

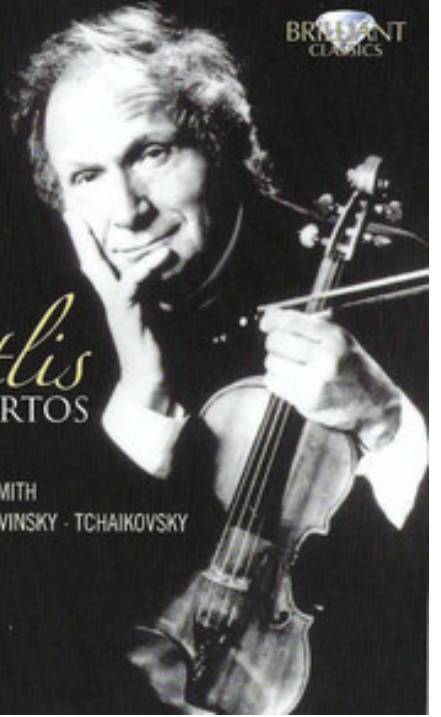
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BRIGHT
CLASSICS

THE ART OF
Ivry Gitlis
VIOLIN CONCERTOS

BARTÓK · BERG · BRUCH · HINDEMITH
MENDELSSOHN · SIBELIUS · STRAVINSKY · TCHAIKOVSKY



IVRY GITLIS

One of the most original violinists of his time, Ivry Gitlis was born in Haifa, Israel on 22 August 1922. He began to study the violin at the age of five and gave his first concert at the age of nine. Bronislaw Huberman, the celebrated violinist, heard him play when he was ten and was so impressed with his talent that he sent Gitlis to Paris to study at the National Conservatory. Having won a Premier Prix by the age of 13, he continued his studies with George Enescu, Jacques Thibaud, Carl Flesch and Theodore Pashkos.

During the Second World War he went to London where he first worked in a war factory and was then assigned to the artists branch of the British Army, giving numerous concerts for the Allied soldiers.

After the war Gitlis made a highly successful debut with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and subsequently played with the BBC and all other principal orchestras in Great Britain. In 1951 he won the Jacques Thibaud International Competition, and a few days later received an enthusiastic

reception on the occasion of his Paris debut. He was soon in demand on concert platforms internationally – he made his first tour of the United States in 1955 and thereafter was busy with concerts in America, Europe, the Middle East, South Africa, Greece, Israel, and England.

Gitlis's maverick approach and unwillingness to be categorised have caused him to remain something of an outsider to the glossy, increasingly commercial music business. He has, instead, gone his own way, appearing regularly on film and television, establishing and taking part in festivals, teaching in Paris and further afield and, in 1990, becoming a 'special ambassador' for UNESCO. Throughout his long and distinguished performing career, in addition to presenting the standard virtuoso repertoire, he remained a devoted champion of the cause of contemporary music.

The long career of Ivry Gitlis was blessed at the outset by the great Bronislaw Huberman – a particularly apt

benediction, as it has always seemed to me that Gitlis is the true heir to the Huberman tradition. By that I mean that while perfectly capable of playing beautifully, he will play less than beautifully if he thinks the music demands that approach – and while sheer virtuosity appears to be important to him, it takes second place in his list of priorities to the need to communicate the essence of the work in hand. This attitude is apparent as much in his recordings as in his concert performances. A Gitlis recording may be somewhat strange, or even 'over the top', but it will never be dull. And when the music, the moment and the muse all come together, in one of those rare conjunctions that record collectors spend years waiting for, his interpretations can be absolutely overwhelming.

A further link with Huberman is that Gitlis has always seemed to be something of an outsider, a player apart from the mainstream, for all his legendary status within the profession. He rates a mere mention in some standard violin books, and many dictionaries omit him altogether. So here is one paradox

associated with this terrific fiddler: he is more cosmopolitan than most, having been trained in Paris by Marcel Chailley and having had Enescu, Thibaud and Flesch among his teachers; he has strong links with Britain as well as France; and yet I doubt if he is a household name even in his native Israel. He is, perhaps, one of those 'free spirits' who have no single artistic home.

Here is another Gitlis paradox. A man who can play Paganini, Wieniawski or Sarasate to the manner born, he is often at his best in 20th-century music. I think the reason for his success with modern music is that he approaches it with total involvement, as if it were something from the easily accessible 19th century rather than something knotty and difficult. The result is that suddenly the music is no longer difficult for the listener, because it has been lit so brilliantly from within by the burning commitment of the artist. In the concert hall he has premiered works by Madera and Xenakis, among others. His discography, although not particularly large, spans the gamut of violin-playing; it even includes an appearance of which he

is particularly proud on The Rolling Stones' *Rock and Roll Circus* album.
Tully Potter

Violin Concertos

Tchaikovsky had bad luck, initially, with two of his most popular pieces – the Violin Concerto and the Piano Concerto in B flat minor. The story about the Violin Concerto is well known: how his patroness was unhappy with it; how Leopold Auer refused to play it; how the premiere in Vienna was a fiasco; and how Hanslick slaughtered it. Much the same thing happened with the First Piano Concerto – a work that may well be the most popular composition that Tchaikovsky ever wrote.

Tchaikovsky had a violinist cast a professional eye over his Violin Concerto while it was in the process of composition. This was in the spring of 1878, while he was staying at a lodge in Switzerland with one Joseph Kotek, a Russian fiddle virtuoso. Kotek had studied with Joachim and developed into one of Russia's finest instrumentalists. He

helped Tchaikovsky with the solo layout and technique. In April of 1878 the composer was able to write to his benefactress, Nadezhda von Meck, that the first movement was finished. 'I am satisfied with it. I am not content with the Andante, and I shall either improve it radically or compose a new one. The finale, if I am not mistaken, is as successful as the first movement.'

On 29 April, Tchaikovsky let Mme. von Meck know that he had composed a new Andante 'which corresponds better with the other movements, which are very complicated ... I consider that the concerto is now completed, and tomorrow I shall rush at its scoring, so that I can leave here without having this work any longer before me.'

Tchaikovsky returned to Russia. Then came a series of disheartening experiences. When Kotek refused the first performance, Tchaikovsky dedicated the concerto to the great Leopold Auer, Russia's first violinist and probably the greatest teacher of the 19th century. But Auer would not learn the concerto. He read through it a few times and then told

Tchaikovsky that it was unviolinistic and unplayable. Mme. von Meck also took a disliking to the music. In a series of letters, Tchaikovsky meekly defended his score. 'I hope that in time the work will give you greater pleasure,' he concluded.

Then Tchaikovsky tried to interest Émile Sauret in the score, but the French violinist turned it down. Tchaikovsky went to his grave believing that Auer had used his influence to turn Sauret against the score. There is a notation in Tchaikovsky's diary to the effect that Auer's judgment had placed the concerto, 'this unfortunate child of my imagination,' into 'the limbo of forgotten things' for many years.

Three years passed until the first performance by Adolph Brodsky, a Russian violinist, with the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Hans Richter on 4 December 1881. For two of these years Brodsky had kept Tchaikovsky on pins and needles, blowing hot and cold about the concerto. Even after the first performance Brodsky did not fail to let Tchaikovsky know that 'you have, indeed, packed too many difficulties into

it'. And Brodsky admitted that the prime mover in the premiere was the conductor. 'You must not thank me; it is I who should thank you, for it was only the desire to make the acquaintance of the new concerto that induced Hans Richter and afterwards the Philharmonic Orchestra to hear me play and allow me to participate in one of their concerts. The concerto was not like at the rehearsal of the new things, although I came out successfully ... At length we were admitted to the Philharmonic concert. I had to be content with one rehearsal, and much time was lost correcting the orchestral parts, which swarmed with errors ... Richter desired to make some cuts but I did not permit it.'

The Viennese critics simply murdered the concerto. Edward Hanslick, the most powerful of all, whose word was law throughout Germany, set pen to paper and came up with some gentle comments that 'the violin was yanked about, torn asunder, beaten black and blue ... Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto brings us for the first time to the horrid idea that there may be music that stinks in the ear.'

An ironic aftermath: Bruckner made, in years to come, a tremendous reputation as a specialist in the concerto; and Tchaikovsky rededicated it to him. And Leopold Auer decided that the score could be played, after all, and presented it in public many times. It did not take long before the concerto was popular the world over. Did Handlick ever recant? One wonders.

In the year 1850 in Cologne there was presented to the musical world the First Symphony by Max Bruch, aged 12 years. Born on 6 January 1838, Bruch had the good fortune to be the son of a highly esteemed soprano and music pedagogue. His mother became overseer of her son's musical fortunes and because of her experience and associations was able to guide him along the smoothest pathways to a sound musical training. Combining this with a domestic atmosphere of devoted love for the craft she nurtured his great gift until it found fulfilment in the esteem of many of his contemporaries.

Although represented today in the concert world by little more than his Violin Concerto No.1 in G minor and his

setting for cello of the *Kol Nidrei*, the catalogue of Bruch's compositions overwhelmingly favours works for voices and orchestra, mostly pieces of heavy proportions. Three operas are known, including an early setting of an adaptation of Goethe's *Scherz, List und Rache*, and his best-known product in this medium, *Die Lorelei*. In a commemorative essay about Bruch, Hans Pfitzner, one of the outstanding composers of German opera, considers this latter work one of the important contributions to the category. He places *Die Lorelei* among the best works in this field, in a class with *Don Giovanni*, *Der Freischütz* and *Hans Heiling*. He also finds Bruch's First Violin Concerto most joyful sounding. Bruch quickly achieved worldwide recognition with the concerto; indeed he himself later called it 'mein Allerweltskonzert' ('my worldwide concerto'). The first performance was given on 7 January 1868, at Bremen, with the eminent Joseph Joachim as soloist. Four years later, on 3 February 1872, Pablo de Sarasate performed it for the first time in America, with the

Orchestra of the Philharmonic Society.

Jean Sibelius's family background consists mainly of persons of professional association. He was born on 8 December 1865, the son of a regimental doctor in Tavastehus. The same source also states that out of 32 direct ancestors living around 1700, 18 were Finnish Swedes (persons of Swedish origin living in Finland), nine were pure Swedes, and one was German, leaving only four pure Finns. Sibelius himself considered this mixed national heritage subordinate to the environmental influence of having been a Finn throughout his life.

He must be listed among the numerous great composers in history whose early training was in a foreign field. Having had no professional musicians in his family and since music as a means of earning a livelihood was considered a risky business, he was sent to law school. Of his own volition, however, he studied music simultaneously, and eventually law was abandoned.

In a statement to his biographer, Karl Ekman, Sibelius is reported to have said that his tragedy was his desire to be a

celebrated violinist. For 10 years, from the age of 15, he played his violin practically from morning to night, preferring an elegant violin bow to haphazard pen and ink. He actually became sufficiently expert to perform in public the Mendelssohn concerto in Helsinki. Obviously he soon came to the realization that he was better suited to composition, for one has to dig more deeply to discover information about Sibelius the concert violinist than about Sibelius the composer of the Violin Concerto in D minor. Some disappointment is still apparent, though, in the fact that he seems to have been preoccupied with writing for violin as a solo instrument. Standing alone among several other minor compositions for violin, the concerto is his only major work for a solo instrument and orchestra. There is perhaps an indication of this disappointment too in the opinion of several concert violinists that the monumental difficulties of the last movement of the concerto are Sibelius's gleeful revenge on those who have succeeded where he failed. Carl Halir was soloist at the first performance in Berlin,

1905, with Richard Strauss conducting.

The juxtaposition of the works by Bruch and Sibelius here should provide a fascinating opportunity to contrast the approaches of two dissimilar composers to the same task. The European Bruch, steeped on the one hand in the *Sturm und Drang* era in Germany, on the other hand powerfully influenced by the sophistication and ease of the Mendelssohnian culture, must stand as the direct opposite of the aloof, mystical, Finnish Sibelius. Comradeship and sociability shine through every measure of the Bruch concerto, as well as the friendly atmosphere of music as a delightful refuge from the real struggles of living. What turmoil is suggested is done so with the attitude that it is all merely another means by which the delights of life may be pointed up. For Sibelius the affair is a serious one with no room for frivolity. The performer who takes this music in hand is not permitted to relax into joviality but must assume an attitude of independence, strong and secure in the delineation of its mighty message. The struggles are in earnest, and the performer

must be prepared at all costs to emerge victorious or leave the task to one more heroically trained. Bruch has supplied passages of pyrotechnical brilliance, it is true, and his music is not easy to play, but there is such a good humour about it that one imagines that he set them on paper with a kindly pleasure, hoping they would not too seriously obscure the player's enjoyment. The technical problems created by Sibelius are meant to serve as a challenge, one which only the most valiant dare accept. Accepted and overcome, the task is its own reward, obviating the necessity of acclaim from one's colleagues.

The first movement of the Bruch Concerto is a prelude, *Allegro moderato*, in 4/4 time. This is a true prelude movement, as if the soloist were asked to come before the audience and demonstrate 'warming-up' procedures, usually reserved for the dressing room. He tries the bow, and the fingers, improvising little rapid passages up and down the strings. After a bit of this he begins to sing a fine broad melody, to test how the instrument is going to react to a

change in atmospheric conditions. Then some more rapid improvisations, and a transition to the second movement, *Adagio* (E flat major), in 3/8 time, the music for which the soloist has prepared himself in the prelude. It arrives quietly and warmly as a wonderful cantilena. In contrast to this the second group is somewhat more impetuous and leads the solo far in all directions. All this is recalled with more adventurous excursions by the soloist, and the movement comes to a close with a coda-like version of the opening music.

In the third movement, *Allegro energico* (G major), in 2/2 time, a vague suggestion of darkness is given, but is soon laughed away by the explosive joviality when the solo enters. These good spirits pervade the entire movement, with many irrepressible antics rushing the music on to its conclusion.

In the opening of the first movement, *Allegro moderato*, 2/2 time, of his concerto, Sibelius followed his own advice to 'jump straight into the water and start swimming'. The solo enters immediately after a moment of string tremolo on the

tonic chord. The exposition of this movement is divided into three distinct sections, the first two separated by an embryonic cadenza, the third intruding itself rather gruffly into the meditation of the second. The real cadenza follows immediately, before the development. Development and recapitulation occur simultaneously, each of the original sections being treated in order of its first appearance. A short coda based on the first motif of the movement provides the conclusion.

In the second movement, *Adagio di molto* (B flat major), 4/4 time, after a chilly, sombre woodwind opening, the violin sings a sweet cantabile melody, one of the few such extended warm passages to be found in Sibelius's works. Contrasted to this is a secondary section with rhythmically involved double stops for the violin, that soon succumbs to the calm of the original melody. This is given to the orchestra while the solo indulges in fanciful yet sympathetic coloratura. The solo stops in time to repeat a little question recalled from the beginning, which it answers for itself.

The third movement, *Allegro ma non tanto* (D major), 3/4 time, consists chiefly of the alternation of two main themes. The first, accompanied by a hoof-beat sort of accompaniment, is in a jerky rhythm, strongly suggestive of a polonaise. The second threatens constantly to destroy the 3/4 rhythm, but subdues itself, probably under the influence of several chilly little drafts that occur in the woodwinds. The two themes become rather mixed toward the end, both somewhat mollified, as the solo violin shows by its increasing brilliance that it is master of the situation.

The Mendelssohn Violin Concerto was immediately popular, and analysts ever since 1845 have been exclaiming about its purity, its perfection, its resourceful scoring. It was Ferdinand David who played the first performance of the concerto on 13 March 1845. David was probably the finest German violinist of his time, and he was a close friend of Mendelssohn. When the composer became conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts he insisted that David be concert master. That was in

1836; and the violinist held that position until his death in 1873, in addition to being violin professor at the Leipzig Conservatory.

Although this E minor Concerto was to be Mendelssohn's only work in the form, it was not his first attempt. As a boy of 14 he had made two sketches for a pair of violin concertos. It should be mentioned that although as an executive artist Mendelssohn achieved his greatest fame as a pianist, he also was a first-class string player.

The genesis of the E minor Concerto can be traced through letters to Ferdinand David. On 30 July 1838, Mendelssohn told the violinist that 'I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter. One in E minor runs through my head, the beginning of which gives me no peace.' David, of course, responded enthusiastically. Some time later, Mendelssohn answered, 'It is nice of you to urge me for a violin concerto ... I shall bring you something of the sort, but it is not an easy job. You want it to be brilliant, and how can such a person as myself accomplish that? The whole first

solo is going to be played on the E string!' It is amusing to note that the tribe of virtuosos has changed little. They all want brilliant concertos.

Several letters passed between Mendelssohn and David. Although Mendelssohn knew quite well the potential of the violin, he deferred to David's greater professional experience in matters of technique and solo writing. The cadenza – a written-in cadenza – as it now stands seems to be largely David's work; and one wonders how much else of the concerto was due to David's suggestions. Mendelssohn, at any rate, never tried to hide the fact that the concerto was in many respects a work of collaboration. But of one thing we can be certain: the workmanship and orchestration are pure Mendelssohn, and the thematic content is Mendelssohn at his greatest. There may be greater violin concertos – by Beethoven, say, or Brahms – but there is none more perfect, and that includes the violin concertos of Mozart.

Bartók's two compositions represented here belong to his 'third period' in which

his music shows, beyond a perfect command of technical resources, his increasing concern with principles of form. The exceptional clarity of design that distinguishes the Violin Concerto and the Music for Strings and Percussion, for example, derives from the strict correlation of thematic elements as an overall unifying factor, and an almost mathematically exact balance of formal divisions.

The Violin Concerto was commissioned by Bartók's 'dear friend Zoltán Székely,' to whom it is dedicated. It was composed in Budapest between August 1937 and December 1938; the first performance took place in Amsterdam by the dedicatee and the Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Willem Mengelberg, on 23 April 1939.

In form and spirit this concerto conforms to Classical ideals; although the violin part requires a high degree of technical perfection from the performer, the virtuoso element is always controlled by primarily musical considerations. Apart from the analogous thematic material, the unity of the composition is

also ensured by the key relationship of the separate movements. The B major – G major – B major sequence corresponds entirely to Classical principles, if allowance is made for the G major of the middle movement that replaces, in consideration of the solo instrument's limitations, the true dominant F sharp. But the principle of unity goes deeper than this: there is a subtle relationship between the tonal centres of the two outer movements whose B major shows a pronounced inclination to G, and the middle movement whose G major is pulled in the direction of B.

A similar subtlety is evident in the thematic interrelationship that associates the two outer movements, and also the ideas of each of the two movements taken separately. In fact, Bartók originally proposed to write a concerto in the form of variations, but Székely insisted on a proper concerto. The composer apparently gave in; yet on examining the thematic material of the two movements it will be obvious that his original intentions prevailed.

In the first movement, *Allegro non*

troppo, six bars of orchestral introduction, set for harp, soft pizzicatos of the lower strings, and horn, precede the solo violin's entry with the noble first sentence of the principal theme. The paragraph divides into three parts of which the third repeats, with modifications, the first, and the second, from bar 22, contains brisk semiquaver figurations in contrast to the dignity and smooth continuity of the first. The development section begins with a dreamy, lyrical passage of the solo violin, recalling the introduction both in its melodic configuration, which derives from the pizzicato motif in the basses, and the accompanying chords of the harp. After an extensive orchestral interlude, and the recapitulation of the remaining material of the exposition, the solo violin comes to rest on D, which ushers in the *cadenza*. The *coda* is given over to combinations of various thematic fragments, providing a suitable background to the solo instrument's brilliant flights.

The ternary formal pattern of the second movement, *Andante tranquillo*, is

comparatively simple: the statement of a thematic strophe and its recapitulation at the end embrace six variations of strongly contrasted character. The theme itself, in its melodic profile and harmonic implications (most important of which is the Lydian – augmented – fourth), is extremely suitable for musical transformations. In the first variation the violin is largely left alone; the second variation witnesses a dialogue between the harp and the solo violin; the third variation belongs again largely to the solo violin, showing a version of raucous double-stops, in striking contrast to the previous section's lyrical confessions. The fourth variation, again in contrast to the decided rhythm of its predecessor, is rhapsodic in character, containing scales and melismatic passages; the fifth variation is a scherzo that combines motivic fragments and figurations in a brilliant filigree work; in the sixth variation the gist of the musical argument – canonic entries of the substantially altered theme – is relegated to the orchestra, the solo violin's contribution consisting mainly of shakes,

turns, and similar devices. Towards the end, however, the solo violin joins the orchestra's canonic texture, and prepares its own entry with the reprise of the variation theme.

The principal thematic group of the third movement, *Allegro molto*, like that of the first movement, consists of three sections. The relationship of the opening theme to the noble melody of the first movement is obvious even at first hearing; it is introduced, like its prototype, by the solo violin. There is excitement in the second section that consists mostly of brilliant violinistic figurations: the climax of a crescendo is followed by the third paragraph given over entirely to the orchestra that elaborates the dance-like opening theme. The rest of the thematic components are all easily recognizable variants of their opposite numbers in the first movement. The closing group is omitted, and the exposition runs right into the development section, which opens on E. This section is mainly concerned with the menacing succession of chords that first occurred in the first movement; here, however, their dynamic

control makes them less alarming than previously. Nevertheless they gather momentum towards the end of the section, and their tension is relieved by the entry of the principal theme, inverted, on the solo violin later, which corresponds to the pseudo-reprise of the first movement. An orchestral episode intervenes, which elaborates its head-motif and issues in a canonic passage on the brass. After the inverted transition passage the subsidiary group follows, and an extensive ostinato passage prepares the short cadenza of the solo violin. The fairly long coda is chiefly concerned with motifs of the principal theme.

The Sonata for solo violin, commissioned by Yehudi Menuhin and finished on the 14 March 1944, is Bartók's last published work completed by himself. The spirit of Bach is felt in the formal conception of the work as well as in the pre-eminently polyphonic idiom of the music. Its enormous difficulties would strain the technical resources of the most accomplished performers.

The first movement, although marked

Tempo di ciaccona, is cast in sonata form with G as tonal centre. The opening of the development section is pointed out by the reappearance of the opening chords here transposed to B. It is wholly devoted to the violinistic elaboration of material from the first theme. The beginning of the considerably shortened reprise is again indicated by the opening chords, now transposed to B flat. The coda is indicated by the return of G, the home key.

The lengthy episodes and interpolated free fantasias of the second movement, *Fuga*, remind one of Bach's organ fugues. The subject itself, although strongly chromatic, is firmly anchored on C, and has a rather limited compass. The most remarkable passage of the movement occurs with the last complete appearance of the subject shown in canonic inversion with itself.

The third movement, *Mefistóf*, displays a simple ternary pattern with B flat as tonal centre. The calm first section contains an extended and expansive musical idea. The middle section is slightly more animated and is devoted to violinistic devices: chords, scalic passages,

shakes and tremolos. The third section is a considerably varied reprise of the first: the movement is concluded by the first part of the opening theme on the crystalline high register of the instrument.

The fourth movement, *Presto*, in G, is a scherzo in rondo form. It contains three elements: a rapid passage of semiquaver figures that decrease their speed to an obstinate D; an episode of more marked rhythmic profile and diversity of treatment; and a second episode of outspokenly melodic character, interpolated between reprises of the principal rondo theme. The Coda combines the material of all three.

Immediately after winning the fifth prize at the Concours Long-Thibaud in Paris in 1951 – and causing quite a stir – Gitlis chose to open his recording career not with Mozart, Paganini or Brahms but with a coupling of the Berg Violin and Chamber Concertos. This Vox LP won a Grand Prix du Disque at the time and when the Violin Concerto was recoupled with the Stravinsky Concerto, the

resulting LP was treasured by many fellow musicians and even by Marilyn Monroe. With his Hindemith recording, one of two he made of the Concerto in 1962 – the other a live performance with the Südwestfunk Orchestra Baden-Baden under Hans Rosbaud – he joined the ranks of the precious handful of previous interpreters of the work, among them the composer's friend Szymon Goldberg, Joseph Fuchs and David Oistrakh.

These are three masterpieces, each presenting a different solution to the problem of how to write a violin concerto in the 20th century, and yet each with one foot in the past... the Berg approaching late Romanticism through a guise of serialism but anchoring itself to tradition with its elegaic reference to a Bach chorale, the Stravinsky proposing a neo-Classical form, with echoes of the Baroque in the titles of its movements and a finale that could be an exercise in pure rhythm, and the Hindemith, even more than the other two, a synthesis of old and new.