

Feb 24-25 2010

Nagano and Repin, Summit Meeting

Ludwig van Beethoven, *Violin Concerto* in D major, Op. 61

Premiered on December 23, 1806, in the Theater an der Wien. Franz Clement, soloist and conductor.

The original manuscript of this concerto is a puzzle. Aside from numerous corrections and alternative sketches, it contains two different versions for the soloist, and the first printed edition presents a third one. The composer's original thoughts were probably influenced by the soloist's suggestions, technically simpler, and later on, by his publisher.

The premiere was not a success, indeed. Contemporary critics of Beethoven agreed that it was not possible to appreciate his compositions at the first audition. The great majority of his listeners were shocked, "overcome by the incoherent and excessive ideas", "troubled by the unfamiliar sounds", and by "the crude, wild and extraneous harmonies". In other words, Beethoven's works, breaking free from the conventional frames of his time, puzzled critics as much as listeners. They would need time to tune their ears in order to find music in Beethoven's sounds.

The reviewer from the Viennese *Zeitung fur Theater, Musik und Poesie* wrote:

The verdict of the connoisseurs is unanimous: they concede that it has some beauty, but maintain that the continuity is often completely fragmented, and that the endless repetition of some commonplace passages might easily prove wearisome. They assert that Beethoven could put his undoubtedly great talents to better use.

Even so, the critics of the time weren't quite wrong. Beethoven completed the work in the last moment; the score looks like a sketch with a mass of corrections. No wonder that the soloist had little time to learn his part, and no time at all to rehearse it with the orchestra. It was a sight-reading, and the audience didn't appreciate it. In such conditions, even the most beautiful music is at risk of being betrayed. In the following decades the concerto was almost forgotten, till 1844, when the young violinist Joseph Joachim, with the orchestra conducted by Mendelssohn, rediscovered it, taking the work on an European tour. Since then, it has become one of the touchstones of the violin concerto repertoire.

The work breaks the link with classical Viennese tradition, asserting its own style, marked by the *Eroica Symphony* (1803), piano sonatas *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* (1803-5), the *Fourth Piano Concerto* (1805-6), and the opera *Fidelio* (1805). Beethoven used to work on several pieces at the same time; the *Violin Concerto's* autograph is sprinkled with sketches of his *Symphony No. 5* (1806). Moreover, following the suggestion of the publisher and pianist Muzio Clementi, the composer revised his *Violin Concerto* in a version for piano and orchestra (1808), whose first sketches were also found in margins of the original manuscript.

While Beethoven's piano concertos follow in greater or lesser degree Mozart's trail, his *Violin Concerto* has no model, although he was familiar with the repertoire for stringed instruments, French and Italian alike. The work certainly disturbed the audience with its unusual, vast proportions and musical depth, strikingly different from earlier pieces of its kind. Far away from the virtuosity, without bravura effects to seduce the public, Beethoven conceived this concerto in a new light, as serious and dramatic as his symphonies. Nevertheless, the solo violin is accompanied by the chamber orchestra, consisting of strings, woodwinds and pairs of horns, trumpets and timpani.

An expansive orchestral introduction presents the themes of the first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*, opening with five soft beats on the timpani which permeate the whole movement. The pulsing sounds introduce the first theme, played by the woodwinds in consecutive thirds, announcing the character of the piece, serene and reflective, with a touch of sadness. The growing intensity of the orchestra prepares the soloist's restatement of the theme. The timpani beats herald the second theme in minor, vigorous and dynamic, participating in the vast development, dominated by the solo violin. The traditional recapitulation ends with a cadenza, which Beethoven himself never wrote, leaving to the performer the freedom to compose his own piece of bravura, as it was the custom before his time. Several great violinists, past and present, provided cadenzas for this Concerto, among them Joseph Joachim, Fritz Kreisler, Wolfgang Schneiderhan and Alfred Schnittke. For this performance, the soloist chose Fritz Kreisler's cadenza.

The slow movement, *Larghetto*, is a romance built as a theme and variations, whose transformations use the orchestral colors. Various instruments (horn, clarinet, bassoon) repeat the theme literally, leaving to the soloist the subtle figurations of the melody. The light accompaniment of muted strings emphasizes the violin solo and its chant. This romance reaches the highest level in compositional skill, developing various aspects of the unique musical idea, without transforming its melody, rhythm or harmony. The concluding cadenza leads into the sparkling *Rondo Allegro*. Dancing on a folk-like melody introduced by the soloist, this *Rondo*, with its earthy character, dissipates the dream-like mood of the romance. The orchestra follows the violin in a dialogue with the *ritornello* episodes, playing a number of other themes, most notable the lyrical one in G minor key, divided between violin and bassoon. Finally, the solo violin embroiders the melodic arabesques, leading to a short cadenza, and together with the orchestra, brings the *Concerto* to its brilliant conclusion.

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Johannes Brahms, *Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68*

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany; died April 2, 1897, Vienna, Austria.
The first performance took place in Karlsruhe on November 4, 1876; Otto Dessoff conducting.

Why compose symphonies after Beethoven?

The heritage of the Master weighed heavily on generations of composers of the Romantic era. It took a long and difficult path, starting with Mendelssohn, Schubert and Schumann,

to go beyond the footsteps of the giant. Brahms needed twenty years of sketches and various experiences in orchestra writing (his Op.11 and Op. 16 *Serenades* , *First piano concerto*, op. 15, the *German Requiem*, Op. 45), before he felt ready to leave the shadow of Beethoven behind and build his own style.

Brahms worked on his *Symphony* sporadically. The first movement was completed as early as 1862 and sent to Clara Schumann, his friend and best critic. The next time she received news about it was six years later: he send her a birthday card with the horn call from the last movement. Finally, some eight years after that, in 1876, Brahms played for Clara the whole work at the piano.

The time was on his side, rewarding composer's long effort. It gave him a valuable experience in orchestration and mastery of large forms. Eduard Hanslick, the famous Vienna critic, wrote after the concert:

Seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer's first symphony with such tense anticipation. The new symphony is so fervent and complex, so unconcerned with common effects, that it hardly lends itself to easy understanding...even the layman will immediately recognise it as one of the most magnificent works of the symphonic literature.

The first performance in Karlsruhe was a triumph, acclaimed by the audience and critics. The influential conductor Hans von Bülow proclaimed it "the Tenth", referring, of course, to Beethoven; the honour which no other composer would dare to expect.

However, in other countries, the audience was rather reluctant. Brahms' symphony would wait a long time before it became part of the symphonic repertoire. Critics outside Germanic countries were uncompromising: the *C minor Symphony* "sounds for the most part morbid, strained and unnatural; much of it even ugly", "poor in ideas", it is "full of irritant and restless discords; it has strange, climbing, grasping phrases." Moreover, Brahms' music was qualified as "modern of the moderns"; which is, in the context, far from being a compliment (*Boston Daily Advertiser*, 1878). According to the *Evening Transcript*, there were doubts "whether Brahms's music would ever become popular". "It must be admitted that to the larger part of our public, Brahms is still an incomprehensible terror." (Boston, 1885-8).

It is hardly a surprise. Since the time of Beethoven, listeners as well as critics didn't appreciate the unfamiliar music, often perceived as offensive or meaningless; the non-conformist works received the same kind of reactionary comments. However, it is true that Brahms was not seeking to please the audience with pretty sounds: « My symphony is long and not exactly loveable. »

Composed according to the traditional model of four movements, the symphony is build on contrasting themes and dramatic conflict, highlighted by masterly orchestration. Following the last of Beethoven's symphonies, all the thematic material is still outlined in the opening movement, progressively shifting the emphasis to the last. The listener,

today, is impressed by its thematic unity, dramatic strength and lyrical intensity that make it a true masterpiece.

As an echo to Beethoven's timpani (opening the *Violin Concerto*), the first movement, *Un poco sostenuto-Allegro*, announces its dramatic soundscape with the powerful pounding of percussions. After the slow introduction, the exposition of a sonata form suddenly begins with the tense, dark main theme, first heard in the violins, then amplified in the orchestra. The second theme - a triplet melody - appears at the very end of the exposition, leading to the development, which brings a striking change of mood. The two thematic lines are entwined, above the light accompaniment of the orchestra. A long *ostinato* pedal held by the timpani, and a chromatic horn transition announces the recapitulation, stretched to a huge length. Near the end, Brahms introduces a mysterious episode in B flat minor, delaying the conclusion and producing a dramatic final effect with the luminous accords in C major.

The two contrasting inner movements are calm and relatively short, more suited to a serenade, with their intimate and light character. Both are in a symmetric tripartite form of the song.

After the dark, stormy *Allegro, Andante sostenuto* brings calm and serenity. Strings sing simple, lyrical melody in a dialogue with oboe, clarinet and flute, before a new tempestuous episode recalls the opening movement. It comes to rest with a duet between violin and horn.

The third movement, *Un poco allegretto e grazioso*, is an *intermezzo*, warm and gentle, very close to Brahms' piano miniatures. Two flowing melodies are traded playfully between strings and woodwinds, surrounding the more animated middle section in a minor key. It concludes in a light mood.

The immense finale, *Adagio-Più andante-Allegro non troppo, ma con brio-Più Allegro*, begins with a vast introduction, leading towards the horn call, enhanced with a majestic trombone chorale. Then follows the bright C major principal theme, reminiscent of the famous "Ode to Joy", homage to Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*. The woodwinds develop it in a stormy episode, before the choral (horn call) returns to close the exposition. The development focuses on the contrapuntal climax of the main theme and the horn call appears announcing the recapitulation. The brass chorale (echo of the work's opening) and the strings with the grand theme culminate in a flamboyant coda.

Eduard Hanslick was right, indeed: it is one of the most magnificent works of symphonic literature.

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