

Max Bruch - Violin Concerto No.1 in G minor, Op.26

I. Vorspiel: Allegro Moderato

II. Adagio

III. Finale: Allegro Energico

Max Bruch (1838-1920) was a German romantic composer, conductor, teacher and violinist. He started composing in his childhood and wrote this concerto at the age of 26, but only completed it 4 years later in 1868. This work has become a staple in the repertoire of violin concertos.

The first performance of this concerto was given on 24 April 1866 but it was immediately withdrawn as Bruch was grossly dissatisfied with it. He then sent the manuscript to several musician friends, including the great violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, who responded with a comprehensive list of suggestions for the work's improvement.

After having re-written the work at least half a dozen times, the revised edition premiered on 7 January 1868, with Joachim as the soloist. Bruch dedicated this work to him to express his respect for Joachim and gratitude for a successful collaboration.

Although Bruch's *Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor*, along with *Scottish Fantasy* and *Kol Nidrei*, were his most celebrated works, this violin concerto was so well-received that it overshadowed his other works. Bruch probably did not expect this and had already sold the manuscript to a publisher for only a small sum of money. Thus, he did not benefit financially from its immense popularity.

This may have been a sore point for Bruch. Although many great German violinists wanted to perform this concerto, he would dismissively say "every fortnight another one comes to me wanting to play the first concerto. I have now become rude; and have told them: 'I cannot listen to this concerto any more – did I perhaps write just this one? Go away and once and for all play the other concertos, which are just as good, if not better.'"

Bruch was known for his beautiful and well-structured music, and was not one to push artistic boundaries. This style placed him in the category of a "Romantic Classicism" composer.

Bruch's *Violin Concerto in G Minor* is written in the standard sonata form. It was composed around 20 years after the premiere of Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E Minor*, and there are many parallels drawn between the two works. These include omitting the use of a long orchestral introduction, unlike most typical classical concertos, and having transitions that connect one movement into the next seamlessly, instead of clearly defined pauses.

It is interesting to note that Bruch initially titled the first movement *Introduzione-Fantasia*, but later changed it to *Vorspiel (Prelude)*. He struggled between classifying this work in the style of a concerto or a fantasy as the first movement requires the soloist to play in an improvisatory manner. But Joachim convinced him that “the designation (of) concerto is completely apt” as there were adequate tempo and mood contrasts among the three movements.

In the opening of ***Vorspiel: Allegro Moderato***, Bruch opens with a haunting 2-bar timpani tremolo, followed by a questioning statement posed by the woodwinds. It is apparent that the composer was well-versed in composing operas as the solo violin begins in an improvisatory manner, similar to a recitative. The questioning and mini cadenza-like exchanges are repeated again, before the orchestra replies in full force and the soloist joins in together with the orchestra. The driving pulse in this section is characterised by the long-short rhythms in the lower strings, and the tremolo chords in the upper strings.

The music then gives way to a lyrical section where the interplay between the soloist and the orchestra is kaleidoscopic in nature. An ascending chromatic line in the solo violin ensues, which turns into a sequence of intense arpeggiated chords, before the orchestra takes over the final section ever so passionately. The opening of this movement reinstates itself, ending on a climax that slowly descends and eventually settles on a single B-flat note, marking the start of the second movement.

The ***Adagio*** begins peacefully and prayer-like. It gains activity and momentum from the pizzicatos in the cellos and double basses, and from the demisemiquavers in the 2nd violins and violas, resembling flowing water. This movement features some of the most beautiful and nostalgic melodies ever written for the violin. The expressive melodies and luscious harmonies of this movement caused Joachim to term this concerto “the richest and most seductive”, when comparing it to the violin concertos of Bruch’s German counterparts (Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn).

Bruch moves almost continuously (except for a brief pause) into the ***Finale: Allegro Energico***, with the violas opening with measured tremolos. The orchestra slowly joins in, preparing the soloist for a grand entry that is charged with energy and a gypsy-like Hungarian dance. This movement has its fair share of technical brilliance, and also the dignified, inward and exquisite melodies of Bruch’s writing. The coda of this movement is marked “Con Fuoco (With Fire)”, comprising a gradual stringendo to a final presto section that concludes on an exhilarating note.

This concerto paved the way for Tchaikovsky’s and Brahms’ Violin Concertos a decade later, with the two composers borrowing the style and structure of the second and third movements of Bruch’s concerto respectively. The success of this work has ensured its lasting place in the violin repertoire today and remains a perennial favourite among audiences worldwide.