Max Bruch – Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 26

Composition History

Bruch began his Violin Concerto in 1864 and finished it in October 1867. The first performance was given in Bremen, Germany, on January 7, 1868, with Joseph Joachim as soloist. The orchestra consists of pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons; four horns; two trumpets; timpani; and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-five minutes.

Performance History

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Bruch’s First Violin Concerto were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 21 and 22, 1894, with Cesar Thomson as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on April 5, 6, 7, and 10, 2007, with Pinchas Zukerman as soloist and Gustavo Dudamel conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 15, 1950, with Zino Francescatti as soloist and Antal Dorati conducting, and most recently on August 6, 2005, with Erik Schumann as soloist and Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

For the record

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Bruch’s First Violin Concerto in 1980 with Shlomo Mintz as soloist and Claudio Abbado conducting for Deutsche Grammophon, and in 1986 with Cho-Liang Lin as soloist and Leonard Slatkin conducting for CBS.

Max Bruch

Born January 6, 1838, Cologne, Germany.
Died October 2, 1920, Friedenau, near Berlin, Germany.

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Although he was born five years after Johannes Brahms, Max Bruch hit his stride much sooner. At eleven he was writing chamber music; in 1852, at the age of fourteen, he tossed off his first symphony. (Brahms was forty-two when he finished
his, after nearly a quarter century of intermittent work.) Bruch’s first violin concerto was begun in 1864 and first performed, to considerable acclaim, in 1868—before *A German Requiem* put Brahms on the map (and more than a decade before his own celebrated violin concerto).

The downside of early success is the waning star. Several composers, some as great as Felix Mendelssohn, are regularly accused of failing to sustain their promise. This is a standard line in the Bruch literature, too, along with that even more worrisome one about a one-hit reputation. Neither assertion is entirely accurate—or fair—although Bruch’s G minor concerto has always been immensely popular (far more so than his other two) and more frequently performed than *Kol nidrei* for cello and orchestra, or the *Scottish* Fantasy for violin and orchestra. The irony of Bruch’s career—particularly in light of the current admiration for art that is, above all, accessible—is that by writing music to please the audience of his day, Bruch lost the interest of succeeding generations.

The G minor violin concerto, however, has withstood time, and it makes a most persuasive case for the composer. Soloists keep concertos before the public, and violinists have always loved to play this piece. Bruch studied violin for several years, and he wrote for the instrument with enormous affection and skill. When his publisher once suggested he try a work for cello and orchestra, Bruch replied, “I have more important things to do than write stupid cello concertos.” Eugen d’Albert asked for a piano concerto in 1886; Bruch fired back: “Me, write a piano concerto! That’s the limit!” (Bruch eventually wrote beautifully for cello with orchestra, though he never did compose a piano concerto.)

Bruch had difficulty writing this concerto, his first major work. There was even a public performance of a preliminary version, but Bruch was dissatisfied. The celebrated violinist Joseph Joachim offered important suggestions (he would later play the same role in the creation of Brahms’s concerto), and Bruch was smart enough to take his advice. When the concerto was presented in its final form in 1868, Joachim was the soloist (Bruch also dedicated the score to him).

Bruch planned to call the concerto a fantasy, which helps to explain the disposition of the three movements. The first is a prelude in title and mood, rather than the weightiest movement of the work. Even though the violinist works as hard as in any of the great virtuoso concertos, and the dialogue between solo and orchestra is heated and extensive, the tone is anticipatory. When, without a pause, we reach the slow movement, we find the heart of the concerto: a rich, wonderfully lyrical expanse of music that shows Bruch at his best and offers melodies custom-made for the violin. The finale begins in quiet suspense, broken by the entrance of the violin with a hearty dance tune and more fireworks.

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