

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.



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. Apthorp 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 No. 1 & 2

Katchen / piano - London Philharmonic Orchestra / Argenta

Liszt: Piano Concerto No.1 in E flat

1. Allegro maestoso - Tempo giusto 5:24
2. Quasi adagio 5:10
3. Allegretto vivace 4:12
4. Allegro marziale animato 3:54

Total Time: 18:40

Liszt: Piano Concerto No.2 in A, S.125

1. Adagio sostenuto assai - Allegro agitato assai 6:59
2. Allegro moderato 5:01
3. Allegro deciso - Marziale un poco meno allegro 6:02
4. Allegro animato 1:34

Total Time: 19:36

Recorded 3 - 4 January 1957 in Kingsway Hall, London by Decca
Producer - Erik Smith Engineer - Gordon Parry



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