

Formal Inventions

By René Spencer Saller

This program explores the myriad possibilities of form, revealing how structural conventions shape, and are shaped by, the artist's imagination. The Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski's *Concerto for Orchestra* deepens our understanding of 20th-century virtuosity and the meaning of musical modernism. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 27, his last work in the form, sacrifices the usual bravura pyrotechnics in favor of a radiant warmth and a deceptive simplicity. Johannes Brahms's fourth and final symphony draws on a lifetime of experience and immersive study to create a work that's both intensely experimental and deeply traditional.

Creative Constraints

The foremost Polish composer of his generation, Witold Lutoslawski was born in Warsaw, in 1913, when it was still a province of Imperial Russia. When he was five years old, his father, a member of the landed gentry, was executed by the Bolsheviks. Despite the ongoing political unrest, Lutoslawski, who had shown early promise as a pianist and violinist, earned degrees from the Warsaw Conservatory in piano and composition. In the summer of 1939, he was sent to war as an officer cadet. He was captured by the Germans, but he quickly escaped and returned to Warsaw, where he cobbled together a living playing piano in cafés.

In 1941 he wrote his first significant piece: the *Variations on a Theme by Paganini* for two pianos. Few of his other early works survived the destruction of Warsaw during the final year of World War II. In 1947, while working as the music director of Polish Radio, he completed his boldly atonal Symphony No. 1, but when the Communists assumed power in 1948, the symphony was banned and he was labeled a "formalist"—a dangerous designation. In keeping with the dictates of state-sanctioned social realism, he began to incorporate folk elements in his work, although he remained committed to exploring new harmonic and structural possibilities. "I wrote as I was able," he later explained, "since I could not yet write as I wished."

Folk Symbiosis

Composed over four years and completed in 1954, Lutoslawski's *Concerto for Orchestra* was an immediate hit, securing his position as a formidable figure in contemporary music. He later downplayed his use of folk melodies, calling them merely "raw material" for his "episodic symbiosis with folk music." However, the *Concerto for Orchestra* remains among his most frequently performed and recorded compositions, thanks to its dynamic range, its arresting orchestral textures, and its ingenious treatment of ancient forms, such as the passacaglia. The opening Intrada assembles motives from Masovian folk songs into an intricately contrapuntal foundation. The central movement, Capriccio notturno ed Arioso, is a dazzling and dramatic scherzo that scampers nimbly between whimsy and nightmare, closing not with a bang but a whisper of tenor and bass drums. The finale, an ambitious

synthesis, is more than twice as long as the two preceding movements combined. It begins quietly, with harp and double basses, before introducing the theme for a passacaglia that generates fifteen linked variations. Then, a sturdy, cheerful toccata is followed by a somber, Bartók-inflected chorale voiced by the woodwinds. The concerto ends on a high note, with the entire orchestra bursting forth in an exultant coda.

Strife and Splendor

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's last years of life were marred by many difficulties, most of them beyond his control. Austria's political conflicts with Turkey had resulted in an economic depression; his wife, Constanze, was frequently ill; he had only two piano pupils left; and the new emperor, Leopold II, treated him with contempt. He was forced to crank out trivial work on commission while dashing off desperate letters to patrons and creditors. But despite these stressors, he was firing on all cylinders, producing several of his most glorious achievements, such as the operas *Così fan tutte* (1789) and *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) as well as his Clarinet Quintet (1789) and his monumental, almost-completed *Requiem* (1791). No one knows exactly when Mozart composed his Piano Concerto No. 27, in B-flat major, but it was almost certainly his final contribution to the genre. It received its premiere in 1791, the year of his death, but whether he performed it himself or one of his students enjoyed that distinction is subject to debate.

Sunlight and Shadow

Music scholars often subject Mozart's later works to psychological scrutiny, imposing autobiographical readings without any real evidence from the score. For that reason, some commentators point to his last concerto's pervasive air of "resignation," "subdued gravity," and "sadness," although it seems unlikely that anyone could reach this conclusion simply by listening. Direct and intimate, with glistening passagework and mellow woodwinds, Piano Concerto No. 27 combines a soaring lyricism with the transparent textures of chamber music. The orchestration is relatively sparse, without trumpets, drums, or clarinets. Mozart wrote down his own cadenzas for the first and third movements. Although each of the three movements is in a major key, they often drift into the minor mode, a characteristic trick of musical chiaroscuro that enhances both nuance and contrast.

Rather atypically for Mozart, the opening Allegro begins gently, rolling out a murmuring backdrop against which the first violins eventually propose the first real melody. This tune is peppered with little contrasting flourishes by the winds and horns. When the second theme emerges, also sung by the violins, the winds insinuate themselves so subtly that they almost seem to merge with it. After this somewhat lengthy preamble, Mozart introduces the piano, which takes over the melodic duties while the strings inject zippy retorts. The development features unusual harmonic progressions as well as subtle counterpoint.

The central Larghetto, in E-flat major, is luminous and deceptively simple. Its main theme returns, almost unchanged, as the second theme of the Allegro finale,

reinforcing the structural coherence and infusing the overall cheer with a hint of melancholy. The closing movement's main theme resembles Mozart's contemporaneous song *Sehnsucht nach dem Frühling* ("Longing for Spring"), which is set to lines from a poem by Christian Adolf Overbeck: "Come, sweet May, and turn the trees green again/And make the little violets bloom for me by the brook."

An Awkward Silence

Although Symphony No. 4 is widely considered to be the capstone of Johannes Brahms's work as a symphonist, it was not warmly welcomed. After the composer and fellow pianist Ignaz Brüll performed a two-piano reduction of the score for a small gathering of the composer's closest friends, an awkward silence descended. The conductor Hans Richter and the music critics Eduard Hanslick and Max Kalbeck, all loyal supporters, were unable to say a single nice thing about it. Hanslick later wrote, "I felt as though I were being thrashed by two extremely clever fellows." Kalbeck told him that the finale, now regarded as the very heart of the work, was unsuitable for a symphony and should be replaced.

From Flop to Fond Farewell

Although the Fourth's premiere, conducted by the composer himself on October 25, 1885, in Meiningen, was a great success, it flopped badly in later performances in Vienna. The Austrian composer and critic Hugo Wolf dismissed it as "the art of composing without ideas." Even the conductor Hans von Bülow, who famously anointed Brahms the successor to Bach and Beethoven, described it as "difficult, very." For more than a decade, audiences were unmoved, if not openly hostile. It was not until his final appearance in public, less than a month before he died, that Brahms was to witness a positive response to his final symphony. His former student and biographer Florence May described the performance in Vienna of March 7, 1897, as follows: "A storm of applause broke out at the end of the first movement, not to be quieted until the composer, coming to the front of the artists' box in which he was seated, showed himself to the audience.... The applauding, shouting house, its gaze riveted on the figure standing in the balcony, so familiar and yet in present aspect so strange, seemed unable to let him go. Tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there in shrunken form, with lined countenance, strained expression, white hair hanging lank; and through the audience there was a feeling as of a stifled sob, for each knew that they were saying farewell."

Ancient and Modern, Dark and Light

Today it is hard to understand why Brahms's contemporaries found the Fourth Symphony so perplexing. Although it is certainly cunningly made, its cerebral underpinnings never distract from its beauty. The repeating cycles of descending thirds, which appear throughout the symphony in myriad motivic patterns, unite contrasting moods. Darkness permeates light, minor shifts to major, and vice versa. The springing Allegro theme of the first movement gives rise to an overt quotation from one of Brahms's *Four Serious Songs*: "Oh death, how bitter you are." The gorgeous Andante moderato begins with a theme in the medieval-church Phrygian mode—which Brahms understood as the expression of deep need, a longing for

heavenly comfort—and then gives way to the scherzo-like *Allegro giocoso*, a triangle-happy romp in C major. Yet it is the finale, based on the almost archaic passacaglia form (a set of variations over a repeated bass line), that renders the work truly sublime. A masterful compendium of everything Brahms had learned as a symphonist, it's loosely based on Bach's death-drunk Cantata No. 150, "For Thee, O Lord, I Long," and transforms an ancient device into a recognizable but astonishing take on 19th-century sonata form.

Copyright 2016 René Spencer Saller