

BRAHMS: Serenade No. 2 Violin Concerto

Notes on the Program

By Noel Morris ©2021



Joseph Joachim

c. 1855



Johannes Brahms


Beethoven was a giant to 19th-century composers. He kicked off the Romantic age with a set of nine watershed symphonies, which became the gold standard for orchestral writing. And he got into people's heads. People kept anointing this composer and that composer as the "heir to Beethoven." A superstitious man, Gustav Mahler gave his ninth symphonic effort a fancy title (*Das Lied von der Erde*) rather than naming it "Symphony No. 9," because he was afraid he'd die if he completed as many symphonies as Beethoven had. (After *Das Lied*, he did write a Ninth Symphony—and then he died.)

Brahms reacted in a different way. It seems he suffered from imposter syndrome, famously saying, "You have no idea what it's like to hear the footsteps of a giant like that behind you."

Johannes Brahms was born into a working-class neighborhood along the seaport of Hamburg. A teenager when the 1848 revolutions swept across Europe, he witnessed a flood refugees, all hoping to board a ship to the New World. Hungarians arrived by the thousands. And the people of Hamburg developed a taste for their music.

From the age of fourteen, Brahms helped support his parents by playing piano in dive bars. With long, blonde hair, piercing blue eyes and an almost feminine beauty, he cut an unlikely figure among the sailors and exiles, but one of those, the young violinist Eduard Reményi, found in him a brilliant recital partner.


Reményi introduced Brahms to the community of Hungarians, exposing him to the wild, whirling fiddle music of the Roma—a sound that would inhabit Brahms's music from that point on. Soon, he worked up some feverish piano parts to accompany his friend, and the two boys went on the road. The friendship didn't last, but Reményi did introduce him to someone who would change his life: the prominent Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim.

A large, sepia-toned portrait of Johannes Brahms, showing him from the chest up. He has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark bow tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

*Brahms began writing a serenade for
wind instruments in July of 1858.*

Glomming onto the gifted youth, Joachim, who was only a couple years older, secured for Brahms an audience with composers Franz Liszt and Robert Schumann, as well as George V, King of Hanover. The blind king dubbed the twenty-year-old Brahms "Little Beethoven," and Joachim became Brahms's primary resource for all things violin.

It was Robert Schumann, editor of a music journal, who published an article about Brahms, introducing him to the world:

A circular, sepia-toned portrait of Robert Schumann, showing him from the chest up. He has dark hair and is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark bow tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression.

I thought . . . that someone would suddenly come along . . . one whose mastery would not gradually unfold but, like Minerva, would spring fully armed from the head of Jupiter. And now he has arrived, a young blood, at whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch. His name is Johannes Brahms.

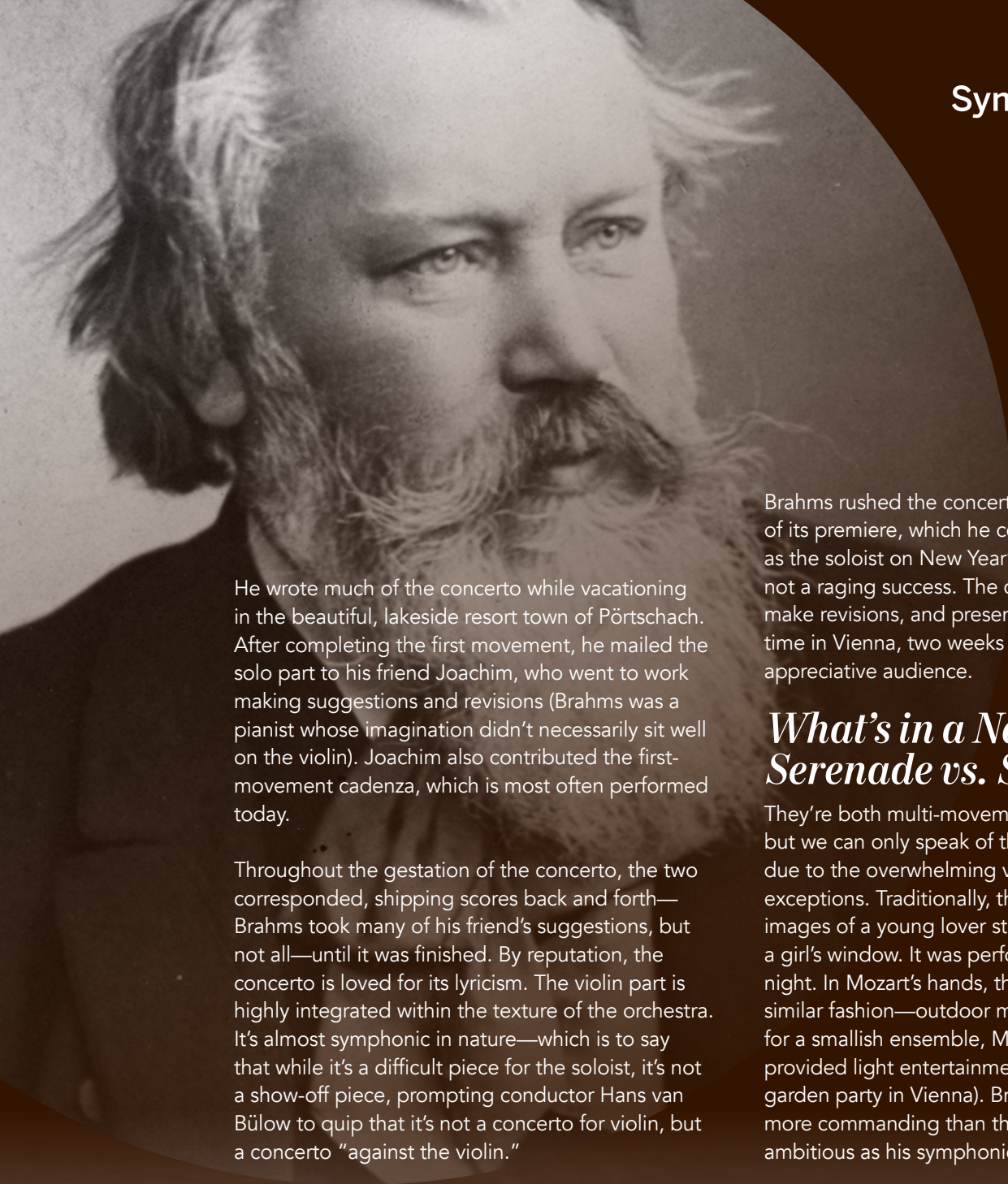
It was high praise for a youth who had written a few piano pieces. From that point on, Brahms was burdened by Schumann's prophesy. Not long after the article was published, he got it in his head that he needed write a symphony, and thus began a long series of frustrated attempts, one of which became his Piano Concerto No. 1 in 1858.

He had his first real taste of the orchestra while serving as the director of Court Concerts and Choral Society for the Prince of Lippe-Detmold. A cushy job for a 21-year-old, he played piano, directed a fine orchestra, a women's chorus and gave lessons. With the ensemble as his laboratory, Brahms began writing a serenade for wind instruments in July of 1858. He soon added strings and toyed with the idea of expanding it into a symphony.

"I need the [staff] paper," he wrote to Joachim, "to change my first serenade, now and finally into a symphony." But that didn't stick—the piece would remain a serenade. **That same year, he began working on the Serenade No. 2, this time scoring it for orchestra minus the violins. He finished his Second Serenade in 1859.**

Over the next decade, Brahms produced his German Requiem, along with a number of important chamber works, songs, piano pieces—but still no symphony. Meanwhile—sadly—for all the wonderful works that came from this period, there are many more that he produced and destroyed.

Brahms finally issued his First Symphony in 1876, some twenty years after his earliest attempts. **The Violin Concerto followed in 1878.**



He wrote much of the concerto while vacationing in the beautiful, lakeside resort town of Pörtlach. After completing the first movement, he mailed the solo part to his friend Joachim, who went to work making suggestions and revisions (Brahms was a pianist whose imagination didn't necessarily sit well on the violin). Joachim also contributed the first-movement cadenza, which is most often performed today.

Throughout the gestation of the concerto, the two corresponded, shipping scores back and forth—Brahms took many of his friend's suggestions, but not all—until it was finished. By reputation, the concerto is loved for its lyricism. The violin part is highly integrated within the texture of the orchestra. It's almost symphonic in nature—which is to say that while it's a difficult piece for the soloist, it's not a show-off piece, prompting conductor Hans van Bülow to quip that it's not a concerto for violin, but a concerto "against the violin."

Brahms rushed the concerto to completion ahead of its premiere, which he conducted with Joachim as the soloist on New Year's Day in 1879. It was not a raging success. The composer continued to make revisions, and presented the piece a second time in Vienna, two weeks later, to a much more appreciative audience.

What's in a Name? Serenade vs. Symphony

They're both multi-movement orchestral pieces, but we can only speak of them in general terms due to the overwhelming variety of examples and exceptions. Traditionally, the serenade conjures images of a young lover strumming his lute beneath a girl's window. It was performed outdoors and at night. In Mozart's hands, the serenade followed in similar fashion—outdoor music at night. Scored for a smallish ensemble, Mozart's serenades provided light entertainment (picture an elegant garden party in Vienna). Brahms' serenades are more commanding than that, but not as heavy or ambitious as his symphonies.

Serenade No. 2

First ASO Performance: **JAN 30, 1954** | **Henry Sopkin, conductor**

Most Recent ASO Performance: **NOV 5, 2006** | **Donald Runnicles, conductor**

Instrumentation: **3 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, strings**

BRAHMS: Violin Concerto

First ASO Performance: **MAR 10, 1952** | **Henry Sopkin, conductor** | **Robert Harrison, violin**

Most Recent ASO Performance: **NOV 11, 2018** | **Robert Abbado, conductor** | **Veronika Eberle, violin**

Instrumentation: **Solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings**



Pörtlach am Wörthersee — Austria