

Notes on the Program

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Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra, Op. 88a

Max Bruch

Max Bruch was born in 1838, roughly a decade after the passing of Beethoven, Weber, and Schubert, and he died in 1920, three months shy of his 83rd birthday, when Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Bartók were already famous. Their language was foreign to him. Once Bruch achieved fluency in his mainstream, Germanic, mid-19th-century style, he did not evolve greatly. What he composed in 1920 did not differ in its musical fundamentals from what he had written a half-century before, when he was one of a small army of highly accomplished German composers who were largely eclipsed by Brahms and Wagner.

His Concerto for Two Pianos had an awkward history. The work's genesis dates to April 1904, when Bruch was in Capri for a medically enforced vacation. He wrote to his family:

In the evening between eight and nine, a procession in the narrow streets and alleys of Capri. Leading it was a messenger of sadness with a large tuba on which he played a kind of signal.

He then notated a phrase markedly similar to what would open the concerto. "Not bad at all," he continued,

One could make quite a good funeral march out of it! Next came several large flowered crosses, one carried by a hermit from Mount Tiberio. A few hundred children dressed in white and carrying large burning candles, each of them also holding a small black cross. They sang in unison a kind of lamentation.

At that point Bruch began working on his Third Suite for Orchestra (with a prominent organ part), which incorporated those melodies into the first and last of its four movements. In May 1909 the suite was premiered at a Promenade Concert in London, with Henry Wood conducting, but Bruch continued to rewrite the piece through 1915. In the end, he did not publish it. Instead, he re-fashioned it into his Concerto for Two Pianos.

The composer had been approached by a pair of American sisters from Baltimore, Otilie and Rose Sutro, who had studied years earlier at Berlin's Royal Conservatory and had pursued a reasonably successful career as a duo-piano team until a hand injury put Otilie out of commission from 1904 through 1910. They made Bruch's acquaintance during their student years, and

In Short

Born: January 6, 1838, in Cologne, Germany

Died: October 30, 1920, in Friedenau

Work composed: 1915, as a recomposition of his Third Suite for Orchestra, which occupied him from 1904 to 1915

World premiere: December 29, 1916, in Philadelphia, by The Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski, conductor, Rose and Otilie Sutro, soloists

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 30, 1917, Josef Stransky, conductor, Rose and Otilie Sutro, soloists; this marked the New York Premiere, and the Orchestra's only previous performance

Estimated duration: ca. 26 minutes

in 1911 they played his *Fantasia for Two Pianos* (Op. 11) in his presence. Their father was an organist and composer who conducted the Oratorio Society of Baltimore, their mother was an accomplished singer and pianist, and their uncle made a fortune engineering a mining tunnel in Nevada and got elected mayor of San Francisco.

Ottilie and Rose turned out not to be paragons of virtue. They would figure in the history of Bruch's celebrated G-minor

Violin Concerto because near the end of the composer's life they scammed him out of his valuable manuscript of that work. They claimed to sell it on his behalf in the United States, paid him in worthless marks devalued by German inflation, and made a tidy sum for themselves alone when they finally sold it years later.

Bruch based his trust on the fact that they had championed his *Concerto for Two Pianos* a few years earlier, introducing it in 1916

The New York Philharmonic Connection



Rose and Ottilie Sutro, from a 1917 *Musical America* listing

On November 30, 1917, the New York Philharmonic performed the New York Premiere of Bruch's *Concerto for Two Pianos*, with Rose and Ottilie Sutro as soloists. It was only the second time the work had been performed following the World Premiere by The Philadelphia Orchestra a year earlier, also featuring the Sutros. In the intervening time, the sisters, who had already taken liberties with Bruch's composition — even copyrighting it in 1916 — had made some additional revisions and cuts. The 1917 Philharmonic program lists it as a three-movement work, noted as *Andante*, *Andante con moto*, and *Allegro molto vivace*. It would be the first and only Philharmonic performance of the concerto, prior to these concerts, and the last time the Sutro sisters performed it anywhere.

In retrospect, *The New York Times* review of the 1917 concert offers potential clues about the pianists' technical abilities and editing of Bruch's work:

A concerto for the instrument with the accompaniment of orchestra is a strange, if not a fearful, wildfowl. The effect was hardly such as to encourage other composers to follow the footsteps of Max Bruch, apparently a pioneer in this direction. It was thick, and often heavy, sometimes confused, and it went to show that doubling the instrument does not always double the effect. ... The two players toiled over the work to overcome a heavy orchestra handicap, and were rewarded by applause fitting for their exertions.

Here, the Orchestra performs the reconstructed version of Bruch's work, compiled from a score signed by the composer that was found in papers from Ottilie Sutro's estate after her death in 1970 (Rose had died in 1957). Pianist Nathan Twining purchased a box of miscellaneous items from the estate auction for \$11, and discovered what was then an unknown orchestral score. He and pianist Martin Berkofsky performed the first recording of the concerto, with the London Philharmonia Orchestra, in 1974.

in the lofty company of Leopold Stokowski and The Philadelphia Orchestra. What he did not know is that for that premiere, and for a performance with the New York Philharmonic the next year, the Sutros rewrote his piece substantially, altering its structure, changing its orchestration, and simplifying the technical demands to accord with their abilities. Bruch remained unaware of this, since they never played it in Europe; nor did he know that they boldly copyrighted their revision of the piece. In fact, he told an interviewer in Germany, “I will neither permit the work to be performed nor printed here in its form as a piano concerto” — without

clarifying why. Not until after Otilie’s death, in 1970, did materials in her musical estate allow for the reconstruction of the piece in Bruch’s original version.

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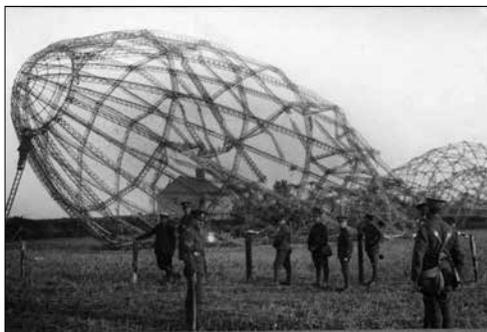
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Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings, in addition to the two pianos.

At the Time

In 1915, as Bruch was completing his Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra, the following events were taking place:

- In the United States, Alexander Graham Bell places the first transcontinental call, from New York to San Francisco; D.W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* is released; Boston Red Sox pitcher Babe Ruth hits his first major league home run, in a game against the New York Yankees at the Polo Grounds.
- In Germany, the first casualty in aerial combat occurs when a German pilot shoots down a plane; as war escalates across Europe, German forces carry out the first large-scale poison gas attack, on Russian troops near Warsaw.
- In England, London is bombed in a German Zeppelin attack; the British Army tests a prototype armored tank.
- In Denmark, women gain the right to vote.



From top: Babe Ruth; remains of a downed Zeppelin warship near Essex, England