

Byron Janis (born 1928) became one of the most brilliant of his generation of American pianists before his career was cut short by illness. At the age of 7 he was taken to New York, becoming a pupil of Adele Marcus, then of Joseph and Rosina Lhévinne. In 1943 he made his professional debut playing Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in New York, with Frank Black conducting. In 1944 he repeated the same concerto in Pittsburgh with 13-year-old Lorin Maazel conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Vladimir Horowitz was in the audience, and subsequently invited Janis to study with him. Then Janis embarked on a successful career as a concert pianist, including a 1948 tour to South America, and a 1952 tour of Europe.

In 1960 Janis was chosen as the first American artist to be sent to the Soviet Union, opening a newly formed Cultural Exchange between the USSR and the United States. The result was a brilliant Mercury Living Presence LP that is an all-time classic, pairing the Rachmaninov First and Prokofiev Third concertos. Aided by exemplary sound recording, the Prokofiev in particular is still regarded by many connoisseurs as the work's finest recorded interpretation. In 1995 the CD version won the Cannes Award for Best Reissue. He interrupted his career in the late '60s at the onset of an illness, and temporarily resumed it in 1972. Soon however, his concert appearances became more rare.

Meanwhile, in 1967 he had discovered the manuscripts of two previously unknown Chopin waltzes in Paris, and in 1973, two variations of them, also in Chopin's hand, at the Yale Library. This led to a 1978 French television documentary, Frédéric Chopin: A Voyage with Byron Janis, in which he detailed the difficulties in determining the authentic versions of Chopin's music.

In 1985 he was invited to perform at the White House. On that occasion he publicly disclosed the nature of the illness that had hampered him for nearly 20 years: psoriatic arthritis affecting his wrists and hands. The ailment had not prevented him from continuing to play piano well, but it often made it impossible to play to his former high standard.

In the meantime, he devoted much of his energy to teaching, composing, and humanitarian concerns. He became Ambassador of the Arts for the Arthritis Foundation, often playing in fund-raising concerts. He is Chairman of the Global Forum Arts and Culture Committee. He composed the musical theme for the Global Forum on Human Survival in Oxford, England, held April, 1988. With lyrics by Sammy Cahn, it became the song The One World. Janis's music is primarily in the Pop style, and includes a musical version of The Hunchback of Notre Dame. In 1989 he composed the score for Turner Network Television's 1989 major documentary on Gary Cooper. He is on the faculty of Manhattan School of Music, and works on the Board and Music Advisory Committee for Pro Musicus, an international organization devoted to helping young artists.

LISZT

Piano Concertos 1 & 2

Byron Janis, piano

Kiril Kondrashin / Orchestra – Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra

Gennadi Rozhdestvensky / Orchestra – Moscow Radio Symphony



The genesis of Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E flat major dates to 1830, when the composer sketched out the main theme in a notebook. It wasn't until the 1840s, however, that Liszt actually commenced work on the concerto. As a neophyte in the art of orchestration -- his output to that point consisted almost entirely of keyboard music -- Liszt enlisted the assistance of his pupil Joachim Raff in providing the work an instrumental skin. Liszt completed the concerto in 1849 but made a number of revisions over the next several years. The final version of the work dates from 1856.

The concerto's three main sections -- Allegro maestoso, Quasi adagio-Allegretto vivace-Allegro animato, and Allegro marziale animato -- are joined seamlessly into a single large-scale structure. The opening statement, characterized by a bold, almost martial chromatic descent, contains the essential elements from which all subsequent thematic material is derived. The piano enters with a dramatic passage in characteristic Lisztian octaves, after which the main theme reappears in a more tranquil guise. The second subject is introduced in the piano, after which a dialogue between piano and clarinet ensues. The sweetness of the mood suddenly gives way to intensity as the main theme makes a dramatic, almost angry reappearance.

The second section begins with a quiet cantabile melody in the muted strings. After the piano takes up the theme, the mood grows restive with mercurial, dramatic statements from the orchestra that alternate with quasi-improvisatory passages in the piano. The tempo picks up as the flute, and then oboe and clarinet, take up the theme. Lyricism gives way to a more lighthearted spirit, signaled by a pair of delicate strokes on the triangle. (The prominence of this instrument in the latter portion of the work, in fact, elicited derisive commentary from a number of critics. Eduard Hanslick, for example, leapt on this feature in describing the work as Liszt's "Triangle Concerto.") The piano introduces a lively, playful theme in its upper register; other instruments gradually join the texture as the triangle continues to chime in with jovial comment. The mood darkens with the reappearance of the concerto's opening theme, as though to suggest a return to that musical sequence of events. Instead, the piano introduces the final section, which commences with a sped-up version of the cantabile theme from the second section. Other earlier themes reappear in various guises as the triangle continues to add its color throughout. Alternating between intricate passagework and thunderous octaves, the concerto draws to a close in the bravura manner with which Liszt is so closely associated.

Liszt began work on his Piano Concerto No. 2 in 1839 and initially completed it in 1857.

Further revisions were made over the course of the next few years and a final version was fashioned in 1861, with its publication in 1863. Like the first piano concerto, it is cast in a single movement although, unlike its sibling, the sections comprising it are numerous and less distinct, prompting some musicologists to view it as a symphonic poem with piano. W.F. Aporp subtitled the concerto, "The life and adventures of a melody." His description is quite appropriate because, also like the First, the whole of this concerto derives from its opening melody, which, over the course of the work's 20 or so minutes, yields many transformations and variations. This is also a more intimate composition than the first, and, ironically, more bombastic, as well.

The main theme is a long-breathed melancholy melody, first presented by the woodwinds. The piano enters in a modest, almost tentative way, playing filigree as the strings sweetly deliver the theme. The piano's deferential role ends with a dramatic, rippling plunge that keeps the instrument in the bass regions to introduce a menacing, rhythmic theme. The orchestra joins the grim proceedings, but the piano then incites further sonic mayhem with octave passages and other virtuosic fireworks. The orchestra takes over to punctuate the episode with a dramatic climax, after which the melody is played by a solo cello, accompanied by the piano. The piano then plays a variation on the melody, joined soon by the strings as the emotional pitch heightens. This section ends with sweetly descending scales and expectant swirls in the piano's upper register. This precedes bombastic chords from the piano, as the brass section blares out a variant of the theme. After a dreamy passage in the strings, the music intensifies and the piano breaks into furious octaves. A further buildup leads to another episode where the brass, now abetted by the piano, deliver a march-like variation of the opening melody. The music gradually winds down and the piano plays a straightforward rendering of the ubiquitous main theme, after which the woodwinds play in kind. This passage ends with the same kind of sweet, delicate cascading of notes that closed out the first extended slow section. Liszt invests the concerto's final episode with all manner of pianistic and orchestral fireworks.

For all the brilliant variations and transformations of the Second Concerto, its music does not seem to arrive at a resolution resulting from some logical musical sequence. It is well crafted, but hardly profound. The work was premiered in Weimar on January 7, 1857, with the work's dedicatee, Hans von Bronsart, as soloist and Liszt conducting.



Liszt - Piano Concertos 1 & 2 / Byron Janis, piano

LISZT

Piano Concertos 1 & 2

Byron Janis, piano

Kiril Kondrashin / Orchestra – Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra

Gennadi Rozhdestvensky / Orchestra – Moscow Radio Symphony

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-Flat, S. 124

Byron Janis, Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra & Kirill Kondrashin

1 Allegro maestoso 5:07

2 Quasi adagio - Allegretto vivace - Allegro animato 8:13

3 Allegro marziale animato 4:07

Piano Concerto No. 2 in A, S. 125

Byron Janis, Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra & Gennadi Rozhdestvensky

4 Adagio sostenuto assai 4:39

5 Allegro agitato assai 2:05

6 Allegro moderato 4:56

7 Allegro deciso 2:43

8 Marziale un poco meno allegro 3:35

9 Allegro animato 1:40

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