

Leonard Pennario was among the most popular American-born concert pianists of the twentieth century. Pennario's professional career began at the tender age of 12 when he filled in for an ailing soloist on the Grieg Concerto in A minor at a 1936 concert with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. Freshly inducted into the U.S. Army, Pennario gave his Carnegie Hall debut in the uniform of an Army private, playing the Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1 in November 1943. Pennario returned from his tour of duty to an eager reception in the concert world. At the time, a Minneapolis critic wrote "Pennario is endowed with temperament, interpretive imagination and the capacity to express it, above and beyond the flyingest ten fingers you ever saw. He made the concert one of the most exciting and exhilarating musical experiences in a long, long time." This sentiment would be repeated in city after city as Pennario dutifully traversed the concert circuit.

Where many young concert artists view resettling in New York as a necessity, Pennario stayed based in Los Angeles his entire career. Although he gave his first European tour in 1952, Pennario concentrated his performances mostly within the continental U.S. and Hawaii. His choice of venue allowed him to build up longstanding relationships of value with other Los Angeles-based individuals and concerns, such as his friendship with composer Miklós Rózsa, who composed both a Piano Concerto and the outstanding Piano Sonata (1948) for him. Pennario also began an association with Hollywood-based Capitol Records, for whom he recorded for more than three decades. Among more than 60 albums made for Capitol is Pennario's recording of George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue with the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra under Felix Slatkin, one of the best-selling classical albums from the era of vinyl records.

When the classical division of Capitol went belly up in the early 1980s, it derailed Pennario's recording career, but it did not affect his standing in the concert world. In 1987 Pennario played a concert at Lincoln Center that was broadcast over PBS in observance of the 50th anniversary of Gershwin's death. Ultimately, by the 1990s, Pennario finally began to retreat from the concert stage, pursuing instead his other great ability -- as a champion bridge player. Leonard Pennario was a great all-around pianist with an innate sense of musicianship as one of his record producers put it "Pennario is one of those artists who just 'gets' the music."



LEONARD PENNARIO

LISZT: CONCERTOS 1 and 2

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

RENÉ LEIBOWITZ conducting

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 1 & 2 - Leonard Pennario, piano - Leibowitz LSO

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Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-Flat Major 18:13

1 Allegro maestoso - Tempo giusto 5:14

2 Quasi adagio - Allegretto vivace - Allegro animato 4:33

3 Allegretto vivace - Allegro animato 4:04

4 Allegro marziale animato 4:22

Piano Concerto No. 2 in A Major 20:48

5 Adagio sostenuto assai 5:21

6 Allegro agitato assai 1:50

7 Allegro moderato 5:12

8 Allegro deciso 2:57

9 Marziale un poco meno allegro 3:40

10 Allegro animato 1:48

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Engineer – K. E. Wilkinson

Producer – Charles Gerhardt



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