

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54

ROBERT SCHUMANN

B: June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Germany

D: July 27, 1856, Endenich, Germany

Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto in A minor had its premiere in Dresden, Germany, on December 4, 1845, with the composer's wife Clara as soloist.

Scored for solo piano, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings (approx. 31 minutes).

It might have seemed the most natural thing in the world for Robert Schumann to write a piano concerto, but in fact he hesitated long before tackling one. After Beethoven, it must have seemed that the symphonic concerto could be carried no further, and for the virtuosos of the 1820s and '30s, a concerto was a vehicle for solo display, with the orchestra relegated to the background.

The problem, as Schumann realized, was to reestablish the balance between soloist and orchestra. As the piano had grown in range, stamina and reliability in the second quarter of the 19th century, the orchestra had not kept pace, and traveling virtuosos often preferred to show off their wares in solo compositions.

In 1841, he wrote a single-movement *Fantasy* for piano and orchestra. His wife, Clara, was so taken with the work that she insisted on a run-through with the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig. She played it twice and pronounced it "marvelous."

The first movement is for all practical purposes monothematic, a falling phrase first introduced by the oboe being subtly varied without every losing its plaintive character. Schumann found the way out of the piano-concerto impasse by dissolving the barrier between the formal ritornello and the more capricious solo; henceforth, any instrument could speak in any tone of voice.

The rest of the concerto does not comprise two movements, really, but one lengthy span, joined by a ghostly reminiscence of the first movement. The mood of the Intermezzo is playful, bantering, despite the almost comically passionate second theme. Even more than in the first movement, the piano and the orchestra are partners in a delicately balanced game, in which neither is allowed to run too far ahead.

Schumann has been accused of running rhythmic patterns to death, especially in his orchestral works, but in the finale of this concerto, he manages to have his cake and eat it too. Built into the principal theme is a hint of ambiguity between the prevailing 3/4 measure and a 3/2, in which the pace is cut in half. This hint becomes explicit in the second theme, and there is much teasing between piano and orchestra over the sums of three plus three, versus two plus two plus two.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Schumann's Piano Concerto in A minor on March 24, 2001, with Music Director Emeritus Neeme Järvi conducting and Leif Ove Andsnes as soloist.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Schumann, Piano Concerto, Hélène Grimaud, piano, Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting the Dresden Staaskapelle, Deutsche Grammophon B0006904.