

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Piano Concerto No. 2

*First performance:* January 7, 1857, Weimar Court Theater, Liszt cond., Hans von Bronsart, soloist. *First BSO performance:* February 1884, Georg Henschel cond., Carl Baermann, soloist. *First Tanglewood performance:* July 30, 1961, Charles Munch cond., Byron Janis, soloist. *Most recent Tanglewood performance:* July 16, 2006, Andrew Davis cond., Jean-Yves Thibaudet, soloist.

For all his spectacular self-assurance at the piano, Liszt was astonishingly insecure as a composer. He would rework old compositions repeatedly, fussing with this detail or that, never quite sure if he had yet got it right. And, worse, he often took advice from random acquaintances, offered gratuitously, and then reworked pieces again. Almost every one of his major compositions went through stages of creation, and a number of works actually exist in two different “finished” forms. But few, if any, of his works have so long a gap between conception and first performance as the Second Piano Concerto.

It was during the early phase of his career, when he was known primarily as a touring piano virtuoso of extraordinary attainments, that Liszt sketched both of his piano concertos—almost simultaneously—in 1839. At that point they were surely conceived as showpieces for his own talents, and if he had actually finished and performed them then, they would no doubt have been much different in character than they finally turned out. As it was, the pressure of touring caused him to put both works aside for a decade until he had settled in Weimar and given up the vagabond life of the international concert star to devote himself to composition and conducting. Although he had written a great deal of music already (mostly brilliant display pieces for piano solo), he worked hard to improve his skills, especially in orchestration.

Liszt was surely not lacking totally in experience at orchestration, since he had already finished a score for the 1839 version of the concerto. But by 1849 he had put himself to some extent in the hands of Joachim Raff, who is believed to have worked with him on his scoring and even perhaps to have scored a few of the symphonic poems. (Raff was an extremely fluent and prolific composer, eleven years Liszt’s junior; in 1875—the year before Brahms’s First Symphony—he was widely recognized as the greatest living German symphonist.) But it is clear that Liszt had essentially finished the A major concerto before Raff even arrived. His letter to the younger man, accepting Raff’s offer of assistance in orchestration, mentions in passing that the scores of his two concertos have been fully written out. At most Raff might have suggested some changes as cosmetic improvements after the fact, though the orchestration of the Second Concerto is so much of a piece, and so poetic throughout, that it is hard to see where any changes could have been made.

Even though the work was “finished” according to Liszt in 1849, he was in no hurry to present it to the public, and there seem to have been some slight adjustments to the score during the ensuing years. Liszt wrote to Hans von Bülow on May 12, 1853, “I have just finished reworking my two concertos and the *Totentanz* in order to have them copied definitively.” The “definitive” fair copy was made by Raff, but even then Liszt added a few more touches himself. And Raff made yet another copy about the time of the first performance, which took place in Weimar with the work’s dedicatee, Hans von Bronsart, as soloist. By now Liszt himself had definitely given up appearing as a virtuoso, and most of his own performances at the keyboard were private affairs. He preferred to be presented as a conductor and composer.

Like so much of Liszt’s work, the Second Concerto is *sui generis*. Although it is by no means lacking in opportunities for virtuoso display, it gives the impression of being quieter, more introspective than the First Concerto, partly because of the ravishingly beautiful opening for woodwinds, in which the sweet song of the clarinet turns out to generate many of the musical ideas that follow. The fusion of the usual three movements of a concerto into a single long movement that could be construed as a kind of sonata form is Liszt’s response to the nineteenth-century composer’s search for increasing organic relationships throughout a composition, and his inventive reworking of the motivic material to produce melodies of strikingly diverse psychological tone remains a matter of admiration. The orchestration throughout is masterly, and though there are brilliant passages galore throughout this concerto, Liszt is admirably restrained in his virtuoso display. Almost without exception the sparkling, cadenza-like passages are built on still new developments of the basic thematic material; thus, rather than intruding, as virtuosic elements so often do in romantic piano compositions, they contribute further to the unity of this remarkable score.

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