

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26

Max Bruch

It would not be quite accurate to label Max Bruch a one-work wonder, but his G-minor Violin Concerto does account for almost all of his exposure in modern concert life. Two of his other pieces for solo instrument with orchestra occasionally appear on programs: the *Kol Nidrei* for cello and the *Scottish Fantasy* for violin. In fact, Bruch wrote quite a few pieces for violin and orchestra, including two further full-fledged violin concertos. In addition, one might do well to revisit his three symphonies, as well as his splendid chamber works and choral compositions. Nevertheless, if his production were reduced to the single work performed in this concert, his reputation would change hardly at all.

His First Violin Concerto is a relatively early piece, begun tentatively in 1857, but mostly composed between 1864 and 1866, while Bruch was music director at the court in Coblenz. It was premiered in April 1866, with Otto von Königs-
low as soloist, but Bruch immediately decided to rework it. He sent the score to the more eminent violinist Joseph Joachim, who responded that he found the piece “very violinistic” but also offered a lot of specific advice pertaining to both the solo and the orchestral parts.

Bruch adopted many of Joachim’s sugges-
tions, and the two

soon tried out the piece in a private orchestral reading. Further emendation ensued, and the concerto was unveiled in its definitive form in Bremen in January 1868. Some years later Bruch wrote to his publisher:

Between 1864 and 1868 I rewrote my concerto at least a half dozen times, and conferred with *x* violinists before it took the final form in which it is universally famous and played everywhere.

He may have been exaggerating, but not by much. Word started to circulate about the new concerto, and it soon made its way into the repertoires of other leading violinists of the day, including Ferdinand David (who had premiered Mendelssohn’s E-minor Violin Concerto), Henri Vieuxtemps, and Leopold Auer, who not only performed the work himself but also championed it among some of his students, such as Mischa Elman, Efrem Zimbalist, and Jascha Heifetz.

The correspondence between Bruch and Joachim during the revisions makes interesting reading. Bruch expressed insecurity about calling the piece a concerto at all, and toyed

In Short

Born: January 6, 1838, in Cologne, then in the Kingdom of Prussia

Died: October 2, 1920, in Friedenau, outside of Berlin

Work composed: 1864–66, drawing on material produced as early as 1857; revised in 1867

World premiere: April 24, 1866, in Coblenz, the composer conducting, Otto von Königs-
low, soloist; in its revised version, on January 5, 1868, in Bremen, Karl Martin Rheinthal-
er, conductor, Joseph Joachim, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 3, 1872, Carl Bergmann, conductor,
Pablo de Sarasate, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 14, 2009, Lorin
Maazel, conductor, Glenn Dicterow, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 25 minutes

with naming it a “fantasy” instead. “As to your doubts,” responded Joachim,

I am happy to say that I find the title ‘concerto’ fully justified; for the name ‘fantasy,’

the last two movements are actually too completely and symmetrically developed.

In truth, the first movement is far from orthodox in the context of 19th-century

Bad Business

Although Bruch’s G-minor Violin Concerto quickly became a concert-hall staple, its composer profited little from it financially, as he had sold it to a publisher for a flat fee with no provision for royalties. Bruch lived to the age of 82, and near the end of his life, after German currency had been eroded in the aftermath of World War I, he decided to raise some much-needed funds by selling the concerto’s manuscript, which, fortunately, he had kept. In April 1920 he gave the manuscript to a pair of American sisters, the Misses Sutro, who were supposed to sell it in the United States and send Bruch the proceeds. Fifty years later, Bruch’s son Ewald recalled what happened:

I was rather skeptical about the matter, but my father reassured me: “My boy, soon I shall be free of all worries when the first dollars arrive.” The unsuspecting man just smiled. My father sustained this good faith until his death in October 1920. He had neither received the promised dollars, nor had he seen the score of his G-minor Concerto again.

In December 1920 my brother, sister, and I received the ostensible proceeds from the score: we were paid out in worthless German paper money. Where from, we could not find out – some bank somewhere paid us the worthless money. For years experts tried to find out the whereabouts of the score in America,

but in vain. The Sutro sisters abruptly rejected every request for information, and hindered any enquiries. About twelve years ago [i.e., ca. 1958] I received the address, through friends, of a German-American music publisher who apparently knew the current owner of the manuscript. He replied politely that a short while before it had been sold through him, and the present owner had sworn him to silence regarding his possession of the score. The Sutro sisters are no longer alive. They took the secret of this outrageous deception, the victim of which was my poor father, with them to the grave.

Ewald Bruch was correct about the Sutro sisters’ dishonest dealings, but he did not know that the manuscript had in fact resurfaced just shortly before he penned his account. The Sutro sisters had sold the manuscript in 1949, and it ended up in the distinguished collection of Mary Flagler Cary. Upon her death in 1967, the manuscript was donated with the rest of her collection to The Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, where it has resided ever since.

Concert.
I. Vorspiel.
Allegro moderato. Max Bruch, Op. 26.

2 Flöten.
2 Oboen.
2 Clarinetten in B.
2 Fagotte.
2 Hörner in Es. (I. II.)
2 Hörner in B. (III. IV.)
2 Trompeten in D.
Pauken in G. D.
Violine principale
Violine 1.
Violine 2.
Bratsche.
Violoncello.
Contrabass.

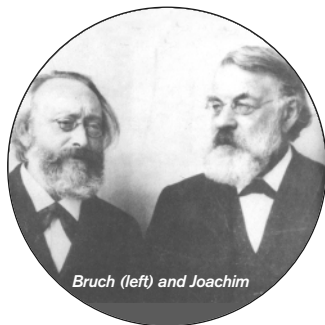
Allegro moderato.

A page from the score of Bruch’s Violin Concerto

concertos. It opens with a solemn prelude, in which the soloist, playing in a somewhat improvisational style, alternates with the orchestra. Then the movement proceeds in more or less “proper” sonata-form fashion until the point where one would expect the development section to begin. But there the movement elides without a break into the hushed, rapturous slow movement.

Bruch's G-minor Concerto helps fill in a curious gap in our understanding of 19th-century Germanic music, which stresses A-list composers at the total expense of lesser masters. (What have you heard recently by Hermann Goetz, Otto Nicolai, or Ferdinand Hiller, for example?) Bruch was inherently conservative, so it was his fate to remain in the shadow of Brahms, who was five years his elder. Brahms was surely the greater composer, but Bruch was often inspired and, frankly, original. If one were to note the similarity between the openings of the third movements of Bruch's G-minor and Brahms's D-major violin concertos, one should remember that Bruch's preceded Brahms's by a decade. When Joachim was asked to characterize the four most famous German concertos in his repertoire – by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch, and Brahms (which he premiered) – he insisted that Bruch's was “the richest and the most seductive.”

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.



Bruch (left) and Joachim

Correspondence and Creation

When revising his Violin Concerto, Max Bruch consulted the eminent violinist Joseph Joachim, with whom he shared mutual respect and collegiality. Below are excerpts from their correspondence.

Joachim to Bruch, August 17, 1866:

As a whole the piece is very violinistic and, as such, I believe it will make a splendid effect.

Bruch to Joachim, September 26, 1866:

Nothing makes me happier or more comforted than the certainty that you are prepared, after carefully and sincerely looking through it, to take an interest in it. I have now renewed work on it with fresh enthusiasm, and have gratefully used your good suggestions.

Bruch to Johannes Joachim (son of the violinist, who died in 1907), on possibly publishing the Joachim/Bruch correspondence, March 17, 1912:

I have always considered it fully satisfactory, that regarding the first Concerto, Joachim's beautiful, interesting, and useful letter of August 1866 would be published; what I used from it, anyone wishing to take up the matter can see easily and clearly enough by comparing this letter with the printed work.

— The Editors