

JAMES AND THE GIANTS: PROGRAM NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): Symphony No.2 in D major, Op.36

When Tchaikovsky wrote his anguished Fourth Symphony he was a gay man in a very claustrophobic closet, trapped between the desirability of outward conformity and a monumental matrimonial mistake. When Schumann wrote his romantic song cycles of 1840 he was first anticipating and then enjoying connubial bliss with his pretty young wife, newly liberated from her tyrannical father. When Beethoven wrote his joyous Second Symphony he was suffering from debilitating diarrhea, beginning to lose his hearing and harbouring thoughts of suicide.

Beethoven's Second Symphony provides the classic example of the danger in causally connecting a composer's music and the concurrent events of his life. The nineteenth century popularized the notion of composers unburdening themselves in emotional masterpieces, and it is easy to assume such a direct link; indeed, as we have noted, it often exists: a convalescent Beethoven himself provided an example in the *Thanksgiving* section of his 1825 A minor string quartet. Yet no successful carpenter builds a customer half a cabinet because his ex-wife got fifty per cent in his divorce settlement, and a professional composer must be able produce music at emotional odds with his personal circumstances. Beethoven was certainly as capable of self-pity as Tchaikovsky or Mahler—yet unlike them, you will not find this in a note of his music.

To describe the will Beethoven addressed to his brothers in October 1802 as “self-pitying” is rather harsh—his situation was genuinely harrowing, after all, and had been for several years—yet it is justified by Beethoven's own triumph over his tragedy, his refusal to succumb to a fate that few could have overcome. This extraordinary document is known as ‘The Heiligenstadt Testament’ (after the quiet Viennese suburb to which Beethoven had removed to protect his ears) and begins

“Oh you men who think or say that I am malevolent, stubborn, or misanthropic, how greatly do you wrong me. You do not know the secret cause which makes me seem that way to you. From childhood on, my heart and soul have been full of the tender feeling of goodwill, and I was ever inclined to accomplish great things. But, think that for 6 years now I have been hopelessly afflicted, made worse by senseless physicians, from year to year deceived with hopes of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a *lasting malady* (whose cure will take years or, perhaps, be impossible). Though born with a fiery, active temperament, even susceptible to the diversions of society, I was soon compelled to withdraw myself, to live life alone. If at times I tried to forget all this, oh how harshly was I flung back by the doubly sad experience of my bad hearing. Yet it was impossible for me to say to people, "Speak louder, shout, for I am deaf." Ah, how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the *one sense* which ought to be more perfect in me than others, a sense which I once possessed in the highest perfection, a perfection such as few in my profession enjoy or ever have enjoyed. — Oh I cannot do it...I must live almost alone, like one who has been banished...If I approach near to people a hot terror seizes upon me, and I fear...that my

condition might be noticed...What a humiliation [it has been] for me when someone standing next to me heard a flute in the distance and *I heard nothing*, or someone heard a *shepherd singing* and again I heard nothing. Such incidents drove me almost to despair; a little more of that and I would have ended my life—it was *only my art* that held me back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me. So I endured this wretched existence—truly wretched for so susceptible a body, which can be thrown by a sudden change from the best condition to the very worst...”

The document was signed and sealed but never delivered; it was found among Beethoven’s papers after his death. Whether he kept it through his many moves as a personal reminder of the magnitude of his victory, or for posterity, or whether it merely travelled around forgotten in his unsorted possessions is anyone’s guess. It nonetheless offers a unique glimpse into the mind and personality of one of music’s greatest geniuses.

Modern science has determined (from tests conducted on a sample of his hair) that Beethoven was in fact suffering from chronic lead poisoning, possibly absorbed from a favourite leaden wine goblet. This lays to rest a veritable medical encyclopedia of speculative causes for his condition, from syphilis to lupus.

The Second Symphony, first heard April 5, 1803, still contains traces of Mozart and Haydn: the Introduction to the **first movement**, with its descending scales, and passages for flute and bassoon in double octaves, recalls Mozart’s Symphony No.39, while the coda, with its exhilarating harmonies over a chromatically ascending bass, suggests “The Heavens are telling” chorus from Haydn’s *Creation*. In general, though, the robust high-energy style is Beethoven’s own: crescendos that end in sudden pianissimi, sudden accents and syncopations, and a lot of string scrubbing make a loud and splendid noise unlike any heard previously.

Also new in a symphonic context is the third movement’s designation as a ‘**scherzo**’, although Beethoven (and Haydn) had employed the term in sonatas and chamber music for years. However, the word’s Italian meaning—‘joke’—is nicely conveyed by constant unexpected changes of volume, texture and instrumentation. And the same humorous character is carried over into the **Finale**, with the added Haydnesque feature of the unexpected pause. An outraged contemporary Viennese critic, perhaps suffering from the DT’s, described this movement as “a gross monster, a hideously writhing wounded dragon that refuses to expire, and though bleeding...furiously beats about with its tail erect”. This echoes an earlier review of Beethoven’s First Symphony as the “confused explosions of the outrageous effrontery of a young man”—but if proof of the composer’s maturation is required, it is powerfully demonstrated in the Second Symphony’s lovely **Larghetto**, where for the first time Beethoven displays in a climax of throbbing strings his unique ability to seemingly draw aside, however briefly, the curtain separating Earth from Paradise, a passage presaging the glories of the *Pastoral* Symphony, still six years off.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major, Op.77

In June of 1878 Brahms returned to the scenic southern Austrian village of Pörschach, where the previous summer he had composed his Second Symphony. This time the snowy white mountains surrounding the blue lake and delicate green trees (so Brahms described it) were to witness the creation of the 45-year-old composer's first major work for the violin, only his second in the concerto form.

The hostility which greeted his *Piano Concerto No.1* may partly explain a twenty year hiatus between concertos. The conductor at that work's premiere was Joseph Joachim, renowned as violin virtuoso and esteemed as composer, whose counsel and friendship were significant to Brahms throughout his career. Not surprisingly, it was Joachim that Brahms had in mind as soloist for his new concerto, and to whom he turned for advice on the figuration of the violin part (most of which he seems to have ignored).

Joachim and Brahms had in common a great reverence for the Classic composers in general and Beethoven in particular. The violinist made his mark at the age of 12 playing Beethoven's concerto, at the time (1844) still a controversial concert item; he soon became the century's foremost proponent not only of that monumental work but also of the Master's neglected late string quartets, eschewing popular virtuoso repertoire in pursuit of great and serious music for his instrument. This brought him more respect than unbridled adulation from audiences, but endeared him to the greatest composers of his age: Schumann, Dvořák, Bruch and Brahms all wrote major works for him.

Could the identification of Joachim with the Beethoven Concerto have given Brahms a conceptual starting point? That there is a close relationship between the Beethoven and the concerto Brahms produced for his friend is undeniable. Aside from sharing the key of D major, the overall dimensions of both works are similar; indeed, in the **first movements** (both marked *Allegro non troppo*) the unusually long orchestral introductions are within one bar of being the same length. Both movements also end similarly, with formal cadenzas, followed by a tranquil solo restatement of theme and a quickening of pace. The musical content of the Brahms is of course entirely Romantic in its alternation of lyric major and dramatic minor, and in the extreme technical demands made upon the soloist (giving rise to the variously attributed quip that the concerto is not *for*, but *against* the violin).

The **second movement** begins like a wind serenade (pity the composer never wrote one!); the oboe melody is subjected to variation by the solo violin, both before and after a passionate middle section.

The rhythmically vigorous **finale** is a celebration of Joachim's Hungarian origins, a recollection perhaps of an evening in 1870 the two musicians spent in a Budapest restaurant listening to the gypsy orchestra. In 1879, the year of this concerto's premiere, Joachim reciprocated with his violin transcriptions of Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*. These, along with his cadenza for the concerto, keep his name alive in the 21st century.

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