

## Preface

The genesis of the Second Piano Concerto op. 83 by Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), completed in 1881, in a sense actually goes back to 1859. In a concert at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 27 January of that year, the composer gave the second public performance of his First Piano Concerto op. 15. Musicians, audience and critics alike openly rejected it. The next day, Brahms wrote to his friend Joseph Joachim of the failure he had just experienced and added, as a means of self-encouragement: “Despite everything the concerto will still please people once I’ve improved its physique; and a second one is to sound rather different.”<sup>1</sup> So, in principle at least, he might already have conceived a plan to write another piano concerto. It would be another two decades, however, before he carried out his intentions.

Entries in Brahms’s pocket diaries make it evident that he began work on his Second Piano Concerto in May 1878, completing it in June 1881 during a summer stay in Preßbaum outside Vienna. On 11 July he sent his initial copy of the score (now missing) to Theodor Billroth in Vienna, who that same day wrote back an extensive letter in which he expressed his enthusiasm for the “magnificent piece.”<sup>2</sup> It was on the basis of this score that Brahms prepared the fair copy of the score that is extant today, finishing it presumably by late July. This then served as the source for various manuscripts made by copyists between August and October. With a view to trying out his new work in the second half of October with the Meiningen Court Orchestra under the baton of Hans von Bülow, Brahms commissioned a set of copies of the orchestral parts (no longer extant) and had a copy made of the piano solo part. The latter must have been ready by about the beginning of September 1881 and represents the first stage of the extant manuscript of the piano reduction. Brahms then added a second layer of music, namely an arrangement of the orchestra for two hands, written in the empty staves left for this purpose by the anonymous copyist. Where the solo piano has long pauses, Brahms also used all four “empty” staves for his arrangement of the orchestral part, which in these passages is thus for four hands at two pianos. The resultant piano reduction must have been finished by early October at the latest, because it was at this time that Brahms held a first rehearsal for two pianos in Vienna, together with the pianist and composer Ignaz Brüll. On 12 October, a private performance of this version took place in the Ehrbar Hall in Vienna before a small group of listeners including Billroth, the conductor Hans Richter and the music critics Eduard Hanslick and Max Kalbeck.

After Brahms had returned from the orchestral rehearsals in Meiningen on 24 October 1881, he prepared the piano reduction of the Second Piano Concerto for publication. On 31 October he sent the revised engraver’s copy to his publisher Fritz Simrock in Berlin. Immediately thereafter, a further revision of it was undertaken by Robert Keller, an editor at the publishing house, and then it was engraved by C. G. Röder in Leipzig. Two proofreading phases took place in December, undertaken by both Keller and Brahms himself. The composer also made several substantial changes to the musical text at this time. The proofs are all lost; only a preprint copy has survived that was made as a gift for Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, and it reflects the state of revisions after the first set of proofs but before the second set. The first edition of the piano

reduction was published from plates in early January 1882, apparently in a small print run, as a second, unaltered, lithographic issue followed later that month. The copy of the piano reduction that Brahms later used as the engraver’s copy of the solo part was taken from this second issue, as was his own private copy of the piano reduction that has survived as part of his estate. A third issue was published already in early February, and its musical text contains a number of editorial corrections made by Robert Keller. A fourth issue, published between late February and mid-April 1882, contains several additional corrections that were made in part by Keller, in part at the written request of the composer. All further issues of the piano reduction retain the musical text of the fourth issue in unaltered form (which resulted in it having an older version of the solo part, since several corrections and changes were later made to it while preparing and correcting the orchestral score and solo part; these changes were never applied retrospectively to the solo part in the piano reduction). Only the title page was subject to a later addition; from the sixth identified issue onwards (printed no earlier than May 1882) it bore the dedication “Dedicated to his dear friend and teacher Eduard Marxsen.” Brahms only decided to make this dedication to his former piano and composition teacher from Hamburg at a late stage, conveying his intention to his publisher on 16 May 1882.

Brahms sent the engraver’s copies of the score and orchestral parts to Simrock in late March or early April 1882, and sent that of the piano solo part on 15 April. The engraving of the solo part was already finished during the second half of May, and by early June the score had been engraved. The engraving of the orchestral parts was also probably finished in June at the latest. The engravers prepared proofs that were all corrected by Robert Keller, with Brahms also correcting the score and the solo part. Of these sets of proofs, a galley proof of the score has survived bearing numerous corrections and changes by Keller. The corrections of the proofs for the score were finished in July 1882, after which several preprint copies were made for Brahms, the dedicatee Eduard Marxsen, the conductor of the first rehearsals Hans von Bülow and a few other friends. The regular first issue of the score, the orchestral parts and the solo part only came on the market in September 1882. Later issues were published without any changes to the musical text.

The Second Piano Concerto was one of his works that Brahms performed most often himself. In most cases he was the pianist, though in later years he only conducted it. After the première in Budapest on 9 November 1881, Brahms played the Concerto another 19 times as soloist in the 1881/82 concert season. In the following season too, 1882/83, Brahms gave nine public performances of the Concerto. By 1886 he had played it another eleven times. He first conducted his Second Piano Concerto in February 1884 (with Julius Röntgen as his pianist), and between 1887 and 1896 he conducted it another four times, in each case with Eugen d’Albert at the piano. Directly after publication of the score and orchestral parts in September 1882, the 1882/83 season saw the first performances of the Concerto without the participation of the composer. On 14 October 1882 in London, Oscar Beringer became the first pianist to perform it after Brahms; on 3 November Heinrich Barth performed it in Berlin with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Joseph

Joachim. By February 1883 the work had been performed at least ten more times, in Germany, Austria, England and America. Thus the Concerto entered the repertoire of pianists immediately after its publication – and it has remained a firm staple ever since.

Contemporary commentators repeatedly pointed out one particular characteristic of the Second Piano Concerto upon which Brahms had himself remarked several times to his friends: the expansion of the usual three-movement concerto form to four movements by adding a scherzo. Shortly after finishing work on the Concerto, he had written to Emma Engelmann on 7 July 1881 that he had “composed a lovely, big piano concerto” that “to cap it all” also had a scherzo.<sup>3</sup> He made several similar remarks over the ensuing months, and on 1 November 1881 he wrote to his publisher Fritz Simrock: “would it be better to drop the 2nd movement? The thing has turned out rather too long.”<sup>4</sup> This suggestion was surely not meant seriously, but it shows that Brahms was still constantly pondering his justification for expanding the concerto form.

As it happens, some of his contemporary listeners did not approve of the unexpected four-movement format of the work. Thus an anonymous critic wrote in the *Basler Nachrichten* after the performance in Basel on 11 December 1881 that “The second movement is conceived and realised in a highly ingenious fashion, but its purpose in this concerto is not quite apparent. Its key, D minor, which had already featured large in the first movement as a representative of the daemonic and pathetic and had there confounded the initial atmosphere, now even becomes the main key. Since the piece lacks humour, one cannot really see it as a scherzo – and thus the insertion of this movement seems arbitrary, an unmotivated expansion of a work that in any case is rather long for a ‘piano concerto’.”<sup>5</sup>

Other listeners, however, found the four-movement form of the Concerto to be justified on account of its symphonic character. Yet on the whole, contemporary reports for the most part did not refer to it as a “piano concerto” anymore but described it in other ways that seemed more appropriate. The first-ever published report of the Second Piano Concerto, a note presumably written by Max Kalbeck, appeared after the private two-piano performance of 12 October 1881. It called the piece “a truly giant opus” that was “without parallel in the whole music repertoire on account of its sheer dimensions and mighty intentions.” It summed it up as a “complete piano symphony in four movements.”<sup>6</sup> Eduard Hanslick wrote something similar in his review of the first Viennese performance of 26 December 1881: “The B flat major concerto, in a stricter sense than is claimed by other concertos, is really a great symphony with obligato piano. It deserves this designation not just out of consideration for the unusual number of movements, namely four (instead of the usual three) but even more so because of the manner in which the piano part completely permeates the orchestra, foregoing any kind of monologue and in each movement only emerging with just a few solo measures. It is a first among equals throughout.”<sup>7</sup>

A “Symphony with obligato piano” was what Brahms’s First Piano Concerto had already been called back in 1859. If recognition of the

composer’s symphonic intentions had been a constant in the reception of both piano concertos, these works were in another sense regarded as a pair of opposites. After the world première on 9 November 1881, for example, Max Schütz wrote in the *Pester Lloyd*: “The piano concerto in B flat major [...] stands in relation to its predecessor (in D minor, op. 15) rather as does Brahms’s second symphony to his first. It is brighter, more transparent, more comprehensible, if also rather less grandly conceived than the first, which on account of its bulky, complicated structure never really became popular. [...] We might find something greater, more significant and of greater depth in the D minor concerto, but nothing more beautiful and more refreshing.”<sup>8</sup> Thus this work’s initial reception confirmed that the above-quoted, prophetic words of the composer, uttered after the failure of his First Concerto in Leipzig, had indeed been fulfilled with his new work: “A second one is to sound rather different.”

The text presented in this edition follows that of the Johannes Brahms Complete Edition.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently discovered errata in the Complete Edition have been corrected. Information on the sources consulted, the compositional alterations made by Brahms during the evolution and printing of the work, and on editorial corrections can be found in the *Kritischer Bericht* (Critical Report) of the respective volume of the Complete Edition as well as in a more succinct form in the *Bemerkungen* (Remarks) at the end of the present edition.

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- 1 *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Joseph Joachim*, vol. V, ed. by Andreas Moser, Berlin, 1921, p. 234.
- 2 *Billroth und Brahms im Briefwechsel*, ed. by Otto Gottlieb-Billroth, Berlin, 1935, pp. 311–313.
- 3 *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Th. Wilhelm Engelmann*, vol. VIII, ed. by Julius Röntgen, Berlin, 1918, p. 103.
- 4 Elisabeth Maier, *Die Brahms-Autographen der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, in: *Brahms-Studien*, vol. 3, ed. by Helmut Wirth, Hamburg, 1979, pp. 20f.
- 5 As cited in Werner G. Zimmermann, *Brahms in der Schweiz. Eine Dokumentation*, Zurich, 1983, p. 69.
- 6 *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 584, 14 October 1881, *Morgenblatt*, p. 5.
- 7 Eduard Hanslick, *Concerte, Componisten und Virtuosen der letzten fünfzehn Jahre. 1870–1885*, Berlin, 1886, p. 299.
- 8 As cited in Adam Gellen, *Brahms und Ungarn. Biographische, rezeptionsgeschichtliche, quellenkritische und analytische Studien*, Tutzing, 2011, pp. 568f.
- 9 *Johannes Brahms. Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, series I, vol. 8: *Klavierkonzert Nr. 2 Opus 83*, ed. by Johannes Behr, Munich, 2013.