

# A concert in Atlanta: Behzad Ranjbaran's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra

By Kenny Crucial  
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*World premiere of Concerto for Piano and Orchestra by Behzad Ranjbaran, performed by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Robert Spano, June 5, 7 and 8*

Atlanta Symphony Director Robert Spano has programmed the present season to foster a type of cultural understanding that stands as a marked contrast to the militaristic posturing of the American government. In an earlier performance, he presented *On the Transmigration of Souls* by John Adams, which chronicles personal grief in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Then in May, the orchestra played Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, which depicts the loss of a loved one in war.

The world premiere of *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* by Iranian-American composer Behzad Ranjbaran offers further evidence that music provides an opportunity to broaden the audience's perspective and create an atmosphere of openness to the plight of others.

Behzad Ranjbaran was born in Tehran in 1955 and began his musical training in his native Iran. Under the Shah, while still a teenager, he spent a short while in prison. This motivated him to pursue his musical studies at the University of Indiana. He received his doctorate from the Julliard School. In 2005, his string orchestra work *Awakening* was commissioned for a huge peace festival in the demilitarized zone that separates North and South Korea.

Ranjbaran is quite explicit about his inclusion of elements from the music of his native Iran in the concerto. The symphony performance was preceded by a video in which the composer explained how he wanted to express the pomp of Persepolis, the ancient capital of Persia. Dignitaries to the city were entertained by massive celebrations. Ranjbaran has

incorporated monumental horn fanfares propelled by explosive attacks of the drums to assert this triumphant mood.

From the moment that the audience hear Ranjbaran's composition, he explains, it now "belongs to the musicians, [it] belongs to the public."

The magnificence of the horns was very imposing, almost a challenge to the elegance of the piano. The confident phrasing of pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet left no doubt in regard to the composer's intent. In writing the work, Ranjbaran had Thibaudet's skills in mind. His flowing trills and ambitious runs were critical elements in the articulation of the piece. The demanding performance permitted the listener to appreciate an almost competitive quality to the orchestra's boldness. As the drums and horns blared loudly, it seemed almost impossible for the soloist to overcome the sheer force of the sound. Thibaudet mustered the assertive gestures of traditional concerti in meeting this challenge. In so doing, he seemed to assault the keys. But his style was always precise.

As such, Ranjbaran played out his own psychological drama. The dominant images from Persia first seemed to overshadow the subtle complexities of a European art. Thibaudet would consistently send up a barrage of technical mastery in an effort to declare his independence. In a truly modern fashion, his phrases were met by a level of frustration as he attempted to discover the piano's voice. Musical themes were halted in the middle. Melodies were broken up before they were allowed to flow. However, Thibaudet never wavered in his presentation. He communicated the psychological musing of Ranjbaran while making clear the authority of each foray.

A series of cymbal crashes further punctuated the onrush of the horns. All the while, the piano still found

its assertions interrupted. Eventually, the piano used the breaks to create its own sense of space. Within that development the marimba provided further depth to the percussive statements. The more extended piano lines found their reply in the strings. The string progressions echoed Persian scales. This change prepared the way for the *Concerto's* second movement. It assumed the form of a chamber work to suggest the Persian court. Eventually, the tension of the first movement is complemented by the interplay between piano and harp to suggest a transcendent resolution.

In Ken Melzer's program notes, he describes the *Daf*, a large Persian framed drum. "In Iran, Daf is often used in outdoor festivities and weddings." In the final movement of the *Concerto*, the *Daf* was featured prominently. The majesty of the horns emerged once again. Thibaudet was ready with an arsenal of chordal attacks. There was an element of profound dissonance that seemed to expound on the elements of the Persian scale. In the dramatic finale, piano and orchestra exploded together. There was a blending of the different traditions. But Behzad Ranjbaran maintained the independence of the different voices.

Perhaps taking a cue from American composer Aaron Copland, Ranjbaran offers the audience the means to recognize the cultural promise of music in a very immediate way. He insists on the Persian voice as an important component of the American and global landscape. This is a far cry from the demagogic pronouncements of US politicians. It is harder to fall for war propaganda when we see the humanity of other cultures.

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