

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897) – Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat

German composer Johannes Brahms began his musical life as a pianist, studying first with Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel and later with Eduard Marxsen. Marxsen, also a composer, proved to be an important influence on Brahms and the second piano concerto is in fact dedicated to him. The work was premiered in 1881 with Brahms performing the solo part. An immediate success, the composition demonstrates how far Brahms had progressed both artistically and professionally since his initial foray into the genre: the Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, whose premier was met with criticism and contempt.

In the two-decade gap between the first and second concertos, Brahms gained widespread recognition as a leading composer and wrote a number of important works, most notably his first and second symphonies. Composing those pieces allowed Brahms to achieve a level of mastery in the symphonic style foreshadowed by the first piano concerto. The second concerto includes materials that can only reach their full potential when developed in an orchestral setting and thus requires a more equal relationship between the soloist and the ensemble than previously utilized in the genre. Additionally, Brahms expanded the traditional three-movement concerto form to include a fourth movement as found in the symphony. The piano part of the second concerto, unlike those of Brahms' contemporaries such as Liszt, is based on a type of virtuosity that is subservient to musical expression rather than an aim in itself.

Both the piano and the orchestra are prominent characters in this dramatic work from the opening measures, where a rising horn figure is echoed by a similar idea in the piano. That dialogue quickly incorporates the woodwinds and the strings, but is interrupted by a piano cadenza that propels the movement forward. The music journeys through various developments of the opening material, building to a forceful climax that falls into a delicate dream-like section and smoothly transitions to a return of the initial horn theme. A recapitulation of the opening material creates an exciting conclusion to this epic movement. The second movement, a scherzo, begins with a syncopated figure in the piano set against weighty chords in the orchestra. The movement opens in D minor, yet later takes a turn into D major for a trio section whose lightness and joy makes a powerful juxtaposition with the darker mood of the earlier section. Cadenzas in the piano pull the music reluctantly back to minor for the end of the movement. The following *Andante* movement marks a contrast from the previous two. Here, the music returns to the soft, ethereal realm that introduced the recapitulation in movement I and develops into an expansive lyricism. A solo cello is featured throughout the movement, with material that Brahms later used in the song *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*. The restrained yet deeply expressive music of this slow movement gives way to the graceful, dance-like fourth movement, which skillfully recalls the feel of the third movement's trio section. The movement proceeds through a seven-section rondo that encompasses a wide variety of different moods before ending with a humorous and ebullient flourish.