

Bronfman's Brawny Brahms at the San Francisco Symphony

by Theodora Martin

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It is difficult to program Brahms's Second Piano Concerto. At first glance, it was refreshing, even ideal, to see its placement at the end of Friday night's performance at Davies Hall with MTT and Yefim Bronfman. This being contrary to the expected ordering of concertos, which usually come first, and are followed by the more "collective" symphony or orchestral piece in the second half, brought an interesting narrative reversal, which ultimately served to monumentalize Brahms's Op. 83 further. Yet this piece, feared by pianists not just for its clunky difficulties – which are, after all, paralleled by perhaps only two other standard-repertoire concerti's challenges – continues, under such performance circumstances, to be notorious for its length and heaviness.

At first, the difficulty of pairing this piece with compatible others seemed to have been solved. The premiere of Cynthia Lee Wong's active and animated *Carnival Fever*, led by guest conductor Joshua Gersen, opened the program with buzzing excitement; even Gersen's somewhat tangled leading, instead of taking the music off track, positively intensified its busy character. Following that, MTT's short but effective talk about the fascinating world of early 20th-century Vienna – and the SF Symphony's "profound," as he put it, interpretation of Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6, that was to follow – made for an effective and intellectually vivid first half, and only less than 30 minutes in total length.

The first movement of the Berg, with its massive swells emerging out of unsettling nothingness, was played with potent lushness, especially in the strings, whose melodies pointed to the piece's ultimately heightened (although negated) Romanticism. "Modern" or not, these pieces stem right out of the 19th century; the second and third especially were played in that tradition. The jumble of versatile dance characteristics was explored in the second piece's Waltz "collage" with a vividness that MTT usually reserves perhaps only for Mahler, and especially his scherzos. The fully Mahlerian backdrop of Op. 6 was confirmed by the final piece – a collection of "march fragments" – especially as the massive wooden hammer, used among the now-tiny-seeming rest of the percussion section, directly evoked

Mahler's 6th Symphony. Gustav and the 20th century proved once more MTT's specialty, and the huge fanfare that ended the piece left an unbelievably fiery trail behind – although not enough to scorch the stage completely before Brahms.

Thus, all was set up as an evening requiring a smashing kind of audience responsiveness in the second half; evidently there, the needed excitement came through in the clapping following both the first and second movements, and felt as an antidote to the sophisticated first half. The beginning horn solo started the piece more brusquely than nobly, however, and this stood as an interpretative theme for the rest of the performance. Although the strong-fistedness of the piano's first cadenza was mostly appropriate, Bronfman adopted a driven stance *throughout* the first movement, which ultimately lacked any breathing, inherently peaceful qualities (which are, despite the ambitious substance of the piece, at its center nevertheless). The *perpetuum mobile* sections worked best, especially the F-minor flight at the end of the exposition and its B-flat minor equivalent in the recapitulation. The initial return of the first theme, however, rather than wafting back wistfully, even more distantly than it could have begun the movement, came off as a continuation of a huge, uninterrupted line – any expressive contrasts and desirable divisions completely absent.

The second movement worked better with Bronfman's goal-oriented playing, although the suspended, lyrical sections – like the B-flat Major interlude in the middle – continued to suffer from lack of space. The coda – understandably bumpy – sustained both the "clunky" and "monumental" aspects commonly associated with this piece, although the fiery decisiveness was more believable and less distortive of character here than in the first movement. The slow movement was the highlight, although the otherwise beautifully warm-toned cello solo seemed timid, probably constrained by the overall lack of communicative homogeneity between solo and "collective" bodies (a problem that was, however, solved in the fourth movement). In the crystalline F-sharp Major section, clarinetist Carey Bell played with much tenderness, mixing with Bronfman's best moment of quiet intensity to create a rare instant of magic that would have been desirable throughout more of the piece, especially the first movement.

To cap off the "monumentalizing" aspect of Bronfman's interpretation, the almost anti-climatic expected progression of the piece – which, under Brahms's deliberate "anti-virtuosic" agenda, might seem unnatural – was (perhaps understandably) ignored in favor of the more traditional, end-oriented virtuoso concerto conclusiveness. The quick tempo, however, worked well in resurrecting some more energy that might have been lost, ironically, through the "never breathing" beginning. Although the third movement was about 10 minutes long – much more appropriate than the usual 13 one encounters in interpretations of this piece – the first movement's lack of detailed highlighting seemed somewhat "saved" only by the heightened lightness of the finale. Since this work's inherently matter-of-fact ending was amplified rhythmically and dynamically by Bronfman, the finale managed not to seem like a "leftover" movement, as it sometimes does, but rather a real conclusion.

Bronfman's willful dynamics and endings, however, were not the only things amplified this evening. For this performance microphones were placed close to the piano, which brought the orchestra-piano

balance closer to recording sonorities – perhaps unnatural and contrary to live performance standards. No wonder Bronfman’s already hefty Brahms had an additional forceful edge to it! Despite this, however, the pianist proved a reliable narrator, exhibiting once more his consistent voice, and navigating the piece’s difficulties with solidity. One can only wish that Brahms’s overwhelmingly prominent *dolce* and *espressivo* markings, rather than the assumed Brahmsian “monumentality,” could be explored further in performances of this magnificent piece.

End

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