

Historiographical Essay-Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor (Op. 11)

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“It is life, not a professor, which can teach Chopin. It is an artistic existence...One can sense [how to play] Chopin, one cannot learn it” (Swartz, 1994, p. 47). Anne Swartz chose a very appropriate quote from Wilhelm von Lenz, a writer and good friend of Chopin. Chopin is the pianist's composer and a genius not only in his day but in our time as well. His first piano concerto is a perfect example of the romantic era and characteristic of his writing style.

During the 1870s in St. Petersburg, Chopin's early piano works were more recognized and performed due to the relationship to Russia's music in the 'modern' era (Swartz, 1994, p. 46). Wilhelm von Lenz was a critic and teacher at the time, and often complained that Chopin's works were not being performed properly. He was not in favor of being over-zealous and flashy in the performance because performers tended to play Chopin's music as they would perform Liszt's works. He believed that this virtuosic style of playing was far too romanticized. When students performed Chopin's piano concertos when they were published in solo piano form in 1873, he criticized that a “mere execution of the notes of the Concerto Op. 11, without intelligent and expressive rendering of the ‘cantilena-counterpoint sections’, produced for [him] a performance utterly devoid of musical meaning” (Swartz, 1994, p. 47). He obviously held the concerto in high regard, and was unhappy with performances that were too virtuosic and unfeeling.

Chopin's works were generally very well-received, and he was never out of work in teaching and composing. This concerto was very much loved, but due to Chopin's technique it was not immediately 'heard'. Chopin's soft playing was overpowered by the orchestra when he performed this work at the Conservatoire in Paris (Zamoyski, 2010, p. 88). Chopin himself

thought that his playing was “not fit [for giving] concerts” (Zamoyski, 2010, p. 89). Even though his concerto was a success, even Chopin thought that this type of piece was not the best suited to his favored piano performance technique.

Alan Beggerow gave a brief overview of Chopin’s first piano concerto in the blog *Musical Musings*. He presented a short historical aspect of Chopin’s life, focusing mainly his teachers and how they influenced his composing. Chopin often did not use exact forms when composing because of his expressive writing style. Beggerow attributes this to Chopin’s teachers and their recognition of his genius. Beggerow also outlined the three movements quite nicely. The first movement, *Allegro maestoso*, stays loosely within sonata form with “unexpected modulations...which [go against classical form]” (Beggerow, 2012). Beggerow uses Chopin’s own explanation of the second movement in his blog posting. Chopin speaks of the movement’s intentions to be less powerful and more reflective and memorable. Beggerow describes the last movement as “a tuneful Polish dance set in the traditional rondo form” (Beggerow, 2012). His entire review of Chopin’s first piano concerto was very reflective of Chopin’s writing style and helpful to the reader historically and comprehensively.

Jessie Rothwell, publications coordinator for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, also spoke of Chopin’s intention to be more subtle in his virtuosity, both in composing and performing. Her review of the concerto spoke about the impact his music made on Polish political issues. She even quoted Schumann in his political observations of Chopin’s music. “If the Czar knew what a dangerous enemy threatens him in the works of Chopin...he would banish that music. Those works are like cannons hidden beneath flowers” (Rothwell, 2007). She also highlighted the “haunting simplicity”, and how the concerto is meant to be “a showcase for a travelling virtuoso...the virtuosity [is] like an understatement” (Rothwell, 2007). Each movement is very

different in mood and style, which Rothwell also examines. She explains each movement, the first being “passionate and proud...also tender” (Rothwell, 2007). Rothwell depicts the second as a “nocturne characterized by restrained singing [with] an intricate *spianato* section”. The third movement is the most difficult of the three, beginning with ominous chords and eventually moving into a *krakowiak*, a Polish dance. Jessie Rothwell interpreted this concerto from a very interesting viewpoint, her terminology and historical views extremely helpful in comprehending the concerto as a whole.

In May of 1999, Richard Perry reviewed several recordings of Chopin’s Piano Concerto No. 1. The pianists included Emanuel Ax, Martha Argerich, and Maria Joao Pires. He also speaks about the actual concerto and Chopin’s impact with this concerto. He was the second to mention that Chopin was known for his lack in orchestration skills but made up for this with “lyrical intensity” and “passionate reveries” (Perry, 1999). Perry also mentioned Chopin’s “nationalistic pride” through Chopin’s use of “Polish folk idioms” (Perry, 1999). According to Perry each pianist had a very unique performance and all were known for their performances of Chopin. Perry notes that the orchestras also have different takes on accompanying the pianist, being either “all surge and swoon” or “more detailed, purposeful phrasing” (Perry, 1999). In all cases of review, Perry obviously has great taste and distinct taste for the interpretation and musicality of this work.

In more critical reviews, James Huneker speaks of Chopin and how he treats the concerto form. Huneker is fonder of the E minor concerto, even though he still believes Chopin only wrote concertos because he felt obligated as a composer. Huneker believes that this type of composing “was not consistent with [Chopin’s] nature to express himself in broad terms” (Huneker, 1966, p. 171). Of all the movements, he favors the *Romanze*, or second movement,

because it is less flowery. He speaks of the closing of the second movement as “the murmuring mystery [mounting] the imagination” (Huneker, 1966, p. 171). Huneker’s review was certainly the most criticizing of Chopin, but his points had merit and even he could not completely dismiss this concerto as a great work.

Emil Gilels also recorded this piano concerto and received a review from Peter Aston in 1965. This concerto has so far been described in nationalist, romantic, and form terms. Emil Gilels has such a fantastic musical integrity to begin, making his interpretation and performance certain to be well-received. Aston describes Gilel’s performance as being “idle to compare with the concerto of the classical tradition” (Aston, 1965). Aston also makes a good point in that this performance enables the listener to focus on listening to the music in the terms of the music itself rather than analyzing what happens every moment. He comments on the impact of Gilel’s tone color and his understanding of the spirit of the music. This aspect of reviewing the performance of this work is crucial due to the constant reference to Chopin’s nationalism and more subdued virtuosity.

I tend to agree the most with Anne Swartz and Wilhelm von Lenz in that Chopin’s music is partially intrinsic and should not be overdone in a flashy or obviously virtuosic fashion. This concerto’s first movement is meant to be treated as a virtuosic entrance, but still has tender moments that need to be recognized and not overdone. I will absolutely agree with James Huneker in that the second movement is absolutely stunning. The subtle yet present virtuosity provides the listener with the scene of quiet, sweet longing that Chopin felt at the time. The third movement also exhibits all the nationalistic characteristics that most of these reviews and articles discussed. This concerto is so utterly Chopin, and will always be well received and performed.

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