

## Chopin - Piano Concerto No.1 in E minor

Born close to Warsaw in 1810 to French and Polish parents, Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin was soon recognized as a child prodigy. He gave his first public concert at the age of 7 and produced his earliest compositions at the same age. Both parents were amateur musicians and ensured that their son was directed towards a well-rounded but musically biased education. His father's role as a teacher of French at the Warsaw Lyceum also meant that young Frédéric François, as he was to become, spent much of his time not only sharing his education and playtimes with nobles and aristocrats, but also regularly performing for the ruler of Russian Poland, the Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich.

Romantic folklore has left us with the image of Frédéric Chopin as a pained, suffering and fragile individual who died far too early but, left us a legacy of piano music that had a transformative effect on so many through its overtly passionate and emotional language. The composer's focus on shorter musical forms such as nocturnes, mazurkas and preludes that allowed a freer and seemingly more improvisatory style, enhanced this view. One of the very first 'celebrity musicians', Chopin enjoyed a status enhanced by his predilection for playing to private 'salon' gatherings rather than public concerts.

Whilst this image is largely true in the years of his developed career, the period which saw the composition of Chopin's two piano concertos was one in which he enjoyed good health, vitality and the eager anticipation of an international career - he was still only twenty years old after all!

An audience of around 700 heard Chopin himself perform the premiere in Warsaw's Grand Theatre on October 12th, 1830 and received his performance with "thunderous applause." Just a few weeks later in Paris the scene was repeated at the Salle Pleyel with a critic of the time concluding; "There is spirit in these melodies, there is fantasy in these passages, and everywhere there is originality."

The first movement has three main themes, all introduced first by the orchestra before being taken up by the soloist. The second movement is entitled Romance and was described by Chopin to a friend thus; "It is not meant to create a powerful effect; it is rather a Romance, calm and melancholy, giving the impression of someone looking gently towards a spot that calls to mind a thousand happy memories. It is a kind of reverie in the moonlight on a beautiful spring evening." The finale is a rondo which adopts the syncopated rhythms of the Krakowiak - a popular folk dance from the Krakow region.

As Chopin's career and fame grew he enjoyed all the trappings and status of an international celebrity, playing for royalty throughout Europe and enjoying liaisons and friendships with some of the most distinguished people of the time. Gradually however, his weak constitution began to catch up with him. Performances occurred less frequently and his compositional output all but dried up - he seems to have been all too aware that his life was coming to a close.

## **Mozart - Requiem**

The state of confusion surrounding Mozart's Requiem has vexed the minds of musicologists and scholars for way over 230 years. That his friend and student Franz Xaver Süssmayr was responsible for much of its construction is not in question. Exactly how far he was 'acting under instruction' of Mozart, expanding from scraps of paper left behind after his death, repurposing earlier compositions of the great man or, just adding his own original music, will probably remain unknown forever. Perhaps we should then ask the question, probably under our breaths, does it really matter?

Over the years there have been many attempts to complete the Requiem using the benefits of greater scholarly intervention and, supposed, insight. However, it is nearly always the version by Süssmayr that is performed and remains much loved by audiences to this day. Another element of confusion, that even rises to the level of mystery, involves the original commissioning of the Requiem and the subterfuge that followed. A single ten-week period is key to any understanding of this.

On December 5th, 1791 Mozart died. He had received a mysterious commission to write a Requiem Mass from a Count Walsegg for a memorial to take place on February 14th, 1792 - the commemoration of the death of his 20-year-old wife Anna exactly one year earlier. Despite Mozart's incredible facility and ability to compose quickly, he felt his workload and travels would probably prevent him meeting the deadline. However, this concern was nothing compared with that of his wife Constanza. When Mozart died, he left her saddled with debts and two small children to raise. Two things were crucial to her; the first was to ensure receiving the final payment for commission of the work from Walsegg and, convince him that it was indeed Mozart who had completed it. In secret she approached a number of other composers to finish the composition before coming to an agreement with Süssmayr. The second was to then be able to claim the work as part of her inheritance (Walsegg wanted to pass it off as his own work!). This achieved, she would be able to benefit financially from all future performances.

So who could blame her, in an age when life was so cheap and insecure, for creating an aura of mysticism around Mozart's final musical utterances? To this day the Requiem enjoys an appreciation that goes beyond even its own profound and magical qualities.

When Mozart died in 1791 he was buried in a mass paupers' grave with only his closest family and friends in attendance. When Chopin passed away in Paris in 1849 his funeral had to be delayed for two weeks to enable mourners from all over Europe to travel and pay their last respects. It took place on October 30th in the Church of the Madeleine - some 3000 people without tickets had to be turned away.

The music performed at the funeral was the Requiem by - Mozart.

-Andrew Constantine