

Brahms CONCERTO IN D, Op. 77

Henryk Szeryng, Violinist

London Symphony Orchestra • Pierre Monteux, Conducting

(Recorded in England)

Of the four concertos of Brahms, the two for piano and the "double" for violin and cello with orchestra have one point in common: each is a complete unit including a cadenza provided by the composer.

But the latitude Brahms permitted the violinist in writing his own tells us something of his attitude toward the instrument and the work he wrote for it. Among his early experiences as a "working musician," before settling into a career as a composer, was a partnership with the violinist Eduard Reményi (an exotic-sounding name the part-German, part-Hungarian performer preferred to his hereditary one, Hoffmann). Brief though this association was, it had two important consequences: one was an indoctrination in the *friskas* and *czardas*es Reményi-Hoffmann played so well, leading to a whole category of music by Brahms in which the Hungarian idiom predominated (from the *Hungarian Dances* of 1858 to the *Zigeunerlieder* of 1888); the other was a meeting with Joseph Joachim, a fellow-student of Reményi's at the Vienna Conservatory.

Prophetically, this meeting took place only days after Joachim, aged twenty-two and already concertmaster of Liszt's orchestra in Weimar, had taken a long step toward his later distinction as a violinist by taking part in the Festival of the Lower Rhine, that year (1853) held in Düsseldorf. The work he played was the Beethoven concerto, barely known even to the musicians who participated, and productive of "French frenzy, Italian fanaticism in a German audience" according to a contemporary report. Joachim, at home in Hanover, was still fresh from this experience which meant so much to his later life, when Reményi called on him while passing through, bringing along his twenty-year-old "accompanist."

If the hand of Fate guided Brahms to Reményi, it must have been the hand of God that brought them, together, to Joachim. For it was not many hours before Joachim became aware of Brahms' true vocation, and was spreading his name to the famous men of the time with whom he was acquainted: Liszt first, then the Schumanns, with the historic consequences so well known.

If the contact with Reményi inculcated one sort of violin playing in Brahms' mind, then the association with Joachim broadened and deepened his conception of what the instrument could do in the hands of a man whose personal powers created a violin literature based on the solo sonatas of Bach and the Beethoven concerto. If, in the end, he left the creation of a cadenza to Joachim (and,

inferentially, to any later man of courage), he was making specific what is inferential throughout the work—that the violin cannot be successfully fettered, that it must be allowed to soar and rhapsodize if its true nature is to be realized.

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Allegro non troppo. There are few works of Brahms in which his many-sided qualities as a composer are so fully represented as in the violin concerto. It begins with the wonderfully promising introduction by the orchestra in which, literally before we realize it, most of the principal thematic ideas have been exposed. For what follows the opening D major passage in the strings is the oboe sounding the second theme (C major) and then the abrupt chords of which so much is made subsequently. It is only in retrospect that this seemingly uninterrupted line of thought is recognizable, really, as a smooth jointure of several independent ideas. When the violin enters with its impassioned outburst, as though impatient for having had to wait its turn so long, it is with a four-octave thrust that announces, in so many notes, that this is a different instrument than the one for which Beethoven wrote his eloquent but technically restricted work. The artifices of Paganini may seem a long way from the aesthetic of Brahms, but even without the celebrated *Variations on a Theme by Paganini* for piano we now know from this concerto that he was keenly aware of the Italian's contribution to the resources of the instrument. How Brahms utilizes these resources to exploit the disparity of means between soloist and ensemble, then to reconcile their differences in an ennobling statement of the opening theme after the cadenza, is part of the give and take which makes this movement the special kind of experience it is.

Adagio. What this movement might have been like without the composer's rigorous sense of self-criticism one hesitates to think, for he tried several combinations (including a scherzo before the finale) that left him dissatisfied. In the end, he settled upon what now seems the only, inevitable procedure: a prolongation of the "post-cadenzas" mood of the first movement, in which the violin moves through a self-powered orbit around the theme pronounced by the oboe, expanding, expounding, even exhorting the orchestra to follow.

Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace. If thought and

emotion dominate the first two movements, a spirit of play is paramount in the third. It is a kind of holiday for strings in which they all participate as equals, with the game of follow-the-leader initiated by the soloist but ended by the ensemble. Formally, it is a rondo, rather terse for much of its length but evolving a concluding section (coda) in which the material passes in review, newly transformed. Through it all courses the Hungarian dash and fire, the sense of abandon and release which Brahms learned at the source.

Notes by IRVING KOLODIN

For more than a hundred years (dating back to the later 1850s when Henri Wieniawski took his place among the instrumental elite), a school of Polish violinists has marched in artistry side by side with the many fine pianists produced in that oft-partitioned land. In recent times Bronisław Huberman and Paul Kochanski have kept alive a tradition whose present-day inheritor is Henryk Szeryng. The connection, indeed, is more than verbal, for it was Huberman's advice, when he heard Szeryng as a child in 1928, which led to studies in Berlin with Carl Flesch. In turn came the influence of Nadia Boulanger in Paris at a time when Szeryng thought of composition as a career.

A recent concert in London during which Szeryng appeared with the visiting National Orchestra of Mexico in a violin concerto by Manuel Ponce (composer of the world-famous *Estrellita*) might suggest an odd inclination for a man celebrated for his playing of the classics of the literature. Actually it is a root part of Szeryng's present growth, for at the war's end he became a citizen of Mexico, as a consequence of much activity in Caribbean-area troop camps. While winning a "Grand Prix du Disque" for his recording of unaccompanied Bach in 1955, Szeryng has kept alive an interest in contemporary matters as an interpreter of Khachaturian and Prokofiev.

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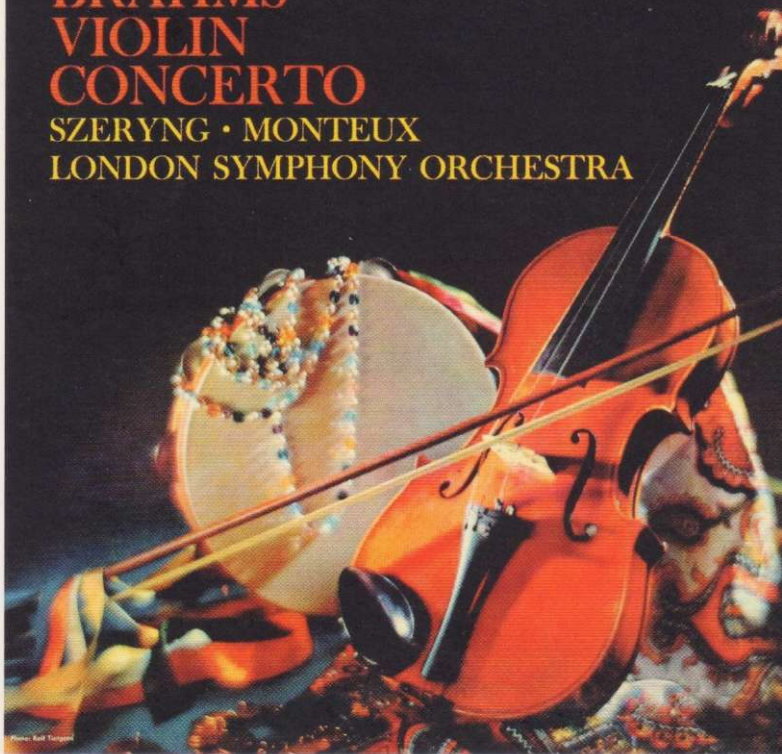


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