

Notes on the Program

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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 in 1853. Schumann was hugely impressed by the young man's talent, and on October 28 of that year he published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, a musical magazine he had founded, an effusive article that acclaimed Brahms as a sort of musical Messiah, "destined to give ideal presentation to the highest expression of the time, ... springing forth like Minerva fully armed from the head of Jove."

Brahms filled Schumann's prophecy and became the figure who most fully adapted the models of Beethoven (via Mendelssohn and Schumann himself) to the evolving aesthetics of the mid-to-late 19th century. He did not achieve this without considerable struggle and, aware of the burden that fell on his shoulders, he was reluctant to sign off on works in the genres that invited direct comparison to Beethoven, 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.

Brahms was not a violinist himself, but he had worked as a piano 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 his

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 Beethoven's catalogue to a repertoire masterwork. 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 Joachim's influence on the final

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, with Joseph Joachim as soloist and with the composer conducting the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra

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

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 23, 2017, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Leonidas Kavakos, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 40 minutes

state of the violin part, and on the work's orchestration overall, was substantial. (Brahms also sought the advice of two other eminent violinists — Pablo de Sarasate and Émile Sauret — although their input was of lesser consequence.) It is hard not to think that Joachim's influence also extended to introducing Brahms to Max Bruch's celebrated First Violin Concerto, which so strikingly prefigures passages in Brahms's concerto that many music-lovers assume that 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 — the summer of the Violin Concerto — found him in Pörschach, on the north shore of the Wörthersee 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. Listeners today are likely to think that he scooped up quite a few for his Violin

About the Cadenza

In 18th-century concertos, cadenzas provided an opportunity for soloists to improvise something original that might show off their skills to personal advantage. As the 19th-century progressed, it became more usual for composers to supply written-out cadenzas in their concerto scores (typically providing an especially imposing one in a piece's first movement), as Brahms did in his two piano concertos, unveiled in 1859 and 1881. In his Violin Concerto, however, Brahms reverted to the more antique practice and left the first movement in the hands of the soloist, writing out only its concluding trill.



The cadenza most commonly heard (including in these performances) is the one written by Joseph Joachim, who introduced this work, but many ensuing musicians have also thrown their hats into the ring by offering alternative cadenzas for this spot: the long roster includes such violinists as Leopold Auer, Maud Powell, Eugène Ysaÿe, Georges Enescu, Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz, Nathan Milstein, and, in our own time, Joshua Bell and Nigel Kennedy. In 1991 Ruggiero Ricci released a record, on Biddulph Recordings, that included 16 different versions of the first-movement cadenza, and even that is not exhaustive.

Violinist Joseph Jachim, whose cadenza is most often performed

Concerto, too, but early audiences 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. One can only mourn what must have been lost.

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

Cadenza: Janine Jansen plays Joseph Joachim's cadenza.

Lady and the Violin

Brahms's Violin Concerto was a fairly new part of the symphonic repertoire in 1899 when it was performed, for the third time, by the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928). The soloist was a certain Lady Hallé. Born Wilhelmine Maria Franziska Neruda, the Moravian violinist had beaten the odds to forge a successful musical career. Her interest in the violin had been encouraged from an early age, as she and her similarly musically inclined siblings performed around Europe. She made her debut with the London Philharmonic at the age of 11, filling in for the eminent Joseph Joachim.

Still, it was expected that her career would top out as she grew into adulthood; women were not thought capable of matching their male counterparts in musicianship. Neruda proved an exception. Joachim, with whom she forged a lifelong friendship, proclaimed, "Her playing is more to my taste than that of any other contemporary — unspoilt, pure and musical," adding, "People will think more of her, and less of me."

She became Lady Hallé upon her marriage in 1888 to pianist and conductor Charles Hallé, founder of the eponymous orchestra, who was knighted by Queen Victoria the same year. Lady Hallé also figured in the very first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, in which the detective and amateur violinist attends one of her concerts. "Her attack and her bowing are splendid. What's that little thing of Chopin's she plays so magnificently: Tra-la-la-lira-lira-lay."

— The Editors



Wilma Neruda, later Lady Hallé, ca. 1870