

PETER LIEBERSON
Piano Concerto

New World Records 80325

The Boston Symphony Orchestra
Seiji Ozawa, music director & conductor
Peter Serkin, piano

Peter Lieberson was born in New York City on October 25, 1946; he lives in Newton Center, Massachusetts, and is currently teaching at Harvard. His Piano Concerto is one of twelve works commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra for its centennial in 1981. From the beginning the piano solo part was intended for Peter Serkin, who gave the first performance with Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra on April 21, 1983, in Symphony Hall, Boston.

The youngest of the 12 composers commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra for its centennial, Peter Lieberson grew up in a family where music was ubiquitous. Both his parents were important figures in the artistic world. His father, Goddard Lieberson, himself a trained composer, was perhaps best known as the most influential record-company executive in the artistic world. Peter's mother, under the stage name Vera Zorina, was a ballerina with the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo and later with George Balanchine, before she became known as a specialist in spoken narration.

Through a job at New York's classical music radio station WNCN, Lieberson came to know Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson. But the crucial connection came when Copland invited Milton Babbitt to do a program. Until that time the major influence on Lieberson's music was Stravinsky. Now he began to study informally with Babbitt. At Babbitt's suggestion Lieberson chose Columbia when he decided to pursue graduate studies; there he worked with Charles Wuorinen (the third of his three principal teachers would be Donald Martino, with whom he studied at Brandeis University). During the next few years, he was commissioned and performed by such organizations as Speculum Musicae, the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, and Pierre Boulez with members of the New York Philharmonic in the Perspective Encounters Series, as well as receiving, among other awards, the Charles Ives Fellowship from the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

But a major change was in store, stemming from a sort of "musical claustrophobia" that got in the way of composition. Lieberson encountered Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, which he began studying intensively with the Buddhist meditation master Chogyam Trungpa (Lieberson has now been practicing Buddhism for nearly ten years and teaching it for five; he is currently East coast regional director of the Shambhala training, a meditation program founded by Chogyam Trungpa). At the same time, he stopped composing for a year, and when he came back to music, he found that "the style had changed," influenced by a new sense of perspective and an ability "to wait."

It was Peter Serkin, a long-time friend, who first suggested that Lieberson compose a piano concerto; from the very beginning the work was conceived with the soloist in mind. It is also worth noting that the concerto is Lieberson's first orchestral work and that the Boston Symphony Orchestra has commissioned a second piece from him.

Throughout what Lieberson regards as the "journey" of the Piano Concerto, the character of each movement changes dramatically, though the very tune that unfolds at the opening of the work returns in full just before the end. Each of the three movements takes off from the endpoint of the preceding

one and uses the fundamental tune (or a derivation of it), but each is strikingly different in orchestral color and mood. Each movement reflects in a musical way the composer's "poetic vision" as based on the Buddhist principles of heaven, earth, and man. The single movements are dominated by one or another of these principles, though each also has something of the qualities of the other two--part of the musical interlocking that ties all three movements together

The first movement has an "earthy, solid, rugged expression," beginning in the lowest instruments: bass, contrabass clarinet, tuba, and the bottom end of the piano. Throughout the introduction--and, in fact, in a substantial part of the movement--the soloist is part of the monolithic body of the orchestra; the piano is doubled almost constantly by other instruments. Very low-pitched sounds predominate through the first piano solo. Then begins a new section offering a series of lively interchanges between brass (starting at the first entrance of the trumpets), piano, woodwinds (with flute punctuations), and strings in a songlike style. This gradually climbs higher and higher until reaching a showering cascade of notes down from the upper woodwinds and piano, "like rain," a passage providing just "a scent" of the principal idea of the third movement. These themes are the raw material of the rest of a complex movement, characterized by vigorous energy, a great deal of brass, and the deep percussion sounds of timpani and bass drum.

"The second movement is a scherzo that frames and adagio. I related it in my own mind to the poetic concept of man, a sense of heart." The scherzo proper consists basically of variations on the opening tune of the movement. The *adagio* within the second movement begins with a melody of romantic cast in solo cello, accompanied by four violas. Each of the piano soloist's three solo utterances gets longer and more elaborate, the third connecting to an extended passage for the string ensemble that builds to a quasi-cadenza for the soloist and a varied return of the scherzo, now transformed into something altogether wilder. Like the first movement, the scherzo has its characteristic sonorities, especially in the addition of wooden percussion instruments. The piano takes on an increasingly independent role, alternating with the orchestral mass rather than doubling it. The movement dissolves into a reflection of its opening and dies away on a sustained A in the oboe.

The third movement is a rondo whose main motive is the smallest motive of the first movement, the descending shower of "rain." The movement begins precisely on the sustained A that ended the middle movement, but now spread through the whole string section, divided. This expansion to include all the octaves accessible to an orchestra seems to reflect the fundamental concept of the movement. "Here the music is inspired by 'heaven,' not in the theological sense, but in the Buddhist sense of spaciousness, and room for things to take place." The characteristic sound in this movement is metal--cymbals, glockenspiel, vibraphone, crotales. The piano plays with these instruments and the harp and celesta, interjecting itself abruptly into this world in which aural space seems to be opening up. The earlier movements are recalled before the music moves to a quasi-cadenza for the soloist. An extended coda brings back the descending music, but now transformed into an accompaniment for the principal tune, projected in long notes.

The piano briefly combats the arrival of the final note, F-sharp, the first note heard in the piece, now spread abroad through the orchestral texture, pulsing constantly at different rates. The piano finally yields and joins in with long-sustained low F-sharps. A few instruments add the second note of the tune, G-sharp; and finally crotales, first violins in the highest register, and the soloist add the third pitch, B-flat, to bring the Concerto to its hushed and tranquil conclusion.

---Steven Ledbetter

Steven Ledbetter is program annotator for the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

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Peter Serkin, pianist, has established himself in the broadest repertoire, of solo, chamber, and concerto works. He studied at the Curtis Institute of Music with Lee Levis, Mieczyslaw Horszowski, and his father, Rudolf Serkin. He has continued to study with Mr. Horszowski, Karl Ulrich Schnabel, Marcel Moyse, and the late Ernst Oster. Mr. Serkin has worked closely with such composers as Olivier Messiaen, Toru Takemitsu, and Luciano Berio. He was a founding member of the chamber group Tashi. Mr. Serkin has recorded for Pro Arte, DGG, RCA, Columbia, and Vanguard records.

Seiji Ozawa became the thirteenth music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the fall of 1973. He was born in China in 1935 to Japanese parents, and graduated from the Toho School of Music in Tokyo with prizes in composition and conducting. Mr. Ozawa came to international attention when he won first prize at the conductors' competition at Besancon, France. In 1970 he became artistic director of the Berkshire Music Festival. He has served as music director of the Ravinia Festival, the Toronto Symphony, and the San Francisco Symphony.

Boston Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1881, has numbered Karl Muck, Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitzky, Erich Leinsdorf, William Steinberg, and (currently) Seiji Ozawa among its illustrious music directors. It has championed contemporary music throughout its history, both in performances and recordings. The Boston Symphony with Seiji Ozawa are also heard on 80273: *The Music of Charles Tomlinson Griffes* and 80296: *Roger Sessions, When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, and 80331: *Olly Wilson: Sinfonia/John Harbison: Symphony No. 1*.

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Lalita (Chamber Variations). Speculum Musicae, Robert Black conducting. Bridge BDG 2005.
Bagatelles, Peter Serkin piano New World 80344.

Peter Serkin also performs Lieberon's *Bagatelles* on New World 80344

Peter Lieberon: Piano Concerto

1- First movement 14:00

2- Second movement 11:57

3- Third movement 14:10

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