

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany.

Died April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.

### Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 77

Brahms wrote his violin concerto in the summer and early fall of 1878 and conducted the first performance on January 1, 1879, in Leipzig, with Joseph Joachim as soloist. The orchestra consists of pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons; four horns; two trumpets; timpani; and strings. At these concerts, Christian Tetzlaff plays the cadenza by Joseph Joachim. Performance time is approximately forty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Brahms's Violin Concerto were given at the Auditorium Theatre on January 19 and 20, 1894, with Henri Marteau as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on May 31, June 1, and 2, 2007, with Vadim Repin as soloist and Myung-Whun Chung conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 30, 1938, with Jascha Heifetz as soloist and Eugene Ormandy conducting, and most recently on August 7, 2008, with Gil Shaham as soloist and James Conlon conducting.

Joseph Joachim and Johannes Brahms became instant friends when they met in May 1853. Both men were in their early twenties, and although Brahms was an unknown, with all his greatest music still to come, Joachim was already a celebrity—the most brilliant and promising violinist around. Joachim described Brahms as “pure as a diamond, soft as snow,” reminding us that the composer's familiar portly figure and bushy beard were later acquisitions. With music as their bond, they became close—confiding secrets, enjoying each other's company, and sharing the things they loved. It was Joachim who insisted that Brahms meet the Schumanns, a visit that changed the young composer's life—Robert wrote his last critic's column to introduce Brahms to the public, and Clara became a confidante and a valued colleague, if not more.

It was simply a matter of time before Brahms would offer to write a concerto for his best friend. (Brahms had overcome his fear of tackling the forms in which Beethoven triumphed, and had completed two symphonies and a piano concerto.) The violin concerto was sketched during a summer holiday at Pörttschach in 1878, just across the lake from the country house where Alban Berg would write *his* violin concerto nearly sixty years later. Brahms picked the key of D major (the tonality of the Second Symphony he had recently finished) and planned the concerto in four movements, an unprecedented scheme. While composing, Brahms often turned to Joachim for technical advice about the solo part—Joachim not only knew the instrument's capabilities better than anyone, but also was a gifted composer himself. (When they met in 1853, Joachim was the more accomplished composer; Brahms used to let him see everything he wrote, seeking both criticism and encouragement.) It was Brahms's own decision to abandon the four-movement design and to replace the two inner movements with a single adagio. (The leftover scherzo may have been salvaged for the four-movement B-flat piano concerto Brahms put aside in order to work on this concerto.) He was still making further adjustments after the first performance, in Leipzig, on New Year's Day, 1879.

The work was not a success. (At the premiere, the applause was lukewarm, though many in the audience were distracted by Brahms's failure to hook up his suspenders properly.) When Clara Schumann heard it earlier, in a private performance, she commented that the orchestra and soloist were "thoroughly blended," but others saw that distinction differently. Hans von Bülow, a man seldom without opinions, said that Brahms had written a concerto *against* the violin; the violinist Bronislaw Huberman elaborated: "It is a concerto *for* violin *against* the orchestra—and the violin wins."

Eventually, Brahms's work was widely performed and greatly admired; it was even deemed worthy of standing beside Beethoven's single violin concerto. Brahms had invited the comparison himself by picking the same key and by writing for the violinist who had recently put Beethoven's concerto back in circulation.

Brahms honors the classical model; in the first movement, he writes a double exposition—one for the orchestra alone, the second led by the violin. This would be unremarkable, except that most concertos written in the seventy-odd years since Beethoven's had struggled to find novel ways to proceed. Brahms has new things to say, but he says them in a form that Beethoven would have recognized immediately. The first movement is on a grand scale, with a wealth of melodic material. (Brahms once said that melodies were so abundant in Pörttschach that one had to be careful not to step on them.) Brahms presents a full harmonic itinerary that allows a side trip to the distant reaches of C major at the beginning of the development section (Beethoven went there, too) and includes, in the recapitulation, further adventures in F-sharp and B-flat, each a major third in either direction from D.

As a final bow to tradition, Brahms reins in the orchestra near the end of the movement and gives the soloist the opportunity to improvise a cadenza. This is the last major concerto to grant that license (even Beethoven had started writing his cadenzas down), although with a musician of Joachim's taste and talent, Brahms had nothing to fear. He would surely be relieved to know that the cadenza Joachim eventually committed to paper quickly caught on and is sometimes performed today. (At these concerts, Christian Tetzlaff plays the cadenza by Joseph Joachim.)

Brahms opens the slow movement with one of his finest melodies, given to the oboe against a woodwind accompaniment. The Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate allegedly refused to play this concerto because he didn't care "to stand on the platform, violin in hand, to listen to the oboe playing the only real tune in the whole work." Sarasate would more easily earn our sympathy if Brahms didn't quickly turn from the oboe to the violin, having saved for it an unbroken outpouring of song that carries us through to the end of the movement.

We don't immediately associate Brahms with merriment, but the finale of the concerto is unmistakably jolly, filled with good-natured themes and flashes of outright wit. The spirit is that of the gypsy violinist, an intentional allusion to Joachim's Hungarian heritage. The final march, with trumpets and drums, rises to a climax and then abruptly unwinds like a mechanical toy before it ends with a bang.

A footnote about friendship. Only two years after the premiere of the Violin Concerto, the fellowship between Brahms and Joachim began to falter. Brahms couldn't stand to watch Joachim become increasingly jealous of his wife, and by the time the couple divorced in 1884, the composer and the violinist were no longer speaking. Joachim continued to play Brahms's music everywhere, but refused to answer his letters. Finally, Brahms wrote the *Double Concerto* as a peace offering, and Joachim—like so many others since—couldn't resist this warm and heartfelt music. The friendship was restored, but the old spark was missing.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

#### **For the record**

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Brahms's Violin Concerto in 1955 with Jascha Heifetz as soloist and Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA, in 1976 with Itzhak Perlman as soloist and Carlo Maria

Giulini conducting for Angel (1978 Grammy Award winner for album of the year), in 1997 with Maxim Vengerov as soloist and Daniel Barenboim conducting for Teldec, and in 2002 with Rachel Barton as soloist and Carlos Kalmar conducting for Cedille.

---

© Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may be reproduced only in their entirety and with express written permission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs subject to change without notice.