

Concerto in G minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 33
– Antonin Dvořák

Born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, Bohemia

Died May 1, 1904, in Prague, Czech Republic

This work was first performed on March 24, 1878, by the orchestra of the Prague Provisional Theatre conducted by Adolf Cech with Karel Slavkovsky as soloist. It is scored for piano solo, pairs of woodwinds, horns, and trumpets, with timpani and strings.

Antonin Dvořák's musical career began in 1861, at the age of 20, when he joined the orchestra of Prague's National Theater as a violist. He led a relatively quiet existence until his *Hymnus* for chorus and orchestra created a small stir in 1873. Dvořák lived a life of poverty until Johannes Brahms noticed one of his scores while judging entries for an Austrian composition contest. Sending the manuscript to his own publisher, Simrock, Brahms opened the door for the young Czech composer to gain international attention. Simrock, more interested in selling music than perpetuating the musical arts, called upon Dvořák to compose a set of stylized dances for piano four-hands. Paying a mere pittance for the work, Simrock became quite wealthy from sales of Dvořák's *Moravian Duets* and, later, his *Slavonic Dances*. The *Slavonic Dances* proved to be his first compositional success in 1878, selling wildly in central Europe.

Simrock wanted to sign the young composer to an exclusive contract, but Dvořák, seeing the potential for more wealth than he had ever known, decided to sign – but with multiple publishing houses, collecting “exclusive” royalties from each. It occurred to him that he could further his profits by declaring some of his new works to be from much earlier – before he signed the contracts. Thus, he could negotiate the best fees for the new works, under the ruse that they were not subject to the terms of his various contracts.

Dvořák was a prolific composer, but he composed only three concertos. His concertos for violin and cello are among his most popular works, but his earliest attempt at this genre, the masterful Piano Concerto, is all but unknown. Composed in the late summer of 1876, this is a puzzling work. Compared to Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No. 3, or those by Grieg or Tchaikovsky, all written during the previous five years, Dvořák's work is very different. Where the others are showpieces that pit the soloist in a combative position with the orchestra, Dvořák's concerto finds a comfortable middle ground that allows the soloist ample opportunity to display pianistic abilities, but permits the piano to act as an orchestral instrument at times.

This new approach to concerto composition, also evident in the violin and cello concertos to a lesser degree, was revolutionary, but puzzled many listeners early on. Some critics at the premiere felt that the piano part was not adequately soloistic. This early opinion has plagued the concerto since its premiere, unjustly damaging its reputation. About 1920, during a period when the ill-advised re-arranging of musical masterpieces was in vogue, the Czech pianist Vilém Kurz revised the solo part to make it more bombastic. When the work is published today, both versions of the solo part are included, so performers may choose which version to play.

Dvořák's Piano Concerto opens with a grandiose first movement that is Brahmsian in its dimensions. Hymn-like sounds are heard first, but they grow almost immediately into the full

Romanticism expected in large orchestra pieces of the 1870s. The usual dotted rhythms of concerto opening movements are present, but the customary martial character never takes root. The piano enters after the usual orchestral exposition, but its opening chords do not lead to a straightforward statement of the first theme. More accompanimental at first, the piano soon takes the lead and dominates much of the movement. In the delightfully fragmented development section, Dvořák ventures into the parallel key of G major. This celebratory section begrudgingly returns to G minor and the final measures of the movement display some of the most virtuosic pianism of the concerto.

A tender *andante sostenuto* second movement begins with a lovely horn solo over a string cushion with woodwind commentary. The solo piano soon takes the theme. The middle section presents more energetic material before returning to the music of the opening.

Dvořák's finale is a brilliant rondo with three themes, all of which are combined at the conclusion. The soloist begins the movement with the lively rondo theme, which the orchestra punctuates with great fervor. A series of increasingly ornamented ideas occur, mostly in the piano part. It is in this movement that the usual Czech flavor of Dvořák's music is apparent. The final measures are a luminous tour-de-force for both the soloist and orchestra.

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