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Violin Concerto No. 1

BRAHMS

Violin Concerto

Takako Nishizaki, Violin

Slovak Philharmonic • Stephen Gunzenhauser, Conductor



Max Bruch (1838 - 1920)

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26

Prelude: Allegro moderato

Adagio

Finale: Allegro energico

Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77

Cadenza by Fritz Kreisler

Allegro non troppo

Adagio

Allegro giocoso ma non troppo vivace

Max Bruch's G Minor Violin Concerto continues to enjoy wide popularity, while much of his music remains unknown to modern audiences. He was born in Cologne in 1838, the son of a Government official and a mother who was well known as a teacher and singer. He was himself to enjoy a reputation as both conductor and composer, and was for a time conductor of the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, before taking up a similar position in Breslau. From 1891 until his retirement in 1910 he was entrusted with the composition master-class at the Berlin Musikhochschule, an appointment of considerable prestige.

The G Minor Violin Concerto avoids traditional form, its first movement a Prelude that opens with a quasi-improvisatory passage for the soloist. There is a second, contrasting theme in B flat major, and some development of this material, before the second, slow movement, which follows without a break. Here the violin opens with a melody of great emotional intensity, in the key of E flat, providing the main source of thematic material for the movement.

A brief linking passage leads us safely to the finale in the key of G major and the entry of the solo violin in a mood that must remind us of the last movement of the concerto by Brahms. This opening forms the principal theme of the

movement, although further opportunities are provided for the soloist, with rapid passage-work as well as a typically forceful romantic theme.

Bruch showed his concerto to Brahms and played it through to him, with a great deal of enthusiasm and sweat. The older composer, not known for his tact, stood up when the performance was over and walking over to the piano took a sheet of the score, feeling it between fingers and thumb and remarking "Where do you buy your music paper? First rate!" The concerto has impressed other listeners rather more deeply.

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg in 1833, the son of a double bass player and a woman thirteen years his senior, who kept a small haberdasher's shop. It seemed at first as if he might follow his father's relatively humble profession as an orchestral player, but his ability as a pianist and as a composer, the latter ability fostered by his generous teacher Marxsen, suggested higher ambitions. After a period of hack work, teaching and playing in dockside taverns, he had his first significant success in a tour with the Hungarian violinist Reményi in 1853. Friendship with the violinist Joachim led to an unproductive visit to Liszt in Weimar and to a more fruitful meeting with Schumann, now established in Duesseldorf as director of music. It was Schumann who detected in the young musician a successor to Beethoven, a forbidding prognostication. Brahms was to continue his relationship with Clara Schumann after her husband's breakdown and subsequent death in 1856.

It was not until 1864 that Brahms settled finally in Vienna, having failed to realise his first ambition for recognition in his native Hamburg. In Vienna he became an established figure, known for his tactlessness and occasional rudeness, but proclaimed by his friends the champion of pure music against the eccentricities of Liszt and Wagner, a role which his four great symphonies did much to reinforce. He died of cancer in April, 1897, at the age of 64.

Brahms completed his Violin Concerto in 1878 and dedicated it to his friend Joseph Joachim. The relationship with the violinist was later to suffer through the composer's lack of tact, when he tried to intervene in a dispute between Joachim and his wife, the singer Amalie Joachim, who brought evidence of her

husband's faults of character in a letter written to her by Brahms. The breach was in part repaired by the later composition of the Double Concerto for violin and cello in 1887, a peace offering.

Following his usual custom, Brahms worked on the Violin Concerto during his summer holiday at Poertschach, where in 1877 he had started his Second Symphony. The first performance of the work was given in Leipzig on New Year's Day, 1879, with Joachim as the soloist. The concerto combines two complementary aspects of the composer, that of the artist concerned with the great and serious, as a contemporary critic put it, and that of the lyrical composer of songs. As always Brahms was critical of his own work, and the concerto, long promised, had been the subject of his usual doubts and hesitations. Originally four movements had been planned, but in the end the two middle movements were replaced by the present Adagio, music that Brahms described as feeble but that pleased Joachim as much as it has always pleased audiences.

The first movement opens with an orchestral exposition in which the first subject is incompletely presented in the initial bars. Its full appearance is entrusted to the soloist, after the orchestra has offered a second subject and other themes that will later seem eminently well suited to the solo violin. The actual entry of the soloist and the approach to it must remind us of Beethoven's Violin Concerto, with its rather longer orchestral exposition that had so taxed the patience of Viennese audiences seventy years earlier. The cadenza Brahms left to Joachim, whose advice on this and other matters he was willing to heed. In this recording, Takako Nishisaki plays the cadenza by Fritz Kreisler. The slow movement is splendidly lyrical, based on a melody of great beauty, which is expanded and developed by the soloist and the orchestra, dying away before the vigorous opening of the Hungarian-style finale. This, in rondo form, is of great variety, intervening episodes providing a contrast with the energetic principal theme, leading to a conclusion of mounting excitement.

Takako Nishizaki

Takako Nishizaki is one of Japan's finest violinist. After studying with her father, Shinji Nishizaki, she became the first student of Shinichi Suzuki, the creator of the famous Suzuki Method of teaching children to play the violin. Subsequently she went to Japan's famous Toho School of Music and to Juilliard in the United States, where she studied with Joseph Fuchs.

Takako Nishizaki won Second Prize in the 1964 Leventritt International Competition (First Prize went to Itzhak Perlman), First Prize in the 1967 Juilliard Concerto Competition (with Japan's Nobuko Imai, the well-known viola-player), and several awards in lesser competitions. She was only the second student at Juilliard, after Michael Rabin, to win her school's coveted Fritz Kreisler Scholarship, established by the great violinist himself.

Takako Nishizaki is one of the most frequently recorded violinists in the world today. She has recorded ten volumes of her complete Fritz Kreisler Edition, many contemporary Chinese violin concertos, among them the Concerto by Du Ming-xin, dedicated to her, and a growing number of rare, previously unrecorded violin concertos, among them concertos by Spohr, De Bériot, Cui, Respighi, Rubinstein and Joachim. For Naxos she has recorded Vivaldi's Four Seasons, Mozart's Violin Concertos Nos. 3 and 5, Sonatas by Mozart and the Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Bruch and Brahms concertos.

The Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra

The Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra has benefited considerably from the work of its distinguished conductors. These included Vaclav Talich (1949 - 1952), Ludovit Rajter and Ladislav Slovak. The Czech conductor Libor Pešek was appointed resident conductor in 1981, and the present Principal Conductor is the Slovak musician Bystrík Rezucha. Zdeněk Košler has also had a long and distinguished association with the orchestra and has conducted many of its most successful recordings, among them the complete symphonies of Dvořák.

During the years of its professional existence the Slovak Philharmonic has worked under the direction of many of the most distinguished conductors from abroad, from Eugene Goossens and Malcolm Sargent to Claudio Abbado, Antal Dorati and Riccardo Muti.

The orchestra has undertaken many tours abroad, including visits to Germany and Japan, and has made a large number of recordings for the Czech Opus label, for Supraphon, for Hungaroton and, in recent years, for the Marco Polo and Naxos labels. These recordings have brought the orchestra a growing international reputation and praise from the critics of leading international publications.

Stephen Gunzenhauser

The American conductor Stephen Gunzenhauser was educated in New York, continuing his studies at Oberlin, at the Salzburg Mozarteum, at the New England Conservatory and at Cologne State Conservatory. His period at the last of these was the result of a Fulbright Scholarship, followed by an award from the West German Government and a first prize in the conducting competition held in the Spanish town of Santiago.

During the last two decades, Gunzenhauser has enjoyed a varied and distinguished career, winning popularity in particular for his work with the Delaware Symphony, an orchestra which he has recently conducted on an eight-concert tour of Portugal.

For the Marco Polo label Stephen Gunzenhauser has recorded works by Bloch, Lachner, Taneyev, Liadov, Gliere and Rubinstein, and for NAXOS Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5, Beethoven Overtures, the Borodin Symphonies and the Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony and Rachmaninov's Second. He is currently engaged in recording all the symphonies and symphonic poems of Dvorák also for NAXOS.

