

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21

Born: March 1, 1810, in Zelazowa Wola, near Warsaw

Died: October 17, 1849, in Paris

Work composed: 1829

World premiere: March 30, 1830, in Warsaw; Chopin playing the solo part and conducting from the piano

In 1829 **Frédéric Chopin** was a young graduate of the Warsaw Conservatory seeking to establish himself in the musical world. He was talented, ambitious and in love, and all three of these qualities found reflection in his **Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21**. Chopin wrote this composition in the autumn and winter of 1829, and he performed it in Warsaw in the spring of the following year. While known as his Second Piano Concerto, this work pre-dates by about half a year Chopin's Concerto in E minor, Op. 11, which now bears the designation "Piano Concerto No. 1." The two concertos were published in reverse order of their composition, resulting in a misleading impression of their chronology.

Although it is a youthful work, the F-minor Concerto reveals a skilled composer who has already found a distinctive musical voice. Hearing this piece, we can admire the 19-year-old's sure grasp of the concerto form. More impressive, we also detect at this early juncture in his career all the original elements of Chopin's style: the themes that are by turns dreamy and passionate, the yearning melancholy of his harmonies and the brilliant flashes of pianistic ornamentation.

Following the procedure found in the keyboard concertos of Mozart and other Classical-period composers, Chopin begins his work with an orchestral exposition. The first theme conveys that restless agitation so prized by the 19th century Romantics. A second subject, introduced by the woodwinds, provides lyrical contrast. With the entrance of the piano, the orchestra retreats to a supporting role while the solo instrument explores these thematic ideas.

The composer once hinted in a letter that the *Larghetto* second movement was inspired by his love for Constancia Gladkowska, a young singer he had met at the Warsaw Conservatory. Beginning with a long and tender theme that appears after a brief orchestral introduction, this portion of the work builds to a passionate recitative for the soloist over dramatic tremolo figures in the strings.

The third movement juxtaposes a bittersweet waltz melody, punctuated by vigorous orchestral comments, with a contrasting episode featuring the rhythms of Poland's national dance, the mazurka. The distinctly Polish flavor of this section caused Warsaw audiences to hail the concerto as an expression of their nationalist hopes. One review of the work's premiere ventured: "More than once these tones seem to be the happy echo of our native harmony. Chopin knows what sounds are heard in our fields and woods, he has listened to the songs of the Polish villager, he has made it his own ..." A sudden turn to the bright key of F major and a conspicuous horn call then launch the brief coda passage that closes the concerto.

What to Listen For

Chopin is one of the essential voices of 19th century Romanticism in music, and the orchestra establishes an air of Romantic ardor with the first theme of the concerto's opening moment. When the piano takes up this idea, Chopin embellishes it with brilliant pianistic flourishes, a signature trait. Chopin loved Italian opera, and the melody featured in the second movement could almost pass as an aria by Bellini or Donizetti. Dance rhythms pervade the finale.

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