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About the Cover

by

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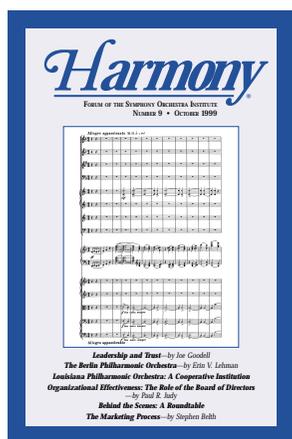
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The score on our cover, Brahms's Second Piano Concerto, in B-flat major—we show the beginning of the “extra,” scherzo-like second movement—launched a unique partnership among conductor, composer, and orchestra. At the first performance, on October 27, 1881, with the Meiningen Orchestra, the composer himself played the piano solo, under the baton of his new champion, Hans von Bülow. We chose this score because in 1886, Bülow became chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, which had been formed four years earlier and is the subject of a case study that appears in this issue.

Bülow is the first important conductor who was not himself a composer. He is the figure on which the conducting tradition turns—from such composer giants as Liszt and Wagner, who took up conducting not just to earn a living, but to promote their new works, to the interpretive specialists who have become the norm in the 20th century.

For six years, from 1880 to 1885, Bülow led the Meiningen Orchestra, known at the time as one of the finest and most disciplined ensembles in the world. Bülow was fiercely demanding of his 48 players, both in rehearsal and in performance. He drilled them daily into an ensemble of nearly inhuman precision (in his famous primer, *On Conducting*, Felix Weingartner wrote that after Meiningen under Bülow, no orchestra could afford to be sloppy). And he insisted that his musicians play from memory—a feat they could not always manage, although by the end of six years they did know most of the standard repertoire by heart.

Bülow was also something of a fanatic and a showman. He regularly lectured his audience and sometimes chastised his critics from the stage, and, apparently with a straight face, he donned black gloves to conduct the Funeral March from the *Eroica* Symphony. He made his musicians play standing, to demonstrate their commitment, and once, to test the commitment of his audience, he played Beethoven's monumental Ninth Symphony *twice* on the same program. (“He baptizes the infidels,” the critic Eduard Hanslick wrote, “with a firehose.”) Some

listeners found his interpretations cold and overly intellectual, but even his detractors marveled at his control over the Meiningen ensemble; Hanslick remarked that Bülow played his orchestra “like a little bell in his hand.”

It was in Meiningen that Bülow and Brahms became friends and colleagues. Bülow had long known Brahms’s music—he was the first pianist, after Brahms himself, to play the composer’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in public. But Bülow had begun his career in the camp of Brahms’s supposed archenemies, Franz Liszt, whose daughter Cosima he married in 1857, and Richard Wagner, whose music he idolized until the composer ran off with Cosima—at once depriving Bülow of both wife and musical hero. Even after Cosima divorced him and married Wagner, Bülow continued to conduct Wagner’s music, although, understandably, he declined to champion his cause.

Shortly after Bülow settled in Meiningen in 1880, he invited Brahms to try out his brand new piano concerto with the orchestra. Their collaboration in preparing that score cemented their friendship and provided Meiningen with one of the most important dates in its rich history. From that point on, Bülow placed his orchestra at Brahms’s disposal as a testing ground for new works. And Bülow began to tour with both Brahms’s piano concertos, sometimes conducting from the keyboard. Bülow called Brahms “the great lion” (to his “little leopard”) and later, linking him with Bach and Beethoven, he coined the term “the three Bs” of music.

Near the end of his Meiningen tenure, Bülow hired the 25-year-old Richard Strauss as his assistant. As a budding conductor, Strauss was deeply influenced by the clarity of Bülow’s exacting and penetrating readings. “Learn to read the score of a Beethoven symphony *accurately*,” Bülow told him, “and you will have found its interpretation.” Bülow, who was famous for conducting both rehearsals and performances from memory, also left his pupil with these famous words: “You must have the score in your head and not your head in the score.”

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.