

Program Notes
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Concerto in F

On February 12, 1924, George Gershwin (1898-1937) took the stage in New York's Aeolian Hall with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra for one of the most famous concerts in history. The partly-improvised debut of his new composition, *Rhapsody in Blue*, electrified the audience and launched one of the most loved pieces of American music.

A very interested member of that audience was Walter Damrosch, the conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra. The very next day Damrosch asked Gershwin to write a piano concerto for the NYSO.

At that point, Gershwin didn't have the formal training in advanced composition, harmony and orchestration that he would seek later, so he bought a stack of books on theory, concerto form and orchestration and taught himself!

Gershwin was also under contract to write three Broadway musicals, so he wasn't able to start sketching the concerto until May of 1925.

On July 22, 1925, after returning from a trip to London, he started sketches on a two-piano score for a piece tentatively titled "New York Concerto." A friend, Ernest Hutcheson, arranged for Gershwin to use a secluded cabin at the Chautauqua Institution, and no one was allowed to violate Gershwin's privacy before four p.m. Gershwin made rapid progress and finished the first movement in July, the second in August and the third in September. The full orchestration was completed on November 10, 1925.

Gershwin hired an orchestra to read through the piece later that month, and at Damrosch's suggestion he made a few cuts and revisions. Gershwin played the première of the new concerto on December 3, in a sold-out Carnegie Hall, with Damrosch conducting the NYSO.

The public loved the piece, but the reviews were mixed. The critics couldn't classify the music as classical or jazz and seemed a bit baffled. Contemporary composers were also split in their opinions. Igor Stravinsky thought the concerto was a work of genius, but Sergei Prokofiev was dismissive. Sergei Diaghilev of the *Ballets Russes* said it was "good jazz, but bad Liszt."

Damrosch wrote a colorful program note for the concert that showed his unmistakable admiration for Gershwin's marriage of jazz and classical styles: "...George Gershwin seems to have accomplished this miracle. He has done it boldly by dressing this extremely independent and up-to-date young lady [jazz] in the classical garb of a concerto. Yet he has not detracted one whit from her fascinating personality. He is the prince who has taken Cinderella by the hand and openly proclaimed her a princess to the astonished world, no doubt to the fury of her envious sisters."

Concerto in A Minor for Violin, Cello and Orchestra, Op. 102

Few composers have contributed as much great music to the symphonic repertoire as Johannes Brahms (1833-1897). Brahms' inspired output includes a monumental violin concerto, two wonderful piano concertos, four stunning symphonies, several colorful overtures and several other pieces, all of which reflect his own, unique style.

Throughout his life Brahms labored long and hard before he was satisfied with any composition. He hesitated for many years before writing a symphony, and when he finished his first, he was forty-three years old. At that age, Beethoven had written all but one of his nine symphonies!

Brahms wrote his "*Double Concerto*" for Violin and Cello in 1887. It was his last work in the concerto genre and his final composition for orchestra.

Brahms' biographer Malcolm MacDonald wrote that this piece was "without question the most Romantic of all his concertos, perhaps of all his orchestral works, in the way it springs from the nature of the instruments themselves."

The two solo parts are treated as equals, with the cellist enjoying the lead role in introducing many of the themes, but the two instruments contrast greatly in sound. Inevitably, this suggests a conversation, and it is easy to imagine a dialogue between a man and a woman. In MacDonald's words, "...it is hardly fanciful to characterize the *Double Concerto* as virtually continuous love music."

One interesting footnote is that this piece played an important role in healing the friendship between Brahms and Joseph Joachim. Joachim was a famous violin virtuoso who had worked closely with Brahms for many years. The two men traveled together extensively on concert tours and had been very close until a quarrel, seven years earlier, had come between them.

The *Double Concerto* was first played October 18, 1887, in Cologne by Joachim and cellist Robert Hausman with Brahms at the piano. Brahms gave his handwritten score to Joachim with the inscription "To him for whom it was written," and Joachim became an enthusiastic promoter of the piece. Their bitterness was soon forgotten.