

Art historians have long speculated about the ruins of a great temple buried under the foundations of the Parthenon, atop the Acropolis in Athens. No one is going to take down the Parthenon, however, so it's up to sophisticated image-scanning technology to peer through the white stone and glean the remnants of what is below.

Along the same line of thought, is something buried within the Brahms Violin Concerto? Not really a pressing question, given that it was premiered on New Year's Day 1879 and, after an initial spate of hostility and puzzlement – a concerto not *for* the violin but “against the violin” – it has settled comfortably near the top of most-perfect and most-beloved status in the standard repertoire. It is a Parthenon of music.

Yet Hans von Bülow's “for/against” quip is perceptive. Despite all of its magisterial beauty and emotional honesty – and despite the copious technical assistance Brahms received from violinist Joseph Joachim – something doesn't quite sit right, violinistically speaking, in the Violin Concerto. Are we missing something, something ghostly within the ontogeny of the concerto?

Pianist Dejan Lazić thinks the answer is apparent from Brahms's life and letters, and he's excavated a highly intriguing alternate view of the concerto. “You have to remember that Brahms composed everything seated at the piano, and that Joachim made actual corrections to make it more playable [for violin],” says the Croatian-born pianist. “Brahms was always a pianistic composer, and he was a symphonic composer – he originally sketched the Violin Concerto in four movements, like a symphony. And it is quite obvious that the Violin Concerto had its roots in both friendship and practicality: Brahms's 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! This gave me encouragement to understand how

Rewriting Brahms

Pierre Ruhe meets pianist Dejan Lazić, who has just recorded Brahms's Third Piano Concerto





Brahms would have done [a piano version] himself.”

Lazić set himself the challenge, and it took him six years to solve it: how would Brahms have transcribed his Violin Concerto for piano? “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.” The result is on a forthcoming disc from the Dutch label Channel Classics. It is officially billed as “the Piano Concerto No 3 in D major (after the Violin Concerto, Op 77)” with double-barrelled authorship: Johannes Brahms-Dejan Lazić.

How the reworked concerto received its premiere (and simultaneously its debut recording) is its own uncommon tale. Lazić had no commission for the project and was making progress at his own pace. Along the way, the Munich-based pianist’s career took off, and he now spends 80 per cent of his year on tour. His own voice as a composer also developed in a post-Bartók style evoking his native Croatian-Istrian folksongs. His music is often inspired by what he loves best, such as a *Kinderszenen* set which is a homage to Schumann.

In 2007 Lazić was soloist for a Beethoven concerto with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. At a rehearsal break, the pianist started noodling at the keyboard, tossing off his Brahms transcription. Atlanta music director Robert Spano was instantly smitten. The conductor was delighted at the audacity of rewriting an old chestnut and, more cerebrally, found Lazić’s solutions to the knottiest transcription problems highly stimulating. “He played me oodles of it,” says Spano, giddy with the results. When he learnt Lazić

wasn’t looking for a commission fee – just a world premiere – Spano recalls: “He didn’t have to ask [the Atlanta Symphony] to play it, I asked him. I said, ‘We have to do this.’ It’s terrific.”

Enter Jared Sacks, founder of Channel Classics, a native of Boston who is now a Dutch citizen producing records from his home in the village of Herwijnen. It’s a one-man operation and he’s been recording Lazić for a decade. For the Atlanta concerts, Sacks had a rehearsal and three performances to capture everything he needed for the recording. No patch sessions. He set up his own microphones but plugged his recording gear into the existing lines set up by ACA Digital Recordings, a local company that records everything for weekly radio broadcasts.

In a live concert setting, where the conductor’s down-beat comes at 8.05pm, the guys in the recording booth are not the orchestra’s only concern. Ready or not, the show was going to start. But at the first of three performances, Sacks couldn’t get the software for his SACD recorder to boot up. “I almost had a heart attack! I was checking everything, restarting, and finally it came up with a minute to go,” says Sacks. With the electricity of a dramatic (or potentially crazy) world premiere in the air, everyone was on high alert. After the orchestra’s opening statement, the solo pianist entered, and the “correctness” of the instrument was astonishing. The arpeggio passages in the first movement for once felt utterly natural, effortless. For the *Allegro non troppo*, at least, Lazić had everyone believing that the beloved Violin Concerto was really a piano concerto in disguise. Essentially,

Something doesn’t quite sit right, violinistically speaking

the pianist’s right hand plays a thickened-up solo violin part. The left hand is entirely Lazić’s own creation, based on figurations and finger pathways from Brahms’s two authentic piano concertos and solo piano music.

As a student clarinettist, Lazić learnt a different side of Brahms, which helped inform countless tiny decisions. And since Brahms left no cadenza for the soloist – Joachim’s is most often heard – Lazić composed his own. Two cadenzas, actually. Lazić recorded them both between concerts and will choose the best for the CD, which will also include two Brahms Rhapsodies and the Scherzo, Op 4.

Unusually for the well-heeled Atlanta audience, the first-night crowd applauded after the opening movement. It threw all sorts of extraneous sounds into the mix that lasted into the slow movement. On the second night, no applause. “Yes!” exclaims Sacks, pumping his fist in air. “The orchestra has warmed to the concerto, and Dejan’s playing with more lyricism, but the audience applauded last night, not tonight. Go figure,” he says with a shrug. In the control booth, with an ear for the recording, the producer offers a running commentary on the performance. The woodwinds are not perfectly aligned at the start of the slow movement. Gorgeous oboe-playing. A consumptive member of the audience has Sacks wincing with every cough. And Sacks curses like a sailor when he realises he’s forgotten his glasses

at the restaurant. But across the three concerts, everything comes together neatly (at least once).

One key factor in this new/old concerto is that Lazić left the orchestral parts completely alone. His piano version – it is not fair to call it a mere transcription – can thus be programmed with what every orchestra already keeps in its library. At the premiere, the Atlanta players were surprised at what a tremendous difference it was to accompany a piano rather than a violin; they had to listen and breathe in entirely new ways. Conductor Spano will join Lazić in Seattle, Philadelphia and other cities to play it again. The concerto’s European premiere came with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Since the premiere, the pianist has had offers from “two handfuls” of orchestras eager for a fresh take on an old favourite.

Historically, of course, transcriptions, updates and “borrowings” were common. Baroque composers moved material freely from one work to another, sometimes giving credit, sometimes not. Beethoven arranged his own Violin Concerto for piano at the request of Muzio Clementi, a pianist who wanted to play it. “Yes, I’ve played it!” chirps Lazić. “Beethoven needed the money [for the arrangement] but he didn’t like 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. My goal is not to provoke but to savour.” ©

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