Frédéric Chopin, Piano Concertos

Chopin’s piano concertos occupy a special place, not only in the history of the concerto as such, but also within the work of their composer. The extraordinary fact that he completed two works of such importance before reaching the age of 20 is one of the unfaithful secrets of creative genius. Although on the other hand it makes it all the more understandable that in these early works not everything can be equally perfect.

Stylistically the piano concertos were determined by the music which Chopin heard and knew in his youth. During the years 1829–30, the musical life of Warsaw was quite varied. There were performances by Italian opera companies, composers like Pietro Rossini and Spontini dominated the repertoire, and great virtuosos, violinists (Paganini, Lipinski) and pianists (Hummel, Stephen Heller) made triumphant appearances. Concert programmes offered a motley collection, and often an operatic aria or a basso solo was interpolated between the movements of a symphony or an instrumental concerto. Nevertheless occasionally a Mozart overture or excerpts from a Haydn concerto were heard, and in some rare cases even the name of Beethoven found its way into a programme.

Mozart attained an unsurpassable peak in his concertos, and Beethoven, following in his footsteps, created a new climax in his great symphonic dialogues. He went his way in solitary greatness, and only many decades later he found a worthy successor in Johannes Brahms.

Side by side with this giant many other gifted musicians also composed concertos. They were the virtuosos who composed for their own use, and although they also took Mozart as their starting point, they often took his form as a convention. Their concertos were compositions which suited them, which displayed their instrumental technique and many with which (such as those by Hummel) were not without musical value and enjoyed great popularity.

It is almost certain that Chopin did not make the acquaintance of Beethoven’s piano concertos until after 1830. All the concertos which were known to him belonged to that other category of sheer virtuosity, and we know that in his youth he played concertos by Gerschwitz, Ries, Moscheles and Hummel. From the latter Chopin borrowed the formula for the Allegro of the E-flat concerto, but here the similarity ends: Whereas Hummel’s concerto is the work of a musician who handles his material like a master craftsman, Chopin’s concerto is a masterpiece. Chopin follows Hummel’s form step by step, surpassing analogy, each phrase of Hummel’s is echoed by a corresponding phrase of Chopin’s, yet Chopin’s concerto has by far the greater impact and bears the stamp of genius in the freshness of its invention, the musicality of its runs and ornamentations, and in the audacity of its harmonies.

The Adagias of both concertos were inspired by a love of Chopin’s youth. At an age when the soul of a young man ferments with indelible feelings, Chopin found their poetic expression with amazing maturity. Another characteristic of both concertos is the Polish element. At the beginning of the 19th century Poland saw the growth of national music, and composers...
like Oginski, Kurpinski and others had woven Polish songs and dance motives into their works, which were frequently performed and highly esteemed. But it was left to Chopin to bring the ideal of his predecessors to its ultimate fulfillment, as all his works (even those of greatest universality) are imbued with the Polish spirit. In the concertos, this fact is made evident by their final movements: A Mazurka and a Cracovienne (Krakowska). In the year 1830 the circles in which Chopin moved in Warsaw were excited by a new patriotic movement, and so this period became decisive for his whole future development, as is proven by the forceful and dynamic First Scherzo which he composed, shortly after the completion of the two piano concertos. Thus his concertos may be regarded as the best reflection of a happy and carefree youth.

In a letter to his friend Woyciechowski Chopin seems to be perturbed by the originality and the success of his compositions. In it one can divine the restlessness of the artist, who at any time capable of judging the worth of his creative objectively is thrown into consternation, because it he sees the product of his own inspiration and the work of his own hands, which he still considers uncouth. He himself cannot fathom the origin of this youthful inventiveness, this audacity and this forward surge. J. Woyciechowski: "CHOPIN"

"Nor was the quality of the concertos overlooked by their surprised audiences. On the occasion of their first performance a Warsaw newspaper wrote: 'Fate has given Chopin to the Poles as it has given Mozart to the Germans' — a statement which Chopin, in his modesty, called "obvious nonsense". But this comparison to Mozart was not the only one. In an article dedicated to the concerto of Taubert, Robert Schumann wrote in 1836: 'We may be sure that a genius like Mozart, were he born to-day, would write concertos like Chopin and not like Mozart'.

As one of Chopin's admirers, I am happy to quote the above sentence, although the claim seems to me to be exaggerated. Mozart's concertos are the summit of perfection, in which nothing can be altered. Chopin's concertos are also of rare beauty, but where Mozart allows soloist and orchestra to pursue a true dialogue with a musicality which is his very own, Chopin reduces the role of the orchestra; it introduces, links and supports the monologue of the piano and in the main serves as a sonorous background. Nevertheless both scores contain a number of happy orchestral episodes, such as the recapitulation of the theme towards the end of the Romance in the e-minor concerto or the raccagni in the Larghetto of the f-minor concerto. Many attempts to reorchestrate the Chopin concertos (Kjeldworth, Tausig, Messager, Fliethberg) have remained unsuccessful, and nowadays they are performed in their original version which is given in this present edition. Chopin may have bowed to the fashion of his time, yet his genius and his inspiration have triumphed. For more than 125 years these concertos have fascinated every pianist and enchanted all music lovers, and it seems to be certain that many generations yet to come will derive the same pleasure from them.

Both concertos were composed in the years 1829-30, and Chopin himself played them for the first time in Warsaw in March and September 1830. The f-minor concerto was the first in order of composition, but as it was published after the e-minor concerto it bears the latter opus number. Bruxelles 1857 Stefan Askenase.