

was responsible for bringing the Beethoven, Brahms, and Mendelssohn violin concertos into the orchestral fold. None was more dear to him than the Bruch, however, which he called "the richest, the most seductive" of the lot.

Max Bruch was already a respected composer as a youth. By age 20, he was teaching in Cologne and had written and produced his first opera. But somehow, Bruch was almost too much of his day, not quirky enough to be remembered and not enough of a revolutionary or bad boy to become notorious. Today, he's known almost exclusively for the Violin Concerto, though his Kol Nidrei, for cello and orchestra, and his Scottish Fantasy, for violin and orchestra, are still performed with some regularity.

Bruch is known for his love of folk music, and this work displays that affinity from the opening moments. The Vorspiel (Prelude) begins as the violin intones a passionate and earthy lament. This sets the stage for an only slightly more robust Allegro moderato, but also prepares us for the longing of the Adagio to come. This all-too-short first movement is compelling, filled with melancholy and impassioned melodies set against a rich orchestral background that only enriches the soloist's mournful utterances. (The first movement is so short in fact, that Bruch himself thought the designation of "concerto" might be misleading.)

With a nod to the Vorspiel, Bruch's first movement yields to the luxurious Adagio, which is as rich and seductive as any in the genre. The violin spins out mournful tunes, adding to the luscious lamentations of the first movement. The Finale is a gypsy romp, a virtuosic display of technical bravado that perfectly balances the Concerto, and also displays keen emotional intensity. It is just this balance of approachability, quirkiness, bravado, and passion that have ensured this work its continued place in the repertory.

# BRAHMS / BRUCH VIOLIN CONCERTOS

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THE CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA, AMSTERDAM

Eduard van Beinum / Bernard Haitink



Brahms was a great pianist, but he would never have wanted to be identified with the armies of piano virtuosos who toured Europe and composed flashy variations on tunes from Mozart's and Verdi's operas. His two piano concertos are stern and serious works, and when it came to writing a violin concerto his model was unquestionably going to be Beethoven, not Paganini. He made that doubly plain by choosing Beethoven's key, D major, and by following Beethoven's precedent with a long, lyrical first movement in full classical sonata form.

Perhaps we should be surprised that he composed a violin concerto at all. Joseph Joachim, for whom it was written, was the first important musician he met when he left his Hamburg home at the age of 20 to seek fame and fortune. Joachim, almost the same age, was already an international star at that time, and the two struck up a firm friendship that lasted over 40 years. In composing a concerto for Joachim 25 years after their first meeting, Brahms worked closely with him in fashioning the solo part; he clearly intended the Concerto to be a test of the player's technique and musicianship and to be free of any suspicion of unmotivated display. Display itself is, of course perfectly legitimate, in fact desirable, in a concerto, so it remains for us only to judge whether the soloist's leaps, arpeggios, double stops, and passage-work are intrinsic to the work or not. The earliest critics were in some doubt, although the violin writing now strikes us as a model of good taste and sensitive musicianship. Others, such as the great Spanish virtuoso Sarasate, felt it had no tunes. "Would I stand there," he said, "violin in hand, while the oboe plays the only melody in the whole work?"

The Concerto was first performed in Leipzig on New Year's Day 1879 by Joachim, the dedicatee, who composed the cadenza that is still played by

many violinists today. Never fond of waste, Brahms presents his first movement's main theme as a bare unison at the very start of the work, based on a D-major triad. Eight measures later the oboe offers something nearer to a scale; eight measures further on the full orchestra dwells on leaping octaves. Gradually the thematic material finds its place, some presented by the orchestra, more provided by the soloist after he has flexed his muscles (46 measures of – yes – display). Eventually we reach a gloriously lyrical second subject, which seems to express the very soul of the violin. The finest moment is reserved for the coda, after the cadenza, when the soloist soars higher and higher in dreamy flight before a final resumption of the main tempo.

The slow movement, in F major, opens with a long theme for the oboe with wind accompaniment. When the soloist takes it up, the strings accompany, and the textures and harmonies become gradually more adventurous, only brought back to earth for the return of the main theme and the main key.

The finale's boisterous lilt is a tribute to Joachim's Hungarian birth. But as in Joachim himself, who never returned to Hungary or sympathized with its nationalist causes, other themes of a quite un-Hungarian character intervene, including a dynamic rising scale in octaves and a beautifully lyrical episode where the meter changes briefly from a stamping 2/4 to a gentle 3/4. The final switch to a 6/8 pulse with heavy off-beats is one of Brahms' stranger inventions, and the dying decline of the last few bars is stranger still.

Max Bruch's first Violin Concerto joined the repertory thanks to many factors. It has soaring melodies, lush and passionate orchestral writing, and devilishly difficult virtuoso passages for the violin. More important, however, was the work's acclaimed champion, Joseph Joachim. In addition to Bruch's Concerto, Joachim

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### **Brahms Violin Concerto In D Major Op. 77**

- 1 Allegro Non Troppo Cadenza - Joachim
- 2 Adagio
- 3 Allegro Giocoso, Ma Non Troppo Vivace - Poco Più Presto

### **Bruch Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor Op. 26**

- 4 Prelude (Allegro Moderato)
- 5 Adagio (Adagio)
- 6 Finale (Allegro Energico - Stringendo Poco A Poco - Presto)

Brahms Recorded by Philips 1958  
Bruch Recorded by Philips 1964



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