

Violin Concerto in D major, op. 35

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky

Born in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka province, May 7, 1840; died in St. Petersburg, November 6, 1893

Three violinists played a part in the creation of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto: Yosif Kotek, composition pupil of Tchaikovsky and initial connection to his great patroness Mme. von Meck (whom he never actually met); Leopold Auer, whom Tchaikovsky met at Nikolay Rubinstein's house and for whom Tchaikovsky wrote the *Sérénade mélancolique*; and Adolf Brodsky, who actually first performed the *Sérénade*.

In 1878 Kotek visited Tchaikovsky in Clarens where the composer was recovering from his disastrous marriage. Kotek offered advice on the solo violin part of the Concerto, which Tchaikovsky had begun in March and completed by the middle of the month. They played it through for Tchaikovsky's brother Modest on April 1, and their dissatisfaction with the original slow movement led the composer to discard it and write another. (The discarded movement later turned up as one of the violin-piano pieces in *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*.) Auer was to premiere the work and thus "took over" the dedication from Kotek, who had abandoned his plan to learn the work. Yet just as Rubinstein had rejected the First Piano Concerto, Auer pronounced the Violin Concerto impossible to play, which "had the effect," wrote Tchaikovsky in his diary, "of casting this unfortunate child of my imagination for many years to come into the limbo of hopelessly forgotten things."

Two years later Tchaikovsky heard from his publisher Jürgenson that Brodsky had learned it and would play the premiere in Vienna. The performance on December 4, 1881, under Hans Richter caused a great stir, as recorded by many critics. Only two out of ten had favorable things to say, and the supreme venerated critic Eduard Hanslick wrote such a nasty attack that Tchaikovsky never forgave him. Hanslick—an arch conservative in the days when critics had less wide-ranging tastes—had just the year before given a glowing report of Brahms's new Violin Concerto and could hardly have been expected to like such a dissimilar work. Brodsky valiantly continued to champion the Concerto, and thus Tchaikovsky finally dedicated it to him, although he had certain problems with it as well. In Auer's defense it should be said that he changed his opinion of the work (again following Rubinstein's pattern) and not only played it everywhere himself but taught it to his many famous pupils, including Jascha Heifetz.

After the orchestral introduction, the solo violin introduces the first subject, whose lyrical character could do as well for a second subject. Nor does the actual second subject provide great contrast as in the Classical tradition. There are, however, plenty of fireworks in the movement, especially in the cadenza, which in the manner of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto creates an elision with the orchestral recapitulation. After the beautiful second movement, Canzonetta, with its graceful melodies, the finale bursts upon us with what Hanslick unfairly described as the "brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian *kermess*—we see wild and vulgar faces, we hear curses, we smell bad brandy." The second section, which is more relaxed compared to the dash of the rest of the movement, still preserves the atmosphere of rustic festivity with its simple melody over a drone bass. In this light-spirited rondo the violinist's opportunities for display are dazzling.

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