

philharmonia orchestra

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Today we are looking at the violin concerto by the German composer Felix Mendelssohn.

Concertos are often in three sections called movements and have a passage called a cadenza, where the soloist can make the part up and really show off. Romantic music was defined by the expression of feelings and emotion. The concerto soloist was seen as the star, a hero to be celebrated for his virtuosic skill and musicianship.

Mendelssohn's violin concerto does this beautifully and brilliantly making it one of the most performed violin works in the repertoire. There are many unusual structural elements to this concerto; Mendelssohn grabs the audience's attention by introducing the concerto soloist in the second bar. This is highly unusual; normally the orchestra will play a huge opening tutti section to introduce the soloist.

The first movement cadenza is also unusual, for three reasons. Firstly Mendelssohn places it much earlier in the movement; usually the cadenza is placed closer to the end. Secondly, Mendelssohn writes the cadenza himself, leaving the performer no leeway to improvise, and finally towards the end of the cadenza Mendelssohn develops the part into an accompaniment part and the soloist then goes on to accompany the orchestra. Our concerto soloist has now become an accompanist.

At the end of the first movement Mendelssohn breaks away from convention again and he uses the bassoon to do it. He links the first and second movements together with a solo bassoon passage. It almost sounds as if the bassoon has lost its place in the score.

Some people say this may have been to stop the audience clapping in between movements so the energy and the drama is not lost. The second movement is slower and full of beautiful, simple melodies, the solo violin sings a gentle lullaby and the string section cradles it with a gentle 6/8 accompaniment. To me, the beauty is in its exquisite simplicity.

At some points the violinist becomes soloist and accompanist at the same time. This can be done by double stopping, which means playing two strings at the same time. This means the melody can be played...

(audio excerpt)

...On the top string. And the accompanying part can be played...

(audio excerpt)

.... Here they are together.

(audio excerpt)

The third movement begins with a theme in the dark key of E minor, reminding us of the dark E minor opening of the first movement. But this only lasts for 14 bars and then Mendelssohn really starts the fun. The key changes to a bright E Major and is heralded by fanfare trumpets. Then the violin takes off in exuberant leaps and the soloist can begin to display their star quality.

To me, the care free, happy nature of this final movement is something Mendelssohn captures perfectly, not only in this piece, but in many of his other compositions too. The third movement offers some lovely examples of why concertos are so much fun with the soloist and the orchestra often playing different parts that work brilliantly together. Listen to the Orchestra playing a light and bouncy melody while the violin soloist plays a romantic counter-melody. Then hear how the soloist and accompanying parts swap over, only a few bars later.

This piece is a journey from dark to light, which becomes more beautiful each time you listen to it. These examples are just my choice, I'm sure on listening; you'll develop your own. But I hope you enjoy listening to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto.