

David Oistrakh is considered the premiere violinist of mid-20th century Soviet Union. His recorded legacy includes nearly the entire standard violin repertory up to and including Prokofiev and Bartók. Oistrakh's violin studies began in 1913 with famed teacher Pyotr Stolyarsky. Later he officially joined Stolyarsky's class at the Odessa Conservatory, graduating in 1926 by playing Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto. Performances of the Glazunov concerto in Odessa and Kiev in 1927, and a 1928 debut in Leningrad (Tchaikovsky concerto), gave Oistrakh the confidence to move to Moscow. He made his premiere there in early 1929, but the event went largely unnoticed. In 1934, however, after several years of patiently refining his craft, Oistrakh was invited to join the Moscow Conservatory, eventually rising to the rank of full professor in 1939.

Meanwhile, Oistrakh was gaining success on the competition circuit, winning the 1930 All-Ukrainian contest, and the All-Soviet competition three years later. In 1935 he took second prize at the Wieniawski competition. In 1937 the Soviet government sent the now veteran violinist to Brussels to compete in the International Ysaÿe Competition, where he took home first prize.

With his victory in Brussels, Soviet composers began to take notice of their young compatriot, enabling Oistrakh to work closely with Myaskovsky and Khachaturian on their concertos in 1939 and 1940, respectively. In addition, his close friendship with Shostakovich led the composer to write two concertos for the instrument (the first of which Oistrakh played at his, and its, triumphant American premiere in 1955). During the 1940s Oistrakh's active performing schedule took him across the Soviet Union but his international career had to wait until the 1950s, when the political climate had cooled enough for Soviet artists to be welcomed in the capitals of the West.

The remaining decades of Oistrakh's life were devoted to maintaining the highest possible standards of excellence throughout an exhausting touring schedule (he returned to the U.S. six times in the 1960s), and he began a small but successful sideline career as an orchestral conductor. His death came suddenly in Amsterdam in 1974, during a cycle of Brahms concerts in which he both played and conducted. Oistrakh's unexpected death left a void in the Soviet musical world which was never really filled.

Throughout his career David Oistrakh was known for his honest, warm personality; he developed close friendships with many of the leading musicians of the day. His violin technique was virtually flawless, though he never allowed purely physical matters to dominate his musical performances. He always demanded of himself (and his students) that musical proficiency, intelligence, and emotion be in balance, regardless of the particular style. Oistrakh felt that a violinist's essence was communicated through clever and subtle use of the bow, and not through overly expressive use of vibrato. To this end he developed a remarkably relaxed, flexible right arm technique, capable of producing the most delicate expressive nuances, but equally capable of generating great volume and projection.

As a teacher, David Oistrakh maintained that a teacher should do no more than necessary to help guide the student toward his or her own solutions to technical and interpretive difficulties. He rarely played during lessons, fearing that he might distract the student from developing a more individual approach, and even encouraged his students to challenge his interpretations. Perhaps the best evidence of the Oistrakh's gift for teaching is that he felt that he gained as much from the teaching experience as his students did.

DAVID OISTRAKH plays violin concertos by STRAVINSKY and MOZART



Stravinsky composed the Violin Concerto (1931) at the instigation of his friend Willy Strecker, head of the music publishing house of Schotts Söhne in Mainz. Strecker and the young Russian-American violinist Samuel Dushkin approached the composer about the possibility of writing a concerto for Dushkin. Stravinsky, himself a pianist, hesitated, realizing that although he had featured the violin prominently in works like *L'histoire du soldat* (1918), it was an altogether different matter to write an extended solo work for the instrument.

Stravinsky consulted Paul Hindemith, whom he knew to be a superb string player, and asked him if he thought his lack of knowledge of violin technique would be obvious in the work. Stravinsky later noted: "Not only did he allay my doubts, but he went further and told me that it would be a very good thing, as it would make me avoid a routine technique, and would give rise to ideas which would not be suggested by the familiar movement of the fingers." Additionally, "Willy Strecker allayed my doubts by assuring me that Dushkin would place himself entirely at my disposal in order to furnish any technical details which I might require. Under such conditions the plan was very alluring."

Stravinsky then began a close collaboration with Dushkin on the solo part. Dushkin's memoirs reveal that he was quite an active partner in this endeavor. When asked about working with the young virtuoso, Stravinsky said: "When I show Sam a new passage, he is deeply moved, very excited -- then a few days later he asks me to make changes." Of course, the ultimate creative decisions rested with the composer. For example, when Dushkin argued for the retention of a particularly virtuosic passage, Stravinsky said: "You remind me of a salesman at the Galeries Lafayette. You say, 'Isn't this brilliant, isn't this exquisite, look at the beautiful colours, everybody's wearing it.' I say, 'Yes, it is brilliant, it is beautiful, everyone is wearing it -- I don't want it.'"

Dushkin recalled the genesis of the sonority -- a wide-spanning D - E - A chord -- which begins each movement of the concerto: "During the winter [1930-1931], I saw Stravinsky in Paris quite often. One day when we were lunching in a restaurant, Stravinsky took out a piece of paper and wrote down this chord and asked me if it

could be played. I had never seen a chord with such an enormous stretch, from the E to the top A, and I said 'No'. Stravinsky said sadly 'What a pity.' After I got home, I tried it, and, to my astonishment, I found that in that register, the stretch of the 11th was relatively easy to play, and the sound fascinated me. I telephoned Stravinsky at once to tell him that it could be done. When the concerto was finished, more than six months later, I understood his disappointment when I first said 'No'. This chord, in a different dress, begins each of the four movements. Stravinsky himself calls it his 'passport' to that concerto."

Although Stravinsky insisted that his Violin Concerto was not modeled after those of Mozart, Beethoven, or Brahms, he did acknowledge that "the subtitles of my concerto -- Toccata, Aria, Capriccio -- may suggest Bach, and so, in a superficial way, might the musical substance. I am very fond of the Bach Concerto for Two Violins, as the duet of the soloist with a violin from the orchestra in the last movement of my own concerto may show." The premiere of the concerto took place on October 23, 1931, in Berlin, with Dushkin as soloist and Stravinsky conducting the Berlin Rundfunk Orchestra.

The Köchel numbers of Mozart's five official violin concertos (there exist sixth and seventh concertos that are surely by others' hands) suggest that they were all composed essentially as a group. While this is doubtless true of the last four, from the year 1775, it now seems very likely that this first violin concerto was actually a preparatory essay written in 1773. It was among the first concertos Mozart composed, which would account for the work's comparative lack of maturity. The mood of this concerto is joyous. It is rather simple in form, with good melodies. But those listeners alert to the usual subtlety of Mozart will notice, for instance, that the accompaniment to the violin's first melody in the concerto is really quite monotonous. The work is not very frequently performed in concert.

*DAVID OISTRAKH plays violin concertos by
STRAVINSKY and MOZART*

Stravinsky Violin Concerto In D

- 1. Toccata 5:34**
- 2. Aria I 4:15**
- 3. Aria II 4:51**
- 4. Capriccio 6:07**

Mozart Violin Concerto No. 1 In B Flat KV 207

- 5. Allegro Moderato 7:51**
- 6. Adagio 7:59**
- 7. Presto 6:05**

Recorded in France 1963 by Philips Records



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