

BEEHOVEN
Violin Concertos
BRAHMS

GIL SHAHAM



ERIC JACOBSEN | THE KNIGHTS

THE VIOLIN CONCERTOS OF BEETHOVEN AND BRAHMS: THE JOACHIM CONNECTION

If the most striking element of Beethoven's only violin concerto is the opening, four soft strokes of a solo tympani announcing the tonic key, surely the oddest element is the violin's solo entrance by octaves, arpeggios, scales, and broken thirds, the basic technical equipment of any decent violinist. Only after having gone through this display of technical *bona fides* does the violin get to partake of the lush melodic treasures provided by Beethoven. They have already been heard in the orchestra before the violin entered, but it is as if the soloist needed to warm up, test out the violin and perhaps the acoustics of the room, and get comfortable before plunging into the real matter of the program. And that may be exactly what is at play here.

In 1806, the year Beethoven wrote the concerto, it was not uncommon for recitalists to begin their programs with an improvised prelude, roulades of arpeggios, scales, passages that might help the performer test the room's acoustics, warm up his/her fingers, or set the mood or key or character of the composed music to come. The practice went back centuries, even mentioned by Aristotle who wrote of a prelude by a flutist playing skillfully to pave the way for what was to come and connect it with the keynote. Beethoven may not have read Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, but this concerto's opening, with its scales and arpeggios in octaves and broken thirds fits an old pattern and leads most decisively to the key of D major, leaving no doubt at all about the sound of the tonic. It is also wickedly difficult to play cleanly.

At the time, Beethoven was at an astonishingly productive point in his life. He had recently written some of his best-known works: the *Eroica Symphony No.3 Op.55*, the *Waldstein Piano Sonata Op.53*, the *Razumowsky String Quartets Op.59*, and substantial works for violin: three demanding violin sonatas in Opus 30 and the *Kreutzer Sonata Op.47*. He had just finished his opera *Fidelio* and was working on the *Fifth Symphony* and the *Fourth Piano Concerto*.

The violin concerto was written on commission for the violin virtuoso Franz Clement, director and principal violinist of the Vienna Theater, the city's leading orchestra. Beethoven had long admired Clement from the time of his fame as child prodigy; the virtuoso was particularly noted for his skill in navigating the upper reaches of the violin fingerboard. Accordingly, the concerto provides ample opportunity to show off not only that skill, but the advanced technical acrobatics of the French school epitomized by Pierre Baillot's *The Art of Playing the Violin*. The volume, already published at the end of the 18th century, includes the exercises and etudes of the triumvirate Baillot, Kreutzer, and Rode all in one volume. Given Beethoven's admiration for Rudolf Kreutzer and his own knowledge of the violin (an instrument he had learned as a boy and played very badly), it seems likely that Beethoven took an interest in the latest possibilities. It is worth noting that by 1806, the French bow maker Francois Tourte had revolutionized the violin bow, making possible long, sustained tones, and the violin itself had been altered to its modern form, with a longer fingerboard. The concerto takes full advantage of these features.

Nevertheless, at its premiere, the concerto disappointed. To be fair, the work was finished scarcely two days before the performance. It was performed from manuscript with barely any rehearsal, or possibly—according to at least one knowledgeable person—performed at sight with no rehearsal. In addition, Clement, who had a reputation as something of a circus performer, inserted a composition of his own between Beethoven's first and second movements, holding the instrument upside down and playing on a single string. While the critics praised Clement's virtuosity, elegance, strength, and sureness on his instrument, and while they recognized the originality and many beautiful passages of the concerto, the general consensus was that the music did not hold together and that the endless repetitions of some trivial passages could easily become tiresome.

Nor did its first known English performance 23 years later fare well. One newspaper critic called it a "wild, imaginative effusion of Beethoven," another opined that "Beethoven has put forth no strength in his violin concerto; it is a *fiddling* affair, and might have been written by any third or fourth rate composer." The turning point came in 1844, when the 13-year-old Hungarian-born violinist Joseph Joachim performed it in London with Felix Mendelssohn conducting the Philharmonic (not yet "Royal") Society. The response was overwhelming. Mendelssohn, who had responsibility for the young boy, wrote to his family:

... what unprecedented success our dear Joseph had last night in the Philharmonic concert. The jubilation of the whole audience, the unanimous love and respect of all musicians, warm affection

that flowed from all who appreciate the music and who build the most beautiful hopes on such a talent. ... despite playing from memory, he played the beginning of the piece so wonderfully securely and pure, and with such impeccable firmness, that the public interrupted him three times before the great tutti; and after the first movement the noise stopped only because it had to stop at some point, and because people's hands hurt from all the clapping and their throats were hoarse from shouting.

The concerto became Joachim's signature work and has been a fixture of the violin repertory ever since.

In 1848 Joachim, now a famous soloist, performed the concerto in leading German concert halls half a dozen times. This time he was in Hamburg. In the audience was an 14-year-old pianist and aspiring composer named Johannes Brahms. Even at this age Brahms was steeped in the music of Beethoven: as a 10-year-old he had performed the piano part of Beethoven's *Quintet for Piano and Winds Op. 16*, in a concert put together by his father's professional colleagues to benefit the education of the talented little boy. Joachim's concert on March 11th, 1848 would be one of the defining moments of Brahms' life. In a letter seven years later to Joachim, now his best friend, Brahms wrote as he was returning the score of the concerto from Robert Schumann's library:

*Herewith the concerto you wanted. If only I could hear it!
Again and again the concerto reminds me of our first encounter, of which you, of course, know nothing.
You were playing in Hamburg, it must be many*

years ago; I was surely your most rapt listener. It was at a time when I was still subject to chaotic infatuations, and I didn't mind at all taking you for Beethoven. So the concerto I always held as your own.

Like me, you undoubtedly enjoy recalling single most powerful impressions, such as ... this concerto... (Brahms to Joachim, letter of February 22nd, 1855).

Brahms' involvement with Beethoven's music did not stop in 1848. While still in his twenties, his performing repertory of Beethoven's music already included the *Waldstein Sonata Op.53* and the late piano sonatas, *Sonata Op.27, No.1 quasi una Fantasia*, the *Eroica Variations Op.35*, the *32 Variations in C-minor WoO 80*, and the *Fantasy Op.77*, a work not often played today but one of Brahms' favorites. The *Triple Concerto*, the *Fourth* and *Fifth piano concertos*, sometimes with his own cadenzas, were also in his repertory. Two violin sonatas in Op.30, performed on occasion with Joachim, were at the tips of his fingers.

So it is no surprise that when Brahms set out to write a concerto for violin, he consulted immediately with his old friend, the master of the concerto by Beethoven—and someone who had himself written a long and complicated work for violin, his “Hungarian Concerto.” Joachim was not only a good composer, but one whom Brahms had considered far better than himself when they were both young men. If Brahms could find any fault with his new friend it was that the violinist was “wasting” his time touring and performing rather than composing. Indeed, Joachim, with a thorough grounding in theory and composition that far exceeded Brahms' during their formative years, had

been of immense help to Brahms as he struggled with his *Piano Concerto No.1 Op.15*. The autograph of that concerto is accompanied by Joachim's guide to the suggestions he had penciled into Brahms' manuscript, many of them still preserved on the working copy. “I say a thousand thanks to you for all your help with this work. Without you I wouldn't have done it,” Brahms wrote to his friend as the piano concerto was nearing completion (letter to Joachim, January 1857).

Always concerned with the playability of his music, with the violin concerto he wanted advice on passage work. Joachim was to mark the score “difficult, uncomfortable, impossible, etc.” (letter of 22 August, 1878). Joachim replied that most of it was manageable, some even violinistically very original; but whether it could all be played in a hot concert hall he couldn't say without playing it through. In all, seven letters concerning their collaboration have survived—far fewer than the 22 letters the men exchanged over the piano concerto, but informative nevertheless. A particular sticking point for Brahms was the issue of bow articulation. It is odd that Brahms was so open to Joachim's musical suggestions, but so slow to accept his authoritative advice regarding the conventions of string writing. Brahms quite stubbornly resisted the fact that *bow* articulations for string instruments are indicated with the same shorthand which, for piano music, are used to indicate *phrasing and touch*. A curved slur over several notes with dots on top of them indicate, for the piano, that the notes should be played as a smooth phrase with one slightly separated note leading to the next; for a string player, that same indication means that the notes are played on one stroke of the bow

but with a real separation between each note—in other words, not a musical indication of phrasing, but instructions for the bow. However, most of Joachim's suggestions concerned the effectiveness of some of the more technically challenging passages, leading to actual changes in the score. Other suggestions had to do with the balance of the orchestra, which in this work is a partner rather than an accompanying background to the violin. Joachim's many markings can still be seen in the autograph manuscript of the score, now held in the Library of Congress, a gift from Fritz Kreisler and available in a detailed facsimile edition published by the Library.

The premiere of Brahms' violin concerto took place in Leipzig, on New Year's Day 1879. Brahms was on the podium. The work is of course dedicated to Joachim, and he was the composer of the cadenza, the one which is now almost universally played, as it is on this recording. The performance, however, was not entirely a success. Neither work nor violinist was completely prepared. It would take several additional consultations between performer and composer and several additional performances before Joachim was comfortable with the piece, which presented difficulties quite different from the repertory he was used to. While he had been well prepared even as a boy for the technical challenges of the Beethoven concerto, Brahms' concerto required that and more. A comparison of the scores of the two concertos reveals striking differences; not only does Brahms employ a more dense orchestral texture than Beethoven, his violin part contains passages of greater rhythmic complexity and is far more gymnastic. It demands greater command of the entire range of the

violin, moving up and down in rapid succession, and presents many sustained passages of string crossings, lengthy passages in double and triple stops, and long passages of rapid scales in triple, quadruple, quintuple, sextuple, sixteenth, and thirty-second note groupings strung together with arpeggios and melodic lines in octaves, all to a genuine musical purpose which must not sound mechanical. For the most part, those passages are in fact accompanying the orchestra, which is carrying the thematic material, so that the soloist has to respond to the orchestra, not the other way around. The concerto requires great concentration, endurance, and strength (it was considered too strenuous for a woman until in 1885 Marie Soldat, the 22-year-old student of Joachim, performed it in Vienna, with Brahms in the audience). Beethoven requires a sparkling and secure technique, sensitivity to character and mood; Brahms does too, but on an even greater canvas. As a means of honing his shaky initial performance, Joachim took the concerto along when he and Brahms made a 15-day tour to Transylvania in the autumn of 1879, and performed it twice with Brahms playing the orchestra part on a piano (against his better judgement). Audiences were thoroughly perplexed but praised Joachim's strength and bow arm and assumed the concerto would eventually take its place in history.

Perhaps more interesting than the differences between Beethoven and Brahms are the similarities. To begin with, both are long—Beethoven's remarkably so for that time—both are in the key of D major, a resonant key for violins with its open G, D, A, and E strings all available. Both concertos make exceptional use of the

orchestra throughout. They are compositions for violin *and* orchestra, not violin with orchestral accompaniment. In an almost chamber music-like way, various important solos are given to orchestral musicians. Both works begin with large-scale orchestral tutti which introduce the characteristic themes that will be further explored by the solo violin—in itself not unusual, but in each case, the solo violin then enters not with any of those characteristic themes but rather with energetic flashes of virtuosity which have nothing to do with the opening yet eventually lead, having climbed to the top of the fingerboard, to something one can sing. Is this a coincidence? Both first movements provide a heavily dotted, almost military-sounding motif to contrast the lyric opening themes. The middle movements (both concertos are in three movements) depend heavily on the orchestra for the primary musical content; the solo instrument is not the protagonist, but the ornament. Brahms begins his middle movement with a gorgeous 28-measure solo for oboe crowned by four measures of flute. The violin doesn't enter until measure 32, prompting the famous Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasate to refuse to play a piece which required him to stand on stage silently while someone else was featured. When the violin does enter, it plays around the tune, embellishing and caressing it, but never quite playing it. Much of Beethoven's middle movement is a reverie for violin floating *around* the material heard in the orchestra, almost improvisatory. Both last movements are spirited rondos. Is this all a coincidence, or is something else at work here?

No one can mistake one concerto for the other. There is no question of plagiarism. Brahms'

connection to the music of Beethoven goes much deeper than imitation; he grew up with the Beethoven sound-world in his ears. Fragments, elements of the Beethoven sound can be found in much of his music: The extensive two-handed trills of Brahms' *Piano Concerto No.1 Op.15* resonate with the trills of Beethoven's *Piano Sonata Op.111*; the opening of Brahms' *Symphony No.4 Op.98* must be some kind of homage to the chain of thirds in the third movement of the *Hammerklavier Sonata Op.106*—perhaps, since Brahms himself had often played the sonata, that progression had lived subconsciously in his mind for years; the immensity of sound in his German Requiem can only have been inspired by Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, as there is no counterpart in the great choral and orchestra works of the time, even considering the Mozart and Cherubini requiems or the choral works of Mendelssohn and Schumann. Brahms' library contained all Beethoven's music in several editions from the earliest to the latest. He could perform all the piano sonatas, many undoubtedly from memory. And yet, to our everlasting delight, he developed a sound and style unmistakably his own.

This CD therefore brings together two of the greatest concertos for violin and orchestra in the entire repertory of Western music. In a remarkable chain of interactions between music and musicians, it is through their connection to Joseph Joachim that both were brought to life and are fully established as a vital part of the violin repertory to this day.

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GIL SHAHAM

Gil Shaham is one of the foremost violinists of our time, whose combination of flawless technique with inimitable warmth and generosity of spirit has solidified his legacy as a beloved master. He is sought after for concerto appearances as well as for recital and ensemble performances in the world's most hallowed concert halls and most prestigious festivals.

Shaham regularly performs with the world's top orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic, the



Berlin Philharmonic, the Bavarian Radio Symphony, the Dresden Staatskapelle, the Israel Philharmonic and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, among others.

In addition to his many orchestral engagements, Gil Shaham is an avid recitalist, chamber musician, and proponent of new works. He regularly collaborates with musical colleagues: composers William Bolcom, Bright Sheng and Avner Dorman;

pianists Yefim Bronfman, Akira Eguchi and sister Orli Shaham; cellists Truls Mørk and Lynn Harrell, and his wife violinist Adele Anthony.

Shaham's broad discography encompasses over 30 recordings including many award-winning discs, including multiple Grammys, a Grand Prix du Disque, a Diapason d'Or and Gramophone Editor's Choice. Since 2004 Shaham's recordings have been produced for his own label, Canary Classics, include *Nigunim*:

Hebrew Melodies with Orli Shaham, *Butterfly Lovers* and the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto; *Sarasate: Virtuoso Violin Works* with Adele Anthony, Akira Eguchi and Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León. 2014 saw the release, to wide critical acclaim, of Volume 1 in his *1930s Violin Concertos* (CC12) series encompassing concertos by Barber, Stravinsky, Berg, Hartmann and Britten, and in 2015 released his landmark recording of JS Bach's solo sonatas and partitas (CC14), and in 2016 the Grammy nominated recording and second instalment in his *1930s Violin Concertos* featuring Prokofiev and Bartok's second violin concertos (CC16).

Shaham was awarded the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1990, and in 2008 he received the coveted Avery Fisher Award, presented live on national television in the USA by conductor Gustavo Dudamel.

In 2012, he was named 'Instrumentalist of the Year' by *Musical America*, which cited the 'special kind of humanism' with which his performances are imbued. He performs on an Antonio Stradivari violin, Cremona c1719, with the assistance of Rare Violins In Consortium Artists and Benefactors Collaborative.

For more visit: gilshaham.com

ERIC JACOBSEN

Hailed by the New York Times as “an interpretive dynamo,” conductor and cellist Eric Jacobsen has built a reputation for engaging audiences with innovative and collaborative programming.

Jacobsen is Co-Artistic Director and conductor of The Knights, and also serves as the Music Director for the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra and the Greater Bridgeport Symphony. Jacobsen founded the adventurous orchestra The Knights with his brother, violinist Colin Jacobsen, to foster the intimacy and camaraderie of chamber music on the orchestral stage. As conductor, Jacobsen has led the “consistently inventive, infectiously engaged indie ensemble” (New York Times) at Central Park’s Naumburg Orchestral Concerts, Celebrate Brooklyn! Festival, (Le) Poisson Rouge, the 92nd Street Y, Carnegie Hall, and Lincoln Center, at major summer festivals such as Tanglewood, Ravinia, and Ojai, and on tour nationally and internationally, including at the Cologne Philharmonie, Düsseldorf Tonhalle, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Salzburg Großes Festspielhaus, Vienna Musikverein, National Gallery of Dublin, and the Dresden Musikfestspiele. Recent collaborators include violinists Itzhak Perlman and Gil Shaham, singers Dawn Upshaw, Susan Graham, and Nicholas Phan, and pianists Emanuel Ax and Jean-Yves Thibaudet. Also in demand as a guest conductor, Jacobsen has led the symphony orchestras of Baltimore, Detroit, Virginia, Alabama, the New World, Naples, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra, and the Deutsche Philharmonie Merck.

Under Jacobsen’s baton, The Knights have developed an extensive recording collection, which includes the critically acclaimed album *Azul*, with longtime

collaborator Yo-Yo Ma, as well as the Prokofiev Concerto in the Grammy-nominated Gil Shaham album *1930s Violin Concertos Vol.2*. The Knights issued three albums for Sony Classical including *Jan Vogler and The Knights Experience: Live from New York*; *New Worlds*, and an all-Beethoven album, as well as the “smartly programmed” (National Public Radio) *A Second in Silence* on the Anacalagon label. Jacobsen’s first release on Warner Classics was *the ground beneath our feet. We Are The Knights*, a documentary film produced by Thirteen/WNET, premiered in September 2011.

A dedicated chamber musician, Jacobsen is a member of Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Ensemble, participating in residencies and performances at the Hollywood Bowl, Carnegie Hall, and across the U.S., Central Asia, Middle East, Far East, and Europe. In addition, as a founding member of the string quartet Brooklyn Rider, he has taken part in a wealth of world premieres and toured extensively in North America, Europe, and Asia.

In December 2012, Jacobsen and his brother Colin were selected from among the nation’s top visual, performing, media, and literary artists to receive a prestigious United States Artists Fellowship. Eric splits his time between New York and Orlando with his wife, singer-songwriter Aoife O’Donovan, and their daughter.



COLIN JACOBSEN

Violinist and composer Colin Jacobsen is “one of the most interesting figures on the classical music scene” (The Washington Post). An eclectic composer who draws on a range of influences, he was named one of the top 100 composers under 40 by NPR listeners. He is also active as an Avery Fisher Career Grant-winning soloist and has toured with the Silk Road Ensemble since its inception in 2000. For his work as a founding member of two game-changing, audience-expanding ensembles – the string quartet *Brooklyn Rider* and orchestra *The Knights* – Jacobsen was



selected from among the nation’s top visual, performing, media, and literary artists to receive a prestigious and substantial United States Artists Fellowship. As a featured soloist and composer with the YouTube Symphony Orchestra, he performed at the Sydney Opera

House in a memorable concert streamed by millions of viewers worldwide. His compositions and arrangements for dance and theater include *The Principles of Uncertainty*, a collaboration between writer/illustrator Maira Kalman and Dance Heginbotham; and *More Or Less I Am*, a theatrical production of Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* by Compagnia de’ Colombari.

THE KNIGHTS

The Knights are a collective of adventurous musicians dedicated to transforming the orchestral experience and eliminating barriers between audiences and music. Driven by an open-minded spirit of camaraderie and exploration, they inspire listeners with vibrant programs that encompass their roots in the classical tradition and passion for artistic discovery. The orchestra has toured and recorded with renowned soloists including Yo-Yo Ma, Dawn Upshaw, Béla Fleck, and Gil Shaham, and has performed at Carnegie Hall, Tanglewood, and the Vienna Musikverein. The Knights evolved from late-night chamber music reading parties with friends at the home of violinist Colin Jacobsen and cellist Eric Jacobsen, who serve as the group’s artistic directors.

The Knights are proud to be known as “one of Brooklyn’s sterling cultural products...known far beyond the borough for their relaxed virtuosity and expansive repertory” (The New Yorker). Their roster boasts musicians of remarkably diverse talents, including composers, arrangers, singer-songwriters, and improvisers, who bring a range of cultural influences to the group, from jazz and klezmer to pop and indie rock music. The unique camaraderie within the group retains the intimacy and spontaneity of chamber music in performance. Through the palatable joy and friendship in their music-making, each musician strives to include new and familiar audiences to experience this important art form.

Counted among the highlights from recent seasons are: a fully-staged version of Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide* in honor of his 100th birthday at both the Tanglewood Music Festival and the Ravinia Festival; the premiere of *The Head and the Load* with international artist William Kentridge at London’s

Tate Modern and New York's Park Avenue Armory; the recording of Prokofiev's Second Violin Concerto on master violinist Gil Shaham's Grammy-nominated 2016 release, *1930s Violin Concertos, Vol. 2* and a performance in the NY PHIL BIENNIAL along with the San Francisco Girls Chorus (led by composer Lisa Bielawa) and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, which featured world premieres by Rome Prize-winner Bielawa, Pulitzer Prize-winner Aaron Jay Kernis, and Knights violinist and co-founder Colin Jacobsen. The ensemble made its Carnegie Hall debut in the New York premiere of the Steven Stucky/Jeremy Denk opera *The Classical Style*, and has toured the U.S. with banjo virtuoso Béla Fleck and Europe with soprano Dawn Upshaw.



Other recordings include the critically acclaimed *Azul*, released in 2016; 2015's "instinctive and appealing" (The Times, UK) *the ground beneath our feet* on Warner Classics; an all-Beethoven disc on Sony Classical; and 2012's "smartly programmed" (NPR) *A Second of Silence for Ancalagon*.

Violin I

Colin Jacobsen,
concertmaster *+
Sonya Chung
Toni Glickman
Yaira Matyakubova
Guillaume Pirard ◦
Chelsea Smith
Emily Daggett Smith ^

Violin II

Guillaume Pirard *^
Emily Daggett Smith +◦
Alex Gonzalez
Sumire Hirotsuru
Tara Lynn Ramsey
Michelle Ross
Amie Weiss

Viola

Kyle Armbrust +
Mario Gotoh *
Miranda Sielaff
Izia Weyman

Cello

Jane Cords-O'Hara *
Caitlin Sullivan +
Jia Kim
Caleb van der Swaagh

Bass

Logan Coale +
Shawn Conley *
Joseph Bongiorno

Flute

Sooyun Kim *+
Christopher Johnson

Oboe

Geoffrey Deemer *
Gustav Highstein +

Clarinet

Christopher Pell *+
Alicia Lee

Bassoon

Martin Garcia +
Erik Höltje *

Horn

Michael P. Atkinson +◦
David Byrd-Marrow *
Rachel Drehmann
Zohar Schondorf ◦

Trumpet

Sycil Mathai *+
Stephen Madancy

Timpani

Ian Sullivan

*Principal, Beethoven
Concerto
+ Principal, Brahms
Concerto

^ Beethoven Concerto only
◦ Brahms Concerto only

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Violin Concerto in D major, Op.61	39:51
1 I. Allegro ma non troppo	21:22
2 II. Larghetto	08:37
3 III. Rondo. Allegro	09:52

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Violin Concerto in D major, Op.77	35:08
4 I. Allegro non troppo.	19:25
5 II. Adagio	08:05
6 III. Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace — Poco più presto	07:38

GIL SHAHAM, violin
ERIC JACOBSEN, conductor
THE KNIGHTS

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