Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 36 (1992)
Lowell Liebermann
Note by Anna Reguero

Lowell Liebermann is an American composer and pianist, born in New York City in 1961. Prior to earning bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees at the Juilliard School, where he worked with composers David Diamond and Vincent Persichetti, he studied for a year at Stony Brook University. He has since has become one of the country's foremost composers. He has held a composer-in-residence spot with the Dallas Symphony, was presented with the first American Composers' Invitational Award for the Van Cliburn Competition, and has won numerous prestigious composition awards. He currently serves on the faculty at the Mannes School of Music in New York City.

The Piano Concerto No. 2 is representative of Liebermann's style: sweeping melodies, technical flare, and an embrace of traditional harmony. Bits of Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, and Bartok can be traced in passing, but rather than resulting in direct quotation, they are assimilated into Liebermann's personal voice. Both haunting and thrilling, his Piano Concerto No. 2 could find a home as easily in a sci-fi flick as in a concert hall. It has been one of the few modern concertos to have a substantial shelf life past its premiere; the work has reached concert halls around the world, surely in part due to the Grammy Award it won in 1998 for Best Contemporary Composition with MacArthur "Genius" Grant recipient Stephen Hough as the soloist, for whom the piece was written.

Yet for all of Liebermann's accessibility, he's often criticized for being a traditionalist. His music highlights a central debate in composition today: Can tonality still be innovative? One might question why Liebermann relies on well-worn sounds when such a diversity of techniques is acceptable and composers today are afforded with such freedom. His concerto provides a suitable answer.

While Liebermann's second piano concerto might be reminiscent of works of the past at its surface, its inner workings are much more modern than our ears might let on. The entire work is based on a 12-tone row (a numerical ordering of the 12 pitches of a chromatic scale). Though the piece isn't 12-tone in a strict sense, the row provides the basic melodic and harmonic material for the work. The row's smaller intervals reveal instances of diatonic half-steps, which are immediately recognizable in the opening notes of the first movement's main melody. Major and minor thirds in the row provide fodder for dramatic opposition within the harmony. And a four-movement structure (which diverts from the traditional three-movement form for classical concertos) allows Liebermann to pursue many variants of his original material, audibly disclosed to the listener.

The first movement starts off with a shimmering piano figure over the opening melody. After a majestic arrival of the pianist and orchestra, a dreamy second theme appears that unsettles with conflicting rhythmic groupings in the pianist's right and left hands. A fugal section declares material derived from the opening melody to build up tension. The movement is interrupted throughout by mini-cadenzas for the piano. A final, extended cadenza quiets down before an exciting race to the finish. The second movement is a lively scherzo that opens with frisky grace notes, eventually revealing a melody that is simply the first movement theme inverted (flipped upside down). The movement's circus-like character is a constant back-and-forth between soloist and orchestra. The concerto's third movement opens with a strange stillness and quiet music box quality. Following a brass statement, the movement launches into a theme

and twelve variations, which cycles the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale in the order of the 12-tone row that grounds the work. The final movement takes flight using material gathered from all the previous movements, rounding up the concerto in an exhilarating fashion.

Liebermann's concerto may include qualities reminiscent of past musical styles, but the composer maintains originality in the work's underlying construction and his keen sense for combining aural fantasy with harmonic complexity.