

Spanish violin virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate (1844–1908), the late-Romantic era’s Paganini, gave his one and only New York Philharmonic performance in February 1872, in the U.S. Premiere of a concerto that the *New York Herald* predicted would “rank beside Mendelssohn’s celebrated work for the same instrument.” The piece was Bruch’s Violin Concerto No. 1, now one of the cornerstones of the violin repertoire. Sarasate, a 28-year-old matinee idol, charmed as much with his presence as with his technique. *The New York Times* reported, “his management of the bow is subject to a sensibility and an eloquence that are not part of merely technical acquirements ... Nothing could have been better.” Bruch apparently also enjoyed Sarasate’s interpretation. While the work is dedicated to Joseph Joachim, the pre-eminent violinist of the late 19th century, who helped Bruch revise it, the composer dedicated his next two concertos to “Señor” Sarasate.

The 1872 program also illuminates the common struggle, so familiar to Philharmonic audiences today, of navigating New York’s traffic and transportation systems to arrive at the concert on time. Admonishing the tardy, the program announced:

Serious complaints have been made ... of the annoyance, or rather the positive pain, occasioned to real lovers of music by those who make their way to their seats during its performance. ... At the close of each movement or composition there will be a pause, during which those who may be late can enter and take their seats without interfering with the enjoyment of others.

With that, the Philharmonic invented the practice of late seating.

The Bruch concerto was also the work that the 18-year-old Maud Powell (1867–1920) performed for her Philharmonic debut in 1885. The first female violinist to play with the Orchestra, she was one of the first violinists from the United States to achieve international success — no small feat in a then male-dominated profession. It was only the beginning of her long relationship with the Philharmonic, and with two of the composers on this program: Bruch and Dvořák.

Antonín Dvořák had been enticed to New York City in 1892 to lead a music conservatory that welcomed students of any race or gender. Powell sought him out with the intention of playing his Violin Concerto for him, but Dvořák warned her that his friend Joseph Joachim had said that no woman could play the piece, as it was far too difficult. However, after listening to Powell’s performance, the composer said that he would “write to Joachim at once that he had found a woman who could play his concerto perfectly.” Two years later, after giving the work’s U.S. Premiere, Powell performed it with the Philharmonic under Anton Seidl. Dvořák, present in the audience, congratulated her on a stunning performance.

— The Archives



Pablo de Sarasate

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

Max Bruch

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

It was a relatively early work, begun tentatively in 1857 but mostly composed between 1864 and 1866, while Bruch was serving as music director at the court in Koblenz, Germany. The concerto was premiered in April 1866, with Otto von Königslow as soloist, but Bruch immediately decided to rework it. He accordingly sent his score to the more eminent violinist Joseph Joachim, who responded that he found the piece "very violinistic," but that didn't keep him from offering a good deal of specific advice pertaining to both the solo and the orchestral parts. Bruch adopted many of Joachim's suggestions, and the two soon tried out the piece in a private orchestral reading. Further emendation ensued, and finally 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 soon it 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 such of his students 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 he toyed with naming the work a "fantasy" instead. Joachim responded:

IN SHORT

Born: January 6, 1838, in Cologne, Germany

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

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

World premiere: April 24, 1866, in Koblenz, with the composer conducting and Otto von Königslow as soloist; in its revised version, on January 5, 1868, in Bremen, with Joseph Joachim as soloist and Karl Martin Rheintaler conducting

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

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: January 12, 2013, Christoph Eschenbach, conductor, Pinchas Zukerman, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 26 minutes

As to your doubts, 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 concertos. It opens with a solemn prelude in which the soloist, playing in a somewhat improvisational style, alternates with the orchestra.

Bad Business

Although Bruch's G-minor Violin Concerto quickly became a concert hall evergreen, its composer profited little from it, as he had sold it to a publisher for a flat fee with no provision for royalties. He 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 manuscript, which, fortunately, he had kept. In April 1920 Bruch gave the manuscript to a pair of American sisters, the Misses Sutro, who were supposed to sell it in the United States and send him 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. That is the fate of the score of the G-minor Violin Concerto by Max Bruch.

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

Opening page from the concerto's score

The image shows the opening page of the score for Max Bruch's G-minor Violin Concerto, Op. 26. The page is titled "Concert." and "I. Vorspiel." with the tempo marking "Allegro moderato." and "Max Bruch, Op. 26." The score includes parts for Flutes (2), Horns (2), Clarinet in B (2), Bassoon (2), Horns in E (2), Horns in B (2), Trumpets in B (2), Percussion (2), Violin principal, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The music begins with a solemn prelude in G minor, featuring a solo violin part and orchestral accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Allegro moderato." and the dynamic is "pp" (pianissimo).

Then the movement proceeds in more or less “proper” sonata-form fashion until the point where one would expect the development section to begin. There the movement ends — or rather, it elides without a break into the hushed, rapturous slow movement.

Bruch’s G-minor Concerto helps fill in a curious gap that exists in the 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 — to pull the names of three very estimable composers out of the hat?) Bruch was inherently conservative, and it was accordingly 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. It is hard to miss the similarity between the openings of the third movements of Bruch’s G-minor and Brahms’s D-major Violin Concertos, but it is only fair to point out that the former preceded the latter by a full decade. Joachim would premiere that work, too, but when he was asked to characterize the four most famous German concertos in his repertoire — by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch, and Brahms — 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.

At the Time

In 1864, as Max Bruch begins composing his Violin Concerto No. 1, the following are taking place:



In the United States, during the Civil War, the Confederate hand-propelled submarine *H.L. Hunley* sinks the U.S.S. *Housatonic* in the harbor at Charleston.

In Switzerland, the first Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field is signed by 12 European states.

In England, what is thought to be London’s first fish-and-chips shop opens

In China, the first “Peking roast duck” restaurant opens in Peking (Beijing).

In France, Louis Pasteur introduces the pasteurization process for wine.



— The Editors

From top: Submarine Torpedo Boat *H.L. Hunley*, by Conrad Wise Chapman, 1864; Louis Pasteur in his laboratory