

Piano Concerto No. 2 (1997)

Robert Greenberg

Program Note

Throb
Lyres and Smokers
Silver Bullet

Among the great philosophical questions of our time - has life meaning?, the chicken or the egg?, breath mint or candy mint? - surely one of the most profound concerns the nature of the piano. Is it a string instrument or a percussion instrument? Should the piano be treated, like a violin, as an instrument capable of infinite lyricism, delicacy and nuance? Or is the piano but a glorified trap set, eighty-eight drums strong, from which we should milk every pop, bang and twang?

Of course, the piano is both a string and percussion instrument; my Piano Concerto No. 2 seeks to walk the line between sing and slam, pop and purr. The first movement, entitled "Throb", displays both sides of the piano's personality in no uncertain terms: rapid, percussive lines and pounding chords eventually give way to a gentle, lyric piano, smitten as it is by the solo flute. The title - "Throb" - describes the two-note "heartbeat" rhythm on which the movement is built. The second movement, entitled "Lyres and Smokers", begins with a volcanic and passionate piano cadenza. The title is a hackneyed reference to the second movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4, in which the piano ("the lyre of Orpheus") gradually calms and quiets the orchestra ("the beast"). In this movement, the roles are reversed; the mysterious and sustained orchestra must calm and quiet the "beast" in the piano. Ultimately, the orchestra succeeds; the movement concludes with an ethereal and becalmed piano solo. The third movement, entitled "Silver Bullet", is percussive and metallic sounding from the start, featuring as it does three brake drums (literally the metal brake drums from demolished automobiles). In this movement the piano's brilliant, bell-like upper register is exploited in particular, ringing and clangorous tremolos in the piano both compete with and compliment others heard in the orchestra. The action-hero fanfares that emerge in the brass are intended as an orchestral tribute to the piano.

Throughout the first and third movements of the concerto percussion instruments are prevalent, as they seek to seduce the piano to their way of music. They do not succeed. Ultimately, the piano stands apart, a combination of passion, bravura, percussion and song.

Piano Concerto No. 2 was composed between January 1996 and July 1997. It is dedicated, with great affection and respect, to my friend Mack McCray, whose personality and pianism inspired every part of this piece - indeed, a combination of passion, bravura, percussion and song.

