Brahms

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2 & THREE INTERMEZZI OP. 117

Francesco Piemontesi

GEWANDHAUSORCHESTER · MANFRED HONECK

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83

1	I. Allegro non troppo	17. 24
2	II. Allegro appassionato	8. 58
3	III. Andante	11. 36
4	IV. Allegretto grazioso	9. 03

3 Intermezzi, Op. 117

5	No. 1, Andante moderato	4. 20
6	No. 2, Andante non troppo e con molto espressione	4. 14
7	No. 3, Andante con moto	5. 16

Total playing time: 61. 03

Live recording

Francesco Piemontesi, piano
Gewandhausorchester Leipzig
Manfred Honeck, conductor

It all begins with sound. Nothing but sound. Rarely in the piano repertoire is the sound of the instrument so purely and simply revealed—indeed, celebrated—as in the opening of Johannes Brahms's Second Piano Concerto.

With those magical opening bars, the curtain rises on a musical drama. They could just as well mark the beginning of an operatic cycle or even the soundtrack to a monumental fantasy epic—had Brahms ever written operas or film scores. The music announces a journey. And Brahms does not disappoint over the next fifty minutes as a musical landscape of vast dimensions unfolds.

For me as a pianist, everything begins with sound as well. "Forte, ma dolce"—strong, yet gentle—Brahms writes in several places throughout his scores. To me, this contradiction perfectly captures my own pianistic ideal: power and expression without harshness. After all, the piano is neither a percussion instrument nor a typewriter. In that regard, I think Brahms and I would have understood each other perfectly.

Is this, perhaps, the finest piano concerto ever written? It certainly exceeds the bounds of the classical instrumental concerto and becomes something of a hybrid form. Brahms fuses the elements of symphony and concerto: grand, richly orchestrated symphonic developments are complemented and enhanced by athletic virtuosity. At the same time, there are passages of the most delicate chamber music tenderness—moments in which the solo piano and orchestral instruments engage in intimate conversations.

It has to be said that it is by no means an easy piece. Not for me as the pianist, and not for the audience either. It requires concentration, openness and dedication. In the Leipzig Gewandhaus, the organ facade bears an inscription: Res severa verum gaudium—"True joy is a serious matter." That, to me, perfectly captures the essence of Brahms's music as well. It is not casual entertainment, not background music. But for those who truly engage with it, the reward is immense: music that allows you, for a moment, to forget the world.

My heartfelt thanks go to Manfred Honeck and the Gewandhausorchester for their inspiring musical partnership. I would like to dedicate this recording to Cécile Ousset and Alfred Brendel, in deep gratitude for all they have passed on to me.

Francesco Piemontesi

Photo by: © Todd Rosenberg

Francesco Piemontesi and I have worked intensively with various outstanding orchestras across Europe and the United States in recent years. From this artistic partnership, a deep mutual understanding has developed that has now reached a special maturity in our interpretations of Brahms.

What makes Johannes Brahms' piano concertos so remarkable is that they were not conceived as conventional soloist concertos, but as musical architectures—structures that, in both form and expression, resemble a grand symphonic arc, with the piano as an equal partner to the orchestra.

Francesco Piemontesi is a wonderful partner for this repertoire. His playing is distinguished by a refined tonal sensibility, inner calm, and interpretative clarity. He possesses the rare ability to combine technical mastery, marked by transparent structure, with organic phrasing that unfolds beautifully and without affectation. These qualities serve Brahms' sound world exceptionally well. Our collaboration is shaped by trust, precision, and the highest musical standards.

The Gewandhaus in Leipzig is one of Europe's most important musical institutions. Every stone of the building breathes history, and yet the sound in this hall is vivid, immediate, and strikingly present. The Gewandhausorchester, highly cultivated and full of vitality, created a special atmosphere during the concerts in April that is directly conveyed in the recording. Every note blends seamlessly into the whole; nothing feels out of place. The orchestral soloists, full of warmth and character, embody a unique tradition that has rightfully earned its international reputation. It was music-making marked by concentration, seriousness, and inner fire, sustained by mutual listening and deep respect.

This recording marks the beginning of a compact Brahms cycle, to be completed with the First Piano Concerto in a forthcoming session. Together, the two concertos and the intimate, inward-looking Intermezzi op. 117 will form a richly faceted portrait of Brahms – as a composer who gave the piano a profound voice both within grand symphonic frameworks and as a solo instrument of exceptional emotional depth and nuance.

Manfred Honeck

If one could pick a handful of works to exemplify why Brahms has captured listeners over the years, those works would surely include the four-movement Piano Concerto No. 2 in B♭ Major, Op. 83, completed in 1881 at the height of his maturity. Here all the elements of Brahms's art come together. There is the joining of the grandly Olympian with the intimately songful. There is the virtuoso command of large-scale musical architecture, for a composer one of the rarest gifts in the world.

For soloists proposing to master this gigantic concerto, it lives up to Brahms's puckish nickname for it: "the Long Terror." For himself, though, the Second was probably, from its first inspiration during a sunny vacation in Italy, one of the most untroubled major efforts of his life. To understand Brahms's cheerfulness concerning the concerto, we need to understand what his earlier effort had cost him. He had launched into the First Piano Concerto with youthful fervor, in the wake of the dramatic events of 1853-54: his discovery at age twenty by Robert Schumann, who declared him the coming savior of German music, followed by Robert's plunge into madness, then Brahms's own fall into a frustrated passion for Robert's wife Clara, one of the great pianists of her time.

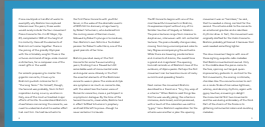
Brahms pounded away at the First Concerto for some five excruciating years, finishing it as a flawed but still remarkable work of monumental scale and singular voice. Already in the First the essential elements of the Brahmsian concerto were in place. The scale and style are symphonic as much as concerto-like, with the soloist less the heroic voice of Romantic concertos, more a participant in a symphonic dialogue. By the time of the Second Concerto, meanwhile, Brahms had in effect fulfilled Schumann's prophecy and had little left to prove—though he never rested on his laurels.

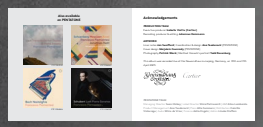
The B♭ Concerto begins with one of the most beautiful movements in Brahms, its expressive import without any of his familiar touches of tragedy or fatalism. The piano textures range from massive to diaphanous, interwoven with rich orchestral textures. The piano steadily changes roles, moving from long unaccompanied solos to lacy filigree accompanying the orchestra. While there are towering proclamations and moments of drama, the overall tone is grand and magisterial. The opening horncall reminds us of Brahms's love of the outdoors, of Alpine peaks. Perhaps the first movement can be heard as music of rocky summits and spreading forests.

Next comes the movement Brahms described to a friend as a "tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo." When Brahms said things like that he was usually joking; the scherzo is immense, dark-toned, and impassioned, with a touch of the coloration we call his "gypsy" tone. Brahms's explanation for the scherzo was another a joke: the opening movement was so "harmless," he said, that he needed a strong contrast for the second. The scherzo adds to the concerto an emotional gravitas and a relentless rhythmic drive. In fact, this movement was originally drafted for the Violin Concerto. Brahms probably jettisoned it because that work needed something lighter.

The slow movement begins with one of those sighing, exquisite cello melodies that Brahms invented and owned. Only in the middle does the piano come to the fore, spinning out languid quasi-improvisatory garlands. In contrast to the first movements, the scoring is intimate, chamber-like. The concerto comes to rest on a rondo finale of marvelous lightness, whimsy, and dancing rhythms, again with gypsy touches, answering in delight the monumental first two movements and the wandering embroidery of the third. Part of the charm of the finale is its glittering instrumental colors and ravishing melodies.




After the premiere in Budapest on November 9, 1881, Brahms and his pianist/conductor collaborator Hans von Bülow took the concerto on the road. His old love Clara Schumann wrote in her journal: "Brahms is celebrating such triumphs everywhere as seldom fall to the lot of a composer." To keep themselves amused, Bülow and Brahms gave programs including both piano concertos, switching off at piano and podium as the mood struck them. Despite the decline of Brahms's once-brilliant piano skills to what Clara bemoaned as "thump, bang, and scrabble," somehow he was always able to play or at least fake his way though his concertos, which after all are among the most beloved and also most difficult in the repertoire.

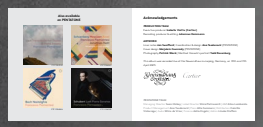
The three pieces of Op. 117 on this recording, along with the rest of Brahms's late piano miniatures, have more behind them than it would seem for a collection of beautiful but apparently unassuming pieces suitable for the parlor. There was a longstanding convention of Brahms scholarship that painted his work as a matter of formal abstraction, free of storytelling and autobiography. That isn't at all the case. It's rather that Brahms, an intensely private and guarded man, didn't want to talk about the personal connections, though he dropped any number of hints, and indeed he declined to write overt program music—or to admit it if he did.

One of those hints he dropped concerned Op. 117: he called these pieces "the lullabies of my sorrows." On the first of the three he attached a bit of folk poem, a mournful lullaby: "Sleep soft my child, sleep soft and sweet,/It grieves me to see you weep." It may have been in the village of Ischl in the summer of 1892, when Brahms wrote Op. 117, that his friend Max Kalbeck saw a startling sight: Brahms emerging from woods, hat in hand and coat dragging on the ground, running wild-eyed across a meadow as if demons were after him. He brushed past Kalbeck apparently without seeing him and disappeared into the distance.

So much for abstraction in these pieces. But there was more to their inspiration. Much of that had to do with a pianist Brahms had gotten to know, Ilona Eibenschütz. An attractive young woman and a keyboard prodigy, she probably did much to inspire the pieces. (Eibenschütz lived until 1968 and recorded some of them early in the century.) At the same time, Brahms probably had also in mind his old love Clara Schumann, who now was failing and no longer able to play big works. He probably wrote the late miniatures for Clara too, and she loved them dearly.

The mood of all three of the Op. 117s is dark, particularly the tragic lullaby of No. 3, in C♯ Minor, traditionally a key of somber import (Brahms would have been thinking of the mournful late Beethoven quartet in C♯ Minor). The expansive first of the three pieces is the most overtly lullaby-like, with its swaying theme that is at once ingenuous and touching. In its gently babbling course the second Intermezzo falls further into sadness, in temper between the first and the tragic third, which is a lullaby of great sorrow but equally great poise. Together the late piano miniatures constitute almost a laboratory demonstration of the depth of craftsmanship Brahms wielded, and of the singular depth of beauty he knew how to reach.

Jan Swafford



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Executive producer **Isabelle Viatte (Cartier)**
Recording producer & editing **Johannes Kammann**

ARTWORK

Liner notes **Jan Swafford** | Coordination & design **Ana Teodorović** (PENTATONE)
Cover design **Marjolein Coenrady** (PENTATONE)
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