

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Liszt Piano Concerto #1 and Brahms Symphony #4 – October 25-26, 2024

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FRANZ LISZT (1811 to 1886)

Franz Liszt may very well have been the first rock star in the history of music. In the 1960s there was Beatlemania. Before Beatlemania there was Lisztomania, a term coined by the German poet Heinrich Heine in the 1840s. Lisztomania is also the title and subject of a 1976 film, directed by Ken Russell.

Liszt was not only the greatest piano virtuoso of his time but a tremendously original composer. His life and work virtually defined the Romantic movement. Here are a few highlights of a biography that could fill a book. A child prodigy, Liszt began concertizing at the age of nine. He had piano lessons with Carl Czerny, a pupil of Beethoven, who Liszt certainly met. Prodigies eventually lose their appeal, and by 19 Liszt was ready to settle down and learn.

Three musicians had decisive influences on his development. Hector Berlioz taught him colour and big thinking in music. Frederic Chopin taught him that piano music could be poetical as well as bravura and that subtlety should accompany ferocity. And Niccolò Paganini inspired Liszt to do for the piano what Paganini was doing for the violin. At the age of 21, Liszt worked feverishly to rebuild his piano technique, and educated himself in the music of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. When Liszt resumed touring, it was as a complete artist.

Liszt changed concert performances forever, inventing the solo piano recital as it is known today. He was the first to situate the piano at a right angle to the stage. With the lid open the sound projected better, and audiences could see him in profile. He was also the first to perform from memory. He was also the first to play the entire existing keyboard repertoire, from Bach to Chopin. His recitals drew massive crowds where hysterical fans tore his clothes and hair and collected spent cigar butts or broken piano strings.

Pianists before Liszt kept their hands close to the keyboard playing from wrist and finger rather than arm and shoulder. Mendelssohn noted that Liszt could play “a degree of virtuosity and complete finger independence and a thoroughly musical feeling that can scarcely be equaled. I have heard no performer whose musical perceptions so extend to the very tips of his fingers.”

He gave up touring in 1847 and helped turn Weimar, Germany into the centre of the progressive musical movement. He taught, conducted, and composed. Among his musical inventions was the symphonic poem, a new musical form in one movement, inspired by a poem, play, or painting. Another innovation was paraphrases of operas for piano. He transcribed, arranged, and wrote variations on other composers' works, including arrangements of Beethoven's nine symphonies. He extended harmonic language and developed forms that foreshadowed the atonal music of the 20th

century. Liszt's bold strokes and frequent dissonances were copied by young composers everywhere.

What is the legacy of Franz Liszt? While he was controversial in his time, much can be attributed to jealousy of his brilliance and panache. Bela Bartok wrote, "The essence of these works... raise Liszt as a composer to the ranks of the great." Brahms and Wagner may have surpassed Liszt as creative figures during the 19th century. "But," says Harold Schonberg, "it may turn out that the prophetic Liszt had more to do with music as it actually developed than any single composer of his time. The full story of his majestic place in musical history has yet to be told."

Schonberg goes on to write, "It was as a pianist that Liszt made his initial impact on Europe. Later he became everything—composer, conductor, critic, litterateur, Don Juan, abbé, teacher, symbol and at the end, The Grand Old Man of music." He was born about the same time as the other romantics but outlived them all, dying in 1886 (the year Vancouver was incorporated as a city). It was said, "Liszt has flung his spear far into the future."

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E \flat Major, S.124 – Franz Liszt

Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, cymbals, triangle, strings, and solo piano

This first of his two piano concertos had its premiere in 1855 with Liszt at the piano and Hector Berlioz, a life-long friend, conducting. On the surface, it appears to be random bits linked by virtuosic piano passages, masquerading as a multi-movement piano concerto, with the orchestra as accompanist. But if one digs deeper, one discovers a very tight and innovative construction.

Although the concerto is only about 20 minutes in duration, there is a tremendous amount packed into it. That's no surprise. One of his earliest compositions, it took 23 years from start to finish for Liszt to write it! An earlier version was radically rewritten, likely in response to a comment from Robert Schumann, "It would be good to invent a new form that consists of one large movement... Perhaps this idea will inspire something that we would gladly see embodied in a peculiarly original composition." Liszt accepted the challenge by incorporating his ideas into a full-fledged concerto. Perhaps the long gestation period analogizes Liszt's life in his maturation from virtuoso performer to influential composer.

The Concerto is divided into an opening fast section, a slow section, a scherzo, and a finale, like a symphony; but everything else about the work is untraditional. The sections are connected and share thematic material. The orchestra does not have long uninterrupted passages, and you won't hear alternating passages by the orchestra and the pianist. You will also hear other instruments – flute, clarinet, and viola especially—as soloists.

Pay close attention to the opening motif or theme. From it, everything blooms. The first notes will be transformed throughout the concerto, in various melodies and keys. Let's look at the four sections:

The first movement, **Allegro maestoso**, presents the main theme, first by the orchestra, quickly followed by the piano, with an energetic display of octave passages spanning the keyboard. There is a story that, to mock his critics, Liszt and his son-in-law, Hans von Bülow, put the words *Das versteht ihr alle nicht, haha!* (none of you understand this, ha-ha) to the notes of the opening two bars. A beautifully peaceful passage includes an expressive duet between the piano and the clarinet. The main theme returns, followed by chromatic octaves (a Lisztian trademark), and then a recap of an earlier bit. The main theme reappears, played by the strings, while the piano imitates a harp, and the movement ends with the piano playing a quiet chromatic scale.

You might find the opening theme slightly disorienting because it is harmonically unstable and ambiguous. It feels as though we have started in the middle of a piece rather than at the beginning; this effect is a Romantic hallmark. Calvin Dotsey wrote, “Assuming the role of a Byronic hero, the soloist continually breaks free from the orchestra’s provocative (perhaps even menacing) main motto, launching into quasi-improvisatory flights of fancy that cycle through many different keys, untethered to the normal laws of harmony.”

The second movement, marked **Quasi adagio**, begins with the cellos and double basses, followed by the rest of the strings. The piano takes up the string theme in a romantic nocturne-like style—think of Chopin—with flowing arpeggios in the left-hand and an utterly beautiful melody in the right hand. The orchestra returns with the same theme, followed by a dialogue between the cellos and the piano. Now it’s the woodwinds’ turn to introduce a new theme, while the piano plays bird-like trills. A short passage for clarinet and piano ends the movement.

How can one resist the novelty of the triangle in what Liszt termed a “mocking little motif” that starts the third movement, marked **Allegretto vivace – Allegro animato**. You’ll hear the triangle again near the end of the work. (Highly criticized, percussion other than timpani was considered bizarre modernism.) The new theme introduced by the strings is developed by the piano throughout the movement. But listen closely for previous themes from the first two movements which reappear. It is humorous in character—the musical direction for the piano is “capriccioso scherzando”. But after the scherzo section, it turns a bit darker. That’s the “Allegro animato” part of the movement with the piano playing in the lower register of the keyboard. That leads to a recap of the now very familiar opening movement theme and a fiery piano passage.

You are now primed for the fourth movement, the **Allegro marziale animato**, which brings in all the previous themes. It adds to the unified, rhapsody-like feeling of the whole piece. Get set for a blisteringly fast and stunningly impressive final few passages. The piano plays one rhythm using sixteenth notes in the left hand and another rhythm of triplets of eighth notes in the right hand. Then marvel at the chromatic octaves with the hands going in opposite directions at breakneck speed and maximum volume—classic Liszt style. The main theme has one more triumphant return. The orchestra gets the last word, or more accurately, the last notes. It is Liszt’s acknowledgement of the partnership between orchestra and piano.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833 to 1897)

“It is not hard to compose but it is wonderfully hard to let the superfluous notes fall under the table. So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them.” ~ Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms is one of the most revered composers in the history of classical music. He was one of “The Three B’s”, with Bach and Beethoven, and certainly deserved that reputation.

Born in Hamburg in 1833 to the son of a double bass player of limited talent, young Johannes augmented the family income playing the piano in dance halls. The first big turning point in his life came in 1853, when he met violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, who immediately recognized Brahms’ talent. Joachim introduced him to Robert and Clara Schumann, who took Brahms under their wings.

He taught piano and conducted choirs which left him ample time for composing. By 1863 he had settled into a mostly quiet, regular life in Vienna, except for a few musical altercations arising from his quick temper and the rivalry between the traditionalists and the new romantics such as Wagner and Bruckner. His reputation grew steadily. Brahms remained in Vienna and held various musical positions but devoted his life to composition. He still went on concert tours, where he conducted or played piano, but only for his own works.

Brahms was very exacting but had a rather dual nature. While he could be solitary, morose, and withdrawn, he loved humour. Behind a rough exterior he hid a tenderness that revealed itself in his music and in his love of children. He remained a lifelong bachelor but had many musical friends and a few close personal friendships. His life was the antithesis of that of the flamboyant Liszt.

As a composer, Brahms bridged the gap between the musical past and its future. He preserved the structural rigour and formal discipline of Classical music—Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—but incorporated the emotional depth and expressiveness of the Romantic era. A musicologist for *Deutsche Grammophon* wrote, “Brahms blended Beethovenian dynamism, Schubertian lyricism, a love of German folk song and the strict contrapuntal mastery of the Baroque into a synthesis of phenomenal richness. His example was as vital as Wagner’s in the creation of the music of the modern era.”

His music is characterized by a mastery of rhythm, movement, and orchestration. This distinguished him from his contemporaries and influenced later composers, including Antonín Dvořák and Gustav Mahler, who greatly admired his work. Brahms's choral works, especially his *German Requiem*, are considered masterpieces and have had a lasting impact on choral music.

Very self-critical, Brahms didn’t complete his first symphony until 1876 at the age of 43. Written in the same key as Beethoven’s Fifth, Brahms’ First was dubbed by some critics as “Beethoven’s Tenth”. By then he was in full command of the symphonic style and wrote his other three symphonies within a decade. Gradually, Brahms’s renown spread through Europe. His contemporaries appreciated the critical significance of his works, and people spoke of the

eminence of the “three great Bs” (meaning Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms). Inevitably, a few detractors including Liszt and Wagner thought Brahms’ work too old-fashioned and uninteresting.

In addition to his symphonies and monumental concertos, Brahms composed a large body of choral, chamber and piano music, as well as over two hundred songs. He excelled in great virtuoso forms, and in intimate small-scale piano pieces and chamber music. Unlike Wagner, Brahms did not write an opera. In Brahms’ works, the music becomes the drama.

The last orchestral concert Brahms attended was a Vienna Philharmonic performance of his own Fourth Symphony a month before he died. An ailing Brahms appeared at the end of the performance and received thunderous applause. Florence May, Brahms’ first English language biographer, described the scene, “Tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there [...] and through the audience there was a feeling as of a stifled sob, for each knew that he was saying farewell. Another outburst of applause and yet another; one more acknowledgment from the master, and Brahms and his Vienna had parted forever.”

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98 – Johannes Brahms

Orchestration: 2 flutes (2nd = piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, triangle, and strings

Symphony No. 4 is the last of Brahms’ four symphonies (the core of his career as a composer), composed in 1884-1885, just one year after completing the Third (and only ten years after his First). It premiered in 1885 with Brahms himself conducting.

It is a work of profound depth, considered by many to be his greatest masterpiece. Musicologist Donald Tovey praised the work as “one of the greatest orchestral works since Beethoven”. In particular, the end of the first movement “bears comparison with the greatest climaxes in classical music, not excluding Beethoven”. The symphony is full of allusions, most notably to various Beethoven compositions. Inspiration for the symphony might have come from the tragedies of Sophocles, which Brahms had been studying. Or it may just have been the typically melancholy Brahms contemplating his own mortality.

Composed in a beautiful town in the Austrian Alps, the symphony has warmth and beauty, but is also tragic in character and one of the darkest symphonies in the repertoire. The more often one hears it, the easier it is to recognize how each melody evolves from previous ones, creating, as one writer noted, “a complex web of musical interrelations.” Brahms was concise and focused in his musical language. That made his compositions both dense and rich. Worried about how the serious nature of the work would be received, Brahms wrote jokingly to the conductor Hans von Bülow (Liszt’s son-in-law), “I’m really afraid that it tastes like the climate here. The cherries don’t ripen in these parts; you wouldn’t eat them!” Fortunately, at the premiere, the audience understood the work as intended and gave it an enthusiastic reception. It has been a cornerstone of symphonic repertoire ever since.

The first movement, **Allegro non troppo**, begins with a simple but serene melody, with pairs of notes an interval of a third apart, so-called falling thirds. Everything afterwards ebbs and flows from it. The theme is interrupted by a heroic romantic era fanfare-motif, which the symphony is full of. Listen for the woodwinds, the horns, the woodwinds again, and then rustling strings. The fanfares now grow louder. Keep your ears peeled for the opening melody recurring throughout, sometimes in disguise. It will give you a feeling of musical déjà vu. The heroic fanfares return, and a distorted opening theme again as the movement rushes to its end.

The slow second movement, **Andante moderato**, is a nocturne that uses the Phrygian mode, a scale common in the medieval and Renaissance eras. It lends a romantic and archaic atmosphere to the symphony. The opening horn fanfare leads to a quiet melody for the woodwinds and pizzicato strings. The violins will soon follow with a forceful theme, and then a splendid melody from the cellos echoes the same notes the violins played but at half-speed. Back and forth go the violas, horns, and violins. The horns end the movement with strange harmonies creating a sense of wonder.

The third movement, **Allegro giocoso** (fast and playful) is the only Beethoven-like scherzo, albeit an untraditional one, in Brahms' symphonies. The use of the piccolo and triangle add to the fun. The fanfares provide spirit and energy, but with a sense of humour and some musical surprises.

The last movement, **Allegro energico e passionato**, is special. The musical term for the form is passacaglia or chaconne, a sort of theme and variations popular in the 16th and 17th centuries. What's more important is that it is a reference to Bach, with the recurring theme taken from a Bach cantata (#150). Its original words were "All my days which pass in suffering, God ends at last in joy." The theme is repeated 30 times in different variations, always 8 bars long, until the 4-bar transition into the coda ends it.

Watch the rapid string crossings in the violins, emulating Bach's violin music. That's followed by a flute solo, then a set of variations. The opening theme returns and the music becomes "relentlessly charged with defiance and bristling with slashing intensity" as Dennis Bade described it. This movement may be the best embodiment of the symphonic ideal in the entire repertoire.

Conductor Felix Weingartner wrote of the finale that "The conclusion of this movement, burning with shattering tragedy, is a true orgy of destruction, a terrible counterpart to the transports of joy at the end of the last symphony of Beethoven." That seems rather prophetic in light of 20th century German history.

There is no doubt that, with his Fourth Symphony, Brahms earned his stature as one of "The Three B's".