

# philharmonia orchestra

## **Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto Listening Guide**

### **James Ehnes - Violinist**

One thing that I think is really great about this concerto is that it just has a little bit of everything. People think of the Tchaikovsky as being this big, powerful, almost bombastic, virtuosic showpiece, but it starts off so gently and it's just so unassuming. I think that the orchestral opening is so gentle you would never know where it's going. Then when it does introduce the first theme in the strings there's almost a dark undercurrent there that when the solo violin enters a few measures later and states that theme it's completely gone. We're back into this beautiful, almost pastoral type of world. It doesn't last for long, it gets exciting pretty fast but I do think that the opening is very special for such a big piece. It's quite a short introduction. The orchestra begins...

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – First Movement*

So then this first theme is introduced in the violins, but it's somewhat dark...

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – First Movement*

And builds in excitement. And then the first violin entrance I think is just wonderful. It comes right out from the orchestra into this brief cadenza, following which the violin restates that theme but in such a beautiful, open, warm way. I think it's just one of the most inviting moments in any concerto and just really draws the audience in for what will end up being a very long journey.

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – First Movement*

The second theme of the first movement is very lush, very beautiful. I think one of the most famous melodies in any violin concerto. I'm sure many listeners will recognise it...

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – First Movement*

Of course, the Tchaikovsky is known for its virtuoso fireworks and there's a lot of this type of writing in the first movement. Very exciting stuff, and I think it's interesting to have a little bit of historical perspective. Some of the writing was very unusual for its time. There's a wonderful spot that happens twice in the first movement where this triplet type of figuration he gets working in double stops. I think to any young violinist it's one of those famous passages that the first time you hear you think 'wow, that's great. I wanna learn how to do that!'

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – First Movement*

I always thought that was such a neat part!

The movement continues with a variation on the themes that were introduced, and then builds to a large central cadenza, that was written by Tchaikovsky, so not one of those cadenzas where the composer left it to your discretion to come up with whatever you might want to. It was written by Tchaikovsky and it's very effective and it has a central place in the movement. It has a couple of very interesting effects, one of my favourites being the so-called left hand staccato...

*Musical extract*

I think that's a very neat effect. Moving into the episode after the cadenza, we have a very beautiful recap of that original theme where it's actually played by the flute and there's a variation upon it in the

violin. We basically move through the same material that was presented in the first bit of the movement with a few extra variations, and it all builds to a very exciting coda where the violin is flying all over and the orchestra is blaring away. It's a really exciting bit of the piece where quite often audiences will think that such a big finale must actually be the end of the entire concerto. And people will clap, and sometimes I've seen people start walking to the exits, but thankfully there is quite a bit more, including the beautiful second movement, the *Canzonetta*. It's interesting that for a piece as big, that the second movement is just a *Canzonetta*. Just a simple, beautiful, very introverted piece of music. It was actually his second attempt at writing a slow movement for this concerto. A meditation that he later rescued from the scrap heap and arranged for violin and piano in a set of 3 pieces that he published as his Opus 42. In any case, one thing that is very unique about it is that it starts with an introduction in the winds, and the first string note that you hear in the movement is from the solo violin, at which point the strings enter...

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – Second Movement*

So the second movement is relatively brief and has a very melancholy atmosphere. Then without pause the orchestra works its way to a spot where you're not quite sure what is going to happen. And then it comes crashing in with the theme of the third movement, which is a very exciting, very virtuosic rondo, with various episodes. The orchestra gives an introduction and then the violin plays a brief cadenza...

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – Third Movement*

So after this brief cadenza the violin introduces the main theme of this movement that keeps coming back. It's very exciting. Lots of notes for the violin. It's lots of fun to play it.

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – Third Movement*

It moves along like this at quite a clip for some time. Being a rondo, in between statements of the theme there are these episodes that are quite varied in character. There is one that is very robust, almost like a staggering type of tune...

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – Third Movement*

It moves back into tempo. Another of which is very lyrical which is often in duet form with other members of the orchestra...

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – Third Movement*

And then answered...

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – Third Movement*

So I think it provide a very nice contrast to so much of the movement, which is really driving and virtuosic.

After the final one of these episodes, the violin once again, through a brief solo cadenza, moves back into a restatement of this theme. Instead of going to where one might think it will go, it moves into an orchestral interlude, which is one of the most famous, or infamous for orchestral violinists. Thankfully I don't have to play that part so I won't demonstrate it because I can't! The violins of the orchestra have a really fabulous tutti where they show the audience that anything the solo violin can do they can do just as well. It's a very exciting part with the orchestral violins ripping all over their instruments. It then comes to a very exciting coda where the violin and the orchestra pass themes back and forth. The violin is basically non-stop.

The violin is running around all over the place. The orchestra is mainly playing tunes that you've heard throughout the movement. It's all very exciting.

*Extract from Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major – Third Movement*

And so on! Lot's of running around like that. It's very exciting and it all builds to this incredible ending that I think is one of the great endings in music. I won't give away the surprise for our listeners but lots of broken bow hairs and sweat and all that. It's quite a spectacle!