



# Richter Plays Brahms

*alto*

# Johannes Brahms

## ***Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-Flat Major, Op. 83***

|   |                        |       |
|---|------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I. Allegro non troppo  | 16:39 |
| 2 | II. Allegro passionato | 8:34  |
| 3 | III. Andante           | 12:34 |
| 4 | IV. Allegro gracioso   | 8:45  |

**Chicago Symphony Orchestra • Erich Leinsdorf, conductor**

## ***Piano Sonata No. 2 in F-Sharp Minor, Op. 2***

|   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| 5 | I. Allegro non troppo, ma energico                                | 5:34  |
| 6 | II. Andante con espressione                                       | 5:09  |
| 7 | III. Scherzo. Allegro   | 3:53  |
| 8 | IV. Finale. Introduzione: Sostenuto – Allegro non troppo e rubato | 10:26 |

|   |  |      |
|---|--|------|
| 9 | <b><i>Intermezzo in C Major, Op. 119 No. 3</i></b> | 2:10 |
|---|--|------|

|   |   |      |
|---|---|------|
| A | <b><i>Rhapsody in E-Flat Major, Op. 119 No. 4</i></b> | 3:57 |
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# Sviatoslav Richter, *piano*

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## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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Twenty-two years separate the two piano concertos by **Johannes Brahms** (1833-97). *Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op.15*, had grown out of sketches he had made for an incomplete symphony, composed between 1856 and 1859, and before Brahms returned again to the *genre*, he had moved to Vienna (1862-3) and had composed a considerable quantity of material including the first two symphonies, the *Violin Concerto*, his *German Requiem* and much chamber and instrumental music.

Brahms habitually subjected his works to intense self-criticism and took years to complete a work to his satisfaction. He began the ***Piano Concerto No.2 in B flat major, Op.83*** in 1878 and completed it on 7 July 1881 in Pressbaum outside Vienna whereupon he playfully announced to a close friend Elisabet von Herzogenberg (1847-92) that he had composed a 'tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo'. A similar note was written to Clara Schumann (1819-96), and to another friend, surgeon and amateur musician Theodor Billroth (1829-94), he sent the hefty score accompanied by a note 'Herewith a few small piano pieces'. This was Brahms sharing a joke with his friends, for what he had actually written was probably the lengthiest piano concerto to date, as he had departed from the conventional three-movement format by adding a scherzo. He dedicated the new piano concerto to Eduard Marxsen (1806-87), his

teacher in Hamburg from 1845 to 1852.

Brahms had gained an important ally in the conductor Hans von Bülow (1830-94) who, since his divorce from Liszt's daughter Cosima, had become a good friend to Brahms. Von Bülow was in charge of a fine Court orchestra in Meiningen which he placed at Brahms' disposal in order for the new work to be substantially rehearsed before its premiere. With Brahms as soloist the *Second Piano Concerto* received its public premiere on 9 November 1881 in Budapest. Later that month the composer played it with the Meiningen orchestra as part of an all-Brahms concert: it was clearly a lengthy event, as besides the *Second Piano Concerto*, the *Tragic* and *Academic Festival Overtures*, the *Haydn Variations* and the *First Symphony* were also played, the last two works conducted by the composer. Other successful performances with Brahms as soloist took place in various towns throughout Austria, Germany and the Netherlands but the concerto was not heard in Vienna until 1884 when it was tactfully noted by the eminent critic Eduard Hanslick that whereas the piece was worthy of attention, Brahms 'should really consider giving up playing the piano'. In comparison with the rather tumultuous *First Piano Concerto*, its successor is more benign although it is just as technically testing for the soloist. A gently serene horn solo is answered quietly by the piano followed by the woodwind instruments. After a short cadenza, indicative of the immense scale of this work, the full orchestra repeats the main theme with gusto. In contrast to this noble theme, the pianist injects a note of anger into the exposition section and the second movement, in D minor, continues this stormier mood. The third movement features a cello solo whose theme has been linked to a song *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* which was published several years later. Although the mood changes to one of anxiety within this movement, the overall tone is one of great calm. The finale contains many themes and is generally carefree in mood, not unlike the Brahms familiar from the *Hungarian Dances*. The soloist however is given no time to relax, making this one of Brahms' most challenging movements. It should be noted that the sizeable orchestra does not include parts for trumpets or timpani in the last two movements.

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Whereas twenty-two years separated the composition of Brahms' two piano concertos, barely a year separated the composition of his two piano sonatas, indeed, all three of his sonatas for piano were composed within twelve months or so during 1852 and 1853. The first of these to be published was in C major. This sonata was composed in 1853, the year in which its composer celebrated his twentieth birthday. It was given its first performance in Leipzig on 17 December and was also published that year as his Op.1. However, this was not the first of his sonatas to be composed for he had written the one ***in F sharp minor, which is now described as his second*** and bears the opus number 2, in 1852. (The *third piano sonata, in F minor*, was also composed in 1853.)



On 30 September 1853, at the suggestion of the Hungarian violinist, Joseph Joachim, Brahms went to visit the composer Robert Schumann and his wife, Clara, the renowned pianist, at their home in Düsseldorf. Some years earlier, Brahms had sent some of his youthful compositions to Schumann but they had been returned, unopened. This time, arriving in person with his latest works and a recommendation from Joachim, he was welcomed with open arms. Brahms began by playing his C major sonata, which he was eventually to dedicate to Joachim, but he had not got far when Schumann told him to stop so that he could fetch his wife so that she could hear what he told her was such music she had never heard before. Brahms therefore went back to the beginning of the sonata and played it right through. Robert described his playing as 'most wondrous' and 'which made of the piano an orchestra of mourning or jubilant voices'. He also claimed him to be 'a man of destiny'. In her diary a few days later, Clara was to describe how moving it was to see Brahms 'sitting at the piano, with his interesting young face which becomes transfigured when he plays [and] his beautiful hands which overcome the greatest difficulties with perfect ease'.

Among the other pieces that he played on that occasion, it seems that one of them was the *F sharp minor sonata* which he was later to dedicate to Clara 'in admiration'. This sonata is in four movements, the second of which contains a set of four variations on an old German song - *Mir ist leide* (I am pained) – which lead straight into the *Scherzo* which turns out to be a further variation.

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## NOTES ON THE ARTISTS

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**Sviatoslav Richter** (1915-97) gave his first public recital in Odessa in 1934 and was taught by Heinrich Neuhaus at the Moscow Conservatory. Having played Prokofiev's *Fifth Piano Concerto* under the composer's direction, Richter gained a formidable reputation in the USSR and played in the West for the first time in 1960. Each subsequent visit was eagerly awaited, but Richter became highly selective in his choice of venue, (always preferring smaller ones). Following an extensive tour of the USA in 1970, he chose not to return there; Aldeburgh and selected sites in France and Italy became his preferred venues outside Russia. In 1986 Richter gave 91 concerts over a four month period during a lengthy tour by car from Leningrad to Vladivostok and back to Moscow. In addition to numerous solo concerts Richter often played alongside friends such as Britten, Rostropovich, Fischer-Dieskau, Oistrakh and Fournier.

**Erich Leinsdorf** (1912-93) was born in Vienna where he studied music from the age of five. Within a few years he was accompanying singers at the piano and he studied conducting in Salzburg and Vienna. Between 1934 and 1937 he assisted Walter and Toscanini at the Salzburg Festival. In 1937 he travelled to the USA to take up a position with the Metropolitan Opera and adopted US citizenship in 1942. Initially placed in charge of German repertoire he later became a fine conductor of Italian opera; for several seasons he was principal conductor of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. He conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic in several recordings but his most famous post was that of Musical Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1962. Towards the end of his career he also conducted in Berlin.



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