

Igor Stravinsky

Violin Concerto in D

IGOR STRAVINSKY was born at Oranienbaum, Russia, on June 17, 1882, and died in New York on April 6, 1971. The Violin Concerto was composed in 1931 between mid-March and September 25 that year. The first performance took place on October 23, 1931, with Samuel Dushkin as soloist and the composer conducting the Berlin Radio Orchestra.

THE VIOLIN CONCERTO CALLS FOR AN ORCHESTRA OF two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and E-flat clarinet, three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, eight first and eight second violins, six violas, four cellos, and four basses.

Stravinsky mistrusted virtuosos:

In order to succeed they are obliged to lend themselves to the wishes of the public, the great majority of whom demand sensational effects from the player. This preoccupation naturally influences their taste, their choice of music, and their manner of treating the piece selected. How many admirable compositions, for instance, are set aside because they do not offer the player any opportunity of shining with facile brilliancy!

These thoughts were prompted by the suggestion made in 1931 by Willy Strecker, one of the directors of the music publisher B. Schott's Sons, that Stravinsky write something for a remarkable young violinist named Samuel Dushkin, whom Strecker admired. Dushkin was a Polish-born musician who had been adopted by an American benefactor, Blair Fairchild, and given training with Leopold Auer. Stravinsky hesitated for two reasons: he doubted that he was familiar enough with the violin to write a really virtuosic part for it, and he was afraid the usual type of "virtuoso performer" would not in any case be interested in playing his piece. A meeting with Dushkin dispelled the latter doubt: "I was very glad to find in him, besides his remarkable gifts as a born violinist, a musical culture, a delicate understanding, and—in the exercise of his profession—an abnegation that is very rare."

In the meantime Paul Hindemith encouraged Stravinsky to undertake the work despite his lack of familiarity with the violin; this could be a positive advantage, Hindemith insisted, since it would prevent the solo part from turning into a rehash of other violin concertos, employing the same old runs and turns of phrase.

So Stravinsky and Dushkin began to work together. The first movement was largely composed between March 11 and March 27, 1931; the second movement was written between April 7 and May 20, the third between May 24 and June 6, and the finale between June 12 and September 4. Early in the collaboration, Dushkin recalled, at lunch in a Paris restaurant, Stravinsky

took out a piece of paper and wrote down a chord and asked me if it could be played. I had never seen a chord with such an enormous stretch, from the E to the top A, and I said, "No." Stravinsky said sadly, "*Quel dommage*" ("What a pity"). After I got home, I tried it, and to my astonishment, I found that in that register the stretch of the eleventh was relatively easy to play, and the sound fascinated me. I telephoned Stravinsky at once to tell him it could be done. When the concerto was finished, more than six months later, I understood his disappointment when I first said, "No." This chord, in different dress, begins each of the four movements. Stravinsky himself calls it his "passport" to that concerto.

As the work progressed, Stravinsky would show Dushkin the materials, little by little, as they were composed; the violinist tried them out and made suggestions as to how they might be made easier or more effective for the solo instrument. Dushkin suggested ways to make the material "violinistic," suggestions that Stravinsky rejected at least as often as he accepted them.

Whenever he accepted one of my suggestions, even a simple change such as extending the range of the violin by stretching the phrase to the octave below and the octave above, Stravinsky would insist upon altering the very foundations accordingly. He behaved like an architect who if asked to change a room on the third floor had to go down to the foundation to keep the proportions of the whole structure.

The one thing Stravinsky sought to avoid throughout was the kind of flashy virtuosity of which many romantic concertos—and especially those by violinists—were made:

Once [recalled Dushkin] when I was particularly pleased with the way I had arranged a brilliant violinistic passage and tried to insist on his keeping it, he said: “You remind me of a salesman at the Galeries Lafayette. You say, ‘Isn’t this brilliant, isn’t this exquisite, look at the beautiful colors, everybody’s wearing it.’ I say, ‘Yes, it is brilliant, it is beautiful, everyone is wearing it—I don’t want it.’”

Despite Dushkin’s assistance, the resulting concerto is unmistakably Stravinsky’s own. In the opening Toccata, the parts for woodwind and brass predominate so thoroughly and to such bright effect that one is tempted to think that Stravinsky completely omitted the upper strings (as he had done in the *Symphony of Psalms* a year earlier) to allow the soloist to stand out. Actually the orchestra is quite large (and includes the full body of strings), but Stravinsky scores the solo violin in a wide variety of chamber-music groupings. The result is thus less like a grand romantic concerto, in which the soloist is David pitted against an orchestral Goliath, and rather more like one of Bach’s *Brandenburg* Concertos, with the soloist enjoying the role of *primus inter pares*.

As is often the case when Stravinsky uses elements of an older style in this period, he takes gestures that sound stable and solid—the turn figure in the trumpets right after the opening chords, the repeated eighth-notes—and uses them in different ways, so that the expectations they raise are sometimes confirmed and sometimes denied. What is an upbeat? a downbeat? What meter are we in, anyway? The witty play of older stylistic clichés in a new and unexpected arrangement is one possible meaning of “neo-classic” in Stravinsky’s work.

The two middle movements are both labeled “Aria,” a name sometimes given by Bach to predominantly lyrical slow movements. Aria I is the minor-key lament of the concerto, but a gentle one; Aria II is the real lyric showpiece. The melodic lines have the kind of sinuous curve found in an embellished slow movement by Bach. Stravinsky himself commented that the one older concerto that might reveal an influence on his work was the Bach concerto for two violins. His predilection for instrumental pairs hints at that in the earlier movements, especially the Toccata, but the last movement is most charmingly explicit: after the solo violin has run through duets with a bassoon, a flute, even a solo horn, the orchestra’s concertmaster suddenly takes off on a solo of his own—or rather a duet with the principal soloist—thus creating the two-violin texture of the Bach concerto.

Steven Ledbetter