

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15 (1858) (44mins)

Maestoso
Adagio
Rondo. Allegro non troppo

Brahms spent much of the 1850s occupied with his D minor Piano Concerto. The first movement's opening was composed in spring 1854, originally conceived as a sonata for two pianos. When Brahms realised that the music demanded larger-scale forces, he set about orchestrating it to create a symphonic movement, with help from some of his friends, including violinist Joseph Joachim. In February 1855 Brahms decided that this movement would work best as a concerto, eventually completing this portion in the autumn of 1856. The finale and 'Adagio' soon followed, finished in late December. Yet even at the work's first performances, in Hanover and Leipzig in January 1859, Brahms was still finalising elements of form and orchestration. Despite all this hard work, the concerto was widely rejected by both critics and audience. Edward Bernsford of the *Signale für die musikalische Welt* declared that: "The work... cannot give pleasure... it has nothing to offer but waste, barren dreariness truly disconsolate... one must... swallow a dessert of the shrillest dissonances and most unpleasant sounds". Brahms wrote to Joachim:

"... my concerto here was a brilliant and decided – failure... The first movement and the second were heard without a sign. At the end three hands attempted to fall slowly one upon the other, at which point a quite audible hissing from all sides forbade such demonstrations... In spite of

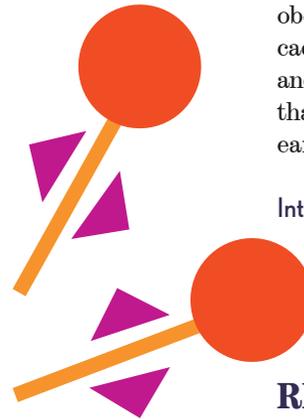
all this, the concerto will please some day, when I have improved its construction... I believe it is the best thing that could have happened to me; it makes one pull one's thoughts together and raises one's courage... But surely the hissing was too much?"

Leipzig publishers followed suit, Breitkopf und Härtel refusing the work in 1860, but Brahms had greater success with Swiss publishing house Jakob Rieter-Biedermann.

The first movement begins in stormy, Beethovenian vein, replete with rumbling timpani, contrasted with achingly beautiful lyricism. The piano develops both themes, building to passages of scintillating virtuosity. Noble horn calls, and a deliciously soft moment for piano and timpani, lead us towards the movement's formidable final bars.

The 'Adagio' was composed by Brahms as a "gentle portrait" of Clara Schumann. In his manuscripts, Brahms wrote "Benedictus, qui venit, in nomine Domini!" ("Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord") under the opening melody, a reference to the words over the entrance to the monastery where Kreisler finally found peace in Hoffmann's novel *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr* (*The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*). Kreisler was a (fictional) musical genius with whom both Brahms and Robert Schumann identified. This movement begins with a warm orchestral introduction, with rich strings and prominent woodwinds, especially bassoon. The piano plays a tender lullaby, and after a more turbulent, harmonically wide-ranging central section, the movement draws to a close with music of radiant passion and, ultimately, sublime contentment.

For the 'Rondo', often a carefree movement, Brahms begins with a remarkably serious, Bach-like theme, the implications of which are realised later in the movement when the orchestra is layered together in counterpoint. This gravitas is balanced by



more romantic music coloured by horns, oboes and flutes. There is a dazzling piano cadenza (a solo display of great virtuosity), and the work ends with such thrilling writing that it is almost impossible to believe that early audiences were so disgusted.

Interval (20 mins)

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864–1949)

Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40 (1898) (43mins)

Der Held (The Hero)
Des Helden Widersacher (The Hero's Adversaries)
Des Helden Gefährtin (The Hero's Companion)
Des Helden Walstatt (The Hero at Battle)
Des Helden Friedenswerke (The Hero's Works of Peace)
Des Helden Weltflucht und Vollendung (The Hero's Retirement from this World and Completion)

Strauss's tone poem, *Ein Heldenleben* (*A Hero's Life*), was inspired by themes that had already featured in his music: his love for his wife, Pauline de Ahna, and the Nietzschean tussle between his inner and outer worlds. Strauss remained non-committal about whether or not the central hero was entirely based on himself. The work is in six sections, but falls into a sonata-like structure, opening with the hero, his adversaries, his beloved, followed by a developmental struggle, and concluding with the rejection of war, and the solace of domestic love. The piece includes dozens of references to Strauss's own works.

Strauss was musing on ideas for *Ein Heldenleben* in 1897 whilst composing *Don Quixote*, a tone poem for cello and orchestra; he thought of them as paired works. His initial conception for *Ein Heldenleben* describes "longing for peace after the struggle with the world, refuge in solitude: the Idyll". Yet the work has frequently been misunderstood; taken at face value, it points to a narcissism that some have found difficult to stomach.

Strauss's French friend Romain Rolland wrote in his diary in January 1898 of sniffing "Neroism in the air". *Heldenleben* was premiered in March 1899; Strauss wrote of critics who "spat poison and gall, mainly because they thought... that the nasty description of the 'Moaners and Adversaries' was aimed at them". It was! But Strauss also satirised 'philistines' in general: "cheeky uneducated laymen who pronounce judgements on the most sublime works of art as if they were equal to their creators". In March 1900, Rolland described Strauss as "the typical artist of the new German empire, the powerful reflection of that heroic pride which is on the verge of becoming delirious, of that contemptuous Nietzscheism, of that egotistical and practical idealism, which makes a cult of power and disdains weakness." As the saying goes, with friends like these, who needs enemies? Strauss responded:

"I am not a hero; I haven't got the necessary strength; I am not cut out for battle; I prefer to withdraw, to be quiet, to have peace. I haven't enough genius. I lack the strength of health and willpower. I don't want to overstrain myself. At the moment I need to create gentle, happy music. No more heroic things."

This seems comical in the light of Strauss's later music, which includes distinctly heroic elements, not to mention the self-referential *Symphonia Domestica*

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of 1903, but it does at least imply that he was more self-aware and less egotistical than his critics claimed.

The work opens with a swooping, ambitious, typically Straussian theme on horns and cellos, offset by more lyrical music and culminating in a dramatic pause. 'The Hero's Adversaries' are depicted through spiky, pedantic woodwind writing pecking at a minor-key version of the hero's theme. There is even a four-note tuba motif, the rhythm of which was aimed at Viennese critic "Doktor Dehring". The third section, 'The Hero's Companion' is a portrait of Pauline: "... very complex, a trifle perverse, a trifle coquettish... changing from minute to minute." The solo violin explores these characteristics, its extensive cadenza heralding a sensual love scene. 'The Hero at Battle' is a swashbuckling

episode peppered with trumpet fanfares and percussion, considered too dissonant at the time. Strauss's music is most audibly quoted in 'The Hero's Works of Peace', especially *Guntram*, *Don Quixote*, *Don Juan*, *Tod und Verklärung (Death and Transfiguration)*, *Macbeth*, *Also sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spake Zarathustra)* and *Till Eulenspiegel*.

The final section, 'The Hero's Retirement from this World and Completion', begins with hymn-like serenity, briefly disturbed by a blustery interruption, before the final mood of deep contentment is established as slow-moving lines swell into luminous final chords.

Programme notes by Joanna Wyld
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Q&A with Kira Doherty, the Philharmonia Orchestra's Second Horn

Kira Doherty has been the Philharmonia's Second Horn since 2013. Originally from Quebec, she studied horn in Montreal and at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and is now studying for a History MA at Oxford. She enjoys cycling and photography.

In the '40s we had a close relationship with Strauss – he conducted us in 1947, and we gave the world premiere of *Four Last Songs* three years later. Has this connection given the Philharmonia a special way of approaching his music? Absolutely. The experience of being conducted by the composer himself would have been an extraordinary opportunity for the musicians. There are often disagreements amongst conductors over how to interpret a certain composer's work and no way of digging them out of their grave to ask them what they *really* wanted in this bar or that, so the fact that the orchestra would have been able to hear (and see) it from the horse's mouth would have meant that they were as close to the intended interpretation

as possible. However, you might be asking "yes but what does today's Philharmonia have to do with the orchestra it was 60 years ago?". None of the players are the same after all. But orchestras are excellent purveyors of tradition and a good one will be able to pass those traditions on – whether it be of interpretation, of style or of sound quality – to the next generation of incoming players. It's a funny process to describe: it happens through a means of consciousness, unconsciousness, osmosis and intuition. And, of course, hanging out with the older generation in the pub afterwards...

Right from the start, *Ein Heldenleben* features some of the most demanding horn moments in orchestral music. How do you prepare for a piece like this, and do you enjoy the challenge? Personally, my preparation for the piece will have a lot to do with what I have been playing right before. Playing a brass instrument can be quite like performing as an athlete, so your muscles will need to be

exercised in different ways for different tasks. The muscle shape that I would need for a Mahler symphony as opposed to a Haydn symphony could be as different as the muscle shape that a long-distance runner would have compared to a sprinter. The same muscles are being used, but they're being used in different ways and so they need to be trained differently. You can imagine then that going from one straight into the other without the right preparation would be quite difficult.

As for enjoying the challenge of the piece, yes definitely! As much as I love playing the horn, there can be quite a few horn parts that aren't terribly stimulating from a technical point of view, so to get a piece like *Ein Heldenleben* that covers the entire range of the instrument in the first minute of music is brilliant fun to play.

The French horn is one of the orchestra's 'endangered' instruments. Help us persuade the next generation – why should people give the horn a try?

I'll let you in on a secret – many conductors and composers, when asked which is their favourite instrument, often say the French horn. It's tempting at first to be drawn to

the flashier instruments like the trumpet or the flute (like I was), but after a career in orchestral music making, you soon realise that so many of the most beautiful and haunting melodies are given to the horns. That and they always get the best bits on the film soundtracks!

Which upcoming concert in our 2018/19 season would you recommend to people who enjoy this one?

The obvious choice might look like Santtu-Matias Rouvali's all-Strauss concert on 6 December (which will be absolutely fantastic) but actually I'm going to stretch things a bit and suggest the 7 February concert with works by Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky and Eötvös. The reason being that if, as a listener you are drawn to Strauss, it will be interesting to hear how these later composers were influenced by Strauss's work and how they chose to build on his musical language, pushing it further towards the limits of tonality and beyond.