

**Max Bruch** (1838-1920)

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Opus 26

*First performance:* January 5, 1868, Bremen, Karl Martin Rheinthal cond., Joseph Joachim, soloist. *First*

*BSO performance:* October 1882, Georg Henschel cond., Louis Schmidt, soloist. *First Tanglewood*

*performance:* August 8, 1975, Arthur Fiedler cond., Emanuel Borok, soloist. *Most recent Tanglewood*

*performance:* July 30, 2006, Hans Graf cond., Midori, soloist.

Max Bruch was a child prodigy who grew into a gifted composer of extraordinary taste and refinement, a composer who could always be relied on to turn out works of professional finish and often of great beauty. He composed in virtually every medium and was highly successful in most. His cantata *Frithjof*, Opus 23 (1864), was extraordinarily popular for the rest of the century; it used to be given in Boston every year or so. Similarly his *Odysseus* (a cantata built on scenes from Homer), *Achilleus*, and a setting of Schiller's *Das Lied von der Glocke* were long popular in the heyday of the cantata and oratorio market that was fueled by annual choral festivals in just about every town of any size or cultural pretension in Europe or America. He also wrote three operas, three symphonies, songs, choral pieces, and chamber music. He was active as a conductor in Germany and England and eventually became a professor of composition at the Berlin Academy.

Yet today he is remembered primarily for a few concertos. There can be little doubt that the violin was his preferred solo instrument. With the exception of a double concerto for clarinet and viola, all of his compositions for soloist with orchestra—three concertos, the *Scottish Fantasy*, a *Serenade*, and a *Konzertstück*—feature the violin. The absence of other media in his concerto output was not for lack of opportunity or invitation. But Bruch felt a strong disinclination to compose for the piano. When Eugen d'Albert specifically asked for a piano concerto in 1886, Bruch wrote to his publisher Simrock, "Well—me, write a piano concerto! That's the limit!" Twelve years earlier, when Simrock had suggested that there might be a market for a cello concerto, Bruch was even more outspoken: "I have more important things to do than write stupid cello concertos!"

In any case, Bruch limited himself almost totally to the violin, and of his three concertos for that instrument, the first was one of his earliest successes and remains the most frequently performed of all his works. The fact that his other work has almost totally dropped out of sight may have been caused, in large part, by his desire to compose music that was immediately "accessible," comprehensible to the bulk of the audience on first hearing. Such music rarely retains its interest over the stylistic changes of a century. Bruch was certainly never embroiled in the kind of controversy that followed Brahms or Wagner or most of the other great innovators. In many respects he resembled the earlier Spohr and Mendelssohn, both of whom wrote a great deal of merely ingratiating music (though Mendelssohn, to be sure, also composed music that was more than that); it might be well made, but it did not speak to audiences across the decades, though every now and then someone would trot out one piece or another, having discovered that it was undeniably "effective."

One of the few works of Bruch that has not fallen into that rather patronizing category is his earliest published large-scale work, the present concerto. And it is, of course, the violinists who have kept it before the world, since it is melodious throughout and ingratiatingly written. The G minor concerto is so popular, in fact, that it is often simply referred to as "the Bruch concerto," though he wrote two others for violin, both in D minor.

Bruch had a great deal of difficulty bringing the work to a successful conclusion; he reworked it over a period of four years, which included even a public performance of a preliminary version. In the end, many of the details of the solo part came about as the result of suggestions from many violinists. The man who had the greatest hand in it was Joseph Joachim (who was, of course, also to serve much the same function for the violin concerto of Johannes Brahms); Joachim's contribution to the score fully justifies that placing of his name on the title page as dedicatee. He worked out the bowings as well as many of the virtuoso passages; he also made suggestions concerning the formal structure of the work. Finally, he insisted that Bruch call it a "concerto" rather than a "fantasy," as the composer had originally intended.

Bruch's planned title—"Fantasy"—helps to explain the first movement, which is something of a biological sport. Rather than being the largest and most elaborate movement formally, Bruch designs it as a "prelude" and labels it as such. The opening timpani roll and woodwind phrase bring in the soloist in a progressively more dramatic dialogue. The modulations hint vaguely at formal structures and new themes, but the atmosphere throughout is preparatory. Following a big orchestral climax and a brief restatement of the opening idea, Bruch modulates to E-flat for the slow movement, which is directly linked to the Prelude. This is a wonderfully lyrical passage; the soloist sings the main theme and an important transitional idea

before a modulation to the dominant introduces the secondary theme (in the bass, under violin triplets). Though the slow movement ends with a full stop (unlike the Prelude), it is directly linked with the finale by key. The last movement begins with a hushed whisper in E-flat, but an exciting crescendo engineers a modulation to G major for the first statement (by the soloist) of the main rondo theme. This is a lively and rhythmic idea that contrasts wonderfully with the soaring, singing second theme, which remains in the ear as one of the most striking ideas of the work, a passage of great nobility in the midst of the finale's energy.

—Steven Ledbetter