

Brahms rework done in respect

Concert preview

Pianist rearranges Violin Concerto.

‘That was my thought, to imagine what Brahms would do.’

By **Pierre Ruhe**
For the AJC

The majestic, soul-satisfying Violin Concerto by Johannes Brahms doesn't seem like music to fiddle around with. Premiered in 1879, it has joined the most beloved classical works. Composed for violinist Joseph Joachim, the concerto is massively difficult for the soloist, because of the emotional maturity it requires.

Now a pianist has gone and put his personal mark on the concerto – and placed his own name alongside the composer's as a co-creator.

Salvador Dali painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa? An act of musical vandalism?

More like an act of deepest sympathy with a fellow artist.

Thursday in Symphony Hall, the Atlanta Symphony will give the world premiere of what's billed as the Brahms-Lazic Piano Concerto No. 3. in D Major.

Brahms wrote one violin concerto and two piano concertos. Croatian pianist and composer Dejan Lazic, 32, is blurring the distinction. With

no set commission, Lazic arranged the violin concerto for piano and, performing with the ASO two years ago, played some of it backstage.

Conductor Robert Spano was taken with the chutzpah of rewriting the genius Brahms, but also found Lazic's solutions to the thorniest problems highly stimulating. When he learned it had never been performed, Spano jumped at the chance. The new(ish) concerto will be recorded this weekend for the Channel Classics label.

Lazic's reputation as a virtuosic musical thinker – the sort of musician Spano most admires – is growing worldwide.

We reached Lazic at his home in Munich, Germany – although he confesses he spends 80 percent of his time on the road, touring to cities like Atlanta.

Q: What made you want to make this violin concertos your own?

A: I've always adored the concerto, it's such a piece of art. Although I'm not a violinist, it's very special to me. I've played a lot of Brahms piano music, of course, and played clarinet for 13 years, so I got to know another side of Brahms. But the concerto is something beyond that, and I realized I had two options: either learn to play the violin or arrange it for piano. [laughs]

Q: Spano told me you left the orchestral part alone.

A: The orchestra plays what it already has in its library. I see [the orchestral part] as the frame, and I paint inside. With my right hand, I usually take the solo violin line. Then the question is “what to do with the left hand?” It took me almost six years to answer the question!

Q: And Brahms was himself a pianist...

Brahms continued on D2

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra
World premiere

Brahms/Lazic Piano Concerto No. 3 with Dejan Lazic as soloist.

8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday.
Symphony Hall, 1280 Peachtree St. N.E., 404-733-5000,
www.atlantasymphony.org

A: That was my thought, to imagine what Brahms would do. It hasn't been easy. I did a lot of research, I read the letters with Joachim. Unlike the violin, I can easily indulge in polyphony: I'm free to use five or six different lines at once. But I understood better that Brahms composed everything seated at the piano, and that Joachim made actual corrections to make it more playable [for violin]. Brahms was always a pianistic composer, and a symphonic composer. ... This gave me encouragement to understand how Brahms would have done this himself.

It is quite obvious that the Violin Concerto had its roots in both friendship and practicality: Brahms' aim was to write a concerto for Joachim, so the concerto took on a greater significance than the violin itself. It is quite justified to speculate about what would have happened if Joachim had been a cellist or a clarinetist or a pianist!

Q: It's a rarity, but Beethoven arranged his own Violin Concerto for pianist Muzio Clementi.

A: Yes, I've played it! It's a rush job, and the left hand has too little to do. In the 19th century and before – to Bach – it was normal to arrange another's music. Brahms arranged his own music, then Schoenberg arranged a Brahms piano quartet as a symphony. A piece of music isn't an institution, it's a living thing.

Q: Tell me about your



own composition?

A: My music balances a tonal and atonal language, like the Croatian-Istrian folk music that is my inspiration. But the Brahms is the only violin concerto that can stand this. My idea was to savor, not provoke.

Q: So what would Brahms think of your arrangement?

A: That's funny – in a dream I asked Brahms about it. This is a secret I tell you, but he said "It's O.K."

Pierre Ruhe blogs about classical music at ArtscriticATL.com