section in the finale (noted below) where Beethoven dispensed with the “melody” completely and continued with only the “accompaniment.”

The second movement, *Scene at the Brook*, continues the mood and undulant figuration of the preceding movement. The music of this movement is almost entirely without chromatic harmony, and exudes an air of tranquility amid pleasing activity. The form is a sonata-allegro whose opening theme starts with a fragmentary idea in the first violins above a rich accompaniment. The second theme begins with a descending motion, like that of the first

movement, but then turns back upward to form an inverted arch. A full development section utilizing the main theme follows. The recapitulation recalls the earlier themes with enriched orchestration, and leads to a most remarkable coda. In the closing pages of this movement, the rustling accompaniment ceases while all Nature seems to hold its breath to listen to the songs of three birds — the nightingale, the dove and the cuckoo. Twice this tiny avian concert is performed before the movement comes quietly to its close. When later Romantic composers sought stylistic and formal models for their works it was to Beethoven that they turned, and when program music was the subject, this coda was their object.

Beethoven titled the scherzo *Merry Gathering of the Peasants*, and filled the music with a rustic bumptiousness and simple humor that recall a hearty if somewhat ungainly country dance. The trio shifts to duple meter for a stomping dance before the scherzo returns. The festivity is halted in mid-step by the distant thunder of a *Storm*, portrayed by the rumblings of the low strings. Beethoven built a convincing storm scene here through the tempestuous use of the tonal and timbral resources of the orchestra that stands in bold contrast to the surrounding movements of this Symphony. As the storm passes away over the horizon, the silvery voice of the flute leads directly into the finale, *Shepherd's Song: Joyful, Thankful Feelings after the Storm*. The clarinet and then the horn sing the unpretentious melody of the shepherd, which returns, rondo-fashion, to support the form of the movement. It is at the expected third hearing of this theme that the melody is deleted, leaving only the luxuriant accompaniment to furnish the background for imagining the rustic tune. The mood of well-being and contented satisfaction continues to the end of this wonderful work.

Hector Berlioz, writing with his customary Romantic effulgence, had the following to say of the “Pastoral” Symphony: “Ancient poems, however beautiful and admired they may be, pale into insignificance when compared with this marvel of music. This great poem of Beethoven — these long phrases so richly colored — these living pictures — these perfumes — that light — that eloquent silence — that vast horizon — these enchanted nooks secreted in the woods — those golden harvests — those rose-tinted clouds like wandering flocks on the surface of the sky — that immense plain seeming to slumber under the rays of the midday sun.... Yes, great and adored poets, you are conquered: *Inclyte sed victi* [‘You are glorious but vanquished’].”

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