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Johannes Brahms, Piano Concerto No. 2: Symphony with Piano Obbligato? For and Against Arguments

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The symphonic scope of Johannes Brahms' works draws its vitality from two main sources. First, there is Beethoven's stylistic influence, manifest throughout Brahms' oeuvre, and then there is his own conception of treating the piano's sonority. The use of the entire keyboard, the increased importance of the lower register, generating the harmonics, the complex polyphonic writing, the multiple timbral suggestions, and the monumental dimensions are some of the traits of Brahmsian piano writing.

In parallel with the orchestral-like aural images of his piano works, Brahms frequently resorts to chamber and vocal sonorities. If passages displaying a certain intimacy can be associated with his vast chamber music output, the flow, the broad scope, and especially the vocalicity of his lyrical themes are natural consequences of the importance of the lied in his oeuvre.

This study aims to analyse the solo, symphonic, and chamber elements of Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83 and develops both the arguments for considering it a solo concerto and for viewing it as a symphony with piano obbligato.

ARGUING FOR A SOLO CONCERTO

Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83 has often been described as a symphony with an integral piano part. But there are several aspects which make the piano an at least equal partner of the orchestra: the clear solo character of its discourse throughout the Concerto, the massive, polyphonic writing,

the vast episodes showcasing the piano (either as a solo instrument or with a minimum of orchestral accompaniment), to name just a few. We will now concentrate on the Concerto from this latter perspective and will attempt to prove the importance of the piano as the leader of the musical discourse.

First movement: *Allegro non troppo*

In this first movement the piano and the orchestra are almost always treated as two distinct entities and, whether on large sections or for just a few lines, they are given the floor by turns.

After the theme is exposed by the solo horn accompanied by the piano's ascending chords, the calm, serene atmosphere is violently interrupted by the intervention of the solo piano playing an eighteen-bar cadenza. Not too long, but very concentrated expression-wise, this cadenza is destined to set the monumental character of the first movement.

These eighteen bars have a symmetric structure and are disposed in three six-bar musical ideas. The first six bars (mm. 11-16) enunciate a new theme which begins abruptly in a diminished seventh harmony and whose dotted rhythm gives it a pronounced rhythmic concision (see Ex. 1). It is only in the development that this theme will be expanded by the orchestra, while the piano accompanies with thirty-second-note arpeggios (see Ex. 2).



Ex. 1. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, first movement, piano cadenza, mm. 11-12.* (see Brahms 1926-27b: 93)

Brahms uses here a very interesting technique. If in the classical concerto the cadenza is meant to recall the thematic material and highlight the soloist's improvisatory skill (working on the already stated musical ideas), the process is now reversed: the cadenza itself proposes the generating material, declaring the soloist the leader of the discourse from the very beginning.

After the six opening bars of the cadenza, the dominant of the home key, Bb major, sets in. The next musical idea (mm. 17-22), a variation of phrase 2 of theme 1, begins majestically from a culmination, descends, and somewhat quiets the mood. The last section of the cadenza (mm. 23-28) repeats theme 1 in the bass, then develops its initial motif in the middle register.



Ex. 2. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, first movement, mm. 199-201. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 108)

This development is carried by an inner voice very well hidden between the lower and the higher register, and the performer must use their aural imagination to highlight and guide the musical flux in this inner voice. The obsessive repetition of the dominant seventh harmony, towards the end of the cadenza, supplemented by an enormous *crescendo* and by a polyphonic, massive piano fabric, generates an extreme tension on the culmination of the cadenza, which resolves by the *forte* explosion of the orchestral tutti.

The exposition mainly proposes a permanent dialogue between the piano and the orchestra, with alternating discourses shared by two clearly delimited entities. The piano largely borrows, develops, and enriches the orchestra's concise enunciations.

After the orchestral tutti, the piano takes over by a passage in octaves alternating between the two hands destined to make the transition between the highly dramatic tutti conclusion and the serene, lyrical theme 1. Eight bars follow (mm. 73-80) wherein the solo piano exposes, develops, and amplifies the main theme, in *crescendo*, leading to the *fortissimo* enunciation of the orchestra's initial motif (m. 81).

Until the appearance of the bridge (m. 118), the orchestra and the piano alternate their replies, the one stating and the other developing the motifs. The thematic material upon which this conversation is built is made up of motif 2 (see Ex. 3) and phrase 2 (see Ex. 4) of theme 1.



Ex. 3. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, first movement, mm. 4-5. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 92)



Ex. 4. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, first movement, mm. 7-10.
(see Brahms 1910: 3)

Motif 2 is thus proposed by the orchestra in mm. 88-89 and 92-97 and continued by the piano in mm. 90-91. Motif 1 of phrase 2 is debated between the orchestra and the piano in mm. 104-109. Throughout this episode, the two are treated as equal partners.

The second thematic group, consisting of two themes, is presented by the piano. Theme 1 has no orchestral accompaniment and theme 2 is subtly punctuated by the strings in pizzicato. Both themes show a typically Brahmsian piano writing.

Unlike its appearance in the orchestral exposition, in *piano*, with a lyrical, flowing character, theme 1 is now massive, in *forte*. Covering almost the entire keyboard, it contains a substantial bass line, rich in harmonics, due to which the general sonority becomes ampler. At the same time, the right hand melody is harmonized in chords, increasing the feeling of an orchestra in full action. This theme is one of the most eloquent expressions of Brahmsian pianistic symphonism and can be considered the composer's intention to treat the two protagonists as equals, investing the piano's discourse with orchestral valences.

Theme 2 from the second group now establishes the key of F minor, rendering the music particularly energetic and dynamic by means of the concise dotted rhythm, the staccato attack, and the accents placed on each beat (m. 159). In phrase 2, the discourse turns even more vigorous, as the off-beat or the weak half-beats are marked *sforzando* (mm. 163-167). The orchestral accompaniment is inconspicuous, making itself felt only through pizzicato strings interventions.

During the development, the orchestra has a greater role in the musical flux, being no longer quite distinct from the piano with which it now harmoniously blends.

We notice however the arrival of a new theme, in a dotted rhythm, in B minor (m. 215), stated by the piano, and which derives from theme 2 of the second thematic group. The orchestral accompaniment is concise, with the occasional strings, bassoon, and clarinet (see Ex. 5).

Ex. 5. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, first movement, mm. 215-218. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 110)

This episode is dominated by the piano, which restates the new theme another three times (m. 221, in D major, m. 227, in C major, and m. 231, in B major).

The reprise allows the piano to continue as the leader while in the coda the piano and the orchestra join one another once again and the end of the first movement is a grandiose apotheosis of the truest symphonic persuasion. It features a striking solo episode (mm. 342-347) during which the piano develops theme 1 in *fortissimo*, in ample chords and then martellato, the orchestra replying with imitations of the triplet motif from the theme.

Second movement: *Allegro appassionato*

Written in D minor, this movement is a combination between the scherzo and the sonata form:

Exposition (mm. 1-105)	Development (mm. 106-295)	Reprise (mm. 296-457)
A (a+b)	B (trio)	A

Table 1. The musical form of the second movement from Brahms' *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83.

Dramatic and full of inner turmoil, it treats the piano as both a soloist and an integral part of the orchestra. The drama is manifest from the very beginning, initiated by the piano and its stormy *fortissimo* exposition of theme 1, Beethovenian in its thematic and expressive concision. The melody is harmonized by the chords in the piano part while the orchestra provides the bass line (see Ex. 6).

The image shows a musical score for the second movement of Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83. The tempo is marked 'Allegro appassionato' with a tempo of quarter note = 76. The score is in 2/4 time. The piano part (I) is in the upper system, and the orchestral part (Hr. u. Str.) is in the lower system. The piano part begins with a fortissimo (ff) dynamic, playing a melody in the right hand and arpeggios/chords in the left hand. The orchestral part begins with a fortissimo (f) dynamic, playing a bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand. The tempo marking 'marc. sempre' appears at the end of the excerpt.

Ex. 6. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, second movement, mm. 1-9.* (see Brahms 1910: 43)

Theme 2 is first played by the strings in unison. In contrast with the tumult of theme 1, it suggests an elegiac mood, as indicated by the *tranquillo* tempo marking. The piano takes over and harmonizes it with arpeggios in the left hand, gradually turning it from lyrical into rhapsodic. The writing is very complex: the melody is presented in the right hand, in the soprano, the left hand ensures the bass line, and the middle register is filled with chords on the off-beat divided between the two hands in a typical Brahmsian piano score: heavy, generating rich, orchestral sounds. It is obvious that in this first section of the movement it is the piano which leads the musical dramaturgy.

In the development, the piano and the orchestra reprise, develop, and contest both the two themes and the leading role. At first, the piano repeats and develops theme 1 twice (m. 116, in C# minor, and m. 128, in E minor) while the orchestra anticipates its interventions by intoning the head of the theme (mm. 114-115 and 125-127). The piano is still the soloist, with a wide-ranging writing combining arpeggios, chords and chords alternating between the two hands (see Ex. 7).



Ex. 7. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, second movement, mm. 116-121.
(see Brahms 1910: 48)

The orchestra then takes over, further develops the two themes, and integrates the piano in its sonority. A succinct conclusion of the orchestral tutti states the two themes in reverse order, settles on D minor and is followed by a sudden modulation to D major, once the trio section appears.

In the Trio, two additional musical ideas are presented by the orchestra, then enriched and transformed by the piano. Melodically and rhythmically, the first idea is very schematic and, probably of folk origin, suggests a rustic dance (see Ex. 8).



Ex. 8. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, second movement, mm. 188-191.
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 143)

As the piano works on it, it undergoes important changes: in a minor key, it is intensely chromatinized, marked *sotto voce*, *pianissimo*, legato, and rhythmically varied, in eighth notes. The piano writing is extremely demanding, at first in octaves then in double octaves, reminiscent at times of Franz Liszt's *Feux follets*. Chromatically rich and marked *pianissimo*, this entire passage is mysterious.

Theme 2 of the Trio is a chorale, its orchestration (horns, bassoon, clarinet) suggestive of an organ timbre (see Ex. 9). Its meaning is again changed by the piano: the melody, in the higher register and marked *forte*, is now rhapsodic, harmonically clothed in ample arpeggios in the left hand as it is.

In the reprise, the two themes are no longer presented in full by the piano. Theme 1 reverses roles: it is the orchestra which carries the melody and the piano which ensures the harmonic support, by its bass line, in octaves and in *fortissimo*. However, towards the end of the phrase, the piano does take the melody over from the orchestra. As for theme 2, it belongs to the horn, the piano only providing, in arpeggios, the harmonisation.



Ex. 9. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, second movement*, mm. 232-235. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 146)

Compared to the first movement, the second is more symphonic in conception, as the episodes in which the piano is part of the orchestra are longer and more numerous.

Third movement: *Andante*

In this movement, in B \flat major, Brahms ingeniously combines the solo and the chamber character. The truly symphonic episodes are limited to just two bars of orchestral tutti (mm. 35 and 42), in which the ensemble states the head of the theme to be varied and developed by the piano. We will therefore insist on the work's solo aspect.

Taking Liszt's example, who had given the cello the opportunity of a solo voice in his Piano Concerto No. 2, S. 125, Brahms now divides the solo part between the piano and the cello, the tendency to individualize a certain instrument being thus extended to the instruments of the orchestra. The two musical ideas upon which the whole slow movement is built are distributed as follows: theme 1 is given to the cello, and theme 2, a sort of a free variation of theme 1, to the piano.

The cello states the theme from the very beginning, in an ample-phrased, very lyrical, smooth solo, with an inconspicuous strings accompaniment. The horn's warm timbre and its resemblance to a human voice may suggest a lied (Brahms did indeed exploit the vocal potential of this theme in his lied *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*).

After the cello's statement and after another two introductory bars on the piano without any precise thematic goal, a true miniature for piano follows, in the style of the pieces Brahms wrote in his late period (Op. 116, 117, 118, 119). The texture evokes the aural image of a lied with piano accompaniment: the melismatic right hand melody is the equivalent of the human voice, and the eighth notes figuration in the left hand, with both a harmonic role and contrapuntal valences, serves as the piano accompaniment.

Sharing a similar melodic profile, the cello's and the piano's theme have a clear affinity for one another (see Ex. 10 and 11).



Ex. 10. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, third movement, mm. 1-2.
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 158)



Ex. 11. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, third movement, m. 25.
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 159)

The exposition of the two themes is followed by a developmental section leading to an F# major episode (m. 59), the movement's point of minimum tension, and to a false reprise in the same key (m. 71). The piano is definitely the soloist here, as it works on and varies the entire thematic material: the two musical ideas as well as the two introductory bars before its solo. The orchestral interventions are brief, and while the piano evolves the ensemble only supplies a discreet accompaniment.

The cello's theme is given by the piano in *forte*, with a trill on the first note, in unison, rhythmically diminished and enriched with thirty-second-note arpeggios, its initial character completely changed: if it had started out with a particularly smooth and warm expression, the dotted rhythm and the arpeggio cavalcades now render it dynamic and tumultuous. The tremolo on the violins and the violas has a significant contribution in suggesting this rustle (see Ex. 12).

Ex. 12. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, third movement, mm. 36-37.
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 160)

The second musical idea, given by the piano, evolves in chords alternating between the two hands. The theme's melismas supported by a richly coloured harmony and these alternating chords help create an uneasy atmosphere (see Ex. 13).



Ex. 13. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, third movement*, mm. 38-39. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 161)

The use of material from the introduction of the piano's theme is meant to conclude the developmental episodes.

With the appearance of the F# major episode and until the end of the movement, the piano will move into the background, to accompany the two clarinets' duet (mm. 59-64) or the cello's solo upon the return of the theme. The exceptions are the six bars before the false reprise (mm. 65-70), in which the accompaniment becomes solo material supported in *pianissimo* by the strings, and the movement's four last bars, functioning as a cadenza.

Fourth movement: *Allegretto grazioso*

After a monumental first movement, a dramatic, tumultuous scherzo, and a lyrical and profound slow movement, Brahms chooses for the work's finale a *grazioso*, *giocoso* humorous register. This way, the composer diversifies and balances the Concerto's palette of affective experiences, adding to the seriousness of the first three movements a touch of lightness, of ludic.

Considering the weight and the importance of the discourses and the fact that the piano and the orchestra alternatively share the leading role of the musical flux, this movement could be described as solo-symphonic.

Structurally, the last movement is a free sonata form. The exposition contains two thematic groups. What is interesting is that within the second group only the second idea is in the dominant key (F major), the first one being presented in A minor. The development consists almost exclusively of theme 1 and its elaboration, to which a passage in sixteenth-note triplets on the piano, without any thematic role, is added. As for the reprise, it brings back the ideas of the second group (the first one given in D minor and the second one in Bb major). The Concerto ends with a coda marked *poco più presto* and built almost exclusively on the material of theme 1.

The humorous side the finale is mainly due to the character of theme 1 and to that of theme 2 from the second thematic group. It is important to mention that both themes are first stated by the piano, which thus assumes its role as a soloist. The elements which render theme 1 graceful, supple and humorous are the dotted rhythm, the staccato attack followed by a legato attack, the dynamic marking (*piano*) and the spacious accompaniment, interrupted by rests, of the left hand. Also, an element of surprise is the debut of theme 1 using the sub-dominant harmony (E \flat major), thus increasing the humorous effect (see Ex. 14).



Ex. 14. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, fourth movement, mm. 1-4. (see Brahms 1910: 73)

The second idea of the second thematic group is also treated in a comic key, by the juxtaposition of two different characters. The first one is that of the theme on the piano: supple, *giocoso*, with a spacious writing in the higher register. The second one belongs to the orchestral accompaniment, jerky, in march time, with the double basses marking the strong part of the beat in the lower register (see Ex. 15).

Ex. 15. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, fourth movement, mm. 97-100. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 175)

In the exposition, the piano affirms its solo role in the bridge, by two interventions in *fortissimo* (mm. 45-46 and mm. 49-50) which interrupt the evolution of the orchestral tutti.

In the development, the piano starts by accompanying the oboe's theme (mm. 165-172) in a chamber aural display and is afterwards integrated in the orchestra as the latter works on theme 1. It gradually wins back its place as a soloist, first by a transition passage in sixteenth-note triplets (mm. 202-205) and then by a solo which rhythmically varies and harmonically colours theme 1. The fabric, in B minor (mm. 211-229), is much richer compared to the first exposition of the theme, with a very demanding writing in double sixths, fourths, and thirds, articulated two by two (see Ex. 16).

Ex. 16. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, fourth movement*, mm. 206-221. (see Brahms 1910: 85-86)

Judged against the exposition, the reprise will not bring any significant changes as to the weight of neither the piano nor the orchestra. There is an exception though, a new musical idea inserted in the second thematic group. Stated in *forte* by the solo piano (mm. 325-332), it is accompanied by the strings in pizzicato and, with a markedly syncopated rhythm, it may be borrowed from a Hungarian folk dance.

In the coda, marked *un poco più presto*, the piano varies theme 1, in octave triplets, prior to its being developed by the orchestra. The two entities evolving alternatively, they integrate with one another in a truly symphonic finale.

ARGUING FOR A SYMPHONY WITH PIANO OBLIGATO

If in the previous subchapter we focused on the solo aspects of the piano score, we will now discuss the elements referring to who leads the musical flux and has the weightier discourse and to the substantiality of the orchestral apparatus – that is, to the factors which render the Concerto symphonic.

Supporting this theory are the scope and the duration of the work (around 50 minutes) and its four-movement, typically symphonic, structure (it's one of the very few piano concertos written in four movements), possible hints that its author might have seen it as a symphony with piano obbligato.

The orchestra is rather designed to support a symphony, and not just as an accompaniment. With the exception of the trombones and the tubas, it contains the entire apparatus characteristic of a symphony and, in the first movement in particular, the orchestral tuttis are quite extended. There are frequent episodes in which the piano is assimilated to the massive sound of the whole orchestra and is imagined as an integral part, with the orchestra leading the musical flux. The chamber-like aspect is also very important, as in each of the four movements there are solos of the orchestral instruments accompanied by the piano.

First movement

The Concerto's opening is quite unusual: it was for the first time that a debut of a concerto was treated in an exclusively chamber music-type display – namely, a horn-piano duo. The melodic simplicity of the theme and the warm, noble sound of the horn are supplemented and harmonically filled by a series of descending piano chords going over almost the entire keyboard (see Ex. 17).

The image displays a musical score for the first movement of Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, measures 1-6. The score is written for piano (Klavier) and orchestra. The piano part is in the lower staves, showing a descending chordal sequence. The orchestral parts include 4 Horns (Hörner) in B and F, 2 Trumpets in B (Trompeten in B), and Drums in B and F (Pauken in B u. F). The piano part is marked 'p' (piano) and the horns are marked 'mp' (moderato piano). The score is in G major and 2/1 time.

Ex. 17. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83*, first movement, mm. 1-6.
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 92)

This is a moment of rare beauty, only surpassed, perhaps, by its repetition in the reprise, when the horn's theme is harmonised by the two clarinets and the last cell is imitated by the flute. The piano accompanies the theme by a passage of sixteenth-note sextuplets in the higher register, and the inconspicuous strings accompany in piano. The combination of the deep, warm sound of the horn and the clarinets and the delicate, immaterial fabric of the piano and the flute against the velvety harmony of the strings, all, coinciding with B \flat major taking power again, give this moment the signification of revelation, after an agitation- and struggle-filled development (see Ex. 18).

Ex. 18. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, first movement*, mm. 260-263. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 118)

If in the Concerto's opening this moment is strictly of the chamber music type, its equivalent in the reprise has a symphonic character.

The orchestral exposition may not be very long (32 bars), but it does, by unfolding massive, varied, truly symphonic sonorities, have all the attributes of a Brahmsian symphony. We notice the resemblance between the writing in theme 2 of the orchestral exposition and a passage from the reprise of second movement from his Symphony No. 2, Op. 73: a melodic line stated by the violins while the violas and the cellos accompany in almost identical formulas of triplet arpeggios and the double basses provide the bass line. In the Concerto,

the theme is preceded by an ascending arpeggios motif on the winds (see Ex. 19), and in the Symphony the two clarinets accompany the violins' theme with descending arpeggios which reply to the ascending arpeggios of the violas and the cellos (see Ex. 20).

Ex. 19. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, first movement, mm. 46-49. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 95)

Ex. 20. Brahms, *Symphony No. 2*, Op. 73, second movement, mm. 74-76. (see Brahms 1926-27a: 122)

In the bridge, the orchestra proposes a new theme, in D \flat major, whose dotted rhythm is developed by the winds and then by the flute accompanied by the strings in pizzicato. The piano will be integrated in this passage (mm. 128-132) and will accompany and colour the orchestral discourse by arpeggios in the opposite direction in both hands. The entire passage is marked *molto dolce e leggiero*, and the orchestration is a reflection of this character: solo flute and pizzicato strings accompanied by supple arpeggios on the piano.

The development significantly increases the role of the orchestra in setting the musical flux. After the conclusive tutti of the exposition, theme 1 appears in the horn part, in F minor, this time against a tremolo on the violins and violas, changing its initial character from serene and noble into restless and quivering.

In the next section of the development (mm. 199-214), the orchestra borrows the solo cadenza theme from the movement's opening. The piano harmonically supplements the orchestral exposition by thirty-second-note arpeggios and then uses the orchestra's dotted rhythm motif in a short conversational interplay which renders the discourse dynamic. The entire episode is symphonic, the piano and the orchestra forming a unitary aural whole.

In the preparatory section of the reprise (mm. 238-259), the orchestra is the one to ensure the modulation from C \sharp major back to the home key, B \flat major. Thematically, the transition is built on a single cell from theme 1 of phrase 2, repeated, sequenced, and alternatively echoed by the strings (viola, cellos and double basses) and the winds (flute, oboe and bassoon). The violins accompany the instruments working on the motif, and the piano offers the harmonic support by wreaths of thirty-second-note arpeggios.

The reprise restores the piano its solo role while in the coda both piano and orchestra become equal partners, joining forces for a grandiose symphonic ending.

The coda acquires a significant importance in the composition of the first movement. Extended (51 bars), it comprises five sections and continues to develop both phrases of theme 1, by eliminating thematic material, in a characteristically Beethovenian technique.

In the first section (mm. 326-331), the culmination of the reprise after the great tension accumulation in theme 1 from the second group, the C \sharp major key affirms itself by means of chords played by the orchestra (long on the winds, and short, in *sforzando*, on the strings). The first violins and the violas develop the triplet motif of theme 1 while the piano supplements the aural picture by trills and chords followed by thirty-second-note arpeggios. The overall effect is ample, substantial.

The second section, much longer (mm. 332-341), abruptly modulates from C# major to Bb major and is permeated by a dull, mysterious tension. Two musical language elements give expression to this tension. First, the cellos and the double basses gravitate around the dominant (Eb, F, Gb). The lower register and the ambiguous subdominant create the feeling of uncertainty (see Ex. 21).



Ex. 21. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, first movement, mm. 337-338. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 126)

The second element is the eighth-note trill formula, double-dotted, followed by a thirty-second note obsessively repeated throughout the passage by the piano in the left hand, in the lower register (see Ex. 22).



Ex. 22. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, first movement, mm. 334-336. (see Brahms 1926-27b: 126)

Against this aural background, the winds rework phrase 1 from theme 1, and the right hand of the piano increases the rustle effect by a chromatic writing in broken octaves. The entire section is marked *pianissimo* and *pianissimo possibile*.

The third section of the coda (mm. 342-354) explodes suddenly in a heroic *fortissimo*, by means of chords played by the orchestra and the piano alternatively. An orchestra-piano tutti leads to the fourth section, in which the piano states phrase 2 of theme 1 and then gives the floor to the orchestra, accompanying it by descending arpeggio sextuplets.

The last section is emblematic for the concept of a symphony with piano obbligato: the entire orchestra explodes in a powerful, conclusive tutti, the piano doubles the flute's and the oboe's trills, and the cavalcade of piano chords alternating between the two hands and covering the entire keyboard is followed by three chords played by the whole ensemble in a monumental conclusion of the first movement.

Second movement

As shown in the previous subchapter, the second movement is quite balanced as to the weight of the two discourses. If in the exposition the piano is the protagonist, in the development the leading role is shared between the piano and the orchestra borrowing and developing each other's ideas. In the reprise, the orchestra states both themes, with the piano accompanying or integrated in the ensemble. In the coda, the orchestra presents the two themes in reverse order while the piano fills the monody of theme 2 with harmonies, rendering the end of the movement even more dynamic and dramatic.

The affirmation of the orchestra as the stimulus of the dramaturgical unfolding occurs during the development, after the piano's two expositions of theme 1 (m. 116, in C# minor, and m. 128, in E minor). The orchestra asserts in *stretto* the two motifs of theme 1, then eliminates the first one, develops the second one, and leads the way to the appearance of theme 2. Throughout this developmental passage (mm. 140-154), the piano intervenes with an octave motif in the higher and the lower register alternatively, supplementing the orchestral sonority.

The developmental writing process now introduces a conversation between the orchestra's sections. Theme 2 is first stated by the winds in unison (mm. 155-158) and is followed by a *tutti* reply (mm. 159-162). The winds interventions are accompanied by the piano playing octaves alternating between the two hands. This dialogue is sequenced and then the orchestra repeats the discourse in a conclusive *tutti* leading to the trio section of the scherzo.

The piano-orchestra balance is maintained in the trio as well: the new themes are stated by the orchestra and then varied by the piano, and in the final *tutti* the piano blends in with the orchestra to form a symphonic organism.

As demonstrated, the themes are no longer given by the piano in the reprise, the solo/accompanist role being reversed. We nevertheless notice that the orchestra doesn't state theme 1 in full, as the last motifs (mm. 326-329) belong to the piano. In the next exposition of the theme, Brahms resorts to a writing technique meant to enhance the aural symphonic effect by polyphonising the musical discourse, with the two generating motifs of the theme superposed. While the piano sequences motif 2, the orchestra introduces a counterpoint built on motif 1 (see Ex. 23).

The equivalent of the piano reworking theme 2, from the exposition, is a chamber-like episode which can be associated with the Concerto's opening: the theme is intoned by the horns and the piano accompanies in eighth-note arpeggios. The horn's deep, warm timbre and its round sound add even more sadness to the already elegiac character of theme 2.

Ex. 23. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, second movement, mm. 344-349.
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 151)

Brahms uses the technique of superposing two distinct ideas again in the coda, but this time he combines elements of the two themes. Over the exposition of theme 1 by the winds and then by the strings, the piano proposes an accompaniment with evident contrapuntal valences, built on motif 1 from theme 1 (see Ex. 24).

Ex. 24. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83, second movement, mm. 419-423.
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 154)

The scherzo ends in force, with the orchestra harmonising its sonorities with those of the piano in a symphonic unitary whole.

Third movement

In the slow movement, the symphonic style gives way to the solo and chamber character. With the exception of two one-bar orchestral tutti interventions (mm. 35 and 42), the cello taking over the theme, and the subsequent dialogue (m. 9-22), the orchestra only provides an unobtrusive accompaniment for the cello's solos, for the piano's developmental processes or, in the reprise, for the cello-piano duos.

After the opening cello solo, accompanied *sotto voce* by the other strings, the discourse becomes somewhat symphonic. The orchestral apparatus is complemented with winds, it states the theme, and enters into dialogue with the solo cello. The two bars of orchestral tutti are the departure points for the piano's developmental process.

The chamber aspect of this third movement is very important. The small-sized ensemble accompanying the opening solo (violas, cellos and double basses, with the first violin entering only in m. 5 and the second violin missing) argues in favour of defining this debut as a true chamber string ensemble moment.

The timbre line-up of the F# major episode (m. 59, clarinet duo, piano and cello) may very well foreshadow the trio for piano, clarinet and cello in A minor, Op. 114 (see Ex. 25).

Ex. 25. Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, third movement, mm. 61-64.*
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 165)

As the cello's theme returns in the home key, B♭ major (m. 78), the chamber-sized ensemble is joined by the piano which accompanies the melodic line with trills and ornamental figures in sixteenth-note septuplets and triplets. The aural image is that of a duo for cello and piano with orchestral accompaniment.

The lyrical, song-like themes and the chamber character of the timbral treatment give this slow movement an atmosphere of a particular intimacy, typical of Brahmsian chamber music.

Fourth movement

The symphonism of the finale is declared right from the beginning. Even if the piano is to a certain extent in the foreground, being the one which defines the ludic, *giocoso* character, the orchestra imitates each of its phrases, the two thus sharing the musical discourse. The orchestra slowly takes over, carrying out the transition to the second thematic group.

Theme 1 of the second thematic group is treated symphonically. With a marked Hungarian tinge, in a way resembling the composer's Hungarian Dances, and a lyrical but substantial character, the theme is a discussion between winds and strings against the piano's staccato chord accompaniment.

The second idea of the second group is similar to theme 1 as regards the division of melodic responsibility. Stated by the piano, it is imitated by the flute and the oboe in unison while the piano colours it in the higher register with sixteenth-note sextuplets figures in parallel thirds, which intensifies the *giocoso* side. The dialogue between the piano on the one hand and the flute and the oboe on the other hand rather render it chamber-, and not symphonic-like.

The chamber-symphonic spirit is perpetuated in the development. Theme 1 is stated three times – by the oboe (mm. 165-172, in B♭ major), by the cellos (mm. 173-177, in A♭ major), and by the first violins (mm. 181-185, in E major). The piano and the strings have an accompanying role, the piano's more distinct because of its denser writing. The intervention of the orchestral tutti (m. 189) in *forte* gives the development symphonic breadth, before the piano resumes its solo role in preparation of the reprise.

As shown earlier, the reprise is almost identical to the exposition with respect to the sound balance between piano and orchestra.

In the coda, built exclusively on material from theme 1, the soloist and the orchestra alternatively state the theme, after which they evolve together, with the piano either integrated in the orchestral sound or giving short answers. After the piano's solo in the opening of the coda (mm. 377-397), representing a rhythmically varied and melodically enriched version of the

theme, the tutti develops it using both the original form and the triplet formula from the piano's variation (see Ex. 26).



Ex. 26. *Brahms, Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83, fourth movement, mm. 402-407.*
(see Brahms 1926-27b: 193)

An eloquent example of the way Brahms integrates the piano writing in the orchestral flux is the episode in which orchestral sections contest the theme in stretto (mm. 432-447) and the piano accompanies and complements the aural landscape by triplet formulas shared between the two hands. The piano is the catalyser, the element binding the succinct, dialogued interventions of the various instruments or sections of the orchestra.

The Concerto closes grandly, with the gradual engagement of the whole orchestra and of the piano in a truly symphonic ending.

CONCLUSIONS

After having analysed both the elements rendering the work symphonic and those arguing in favour of a solo work, we find that calling the Concerto a “symphony with piano obbligato” is not sufficient and doesn’t do justice to a masterpiece of such pianistic scope and of such symphonic monumentality and complexity.

The analysis showed the truly solo character of the piano score, both as concerns the weight of the discourse and the complex, dense, and massive writing. As well, investigating the importance of the orchestra in the composition of the work revealed a profoundly symphonic thinking, the ensemble guiding, not just accompanying, the flux of the music. Last but not least, the chamber aspect is also important, as prove the duos between the various instruments of the orchestra and the piano or the moments featuring a chamber-sized ensemble.

We can therefore affirm that the first movement has a solo-symphonic character, with emphasis on the solo dimension, the second movement is both a concerto and a symphony, the third movement has solo and chamber dimensions, and the finale is solo-chamber-symphonic.

English version by Maria Monica Bojin

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