

A child prodigy of startling promise, Julius Katchen matured into a solo and chamber music pianist of broad interests and probing artistry. His death from cancer at age 42 denied a discerning public the presence of a pianist especially well-equipped to penetrate to the center-most meanings of those works he favored.

Born to a musical family, Katchen was instructed in the musical arts from his earliest years. His grandmother, formerly a faculty member at the Warsaw Conservatory, was his first piano instructor, while his grandfather taught him theory (his mother, a pianist, had trained at the Fontainebleau School of Music and had made concert appearances in both Europe and America). In 1937, Katchen presented himself to Eugene Ormandy and requested that he be permitted to play for him. Ormandy was sufficiently impressed to engage the lad for an appearance with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The October 21, 1937, concert found Katchen performing Mozart's Concerto in D minor to high praise. Following this glowing reception, the 11-year-old pianist was invited to perform at a pension fund concert with the New York Philharmonic the following month. Critic Lawrence Gilman was moved to recall the debut of Josef Hofmann as a prodigy a half century before. "His fingers are fleet, his conceptions clear and intelligent," wrote Gilman of Katchen. "He has a musicianly feeling for the contour and flow and rhythm of a phrase and a sense of what is meant by Mozartean style." A New York recital a year later brought even more enthusiastic praise for the youth's musical understanding.

Before his career advanced, however, Katchen's parents chose to place a hold on further public appearances and enroll him instead at Haverford College, where he majored in philosophy and English literature. His break, Katchen often insisted, developed in him the intellectual curiosity that fed his interest in the more mentally challenging works in the repertory.

A fellowship extended by the French government permitted Katchen to travel to Paris in 1946; that cosmopolitan city became his home for the remainder of his life and he lost no time in making himself a formidable presence there and in the rest of Europe, respected for his commanding interpretive thoughtfulness and virtuoso technique. He undertook several highly successful tours of the Continent, winning acclaim in each center he visited. Decca Records signed him to an exclusive contract and he began recording a bracing cross-section of the repertory with Brahms always at the core. He presented concert performances of Brahms' complete solo piano works in New York, London, Amsterdam, Vienna, and Berlin and was heard with major orchestras in the two piano concertos. In addition to solo appearances, Katchen often took part in chamber music performances, again concentrating on Brahms, but certainly not neglecting other aspects of an extensive personal repertory. Ned Rorem and Benjamin Britten were just two contemporary composers to benefit from Katchen's advocacy. To say, as some have, that Katchen never achieved the success in America that was his in Europe fails to account for the far greater portion of his mature years that were spent on the Continent where other cultural stimulations prompted his most involved and productive work. Katchen was also acutely aware of the need to extend the exposure of classical music well beyond its existing ranks -- on December 11, 1968, he was one of a large group of musicians, all but one of them from the rock and blues fields, to perform as part of the Rolling Stones' Rock & Roll Circus, and a segment that was introduced by Brian Jones, no less; alas, due to production and post-production problems, no one got to see any part of Katchen's performance until over three decades later; the pianist himself, terminally ill with cancer, didn't live another six months after this extraordinary event. His tragic death was keenly felt on both sides of the Atlantic.



# Brahms

## Piano Concerto No. 2

## Julius Katchen

London Symphony Orchestra  
János Ferencsik



Portly, grey-bearded, and a celebrity, on the eve of his 45th birthday, Johannes Brahms began sketching themes for the Second Piano Concerto following the first of eight trips to Italy. He put these aside, however, to compose the D major Violin Concerto. Still in a symphonic mode after his Second Symphony, he added a scherzo to the B flat Piano Concerto's otherwise traditional three-movement form. Brahms finished composing it on July 7, 1881.

Before the Budapest premiere on November 9, however, he tried the music at Meiningen with Hans von Bülow's orchestra, during closed rehearsals of other repertory. He returned there after Budapest for a public performance on November 27, conducted by Bülow, who talked up the work to his former father-in-law, Franz Liszt. Liszt requested a score, and later on wrote to Brahms, "At first reading this work seemed to me a little gray in tone; I have, however, come gradually to understand it. It possesses the pregnant character of a distinguished work of art, in which thought and feeling move in noble harmony." Praise indeed from an acknowledged old master, whose 1853 invitation to join his "New German Music Verein" Brahms had cursorily declined.

Brahms incorporated several quite daring (for him) changes in procedure. He jettisoned the usual orchestral exposition in the opening movement; after the solo horn plays a wistfully expansive first theme with piano arpeggios, extended by the strings, the soloist unleashes a virtuosic cadenza that propels us into the exposition. Additional themes pour forth as if from a cornucopia, always paced by the piano, leading to a tempestuous development section that never loses

sight of the opening horn theme. Its formal restatement signals a mostly benign reprise. There's a brilliant close, though, which poses a serious structural problem for soloist and conductor: how do you keep the ensuing scherzo from sounding anticlimactic, or worse yet, superfluous?

Without appearing to understate or rein-in the opening Allegro non troppo movement, it dare not be played to the hilt. The entire work's structural fulcrum has to be the end of the scherzo, an Allegro appassionato in D minor with a soft-grained second theme; otherwise, the remaining two movements risk outstaying their welcome. Helpfully, the scherzo boasts a brilliant D major trio section, and a tempestuous close. But it must sound harrowing in order for the ensuing Andante to work its calming charm.

The solo cello begins and ends the third movement with a poignant B flat melody that Brahms recalled five years later in his song *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*. The middle portion, however, grows expressively high-strung until the clarinets restore calm with a piano-accompanied duet of russet beauty.

Brahms marked his sonata-rondo finale Allegretto grazioso, although it accelerates later on as the solo writing becomes more and more brilliant, but this never becomes threateningly powerful. Some have claimed to hear "gypsies" in the string writing; but even if so, it would be what Hungarians call *Verbunkos*, subliminally remembered from Brahms' teenage tours with the violinist Reményi, who first introduced him to Liszt.

# BRAHMS

**Piano Concerto No. 2 In B Flat Major, Op. 83**

**Julius Katchen, piano**

**Janos Ferencsik conducts the London Symphony Orchestra**

**1 Allegro Non Troppo 16:52**

**2 Allegro Appassionato 8:13**

**3 Andante 11:58**

**4 Allegretto Grazioso 9:09**

**Total Time: 46:12**

**Recorded by Decca, 12-13 Apr 1960**

**at Walthamstow Assembly Hall**

**Producer: Ray Minshull    Engineer: Alan Reeve**



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