

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 77 (1878)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Johannes Brahms was an unknown 20-year-old, with his greatest works still to come, when he met the already a celebrated and brilliant violinist Joseph Joachim. Throughout life, they had a bond, both musically and personally. It was Joachim who insisted that Brahms meet Robert Schumann and his wife Clara, and the visit changed the young composer's life, for Robert Schumann published his last column to introduce Brahms to the public and Clara became a confidant and treasured colleague. Further, it was their shared dislike of the works of Wagner and Liszt that spurred the two to compose a letter to Liszt expressing their disapproval of such music. Their letter, while not deterring Liszt, cemented their friendship and served to divide the musical debate in Europe for decades as a struggle between the Brahmsian and Wagnerian camps. Brahms and Joachim remained in close contact over the years, producing sizable correspondence full of captivating details of Germany's leading musicians.

After 25 years of coaxing, Brahms finally composed his Violin Concerto for his friend. During summer holidays of 1877 and 1878--just across the lake from the country house where Alban Berg would write *his* violin concerto nearly sixty years later—Brahms wrote three important works while passing his time in the countryside of Pörschach in southern Austria: *Symphony No. 2*, *Violin Concerto* and *First Violin Sonata*. Brahms picked the key of D-Major for the *Violin Concerto*, and planned the work in four movements, an unprecedented scheme. In collaboration, Brahms and Joachim worked closely on many details of violin technique, and several of Joachim's suggestions were incorporated into the final version of the score. Also, instead of providing a cadenza for the first movement, Brahms used the one written by Joachim. When he had completed the first three movements in August of 1878, he sent a copy of the solo violin part to Joachim with a letter asking him to make any corrections. By the time the two premiered the work in Leipzig on New Year's Day 1879, with Brahms conducting, Brahms had also incorporated Joachim's fingerings and bowings.

Brahms dared subtle references to Beethoven's violin concerto, which is also in D-Major, and, in fact, Brahms seems to have been the first composer to have matched the scope of Beethoven's violin concerto. Inviting the comparison himself, Brahms picked the same key and wrote for the same soloist who had recently begun performing Beethoven's concerto. In each work, both Beethoven and Brahms treat the violin and the orchestra as equals. Yet, while the Brahms has many stormy moments with minor-mode harmonies and excited, tense rhythms, the Beethoven is peaceful and serene in total.

Critical response was conflicting probably because of the concerto's extraordinary length and breadth. Brahms' work lasts 45 minutes, 15-20 minutes

longer than audiences were accustomed to, and his formal and thematic treatment are more symphonic than concerto-like. However, it was Brahms' own decision to abandon the four-movement design and to replace the two inner movements with a single *Adagio*. The Violin Concerto's traditional three-movement design nevertheless is of symphonic proportions. The Brahms *Violin Concerto* stands as one of the largest and most challenging works in the solo violin repertoire.

The massive first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, presents a range of characters, from stately to lyrical and from peaceful to agitated, requiring consummate expertise from the solo violin. A simple contemplative and triadic introductory theme begins in D-Major. The orchestra, without soloist, presents the thematic material in one single phrase, blossoming into the solo violin's material. At the beginning of the development section Brahms, again ala Beethoven, presents a full harmonic journey, which melds into a side trip to the harmonically distant reaches of C-Major and includes, in recapitulation further adventures in F-sharp and B-flat, each a major third in either direction from the tonic key of D. As a final nod to tradition, Brahms reins in the orchestra near the end of the movement and gives the soloist the opportunity to improvise a cadenza.

Like the first movement, the second movement, *Adagio*, opens in the orchestra with a rapturous oboe solo accompanied by a wind ensemble. The lyrical F-major theme is contrasted with a more agitated f-sharp minor central section, coming to a close in F-major. There is an abrupt contrast between the reticent ending and the spirited opening of the *rondo* finale in D-Major. Ever humble and self-effacing, Brahms termed this movement "feeble adagio," but the *Adagio* proves to be full of character and intense emotion.

The finale, *Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace*, is a perfect rondo to the bird song tender melodies of the first and second movements. This rondo is usually described as being in the "Gypsy" style, which Brahms also used in his Hungarian Dances and the movement of his Piano Quartet in g-minor, Op. 25. The second section, presenting a tempestuous dotted rhythmic figure, gradually returns to a restatement of the main melody. A more lyrical and central section gives way to dance variations and syncopation. The energetic "Gypsy" theme is followed by contrasting episodes, and returns again and again, ever more excitedly. The concerto comes to a close as wonderfully enchanted as it began with a long, dramatic coda, in which both soloist and orchestra share the main theme material once more.

By Jeanne Rogers edited by Emily Buckley