

Seong-Jin Cho Plays Chopin

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Ligeti: *Romanian Concerto*

Romanian folk music suffuses the character of this early Ligeti work. Prominent woodwind parts and concertante roles for horn and violin make this a miniature concerto for orchestra.

Chopin: *Piano Concerto No. 2*

This concerto flows with characteristic elegance, fusing Italianate delicacy with Polish dance rhythms. Chopin's irresistible music evokes his native Poland and Italy's *bel canto* opera.

Dvořák: *Symphony No. 7*

Brahms' Third Symphony was an important model for Dvořák's Seventh. Dvořák uses a popular Czech dance, the *furiant*, in his third movement, but the balance of the Seventh is the most European of Dvořák's symphonies.

LIGETI: *Romanian Concerto*

GYÖRGY LIGETI

Born: May 28, 1923, in Dicsoszentmárton, Transylvania (Romania)

Died: June 12, 2006, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1951

World Premiere: Privately, 1951 in Budapest. Publicly, August 21, 1971, in Fish Creek, WI.

NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 12 minutes

If you've heard of Ligeti, it's probably because his *Lux Aeterna* was part of the soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick's iconic 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Arguably the most distinguished Hungarian composer since Bartók, Ligeti was best known for his textural shifts and masses of sound. In his later works, he often merged radical techniques with traditional approaches to form. Always, he sought unusual sonorities. From 1959 on, his compositions featured exotic, sometimes bizarre, sonic effects and unusual approaches to organization of time. He withdrew most of his youthful compositions. The *Romanian Concerto* is one of the few early works he did *not* suppress.

Ligeti was born in a Hungarian-speaking part of Transylvania to Jewish parents. His father and brother died in Nazi camps, and he barely survived the war himself, working with high explosives near the front line as a Nazi slave laborer. Postwar life in Communist Romania was not much better, but poor health kept Ligeti out of mandatory military service and he managed to graduate from the Budapest Academy of Music in 1949. He served on its faculty until he fled Hungary for Vienna after the unsuccessful Hungarian uprising in 1956. He became active with the European *avant-garde* and was closely associated with the Darmstadt-Cologne school. He adopted Austrian citizenship in 1967.

The concerto that opens this program predates all that, and it is firmly rooted in the indigenous music of the region where Ligeti grew up. The composer later wrote:

In 1949, when I was 26, I learned how to transcribe folksongs from wax cylinders at the Folklore

Institute in Bucharest. Many of these melodies stuck in my memory and led in 1951 to the composition of my Romanian Concerto; however, not everything in it is genuinely Romanian as I also invented elements in the spirit of the village bands. I was later able to hear the piece at an orchestral rehearsal in Budapest—a public performance had been forbidden. Under Stalin’s dictatorship, even folk music was allowed only in a “politically correct” form, in other words, if forced into the straitjacket of the norms of socialist realism: major/minor harmonizations were welcome and even modal orientalisms in the style of Khachaturian were still permitted, but Stravinsky was excommunicated. The peculiar way in which village bands harmonized their music, often full of dissonances and “against the grain,” was regarded as incorrect. In the fourth movement of my *Concert Românesc* there is a passage in which an F sharp is heard in the context of F major. This was reason enough for the *apparatchiks* responsible for the arts to ban the entire piece.

Romanian Concerto is not a conventional concerto, but more like a concerto for orchestra, with cameo roles for the woodwinds and more prominent solos for horn and violin. The four movements are played without pause. Each has a distinct character, inflected with the modal harmonies and irregular rhythms of Romanian folk music.

If you know Bartók’s *Romanian Folk Dances*, you will identify immediately with the first two movements. The spirit of Kodály’s *Háry János* hovers over the *Adagio*, while George Enescu’s *Romanian Rhapsodies* clearly influence the finale. Ligeti learned well from these models, capturing the individual charm and character of Romanian music. In the third movement, solo horn plays natural harmonics, so the pitches sound slightly out of tune. The harmonics make a surprise return appearance at the end of the fourth movement. Most of the finale is a wild romp, crossing a frenetic tarantella with demonic Gypsy-style fiddling.

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns, two trumpets, tambourine, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, bass drum, strings and solo violin.

CHOPIN: Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 21

FRÉDÉRIC FRANÇOIS CHOPIN

Born: March 1, 1810, in Zelazowa Wola, near Warsaw, Poland

Died: October 17, 1849, in Paris, France

Composed: 1829–30

World Premiere: March 17, 1830, in Warsaw. The composer was the soloist.

NJSO Premiere: 1935–36 season. Griomar Novaes was the soloist; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 32 minutes

Some composers undergo marked changes in their style and approach to their art in the course of a long career: Beethoven and Stravinsky are obvious examples. Others, like Brahms, seem to have burst forth fully formed, with a unique and personal musical language that is instantly identifiable as their own and remains consistent in early, middle and late works.

Frédéric Chopin falls into the latter category. Hallmarks of his style appear in all his compositions. We are exceedingly unlikely to mistake Chopin's music for that of any of his contemporaries. His two piano concertos are the finest of his so-called "apprentice" works. Both demonstrate his incomparable flair for solo display.

Chopin began work on the F-minor concerto in autumn 1829. It was actually his first concerto, but it was not published until 1836, three years after the publication of his Piano Concerto in E Minor, Op. 11. Consequently, the F-minor concerto bears a later opus number.

The relationship between orchestra and piano is different in Chopin from, for example, the conversational balance in a Mozart concerto. Chopin took Johann Nepomuk Hummel, rather than Mozart, as his model. The Second Concerto is more an accompanied solo than a concerted discussion. Everything is geared to highlight technical virtuosity, beautiful tone and the expressive capability of the pianist. The mood of the music changes rapidly, showing every face that the composer has, from

warrior to poet. But these transformations are never at the expense of continuity, and Chopin sustains a convincing forward drive in spite of his unconventional approach to sonata form. As author Peter Gould has observed: "The development section of the F-minor concerto is not a true development as understood by Beethoven. Chopin seldom argued. He was not naturally an intellectual, his greatest attribute being that of sensitivity, and in his development he wrote what could be better described as a commentary on what had gone before."

Chopin had a lifelong love of opera that exercised a powerful influence on his sense of melodic line and inimitable ornamentation. That influence is most readily perceived in his lyrical slow movements. The F-minor concerto's central Andante (originally Adagio) was an expression of Chopin's love for a singer, Konstancja Gładkowska, during the last year he spent in Warsaw. He wrote to his friend Titus Woyciechowski in October 1829: "To my misfortune, perhaps, I have found my ideal. I venerate her with all my soul. For six months now I have been dreaming of her every night and still I have not addressed a single word to her. It is thinking of her that I have composed the Adagio of my Concerto."

Chopin remained very fond of performing this slow movement long after other women (notably Countess Delphine Potocka of Paris, the eventual dedicatee of the concerto) had replaced Konstancja in his affections. It is easy to understand why. With its lavish ornamentation and delicate embroidery, this movement blurs the distinction between melody and decoration, weaving a magical seductive spell.

Polish nationalism finds its way into the finale as a mazurka. This colorful movement incorporates a number of unexpectedly deft orchestral touches, such as *col legno* strings and a horn signal, that contribute to its energy. A virtuoso coda reminds us that the concerto, ultimately, belongs to the soloist.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; bass trombone, timpani, strings and solo piano.

DVOŘÁK: Symphony No. 7 in D Minor, Op. 70

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born: September 8, 1841, in Mühlhausen, Bohemia

Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague, Bohemia

Composed: December 1884 to March 1885

World Premiere: April 22, 1885, in London. The composer conducted the Royal Philharmonic Society.

NJSO Premiere: 1973–74 season. Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 35 minutes

Personal tragedy and its artistic legacy

When Dvořák's beloved mother died in December 1882, the composer's immediate musical response was the intensely emotional Piano Trio in F minor, Op. 65—one of his deepest, most profoundly tragic compositions. Next, Dvořák undertook a symphony, because the Philharmonic Society of London had requested one on the heels of his first trip to England. When he set to work on the English commission late in 1884, the painful emotional loss he had suffered was clearly still with him. The D-minor symphony was serious and tragic, probably the darkest-hued symphonic canvas that Dvořák ever painted.

Seeking a more international voice

One year prior, Dvořák had heard Johannes Brahms's Third Symphony in Vienna. That work made an enormous impression on him, and the seeds for his own new symphony were planted. By December 1884 he was immersed in the piece, writing to his friend Judge Antonín Rus: "I am just occupied by the new Symphony (for London) and everywhere I go I think of nothing else than my work, which must be such as to shake the world, and with God's help it will be so!"

The symphony caused him considerable trouble. He composed three different beginnings before one of them satisfied him. Part of the challenge was his desire to release himself from the stereotype of Czech music. Even though his audiences loved that aspect of his work, with the D-minor symphony he

strove to meet more international musical standards.

Viennese models: Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert

The result is a powerful composition that takes Beethoven and Brahms, rather than Slavonic folk music, as its models. Only the last two movements have a specifically Czech flavor. Dvořák's deft orchestration and rich melodies also recall Schubert in a symphony that is exceptionally well written for strings. The work was received with great enthusiasm at its London premiere, and critics compared it favorably with Schubert's "Great" Symphony and with Brahms' Third. Biographer John Clapham has written, "Without doubt this must surely be Dvořák's greatest symphony."

Slow movement and scherzo: interior power

One of the symphony's strengths is the power of its inner movements. The *Poco adagio* is nothing short of sublime, a glorious movement by any standard. In F major, it is framed by a section that returns to close, eloquent in its expression of peace and faith. Dvořák skillfully shifts back and forth from this serene music to a more anxious mode, resolving to a tranquil atmosphere. On its heels, the angry *Scherzo vivace* bursts forth. Its nervous agitation derives from Dvořák's clever superimposition of two tunes, one in 6/4 meter, the other in 3/2. The pull of cross-rhythms is like that of a Czech *furiant*, and the effect is electrifying.

Numbering confusion

The Seventh Symphony was mistakenly known as the Second for many years because it was the second of Dvořák's symphonies to be published. Seven is the correct and accepted modern numbering.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets in B-flat, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.