

Piano Concerto, Op. 13

Benjamin Britten

At the age of two Benjamin Britten informed his dear mother that he wanted to play the piano, stating, as it was chronicled, “Dear pay pano.” She waited until he was five or six to begin showing him around the keyboard, and two years after that he embarked on formal lessons. He later became a piano pupil of Arthur Benjamin at London’s Royal Conservatory of Music, from which he emerged as a splendid pianist. However, he suffered from anxiety onstage and appeared rarely as a soloist, preferring to perform as an accompanist or in chamber music.

While he was developing as a young pianist Britten also was spreading his wings as a composer, completing more than 500 pieces by the time he turned 14. Those childhood works are principally of historical interest, although the themes of eight of his early piano pieces live on because he refashioned them into his *Simple Symphony* in 1933–34. As a mature composer, his relationship to the piano very much mirrored his stance as a performer; he wrote only a few pieces that spotlighted the piano on its own (all of them of minor importance in his oeuvre), but he composed many that used the instrument in an accompanimental or ensemble context.

The Piano Concerto is the only such work in Britten’s catalogue and even then it hardly seems a virtuoso concerto in the standard sense — neither in its original form (as composed in 1938) nor in its revised version (from 1945, heard here). When the revised version received its United States premiere — in 1948, by pianist Jacques Abram, with Maurice Abravanel conducting the Utah Symphony Orchestra — the critic of the *Salt Lake Tribune* expressed admiration for the piece. Still, he acknowledged, “Any pianist who performs

this work ... will have great difficulty in gaining much personal notoriety from it, for the simple reason that the brilliant orchestral score actually overshadows the solo part.” That observation comes across not as criticism but rather as accurate assessment. The piano part is indeed difficult and often dazzling, but it operates within an active symphonic framework, integrated into the overall texture to a greater extent than one typically hears in the “soloist vs. orchestra” settings of Britten’s 19th-century predecessors.

Still, Britten was clear that he meant the piece to be heard as a concerto pure and simple. In a program note he wrote for the premiere, he said that the concerto,

IN SHORT

Born: November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England

Died: December 4, 1976, in Aldeburgh, Suffolk

Work composed: spring 1938, completed that June; revised 1945; dedicated to composer Lennox Berkeley

World premiere: August 18, 1938, at Queen’s Hall, London, by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Henry Wood, conductor, with the composer as soloist; revised version, premiered July 2, 1946, at the Cheltenham Festival in England, with the composer conducting and Noel Mewton-Wood, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 24, 1949, Leopold Stokowski, conductor, Jacques Abram, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 1, 1981, Raymond Leppard, conductor, Christian Blackshaw, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 33 minutes

was conceived with the idea of exploiting various important characteristics of the pianoforte, such as its enormous compass, its percussive quality, and its suitability for figuration, so that it is not by any means a symphony with pianoforte, but rather a bravura concerto with orchestral accompaniment.

He had characteristic trepidation about appearing as the soloist when the work was premiered, at a “Proms” concert in 1938, but after a rehearsal he reported to his publisher:

The piano part wasn't as impossible to play as I feared, & with a little practice this week ought to be O.K. It certainly sounds “popular” enough & people seem to like it all right.

The audience received the work warmly at its premiere. The reviews were positive, but a recurring refrain was that the opening two movements were stronger than the concluding ones. “There are effective and brilliant

things in both the last movements,” wrote Constant Lambert in the *Listener*, “but they sound like essays in texture rather than a direct expression of musical thought.” The critic for the *Times* of London wondered if perhaps the Shostakovich-flavored finale was intended as a joke. Britten kept the piece in his repertoire long enough to use it as his calling card in America, presenting its U.S. premiere with the Illinois Symphony Orchestra in Chicago in 1940. That was the last time the piece was played in its original version. In 1945 Britten withdrew its third movement, *Recitative and Aria*, and replaced it with the *Impromptu*, bringing the piece to its final form.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, cymbal, gong, side drum, tambourine, whip, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Listen for ... the Passacaglia

The third movement of Britten's Piano Concerto was originally a *Recitative and Aria*, a two-part expanse in which various wind instruments try to introduce tunes in popular styles (blues, waltz, polka) before yielding to a Rachmaninoff-like effusion. Britten changed his mind about its effectiveness, apparently supported in his doubts by his friend, pianist Clifford Curzon. In 1945 he replaced it with an entirely new third movement, the *Impromptu*, in the form of a passacaglia — or, as critic Joan Chissell put it, “that passacaglia form which invariably stimulates Britten to his best.” After being introduced by the

piano, the nine-measure theme is repeated through seven iterations by the orchestra, each overlaid by distinctive piano figuration. What begins in unsettling harmonic mystery ends up comforting thanks to the familiarity born of repetition.

Britten lifted this passacaglia from his incidental music for the 1937 BBC radio drama *King Arthur*, penned by D. Geoffrey Bridson. Britten didn't think much of Bridson's play (“rightly so in so far as one can judge from wading through an irredeemably fustian script,” wrote Britten scholar Donald Mitchell), but his incidental music got further use when he recycled some themes in his 1939 cantata *Ballad of Heroes* and the 1945 revision of the Piano Concerto.

Britten in 1939

