

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Concerto in D major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 77

Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms was the chief acolyte of the conservative stream of 19th-century Romanticism. As a young composer, he sought out the composer and critic Robert Schumann, who was hugely impressed by the young man's talent. On October 28, 1853, Schumann published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, a musical magazine he had founded, an effusive article that acclaimed Brahms as, "destined to give ideal presentation to the highest expression of the time, ... springing forth like Minerva fully armed from the head of Jove."

Brahms fulfilled Schumann's prophecy and became the figure who most adapted the models of Beethoven to the evolving aesthetics of the mid- to late-19th century. He did not achieve this without considerable struggle. He was reluctant to sign off on works in the genres that invited direct comparison to Beethoven, most especially in the case of string quartets and symphonies. He did, however, manage to bring his First Piano Concerto to completion in 1858. Between 1878 and 1881 he followed up with his Second Piano Concerto — a serene, warmhearted work in comparison to the tumultuous Romanticism of the First — and at about the same time he also set to work on his transcendent Violin Concerto.

As a pianist Brahms had worked as an accompanist to violinists since the earliest years of his career, and he had the good fortune to number among his closest friends Joseph Joachim, one of the most eminent string players of the time. It was Joachim who had championed Beethoven's Violin Concerto to a degree that lifted it in musical

prestige from a perceived footnote in that composer's catalogue to a repertoire masterpiece. He would introduce such important works as Schumann's *Phantasie* for Violin and Orchestra (1854) and Violin Concerto (though the latter only in private performances beginning in 1855), and the final version of Max Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 (in 1868), as well as Brahms's Violin Concerto and Double Concerto for Violin and Cello.

Joachim's presence looms large in the case of Brahms's Violin Concerto, as the composer consulted with him very closely while writing the piece, and there is no question that his influence on the final state of the violin part, and on the work's orchestration overall,

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: summer and early fall 1878, revised slightly the following winter; dedicated to Joseph Joachim

World premiere: January 1, 1879, in Leipzig, by the Gewandhaus Orchestra, the composer as conductor, Joseph Joachim, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 13, 1891, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), Adolph Brodsky, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 14, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Lisa Batiashvili, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 40 minutes

was substantial. (Brahms also sought the advice of two other prominent violinists — Pablo de Sarasate and Émile Sauret — but their input was of far lesser consequence.) It is hard not to think that Joachim’s influence also extended to introducing his friend to Bruch’s celebrated First Violin Concerto, which so strikingly prefigures passages in Brahms’s concerto that many music lovers assume Bruch was copying Brahms. In fact, the influence flowed in the other direction.

Brahms did some of his best work during his summer vacations, which he usually spent at some bucolic getaway in the Austrian countryside. The summer of 1878 found him in Pörschach, in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia. When he wrote his Second Symphony there the summer before, he had remarked that beautiful melodies so littered the landscape that one merely had to scoop them up. Audiences today are likely to

think that he scooped up quite a few for his Violin Concerto, too, but early listeners weren’t so sure. Critics were at best cool and at worst savage. When it was presented by the Berlin Conservatory Orchestra, one newspaper complained that students should not be subjected to such “trash,” and Joseph Hellmesberger, Sr., who as one of Vienna’s leading violinists had much Brahmsian experience, dismissed it as “a concerto not for, but against the violin.” Brahms was a bit discouraged by the response and, to the regret of posterity, fed to the flames the draft he had already completed for his Violin Concerto No. 2.

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

Cadenza: by Joseph Joachim

Listen for ... Oboe, then Violin

Brahms consulted with Pablo de Sarasate on his Violin Concerto, but the Spanish violin virtuoso famously refused to perform it, objecting, “Do you think me so devoid of taste that I would stand there in front of the orchestra, violin in hand, but like a listener, while the oboe plays the only melody in the entire work?” He was referring to the *Adagio*, which begins with the winds presenting the principal theme of the movement, with the oboe playing the melody line. When the violin enters, it picks up this same theme but immediately begins rhapsodizing on it, transforming the original tune into something more impassioned and elaborate. When the melody recurs in its original form toward the end of the movement, it is once again played by the oboe; this time, however, the violin does not

stand by “like a listener,” but rather spins out its own delicate, sensitive embroidery. Unlike Sarasate, who apparently felt that any attractive theme in a work was owed by rights to the soloist, Brahms saw the deep expressive possibilities in occasionally letting the solo instrument reflect on a melody rather than present it.

— The Editors

The violin rests in the opening bars of the second movement, *Adagio*

The image shows a page of a musical score for the Adagio movement of Brahms' Violin Concerto No. 2. The score is written for a full orchestra and a solo violin. The instruments listed on the left are: 2 Flöten, 2 Oboen, 2 Klarinetten in B, 2 Fagotte, 2 Hörner in F, Solo-Violine, 1. Violine, 2. Violine, Bratsche, Violoncell, and Kontrabaß. The tempo is marked 'Adagio'. The oboe part is playing a melodic line, while the violin part is mostly blank, indicating it is resting. The score is in 2/2 time and D major.