

BRAHMS

9. — 13.2.2022

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LE PIANO
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Johannes Brahms – Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 2 in B flat major op. 83

“A second will be different,” Johannes Brahms is supposed to have said after the fiasco that he experienced at the 1859 première of his first piano concerto. However, two decades were to pass before he could keep this promise. Although Brahms set to work on a new piano concerto in the summer of 1878, he soon put his drafts to one side (and let them mature), ultimately completing the work three years later. The result is one of the most powerful romantic piano concertos – powerful in its expressiveness, but also in its dimensions: rather than the usual three movements, the insertion of a second allegro brings the total to four. Nonetheless, the shaping of the piece is highly accomplished: accomplished in the effortless mastery of the musical material, in the vivid brilliance of the instrumentation as well as the way in which the dense thematic material and motifs are treated.

The first movement opens unexpectedly with an unaccompanied horn solo to which the solo piano gives a brief, lyrical response. This restrained dialogue is repeated a second time – and then the solo instrument breaks out into a series of massive arpeggios in a grandiose, highly virtuosic cadenza. As a whole, the piano part is unusually dense, sometimes reaching – even surpassing – the limits of what is manually possible. In the first movement, two main themes unfold: the romantically atmospheric principal theme intoned by the horn, followed by a reticently buoyant secondary theme. Both thematic ideas are deconstructed into many variants and then linked anew. They are thus expressively reinterpreted in a variety of ways. The solo piano and orchestra are equal partners: the orchestra is given gravitas and structurally integrated into the music.

The second movement is a somewhat brusque scherzo and feels extremely concentrated due to its monothematic structure. The inserted trio section does little to subdue the impelling energy of the piece, instead further intensifying it with a modulation from D minor to D major. The third movement introduces a second solo instrument – the wonderful voice of a violoncello. It is almost as if the solo piano has temporarily been pushed into the background. The music is dominated by a song-like element – the most beautiful instrumental bel canto – with an extended, reposeful cantabile line. The fourth movement is a dance-like, cheerfully relaxed rondo. Once again, the thematic material is ingeniously handled in a wealth of imaginative variations, and the movement finally leads into a brilliant, ever-accelerating coda.

As with the first, the première performance of the second piano concerto, given on 8 November 1881 in Budapest with Brahms himself at the piano, by no means met with unanimous approval. Critics described the piece as a symphony with obbligato piano, failing to realise that Brahms was not concerned with superficial virtuoso showmanship, but with a synthesis of the concertante and the symphonic. In that respect, this piano concerto is unrivalled.

Johannes Brahms – Symphony No. 2 in D major op. 73

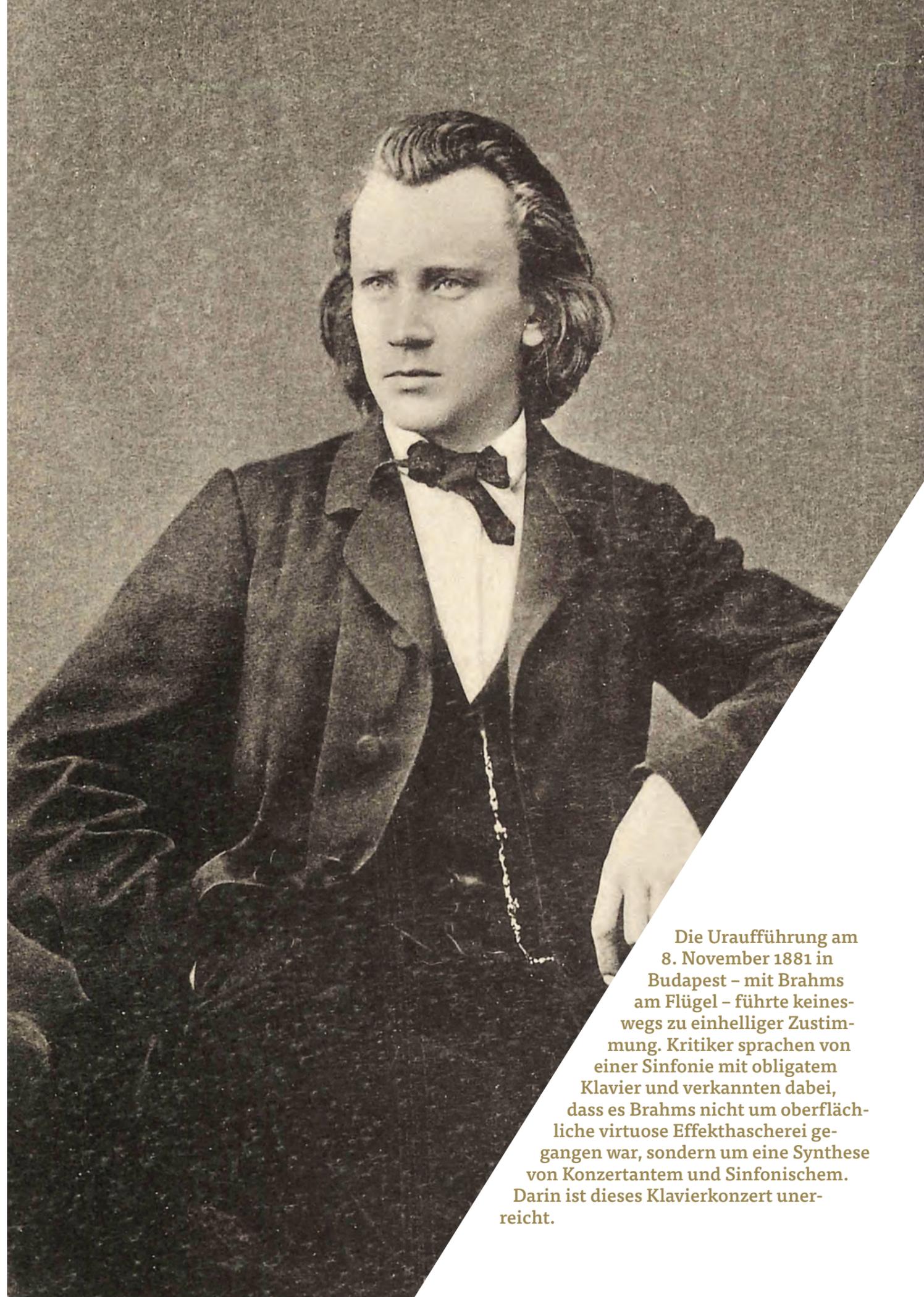
Brahms's road to the symphonic form was long and arduous. He was occupied with his first symphony for almost twenty years. Again and again, he discarded sketches and compositional drafts; nothing seemed to work, nothing convinced him. He was already 43 years old when he finally presented his first symphony in 1876. But the years of hesitation and critical revision had paid off: with his very first symphony, Brahms succeeded in creating a masterpiece. What is more, it gave him secure self-confidence in his symphonic creativity. It is therefore hardly surprising that he completed his second symphony merely a year later.

The première of the second symphony at Vienna's Musikverein on 30 December 1877 was one of the greatest triumphs of Brahms's career: “The orchestra rehearsed and performed with a sensuality and acclaimed me in a way that I had never experienced before.”

This is often referred to as Brahms's “Pastorale,” and its luminous key of D major indeed seems to sound sunnily atmospheric. Clearly Brahms was very much guided by sentiments – including melancholy – in this work, as he himself warned: “The new symphony is so melancholy that you won't be able to bear it.” This was, of course, an exaggeration. The second symphony was composed in 1877 during a summer holiday on Lake Wörthersee, and its buoyancy may well have had something to do with where it was written: “Here the melodies simply fly around you, so you have to be careful not to trample on any of them.” With that in mind, Brahms was initially concerned that people might think he had “made it too easy for himself this time.” Yet we should not be deceived by the semblance of a pastoral idyll – it is only linked to certain motifs. In the first movement, for example, the idyll extends over the first and especially the rapturous second theme. This contrasts, however, with a rhythmically roughened theme, while chains of syncopations and superimposed voices provide an additional sense of agitation and drama.

The motif of the minor second (on the notes D-C sharp-D) that opens the first movement also determines the three following movements. Brahms thus achieved a completely new degree of thematic linkage, which makes all four movements appear to be elements of an organically developed whole, as it were. At the same time, each movement has its own emotional physiognomy. In the second, the only adagio movement in Brahms's four symphonies, a restrained solemnity prevails, while the third – a witty genre piece with rondo-like features – is characterised by a graceful, almost bucolic tone. The fourth, in an occasionally “tumultuous” tone, has the atmosphere of a classical finale, which is interrupted only once, in the transition to the recapitulation, by a serious reminiscence of the slow second movement.

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Die Uraufführung am 8. November 1881 in Budapest – mit Brahms am Flügel – führte keineswegs zu einhelliger Zustimmung. Kritiker sprachen von einer Sinfonie mit obligatem Klavier und verkannten dabei, dass es Brahms nicht um oberflächliche virtuose Effekthascherei gegangen war, sondern um eine Synthese von Konzertantem und Sinfonischem. Darin ist dieses Klavierkonzert unerreich.

JOHANNES BRAHMS, CHAMBER MUSICIAN AN INTRODUCTION

His great composer colleagues were full of praise: "Mr Johannes Brahms was so kind as to play a piece of his that included serious variations," wrote Richard Wagner, "from which I could see that he does not take things lightly, and which I found excellent." Tchaikovsky described Brahms as "the most famous contemporary composer," an "honest and energetic musician with faith in his convictions." And Gustav Mahler admired Brahms for his "exceptionally cohesive compositions, which, incidentally, are not at all obvious, but reveal themselves with all the more depth and richness the more one immerses oneself in them, not to mention his tremendous productivity, which must also be considered in the overall picture of an artist." Furthermore, Mahler also appreciated Brahms as a human being: "He is a gnarled and stout tree, but ripe, sweet fruit, and a joy to behold that powerful tree with its abundance of leaves."

It is unlikely that Brahms was an extrovert. At any rate, he was not attracted by the great stage, where everything is aimed at display and representation: he never seriously tackled an opera or wrote any incidental music. Although many of his contemporaries saw him as the direct successor to Beethoven, he composed only four rather than nine symphonies. While he was certainly an absolute master when it came to handling a large, romantic symphony orchestra, he was even more fascinated by the intimate genre of chamber music, to which he devoted a wealth of compositions, writing magnificent duo sonatas, trios, quartets, quintets and sextets.

As already stated, many justifiably saw Brahms as a successor to Beethoven, who had once also enriched the genre of chamber music with his compositions. This had the unfortunate consequence that Brahms was carelessly pigeonholed as a conservative, backward-looking imitator. Yet the opposite is true! Arnold Schönberg of all people, the controversial twelve-tone revolutionary, was one of the first to confirm this unequivocally in his essay entitled *Brahms the Progressive*, which is still worth reading today. "Economy, yet nonetheless: wealth" he attested to Brahms's compositions, and the composer's numerous works of chamber music present themselves accordingly – with generosity and wisdom.

As a superb pianist, Brahms, as one would expect, preferred genres accompanied by the piano. His milestone compositions certainly include his piano quartets and his piano quintet. However, his piano-accompanied violin and cello sonatas enjoy the greatest popularity – and not only with performers. And although Brahms decided in 1890 that he would definitely stop composing, he was persuaded to change his mind thanks to an outstanding clarinetist whom he met at the time and for whom he wrote two clarinet sonatas as well as a clarinet trio and clarinet quintet: each and every one a profoundly moving, late masterpiece.

As a pianist, Brahms was naturally also interested in song settings. He composed approximately 300 songs in the course of his life. Each of them is a little gem, although his large-scale *Die schöne Magelone* cycle is undoubtedly of particular importance. Interestingly, he only wrote three sonatas for "his" piano, all of them at a very early age. For later in life, he was to become increasingly fascinated by the form of variation. Brahms was equally strongly attracted to "Kattermäng," as he called it, a Germanised version of the French "à quatre mains," of which his extremely imaginative Schumann and Haydn variations are prominent examples.

Even more than by the large-scale musical forms, Brahms was fascinated by the intimate genre of chamber music, to which he devoted a wealth of compositions, writing magnificent duo sonatas, trios, quartets, quintets and sextets.

Johannes Brahms only very rarely turned his hand to the organ, however, and the truly significant *Eleven Chorale Preludes* were produced only in the last year of his life. These are intimate, highly personal works – the calm soliloquies of a serene man at the end of a long life.



The young Johannes Brahms at the grand piano, 1867

Brahms und die Orgel

Nachtkonzerte

Mittwoch, 9. Februar 2022 | 21.45 Uhr
Donnerstag, 10. Februar 2022 | 21.45 Uhr
KKL Luzern, Konzertsaal

Suzanne Z'Graggen, Orgel

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)
Elf Choralvorspiele op. 122

Teil 1: Mittwoch, 9. Februar 2022

Choralvorspiele Nr. 1 – 6

Mein Jesu, der du mich

Herzliebster Jesu

O Welt, ich muss dich lassen

Herzlich tut mich erfreuen

Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele

O wie selig seid ihr doch, ihr Frommen

Teil 2: Donnerstag, 10. Februar 2022

Choralvorspiele Nr. 7 – 11

O Gott, du frommer Gott

Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen

Herzlich tut mich verlangen

Herzlich tut mich verlangen

O Welt, ich muss dich lassen

Elf Choralvorspiele op. 122

Die hohe Opuszahl 122 weist unmissverständlich darauf hin: Bei den elf Choralvorspielen, den bedeutendsten Orgelkompositionen von Johannes Brahms, handelt es sich um letzte Kompositionen – um letzte Worte sozusagen. Bereits im Winter 1895/96

Es handelt sich bei den Elf Choralvorspielen um ganz private Musik, sozusagen um Selbstgespräche an der Orgel, ja mehr noch: um musikalische Trauerarbeit.

wurde sich Brahms bewusst, dass ihm ein grosser Schicksalsschlag bevorstand: Bald sollte er seine «lebenslange» teure Freundin Clara Schumann verlieren. Umso intensiver beschäftigte er sich mit Fragen nach der Bedeutung von Lebensfreundschaft, von Tod und Leben. Die Orgel als Instrument hatte für Brahms nie eine bedeutende Rolle gespielt, und als er 1896, also nur ein knappes Jahr vor seinem Tod, die Elf Choralvorspiele op. 122 schrieb, bedeutete das eine späte – eine letzte – Rückkehr zur Orgel nach über vierzig Jahren.

Es handelt sich um ganz private Musik, sozusagen um Selbstgespräche an der Orgel, ja mehr noch: um musikalische Trauerarbeit. Da und dort erinnern Brahms' Choralvorspiele an das Orgelbüchlein von Johann Sebastian Bach. Die Kirchenmelodien erscheinen meist ohne jegliche Zutat, ohne Verzierungen und Schnörkel sowie in nur einer einzigen Durchführung im Diskant. Es ist zweifellos von grosser Bedeutung, dass Brahms die Sterbechoräle «Herzlich tut mich verlangen nach einem sel'gen End» und «O Welt, ich muss dich lassen» gleich zweimal vertonte.

Eleven Chorale Preludes op. 122

The high opus number 122 unmistakably refers to the fact that the *Eleven Chorale Preludes*, Johannes Brahms's most important organ compositions, are his last – his last words, as it were. As early as the winter of 1895/96, Brahms became aware that a great stroke of fate was imminent: he was soon to lose his dear "lifelong" friend, Clara Schumann. He therefore occupied himself

The *Eleven Chorale Preludes* are deeply private music, soliloquies at the organ, so to speak, indeed more than that: they are mourning set to music.

all the more intensively with questions about the meaning of lifelong friendship, life and death. The organ had never been important to Brahms as an instrument, and writing the *Eleven Chorale Preludes* op. 122 in 1896, just under a year before his death, meant a late – final – return to the organ after more than 40 years.

This is deeply private music, soliloquies at the organ, so to speak, indeed more than that: they are mourning set to music. Here and there, Brahms's *Chorale Preludes* are reminiscent of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*. Most of the chorales appear without any additions, without ornamentation or flourishes, and with only a single development in the descant. It is undoubtedly of great significance that Brahms set each of the chorales on the theme of death – "Herzlich tut mich verlangen nach einem sel'gen End" and "O Welt, ich muss dich lassen" – to music twice.

«Es ist nicht schwer, zu komponieren. Aber es ist fabelhaft schwer, die überflüssigen Noten unter den Tisch fallen zu lassen.»

Johannes Brahms



Brahms am Klavier

Mittagskonzert | Lunchkonzert

Freitag, 11. Februar 2022 | 12.30 Uhr

KKL Luzern, Konzertsaal

Anna Tsybuleva, Klavier

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)

Klaviersonate Nr. 2 fis-Moll op. 2

Allegro non troppo ma energico

Andante con espressione

Scherzo. Allegro – Trio. Poco più moderato

Finale. Introduzione. Sostenuto – Allegro non troppo e

rubato – Molto sostenuto

Johannes Brahms

Auswahl aus den acht Klavierstücken op. 76

Brahms am Klavier

Es war im Herbst 1853, als ein blondgelockter Zwanzigjähriger bei den Schumanns in Düsseldorf vorstellig wurde und ihnen eigene Werke vorspielte. Robert und Clara reagierten begeistert, lobten sein «ganz geniales Spiel, das aus dem Klavier ein Orchester von wehklagenden und lautjubelnden Stimmen machte. Es waren Sonaten, mehr verschleierte Sinfonien ...» Treffender kann man die drei frühen Klaviersonaten von Brahms kaum charakterisieren: verschleierte Sinfonien. Das gilt besonders für die zweite Sonate, die entstehungschronologisch seine erste ist, entstanden 1852. Ein ausladendes, wuchtiges Werk, und die Art und Weise, wie der ungemein virtuose Klaviersatz hier die Grenzen des Instruments zuweilen fast zu sprengen scheint, zeigt den Einfluss von Beethovens späten Klaviersonaten.

Die beiden Ecksätze der Sonate illustrieren Schumanns Bonmot von den «verschleierten Sinfonien» aufs Eindrücklichste. Durch das Andante zieht sich eine elegische Gesangsmelodie, und das Scherzo ist von jener dämonischen Natur, die Schumann besonders mochte. Um seine quasi-sinfonischen Klavierklänge zu notieren, genügten dem jungen Brahms die beiden Systeme der üblichen Klaviernotierung nicht mehr: Zeitweise musste er ein drittes System zu Hilfe nehmen.

Aus einer anderen Welt stammt die 1879 veröffentlichte Sammlung von acht Charakterstücken – je vier Capriccios und Intermezzi. Sie zeugen von einem ausdrucksintensiven Personalstil und zeigen darüber hinaus auch Einflüsse von Robert Schumann und Frédéric Chopin, deren Gesamtausgaben Brahms just zu dieser Zeit als Herausgeber betreute.

Brahms at the Piano

In the autumn of 1853, a twenty-year-old with blond curls presented himself at the Schumann household in Düsseldorf, where he performed his own compositions. Robert and Clara reacted enthusiastically, praising his “utterly brilliant playing, which transformed the piano into an orchestra of lamenting and jubilant voices. They were sonatas, or rather symphonies in disguise ...” There can scarcely be a more fitting characterisation of Brahms’s three early piano sonatas: symphonies in disguise. This applies especially to the second sonata which, written in 1852, is chronologically his first. It is a grandiose, powerful work, and the way in which the exceptionally virtuoso piano setting seems at times almost to test the limits of the instrument reveals the influence of Beethoven’s late piano sonatas.

The sonata’s two outer movements illustrate most impressively Schumann’s bon mot about “symphonies in disguise.” An elegiac, cantabile melody extends through the Andante, and the Scherzo is of the demonic character that Schumann especially liked. The two conventional systems of notation were no longer adequate for the young Brahms wishing to notate his quasi-symphonic piano sound, he occasionally had to use a third system.

The collection of character pieces published in 1879 – consisting of four capriccios and four intermezzi – seem to come from another world. They reveal an intensely expressive personal style and, moreover, display the influence of both Robert Schumann and Frédéric Chopin, the publication of whose complete works Brahms was supervising at precisely this time.

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