

## Johannes Brahms

### Violin Concerto in D, Opus 77

JOHANNES BRAHMS was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He wrote the Violin Concerto in the summer and early fall of 1878, but the published score incorporates revisions made after the premiere, which was given by Joseph Joachim, the dedicatee, in Leipzig on January 1, 1879, with the composer conducting the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO VIOLIN, the score of Brahms's Violin Concerto calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. At these performances, Leonidas Kavakos plays the first-movement cadenza by Joseph Joachim.

Faint phonograph recordings exist of Joseph Joachim playing Brahms Hungarian Dances, some unaccompanied Bach, and a Romance of his own: through the scratch and the distance, one can hear that even in his seventies the bow-arm was firm and the left hand sure. And though the records also convey a sense of the vitality of his playing, they are, in the end, too slight and too faint to tell us anything we want to know about the violinist whose debut at eight was hailed as the coming of "a second Vieuxtemps, Paganini, Ole Bull" or the musician whose name became, across the more than sixty years of his career, a byword for nobility and probity in art. Joachim was also leader of the most highly esteemed string quartet of his day, as well as an accomplished composer and an excellent conductor. His became a dominant voice in German musical anti-Wagnerian conservatism; his passionate identification with the musical past was productive, the range of his experience was prodigious. Europe's courts, universities, and learned academies vied to honor Joachim, but what speaks to us more eloquently than the doctorates and the *Pour le mérites* is an accounting of what composers dedicated to him (and sometimes wrote for him to play), a list that includes the second version of Schumann's Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, Dvořák's Violin Concerto, and, by Brahms, the Opus 1 piano sonata in C, the scherzo of a violin sonata composed jointly with Schumann and Albert Dietrich, and the Violin Concerto.

Brahms and Joachim met in 1853 and they gave many concerts together, with Brahms at the piano or on the conductor's podium. Joachim was the elder by two years and, as a very young man, the more confident and the more technically accomplished composer of the two. Brahms quickly acquired the habit of submitting work in progress to Joachim for stern, specific, and carefully heeded criticism. In the 1880s the friendship was ruptured when Brahms too plainly took Amalie Joachim's side in the differences that brought the Joachims' marriage to an end in 1884. The Double Concerto for violin and cello was tendered and accepted as a peace offering in 1887 (Joachim and Robert Hausmann, cellist in the Joachim Quartet, were the first soloists). Their correspondence was resumed, almost as copiously as before, but intimacy was lost for good, and the prose is prickly with diplomatic formalities and flourishes.

The first mention of a concerto in the Brahms-Joachim correspondence occurs on August 21, 1878. Brahms was spending the summer at Pörtlach on Lake Wörth in southern Austria, where a year previously he had begun his Second Symphony; it was a region, he once said, where melodies were so abundant that one had to be careful not to step on them. Brahms and Joachim met at Pörtlach the end of that month. The correspondence continued, and plans were made for a tryout of the concerto with the orchestra of the Conservatory in Berlin, for Joachim to compose a cadenza, and for the premiere either with the Vienna Philharmonic or at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. On New Year's Day of 1879, Joachim and Brahms introduced the work in that same hall in Leipzig where, just four weeks short of twenty years back, Brahms's First Piano Concerto had met with catastrophic, brutal rejection. Brahms had not written a concerto since, and curiosity was keen, the more so because there were few significant violin concertos: received opinion had it that there were in fact just two, Beethoven's and the Mendelssohn. The first movement rather puzzled the audience, the Adagio was greeted with some warmth, and the finale elicited real enthusiasm. About Joachim's playing there was no disagreement, and his cadenza was universally admired. Indeed, after the Vienna premiere two weeks later, Brahms reported to his friend Elisabet von Herzogenberg that Joachim had played the cadenza "so magnificently that people clapped right into my coda."

On March 6, Joachim reported from London that he had dared play the concerto from memory for the first time, and he continued to champion it wherever he could. None of the early performances was so moving an occasion for Joachim and Brahms as the concert in celebration of the unveiling of the Schumann monument in Bonn (pictured above) on May 2, 1880: Brahms's concerto was the only work chosen that was not by Schumann. Meanwhile,

composer and violinist continued to exchange questions, answers, and opinions about the concerto well into the summer of 1879, Brahms urging Joachim to propose *ossias* (easier alternatives), Joachim responding with suggestions for where and how the orchestral scoring might usefully be thinned out, with changes of violinistic figuration, and even with a considerable compositional emendation in the finale. Except for the last, Brahms accepted most of Joachim's proposals before he turned the material over to his publisher. In spite of Brahms's secure prestige by this point in his career, in spite of Joachim's ardent and effective sponsorship, the concerto did not easily make its way. It was thought a typical example of Brahmsian severity of manner: Hans von Bülow's quip about the difference between Max Bruch, who had written a concerto *for* the violin, and Brahms, who had written one *against* the violin, was widely repeated, and as late as 1905, Brahms's devoted biographer, Florence May, was obliged to admit that "it would be too much to assert that it has as yet entirely conquered the heart of the great public." Fritz Kreisler, who took it into his repertory about 1900, had as much as anyone to do with changing that, and Brahms would be surprised to know that his concerto has surpassed Beethoven's in popularity (and that Mendelssohn's elegant essay is no longer thought of as being in that league at all).

To us it seems odd to think of playing the Beethoven and Brahms concertos on the same program, as was the case at the first performance, at Joachim's suggestion. But then, the likeness that makes the idea an uncomfortable one for us was probably the very factor that made it attractive to Joachim, who was not, after all, presenting two established masterpieces but, rather, one classic, and a new and demanding work by a forty-five-year-old composer with a reputation for being "difficult." But Beethoven is present, in the choice of key, in the unhurried gait (though the tradition that turns Beethoven's and Brahms's "allegro, but not too much so" into an endlessly stretched out, energyless Andante does neither work any good), in the proportions of the three movements, in the fondness for filigree in the high register, in having the soloist enter in an accompanied cadenza, in leading the main cadenza not to a vigorous *tutti* but to a last unexpected and hushed reprise of a lyric theme (the second theme in Beethoven, the first in Brahms).

Brahms begins with a statement that is formal, almost neutral, and unharmonized except for the last two notes. But the sound itself is subtle—low strings and bassoons, to which two horns are added, and then, with basses, two more. And the resumption, quietly and on a remote harmony, is altogether personal.\* So striking a harmonic departure so early will take some justifying, and thus the surprising C major chord under the oboe's melody serves as signal that this movement aims to cover much space, that it must needs be expansive. A moment later, at the top of the brief crescendo, the rhythm broadens—that is, the beats are still grouped by threes, but it is three half-notes rather than three quarters, and this too establishes early a sense of immense breadth. On every level the music is rich in rhythmic surprise and subtlety: the aggressive theme for strings alone insists that the accents belong on the second beat, another idea dissolves order (and imposes a new order of its own) by moving in groups of five notes, the three-four/three-two ambiguity returns again and again. The musing and serene outcome of the cadenza is not so much a matter of the *pianissimo* and *dolce* and *tranquillo* that Brahms writes into the score as of the trance-like slow motion of the harmonies. (Things have changed in the last hundred years. The danger now is not that the audience will applaud as it did at the Vienna premiere, but that it will cough.)

When the great Pablo de Sarasate was asked whether he intended to learn the new Brahms concerto he replied, "I don't deny that it is very good music, but do you think I could fall so low as to stand, violin in hand, and listen to the oboe play the only proper tune in the whole work?" What the oboe plays at the beginning of the Adagio is indeed one of the most wonderful melodies ever to come to Brahms. It is part of a long passage for winds alone, subtly voiced and anything other than a mere accompanied solo for the oboe, and a magical preparation for the return of the violin.\* As the critic Jean-Jacques Normand charmingly puts it, "*Le hautbois propose, et le violon dispose.*" It is strange that Sarasate should not have relished the opportunity to turn the oboe's chastely beautiful melody into ecstatic, super-violinistic rhapsodies. A new and agitated music intervenes. Then the first ideas return, enriched, and with the wind sonorities and the high-flying violin beautifully combined. For the finale, Brahms returns to his old love of gypsy music, fascinatingly and inventively deployed, and the turn, just before the end, to a variant in 6/8 (heard, but not so notated) is a real Brahms signature.

Michael Steinberg