

Piano Concerto (2008)
program note

As a pianist who grew up around orchestras (my father is a conductor), I think of writing a piano concerto as both the most natural as well as the most forbidding musical medium. Knowledge of much of the piano concerto repertoire gives me many musical tools with which to work, but at the same time this very awareness makes it impossible for me to avoid the question, "What could I possibly contribute to such a rich and seemingly complete literature?"

And yet the allure is very hard to resist: the combination of piano colors and those of the full orchestra offers an inexhaustible supply of possibilities to a composer and while many have been invented and used brilliantly, there are so many more just waiting to be found. On top of this there are the various evocative symbolic qualities of the piano concerto: the one with/against the many, in which the one can be hugely powerful; the freedom of the independent soloist vs the conductor- controlled group; the necessarily transient sounds of the piano vs the infinitely sustainable sounds of the orchestra; and on and on...

Although I had been thinking about a piano concerto for decades (and even wrote most of one when I was 16), the recent possibility of collaborating with Awadagin Pratt caused me to be inescapably hooked. I admire the contrasts in Awadagin's playing: he has a lyrical approach to the instrument and yet he can get a huge (not just loud) sound from it; he is a real intellectual who appreciates the design and subtlety of musical objects, and yet he can play with romantic abandon; he is a serious musician and yet he can play with wit and humor. I wanted to custom-design a work which would focus on all of these qualities and more.

I have two pianist-composer friends—Frederic Rzewski and Gao Ping—whose thoughts about the medium of the piano concerto significantly influenced my approach to this piece during the months before I began writing it down. Both are skeptical about piano concertos...exactly what I needed! Not that they are uninterested in the repertoire; quite the contrary. But both see specific fundamental flaws in the medium. For example, Gao Ping asserts that the piano already has as many colors as the orchestra and with the orchestra superimposed on the piano, much of the subtlety of these can be lost. Frederic proposed a radical solution: never have the two playing simultaneously! This brilliant and simple idea immediately provided me an opening: the two would not play together...at least for a good long while. But little by little, a metamorphosis would occur, leading the piece eventually to the exact converse of the beginning: playing not only together but exactly the same thing! A footnote to this: a very strange coincidence occurred recently: another major influence on my musical life is my former teacher Elliott Carter, whose 100th birthday was just celebrated on 11 December, 2008 in Carnegie Hall with his new piano concerto called "Interventions" (written at age 99), performed by Daniel Barenboim with

James Levine and the Boston Symphony. I was at the performance (which was wonderful) and was stunned to discover that the structure of “Interventions” is very similar to what I’ve just described about my piece, which was completed several weeks before that concert. It was fascinating and gratifying to find myself in the middle of what feels like a “movement”.

A couple of other notes about the piece: In recent years I’ve been using a particular kind of harmonic structure for all my music, in which I allow only certain notes to be heard in a given piece. These notes are organized into one very long scale which replicates at some interval other than the octave (as opposed to major and minor scales, all of which replicate at the octave). In “Piano Concerto” the interval of replication is the major 9th, the scale has 11 notes in it, and there are 68 notes altogether (in other words, 6 iterations of the 11-note scale + 2 extra notes). So for example, the Eb just above middle C is never heard in this piece, but there are other Ebs which are, such as the ones both an octave above and below. The effect of this harmonic structure is to give the piece a sort of musical “fingerprint” or overall color quality, a bit like the difference between the color of major or minor but on a much more subtle level. I’d like to think that all of my pieces composed with this method (each of which has a uniquely invented scale) have such a singular fingerprint.

And lastly, one other interesting detail—in the middle of the second movement there is an extended improvised cadenza for the soloist. The instructions in the score state that the pianist is free to invent whatever he/she wishes, on condition that only the 68 notes of the piece are to be used. Presumably, preparing for this will produce a brand-new take on practicing scales and arpeggios!

Joel Hoffman
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