

WALKER: *Lyric for Strings*

Notes on the Program

By Noel Morris ©2021

Getting concerts for me ... would be an uphill battle," recalled George Walker.

The New York Times printed that quote on August 27, 2018. It was Walker's obituary; he had died at the age of 96. But what a remarkable life.

Walker was born in 1922, and began taking piano lessons at the age of five. Soon, he was accompanying his mother as she sang from a book of folksongs. Young George graduated high school at the age of fourteen and won a piano scholarship to attend the Oberlin Conservatory. After graduating Oberlin, he attended the Curtis Institute, graduating with the highest honors in his class. From there, he had a smattering of successes as a pianist, but never the big career—in spite of signing with the National Concert Artists agency in 1950.

"From the outset they explained that getting concerts for me—a black pianist playing classical music—would be an uphill battle," he said. " 'We can't sell you,' they told me."

In an ideal world, a composer would be remembered for the quality of his or her music, but it was George Walker's fate to be the first at a lot of things: the first Black person to be signed by a major artist manager, the first to earn a doctoral degree from the Eastman School of Music, the first to play a recital at New York's Town Hall, and in 1996, the first to earn the Pulitzer Prize for Music. What had started as a frustrated career in piano evolved into a brilliant career as a composer—and as a breaker of glass ceilings.

He wrote music for many orchestras across the United States, and was presented with numerous awards and honors, including a Fulbright Fellowship, two Guggenheim and two Rockefeller Fellowships. In 1999, he was elected to the Academy of American Arts and Letters.

Walker's *Lyric for Strings* is an early work, written in 1946 while he was still at Curtis. Originally, the music was to be the slow movement of his First String Quartet. Titled "Lament," he dedicated the piece to the memory of his grandmother, who had died the year before. He then scored the movement for string orchestra, calling it *Lyric for Strings*. It continues to be one of his most popular works.

WALKER: *Lyric for Strings*

First ASO Performance: **JUN 22, 1983** | William Fred Scott, conductor

Most Recent ASO Performance: **JAN 25, 2016** | Joseph Young, conductor

Instrumentation: **String orchestra**

SHOSTAKOVICH: Chamber Symphony

On January 26, 1936, Joseph Stalin attended a wildly popular opera called *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. It was written by the darling of Soviet music, the 29-year-old Dmitri Shostakovich. So popular was the opera, three productions ran simultaneously in Moscow, alone. And then the bottom dropped out; Stalin walked out mid-performance.

Days later, the state-run newspaper published a blistering article about Shostakovich titled "Muddle Instead of Music." Overnight, conductors dropped him from their programs; colleagues stopped speaking to him, and he was declared an "enemy of the people." Of course, he was not the only man to run afoul of Soviet leadership.

The assassination of Sergey Kirov in 1934 set off a series of events that led to a murderous rampage, purges of various groups including Party leaders, the Red Army, landowners, scientists, academics, and entertainers. Soviet art came under new guidelines: art must be optimistic and life-affirming. Composers must favor traditional forms and avoid experimentation (which was considered corrupt and bourgeois).

And so it was, in 1937, that bloodiest year, Shostakovich got himself out of hot water by writing his triumphal Fifth Symphony with the subtitle "An Artist's Creative Response to Just Criticism." After the first performance, crowds cheered the "rehabilitated" composer, and he more or less got his life back.

In 1960, fifteen years after the close of WWII, the composer traveled to Dresden to write music for a documentary film and was overwhelmed by what he saw. Still deeply scarred by allied bombs, Dresden called up past traumas for Shostakovich, and he found himself unable to write film music. Instead, he sat down and sketched out his 8th String Quartet, finishing it in just three days.

Packed with autobiographical elements, the Quartet included references to a number of his works, including an aria from *Lady MacBeth of the Mtsensk District*. There is a reference to a prisoner's work song, which every Russian would recognize. And even more personal, he infused the piece with his own initials—German publishers had spelled his name "Schostakowitsch," which inspired him to create a musical monogram, D-S-C-H. (In German, the notes of the scale have different names than in English: D, Es, C, H translates to D, E-flat, C, B-natural.)

Harkening back to Stalin's Russia, an explosive 3-note motif—tah-tah-tah—is said to mimic the late-night rap at the door, when people were yanked from their beds and relegated to oblivion.

Shostakovich publicly dedicated his new quartet "to the victims of fascism and war," although in a letter to a friend, he confessed he thought of the piece as his own memorial.

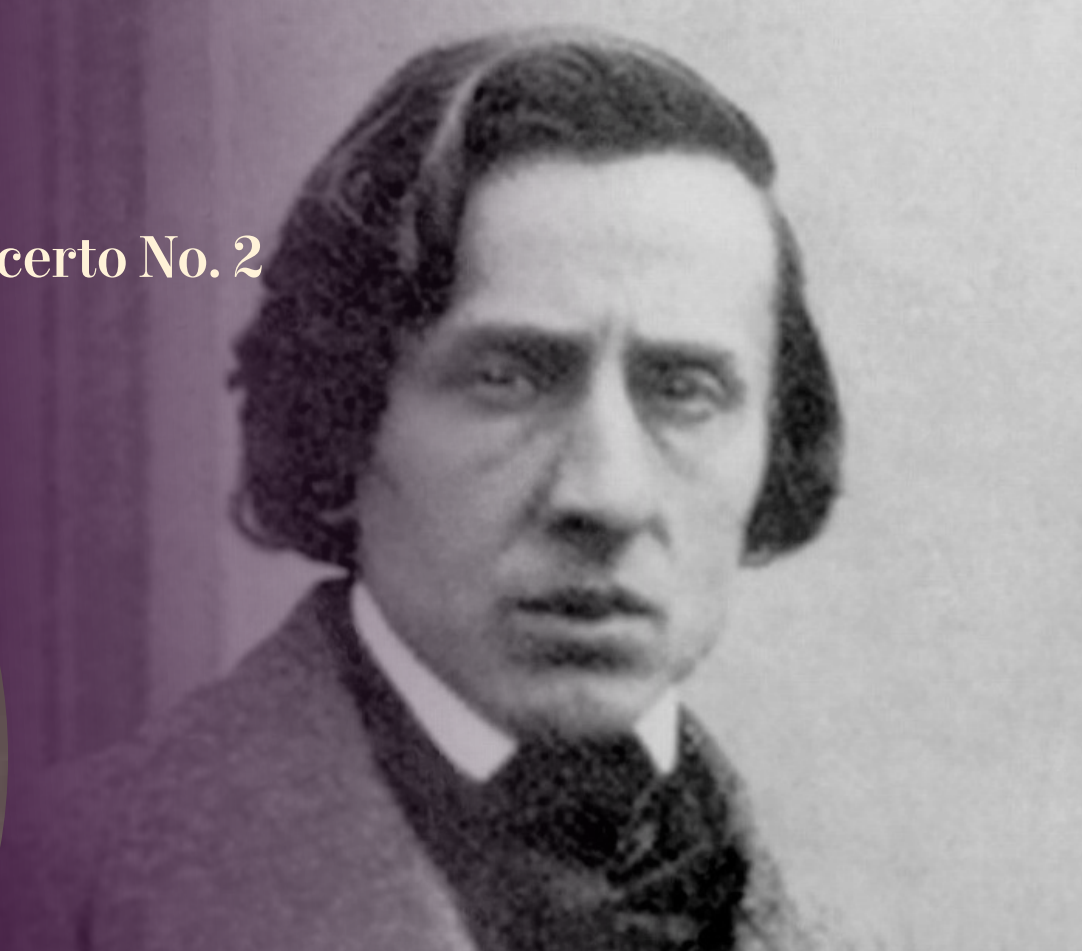
The orchestration of the String Quartet No. 8 was made by Rudolf Barshai, who first met the composer while still a student at the Moscow Conservatory.

Shostakovich: Chamber Symphony

This is an ASO premiere.

Instrumentation: **String orchestra**

CHOPIN: Piano Concerto No. 2



She liked to smoke cigars. She wore men's clothes—defying a police order. By all accounts, the French novelist George Sand (née Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin) was a ball of fire. It's hard to picture her as the lover of the very private and sickly Frédéric Chopin.

A native of Warsaw, Chopin grew up in a musical family. He was eight years old when a literary journal declared him a genius—both as a pianist and a composer. But his world was not the concert hall. He was a hero of the cultural and political elite, performing in private homes. And it was just this sort of intimate musical encounter that would define his substantial and groundbreaking output for the piano alone. It's estimated that over his lifetime, Chopin only gave some thirty public performances. Suffering from tuberculosis, it's possible he didn't have the energy for public life.

When he moved to Paris, he brought with him a giant reputation and soon became friends with the luminaries such as Victor Hugo, Eugene Delacroix, Hector Berlioz and Franz Liszt.

By definition, a piano concerto is a public piece. It calls for a bigger ensemble, a bigger stage and, generally speaking, a bigger audience. The Second Concerto is actually the first of his two piano concertos. Completed when he was just twenty years old, it served as his 1830 public debut in Warsaw, and as his intro to the Parisians in 1832.

The French welcomed Chopin with open arms, but he remained elusive and enigmatic. On a trip to Spain with Georges Sand in 1838, he nearly died.

"While at death's door from illness, on Majorca, he composed music that brings paradise to mind," wrote Sand. "Yet I have become so used to seeing him in the clouds that I have the impression that his life and death mean nothing to him. He himself is not very well aware on what planet he is living."

Atlanta
Symphony
Orchestra 

CHOPIN: Piano Concerto No. 2

First ASO Performance: **OCT 23, 1969** | Robert Shaw, conductor | Eugene Istomin, piano

Most Recent ASO Performance: **MAR 14, 2015** | John Storgårds, conductor | Ingrid Fliter, piano

Instrumentation: **2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, timpani, strings**