

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes  
February 10, 2018  
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Max Bruch (1838-1920)

Concerto No.1 for Violin and Orchestra in G minor, Op.26

*Bruch's first violin concerto was completed in 1866, and the final version was performed for the first time by soloist Joseph Joachim in January 1868.*

Max Bruch is known today primarily for two solo violin works, the G minor concerto heard here, and the *Scottish Fantasy*, and his *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra. However, Bruch was a tremendously successful composer in his day, with a catalog of nearly a hundred works that included three operas, three symphonies, and many solo pieces, sacred and secular choral works, art songs, and chamber works. He was a well-regarded conductor and one of the most sought-after composition teachers in Europe—Ottorino Respighi and Ralph Vaughan Williams were among his more famous pupils.

Bruch made the first sketches for a violin concerto as early as 1857. He finished the work early in 1866, and in April of that year, conducted a preliminary version at a benefit concert in Koblenz, where the solo part was played by a violinist from Cologne, Otto von Königsglöw. Bruch made several significant revisions after hearing this performance, even considering recasting the work as a “Fantasy” because of its relatively free form. Finally, Bruch solicited the advice of the greatest Austrian virtuoso of the day, Joseph Joachim, who was impressed, and suggested several additional changes. Joachim played the premiere of the revised concerto, and Bruch dedicated the published score to him. Almost forty years later, Joachim cited the Bruch G minor as one of the “four German violin concertos”—alongside the concertos of Beethoven, Brahms, and Mendelssohn—calling it the “richest, most seductive” of the four.

The concerto is set in the traditional three movements, but none of the three follows a strict Classical form. Bruch titles the first movement “*Prelude*” and it serves as a kind of extended free-form introduction to the second movement. Two ideas are introduced and briefly developed: a very lyrical solo line played over a quiet orchestral accompaniment and a contrasting melody, played above *pizzicato* basses. The prelude builds to a peak and then dies away, leaving space for a lovely cadenza, which ties directly into the second movement (*Adagio*). The *Adagio* is carried entirely by the solo part, which plays almost without pause until a brief orchestral passage in the middle. The violin introduces three unhurried and beautiful themes, developing each in turn.

Joachim placed this piece alongside the more famous violin concertos of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, and it is in the finale (*Allegro energico*) that the resemblance is clearest. Though Bruch does not use the same Classical Rondo form as the others, the spirit is the same. After an opening orchestral flourish, the violin introduces the main theme—a lively Gypsy-style melody played in double stops. The family resemblance

between this and the main theme of Brahms's finale is particularly close, though Brahms's concerto was written some ten years later. The movement proceeds in a loose sonata form, with a slightly more solemn second subject. The main theme dominates throughout in both the solo part and accompaniment, eventually becoming the basis for a flashy and exhilarating coda.

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