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THE BRAHMS VIOLIN CONCERTO

When Joseph Joachim and Johannes Brahms met in 1853, the twenty-one-year-old Joachim was already an established violin virtuoso and composer. The extremely gifted Brahms, two years younger, was virtually unknown. They quickly became close friends and began a musical interchange that lasted throughout their lives.

Brahms and Joachim challenged each other constantly, trading counterpoint exercises along with their correspondence. In 1853, they roomed together in Göttingen, and Brahms began to study orchestration with Joachim. Joachim served as a mentor to Brahms, introducing him to Schumann and other leading musicians of the day.

Throughout their friendship, Joachim was unwavering in his support of Brahms's compositions. He performed Brahms's chamber works, premiering many of them, and conducted Brahms's symphonies. Joachim was particularly fond of the Brahms Violin Concerto. He described the work, which Brahms dedicated to him, as one of "high artistic value" that roused in him "a peculiarly strong feeling of interest" (Joseph Joachim and Andreas Moser, *Violinschule*, 1902-05).

Brahms began composing his Violin Concerto in the summer of 1878, during a vacation on Lake Wörther in Pörtschach, Carinthia (Austria). On August 22, Brahms sent the manuscript of the violin part to Joachim with this note: "Naturally I wish to ask you to correct it. I thought you ought to have no excuse - neither respect for the music being too good nor the pretext that orchestrating it would not merit the effort. Now I shall be satisfied if you say a word and perhaps write in several: difficult, awkward, impossible, etc." Thus began one of the most intriguing musical exchanges in history.

By the time Joachim premiered the concerto in Leipzig on January 1, 1879, the piece had undergone considerable changes. Two middle movements had been removed and replaced by a newly written Adagio, resulting in the three-movement concerto we know today. (Both of the original middle movements are now lost. Many scholars think that the Scherzo may have been converted into the Allegro appassionato of the Second Piano Concerto.) The score was passed back and forth at least a half dozen times before the premiere, and the two friends' debate over revisions, which is clearly evident in the surviving manuscript, has been left for posterity. In the end, Brahms incorporated most of Joachim's suggested orchestral changes but considerably fewer of his revisions to the solo violin part.



The first movement of the Brahms Concerto follows the example of both Joachim and Beethoven in integrating the solo part with the orchestral writing. Often the solo violin plays counter-melody while other instruments play the main material. Brahms left the composition of the cadenza to the performer. Joachim wrote his own cadenza, which remains the one most frequently performed. There is some evidence that Brahms had a hand in its creation. Brahms wrote to Elizabet von Herzogenberg of an early performance, "the Cadenza sounded so beautiful at the actual concert that the public applauded it into the start of the Coda."

The Brahms Concerto is often described as "masculine," due in large part to its robust first movement. I am continually awed by the majestic and inexorable qualities of such sections as the opening solo and the broken octaves in the development. If the Beethoven Concerto captures the beauty of God's creation, the Brahms Concerto conveys its magnitude and power. Many in the first generation of violinists exposed to the concerto did not recognize its brilliance. Referring to the second movement, Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate complained that he had to stand on stage while the oboe played the only good melody in the whole piece. This comment illustrates the difference between the straightforward melodic concept of the Franco-Belgian virtuoso school and the more complex treatment employed by Brahms and his musical compatriots. Simple in structure, this movement contains some of the most profoundly beautiful music ever written for the violin.

Brahms drew inspiration for the third movement from the Finale of Joachim's "Hungarian" Concerto. Here Brahms's rhythmic vitality and melodic exuberance evoke the same mood as do other Hungarian-inspired works, but without relying on gypsy tunes or the gypsy scale. Unlike the headlong rush that concludes the Joachim Concerto, the poco piu presto at the end of the Brahms calls for a march-like, steady beat, and even implies a slight ritard in the final bars. The concerto ends with D-major chords that confer a feeling of genuine, well-earned triumph. I have been fascinated with the Brahms Concerto since my earliest violin lessons. I began studying it when I was 14, and it rapidly became a mainstay of my repertoire. It was with the Brahms Concerto that I won several of my international prizes and made many of my debuts in Europe, America, and Israel. It remains one of the most fulfilling works I perform.

My teacher in Berlin, Werner Scholz, was a student of Gustav Havemann, who studied with Joachim. I feel fortunate to have gained knowledge about both the Brahms Concerto from one so close to the original source. My study of the Brahms was augmented also by reading Joachim's essay in his *Violinschule* in which he laid out how he felt the Brahms concerto should be played.