

VLADIMIR ASHKENAZY

Pianist

Thursday Evening, December 6, 1990, at 8:00
Hill Auditorium, Ann Arbor, Michigan

PROGRAM

Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major, Op. 110 Ludwig van Beethoven
Moderato cantabile, molto espressivo
Molto allegro
Adagio, ma non troppo — arioso dolente
Fuga: allegro, ma non troppo

Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111 Beethoven
Maestoso, allegro con brio ed appassionato
Arietta: adagio molto semplice e cantabile

INTERMISSION

Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119 Johannes Brahms
Intermezzo in B minor: adagio
Intermezzo in E minor: andantino un poco agitato
Intermezzo in C major: grazioso e giocoso
Rhapsody in E-flat major: allegro risoluto

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24 Brahms

Vladimir Ashkenazy plays the Steinway piano available through Hammell Music, Inc., Livonia.
Mr. Ashkenazy is represented by Harrison/Parrott Ltd., London, a member of the consortium European Artists Direct.
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Sonata No. 31 in A-flat, Op. 110
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

A London critic wrote in 1824, at just about the time when this Sonata reached England, "Beethoven's compositions more and more assume the character of studied eccentricity. He does not write much now, but most of what he produces is impenetrably obscure in design and so full of unaccountable and often repulsive harmonies, that he puzzles the critic as much as he perplexes the performer." Yet, the melodic material made this one of Beethoven's relatively accessible late works, strongly expressive, lyrical, dreamy, even elegiac, perhaps. It is also a bold expansion of the idea of a sonata, requiring it to admit such procedures as recitative and fugue for example. Beethoven dated his manuscript of the Sonata December 25, 1821, but he may have revised the finale in 1822, shortly before its publication in Berlin and Paris. In 1823, he tried to arrange for its publication in London, too, but it was already known there in the Continental edition.

The first movement, *Moderato cantabile, molto espressivo*, is a perfect, seamless, sonata-form structure, brief and apparently of great simplicity, but actually stretching great harmonic distances, with a gracious — or amiable, as Beethoven says — opening phrase that seems perfectly laid out for a string quartet, rather than for the piano. Elsewhere, too, the music seems to be going in the direction of Beethoven's last quartets, which were begun around 1822.

The second movement, *Molto allegro*, is a major-key scherzo, in duple meter but with highly irregular rhythm, that makes a strong contrast with the lyrical mood of the first movement. Its second theme resembles a German folk song, and in the contrasting central section the difficult passage-work for the right hand is made more difficult by the rhythmic displacement of the left hand's single notes.

The remainder of the work is one of Beethoven's new structures, a combination of slow movement and fast finale. The sequence of musical events is this: a slow introduction, *Adagio ma non troppo*, a plaintive recitative, a beautiful *arioso* lament; then a complex

fugue, *Allegro ma non troppo*, a Chopinesque ornamented version of the lament in a key that traditional harmony reckons to be as remote as one could get, a mysterious inversion of the fugue in the new key, and then a long closing section based on the fugue theme that, of course, arrives back in the original key of A-flat.

Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Between 1816 and 1826 — a decade of originality, idiosyncrasy, invention and expressivity unparalleled in the career of any other composer — Beethoven wrote a series of unmatched masterpieces: five piano sonatas, five string quartets, the *Missa Solemnis*, and the Ninth Symphony. During the period just before these compositions began to appear, his output had been slim, for the works of his middle years had exhausted all the possibilities of the forms he had inherited from Haydn and Mozart. Withdrawn and separated from much of the rest of the musical world by his deafness, Beethoven then conceived and wrote a body of musical literature without equal.

The word had gone around in Vienna that Beethoven had written himself out, that he was reduced to making folksong arrangements because he was incapable of doing anything else. When he heard about it from a disciple, Beethoven said, "Wait a while. They'll soon learn differently." To be sure, his Op. 108 was a collection of 25 Scottish songs, arranged in 1815 and 1816 for a British music publisher, but his last Piano Sonatas, Opp. 109, 110, and 111 are three of his greatest compositions. They were written between 1820 and 1822 (not exactly in a "single breath," as Beethoven claimed in a letter), while he was also working on the *Missa Solemnis*.

The Sonata Op. 111, his last, is only one of several that Beethoven wrote in two movements rather than three, but this one, perhaps because it ends with a long slow movement, was found more puzzling than the others. The publisher preparing the first edition for the press wrote to the composer that the copyist seemed to have lost the finale, and when a friend asked why he did not write

a third movement, Beethoven answered — perhaps in jest, perhaps not — that he was too busy with the Ninth Symphony and that the length of the slow movement made up for it anyway. It is now unthinkable that anything follow this transcendental *Adagio*.

The Sonata's first movement is a modernized prelude and fugue, or perhaps even a huge expansion of the old French-style overture that Beethoven knew from the works of Handel. It consists of a grand introduction, *Maestoso*, in the dotted rhythm that had characterized the overture since the seventeenth century, and then a huge, harsh and dramatic, freely fugal movement, *Allegro con brio ed appassionato*.

The second movement is a great set of variations on an Arietta, *Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*. The music becomes increasingly ethereal, otherworldly, until it almost seems to come to a stop in a thrilling cadenza-variation. Then it moves on slowly again, revealing the Arietta theme with increasing clarity but, somehow, at a great distance.

Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119 JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

In his youth Brahms earned his living as a pianist, and in later years he played well enough to get through his difficult concertos, but he played, it was said, like a composer, not a virtuoso. As a young man, he also wrote big works for the piano, grand sonatas and long sets of variations, for example, but after the Second Concerto, of 1881, he produced no piano music until 1892. It was the year of his fifty-ninth birthday. He felt old and thought it time to put his affairs in order. Among the results of his labors then were twenty short, intimate piano pieces, probably based on musical ideas that he had been accumulating for a long time; they would be published in four varied sets as Opp. 116 to 119. They are his last works for piano.

Before the summer was over, he sent them to Clara Schumann, who had been a close friend for about forty years, as a kind of peace offering after a long quarrel they had had about the preparation of the collected edition of the works of her late husband, Robert Schumann. From her letters to Brahms, it is clear that the pieces were then not in the order in which they were later published, and some of them were even in

different keys from those in which we now know them.

The pieces are highly personal statements, eloquent soliloquies, like songs without words, and in many ways they are more like his beautiful songs of the 1880s than like his earlier piano music. Nothing binds together the pieces within each opus number, and the reasons for the final groupings are unknown. The earliest recorded public performance of this group, Op. 119, was given in London, on January 22, 1894. The pianist was Ilona Eibenschütz (1873-1967), who studied with Clara Schumann for four years, and of whom she seems to have been a little jealous for having made the acquaintance of this music before she did. Perhaps to calm her, or else simply out of his habit of belittling his new works, Brahms wrote to her that they were "not worth much discussion."

The individual pieces, among the twenty, have vague, indeterminate titles: ballade, capriccio, intermezzo, rhapsody, romance. The distinctions among them are slight, and a single basic structure suffices for all of them: the simple three-part form in which similar opening and closing music surrounds a contrasting middle section. The four numbers of Op. 119 are three Intermez-zos, which are generally rather slow, compact, lyrical pieces, and a Rhapsody, a title Brahms seems to have used for rather more expansive

No. 1, Intermezzo in B minor, *Adagio*, with a major-key central section.

No. 2, Intermezzo in E minor, *Andantino un poco agitato*, a somewhat larger-scaled variation-like piece of great rhythmic ingenuity, with a contrasting E-major section in which the main theme is converted into a waltz, *Andantino grazioso*.

No. 3, Intermezzo in C major, *Grazioso e giocoso*, a lighter-toned piece, with an interesting layout of the "voices," so that the theme is at first in the middle of the texture, not at its top.

No. 4, Rhapsody in E-flat, *Allegro risoluto*, a piece that looks relatively simple on the page, but is very difficult to play and very powerful in effect.

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24 JOHANNES BRAHMS

The composers who began to write extended instrumental solo pieces in the sixteenth century took up the variation technique as a way of adding interest to repetitions of a melody. Two hundred years later, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven wrote great variation-movements into their extended works, but separate sets of variations were more likely to be either light and entertaining compositions for amateurs or brilliant but empty display pieces for virtuoso performers. Beethoven also wrote several great, independent sets of variations, and young Brahms, whose early ambitions as a symphonist were inhibited by what he described as the mighty tread of Beethoven behind him, did not mind challenging the great master in this field. He first published a set of piano variations when he was only 21 years old and then wrote several others, in a series that reaches its early climax with the present work, which dates from 1861, when he was 29.

Brahms had a profound interest in the music of the past, and in the course of his investigation of Handel's harpsichord music, he found, in a Suite in B-flat published in 1733, an aria with five doubles — that is, a theme with five variations — that caught his fancy and tempted him to try his own hand at varying the theme. It is a symmetrical little tune with square phrases and simple harmony that almost demand variation. Brahms invented no less than 25 variations, in which he plumbed every knowable and imaginable aspect of it and created a wholly new musical universe, while never abandoning but ever repeating Handel's little structure. At the end, as kind of gigantic 26th variation, is the fugue, a work of awesome power, made all the more impressive by the realization that its brief subject is an expansion of just two or three notes from Handel's theme.

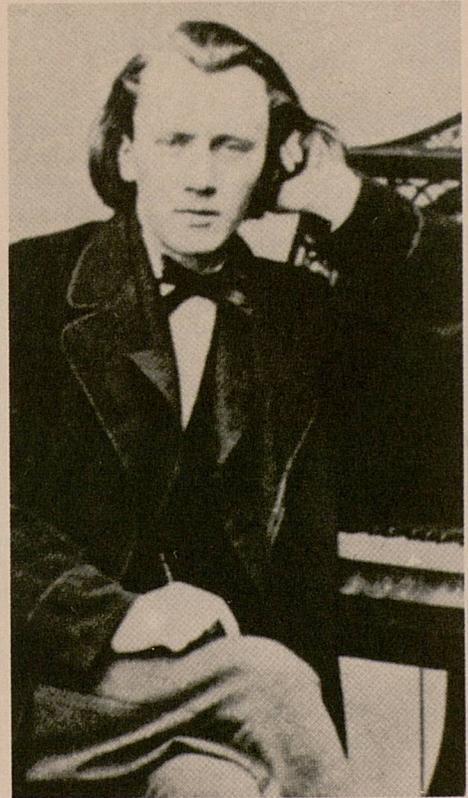
Brahms knew that this was an important work and often played it at his concerts. One of the influential early performances took place on November 29, 1862, in Vienna, where its success helped him decide to make his home in that city. In the important center of Leipzig, where his work was resisted for a long time, it was a concert at which he

played these Variations, in 1874, that finally won over the difficult, critical public there.

A story is told of Brahms playing the Variations for Wagner in 1863. It may never have happened and Wagner is probably not the author of the remark he is said to have made then, but it was, nevertheless, one of great importance for the history of music in the nineteenth century: "These Variations show what can still be done in the old forms by someone who knows how to treat them."

In Brahms's manuscript, the music is headed, "Variations for a Dear Friend," using the German feminine form of the word "friend." The friend was his dear Clara Schumann, widow of his mentor, Robert Schumann, and on September 6, 1861, he wrote that this would be his birthday gift to her. On December 7, in Hamburg, she gave the work its first performance.

— Program Notes by Leonard Burkat



Brahms at the piano in 1856.

About the Artist

In the 28 years since Vladimir Ashkenazy confirmed his international standing with his first prize in the 1962 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, his name has become a household word throughout the world, as he appears each season in the great international music centers in both recital and concerto, offering a wide range of works from his enormous repertoire.

During the last 15 years, Ashkenazy has also consolidated his achievements as a conductor, and in 1987 he was appointed music director of London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. During recent years, he has appeared frequently with this orchestra, both in London and abroad, and in future seasons, he will continue to lead the RPO in its role as one of the most dynamic and innovative musical organizations in Europe.

Of Ashkenazy's recent projects with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, one of the most enduring highlights was the performance of two concerts in Moscow in November 1989, marking the artist's first return to the Soviet Union in 26 years. The concerts were recorded and broadcast, and an international television audience was able to share in the first performance by satellite link-up. This triumphant and emotional return to his homeland, as pianist and conductor of his own orchestra, brought sustained shouts of "Bravo, Bravo!"

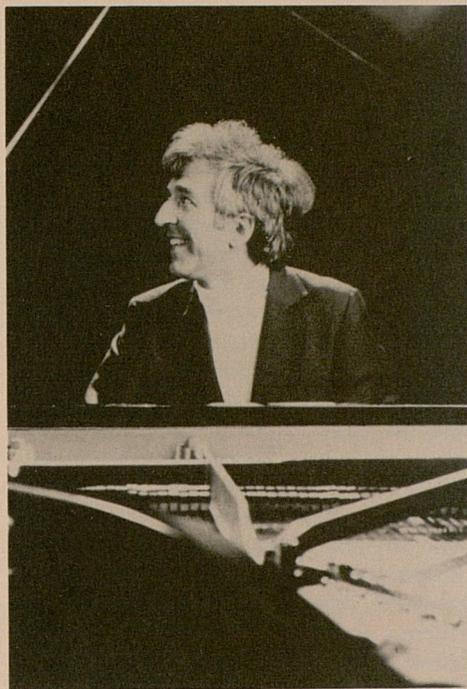
In September 1987, Vladimir Ashkenazy accepted the position of principal guest conductor of The Cleveland Orchestra, and his contract has recently been extended through the 1991-92 season. In addition, in October 1987, he was appointed chief conductor of the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Berlin. Other orchestras with whom he has recently appeared as guest conductor include the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, the latter in Berlin and Salzburg.

Ashkenazy is also active as a chamber musician, notably in partnership with Itzhak Perlman and Lynn Harrell, with whom he has performed and recorded many of the great works of the classical and romantic repertoire.

As a recording artist, Vladimir Ashkenazy's catalogue with Decca Records is enormous, covering almost all the major works for piano by Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, and Scriabin. As a conductor, his list of recordings is growing rapidly and already encompasses the Rachmaninoff Symphonies with the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, the Sibelius and Beethoven Symphonies and Mozart Piano Concertos with London's Philharmonia Orchestra, and works by Prokofiev and Strauss with The Cleveland Orchestra. He is currently recording the complete Shostakovich Symphonies with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and further major recording projects are planned with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, and the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Berlin.

Born in 1937 in Gorky (formerly Novgorod) in the Soviet Union, Ashkenazy studied at Moscow's Central Music School and at the Moscow Conservatory with Lev Oborin. After winning the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1962, he lived in London before moving to Iceland, where he became a citizen in 1972. He currently resides in Switzerland.

This evening's concert marks Vladimir Ashkenazy's seventh Ann Arbor visit, with previous recitals in 1968, 1970, 1975, 1985, 1986, and an appearance in 1978 as both pianist and conductor with the English Chamber Orchestra.



A Triumph of Humility

by Edward Greenfield

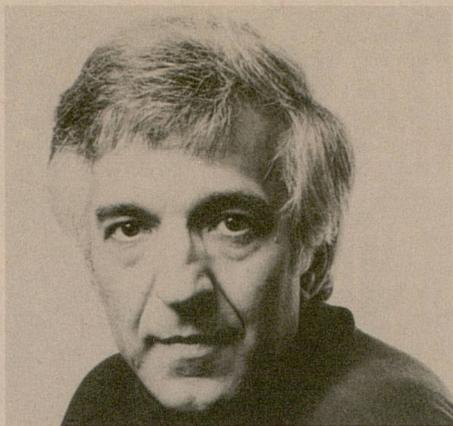
Vladimir Ashkenazy is no showman, no sensationalist, as he said himself. It should be a perfectly normal situation for him to return to his own country, he thought, and so far as virtuoso pianism and conducting allows, that is what he tried to make it on his return to Russia after 26 years in the West. "In my simple way, I am just endorsing that this country has changed."

As the BBC cameras showed, he remained quietly contained as he arrived at Moscow airport, showed a flicker of excitement as in the taxi he passed "one of my favorite places, the Dynamo stadium," visited the flat of his father, David — where he himself started his own family — and finally found his way to the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, where, with his father and family present, he conducted his own orchestra, the Royal Philharmonic, in symphonies by Tchaikovsky and Oliver Knussen, and played Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto.

It was an unostentatious occasion, but a moving one. One needed the close-up intimacy of television to detect the great musician's signs of emotion. On stage, as outside, he is the least demonstrative of artists, always looking embarrassed at the fuss as he makes his little pecking nods in place of bowing fully. His very dress speaks lack of fuss, no white tie and tails, but a polo-necked sweater and dinner jacket, underlining his always businesslike manner.

Yet, emotion there was in plenty, and not just in the music-making. Ashkenazy deliberately chose to counter the Soviet Cultural Foundation's original suggestion of returning for a solo appearance. He thought it would be "a flop." He must be the only one who could dream of any such thing, but it is another instance of his avoiding flamboyance, the glorification of self. Instead, he opted to return with his own orchestra. But, he said, "I couldn't not play the piano. Everybody would ask why not. In Russia, I was educated on the piano, and it would be





false not to play. Maybe the new generation doesn't even know I exist as a pianist."

Thanks to the camera, one was able to pinpoint exactly the signs of emotion, the physical reflection of what his music-making was telling us in sound. In the complex, dramatically contrasted textures of Oliver Knussen's Third Symphony, as well as in the first movement of the Beethoven, he had his work cut out keeping things together, rather than indulging in emotional gestures. A grimace of a wink in approval to the players after the Knussen was allowed, and no more.

But then, in the slow movement of the Beethoven, preparing for the long opening solo, one saw the depth of the occasion suddenly strike him, and the inner concentration of the following performance reflected just that. The finale brought the usual Ashkenazy paradox of muscular brilliance flipped off in total normalcy, with not the slightest sign of physical stress. It promoted the predictable ovation and a whole florist's shop of flowers in tribute.

Then, after the interval came the real reason why Ashkenazy preferred to return to Russia with an orchestra rather than solo. Who would have predicted 26 years ago, when he left for the West, that he would now be not only a great virtuoso pianist still, or even a pianist who conducts, but a conductor who has positive messages to give us about a wide range of repertoire, above all Russian music!

The recordings he made of the last three Tchaikovsky symphonies were a landmark in bringing home just how fine a conductor he is, one to match any rival in these

works. Here in Moscow, he drew from the RPO a performance of the Fourth Symphony at once passionate and direct, which completely avoided vulgar tricks, bringing out the purposefulness of symphonic arguments whose originality is too often underprized through their immediate appeal to the ear.

There were many moments to cherish: the brazen glory of the RPO brass, the warmth of the phrasing as the strings led into the reprise of the *Andantino*, the wit of the village band passage in the pizzicato scherzo, and the exhilaration of the whole of the finale.

It was there, above all, that the Russian-ness of Ashkenazy blossomed. Would he, after 26 years, "feel like a foreigner," he wondered aloud beforehand. Blinking harder as he started the thrilling coda, plainly staving off tears, he gave the most positive answer. He answered, too, the KGB companion-agent on his 1962 U.S. tour, who accused him of lacking pride in being a Soviet citizen, got him confined to Russia, and prompted his defection. If, as it seemed, that memory still rankled him, it need do so no longer.

— *The London Guardian*
November 1989



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