

Johannes Brahms – Double Concerto For Violin & Cello op.102 (1970)

Written by bluesever

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1. Allegro 2. Andante 3. Vivace non troppo David Oistrakh – violin Mstislav Rostropovich – cello Cleveland Orchestra George Szell – conductor

The Double Concerto is Brahms' last major orchestral work, written in the summer of 1887 and first performed on the 18th October that year, with the composer himself conducting the cellist Robert Hausmann and violinist Joseph Joachim. Hausmann was a member of the Joachim Quartet and Brahms' favourite cellist. The Second Cello Sonata was composed for Hausmann.

Joachim had been a close friend of Brahms for many years. The two had collaborated on a number of works and Joachim premiered many of Brahms' chamber works. Brahms' Violin Concerto of 1878 was dedicated to his friend, and Joachim's cadenza is still the one most regularly performed. This all ended in 1883 as the two fell out after Joachim's acrimonious divorce. The two did not speak for the following four years. It is with a backdrop of lost friendship that the concerto was conceived. Brahms' offer to join in the première of the Double Concerto was a peace offering that Joachim accepted, and the two renewed their collaboration.

Brahms' reputation as the foremost composer of the age was so secure by the 1880s that he was already referred to in the same breath as Bach and Beethoven, supplanting Berlioz as the last of the "Three Bs". Unlike Beethoven, to whom Brahms is considered the natural successor; Brahms never had to accept a commission in his adult life. He wrote whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. This is possibly the reason for waiting so late in his career to tackle the technical difficulty of writing for two instruments with such similar symphonic usage but such a dissimilar sound. Brahms was a perfectionist regarding form, and surely considered it a challenge to balance the two instruments, giving each its proper exposure in the spotlight, while still crafting a piece that met his own standards for both beauty and correct musicality.

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The concerto is truly Romantic but has echoes of a Baroque concerto grosso, the soloists against the body of the orchestra. The generous double stopping of both instruments almost gives the effect of a solo string quartet.

The orchestra introduces the main theme of the first movement with a storm of sound and almost immediately falls silent, stopping short as the cello takes sudden command of the stage with a virtuosic cadenza-like passage giving way to the wind who, in turn, allow the violin to respond with its own display before the movement settles into a traditional form with the orchestra presenting strong Romantic lyrical themes and the soloists elaborating on those themes. The hymn-like second movement starts as with a sweet lullaby, tempered by the slightly discordant orchestral echoing of the soloists' lead. The final movement reflects Brahms' love of folk music with a Gypsy theme from the plains of Hungary. It moves from the minor to the major with a fierce good humour.

Much of Brahms' late music was not well received within his lifetime. More than a century later, our ears are more receptive to Brahms' sometimes disconcerting fusion of sternness and delicacy. --- bhso.org.uk

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