

## Musings on Mendelssohn's Homage to Beethoven's Violin Concerto

The facts are fairly clear: Beethoven conducted the première of his own Violin Concerto in 1806 with Franz Clement as soloist, the music being subsequently published in London in 1810. The Concerto was initially fairly neglected following its première until Mendelssohn revived it in 1844 for a London performance featuring the then 12-year-old Joseph Joachim as soloist.

Less obvious are the allusions to the Beethoven Concerto that Mendelssohn incorporated into his own violin concerto which he had been working on since 1838 (the first version being ready in 1844, followed by a second version in 1845). It can be assumed that Mendelssohn would have been studying the Beethoven Concerto for some time prior to its 1844 London performance with Joachim, and would have been influenced by its grandeur and beauty.

Indeed Mendelssohn went on to quote the most memorable, unique motif of the Beethoven Concerto within his own concerto - that motif being the 4 repeated Ds played by the timpani at the very opening of the first movement followed by a minim in the next bar. (This motif is also a 'cousin' of the iconic opening section of the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No.5 of 1808 - 3 repeated Gs followed by a crotchet.)

In various note values, Beethoven's unique motif is quoted 7 times in the Mendelssohn Concerto's first movement (bars 51-52, 71-72, 81-82, 83-84, 85, 88 and 91) whilst its 'cousin' is quoted 35 times. In the second movement the unique motif, as well as its 'cousin', are quoted 45 times. A truncated version of the secondary motif, with only 2 repeated quavers followed by a crotchet, appears 11 times during the introduction to the third movement. In the third movement we also find repetitions of the main motif repeated in bars 720, 721 and another 5 more times, while a 'distant cousin' of this theme, with different rhythmic values, can be heard in this movement on at least 7 other occasions.

Of course, it goes without saying that both concerti stand on their own merits at the very pinnacle of the violin concerti repertoire, remaining favourites of the concert hall without needing reinforcement from one another, yet it is fascinating to see Mendelssohn, musically, tipping his hat to Beethoven and his great Violin Concerto.

Robert Davidovici



## Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809–1847)

### Violin Concerto in E minor, Op.64 (1838-1844, rev. 1845)

I Allegro molto appassionato –

II Andante

III Allegretto non troppo – Allegro molto vivace

In July 1838, Mendelssohn informed his friend and mentor in all things violinistic, Ferdinand David: 'I should like to write a violin concerto for you this winter. The beginning of one in E minor runs constantly through my head, giving me no peace'. Things were a little slow to get started, however, and a year later Mendelssohn was clearly struggling: 'The task is not an easy one. You ask that it should be brilliant, but how can anyone like me do this?' Nevertheless, and despite the composer's considerable doubts and misgivings, David was evidently delighted with the provisional draft of the new concerto, enthusing: 'This is going to be something very special'.

Ferdinand David had been appointed Konzertmeister of the Gewandhaus Orchestra by Mendelssohn in 1836, and such was the composer's devotion in tailoring the Concerto to David's exact requirements that it took him a further five years to complete. Even after the score had been submitted for publication in December 1844, the composer was still making last minute revisions and corrections. This most effortlessly mellifluous of all the great violin concertos was therefore not the product of a blinding moment of inspiration but – unusually for Mendelssohn – several years of painstaking alteration and refinement.

It is rather ironic that on the day of the première, 13th March 1845, Mendelssohn was too unwell to conduct the masterwork on which he had lavished so much care – his replacement was the Danish composer, Niels

Gade. It was after this historic first performance that Schumann made his famous remark to David, the soloist, dedicatee and also a keen amateur composer: 'You see, you have now played the concerto you always wanted to compose yourself!'

The scorching originality of the E minor Violin Concerto is often overlooked because of its easy familiarity of expression. The first masterstroke occurs at the very opening when the soloist immediately announces himself with the soaring main theme without the usual orchestral preamble – the effect is as if one has joined a piece which has already been going on for some time. The predominant brightness and quicksilver writing of the solo part throughout reflects Mendelssohn's almost unequalled ability to extract the maximum amount of brilliance with the minimum of technical fuss.

Soloist-and-orchestra exchanges are dovetailed with quicksilver sleights-of-hand, none more so than the celestial second theme, magically announced by flutes and clarinets and ingeniously accompanied by a sustained pedal G (its lowest string) from the solo violin. The cadenza, which is now thought to be almost entirely the work of David, not only appears earlier in the movement than is customary, but also flows almost imperceptibly into an inspired passage where the soloist's rapid *spiccato* string crossing becomes an accompaniment to the orchestra's re-announcement of the opening theme.

Another sublime, heart-stopping moment occurs when the first movement's searing final *tutti* doesn't close the movement off in the traditional manner but quite suddenly and unexpectedly subsides into a sustained B natural from the solo bassoon, the start of a magical link into the dreamily sentimental slow movement, one of Mendelssohn's most achingly tender melodies. The agitated middle section introduces another innovation

whereby the soloist effectively becomes his own accompanist by simultaneously supporting his melody with a series of oscillating figurations.

This music is then ingeniously transformed at the end of the slow movement to form an *Allegretto non troppo* bridge into the whistle-stop last movement, whose fleeting dancing gestures and breathtakingly fertile imagination leads the ear to accept that a movement in scherzo style is the most natural thing in the world for a concerto finale. Almost unprecedented is the way Mendelssohn weaves orchestra and soloist in and out of the excited textures, creating a near-equal partnership which is the very antithesis of the run-of-the-mill Romantic concerto. The jubilant final coda is one of the most exhilarating in the concerto repertoire, exuberantly rounding off a work in which the soloist has remarkably been silent for only a few bars.

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

### Violin Concerto in D major, Op.61 (1806)

- I Allegro ma non troppo
- II Larghetto
- III Rondo: Allegro

The D major Violin Concerto of 1806 is typical of Beethoven's middle-period work, in terms of both its scale and weight of utterance, and its overriding message of triumph over adversity. However, the explicit tensions and resolutions that characterise his opera *Fidelio* (1804-1805, originally named *Leonore*) and his Fifth Symphony (1807-1808) are almost entirely absent from this concerto, which was written at much the same time as the Fourth Symphony and Fourth Piano Concerto. Together the latter three works form a triumvirate reflecting the more genial and relaxed side of Beethoven's nature, for which the wistful Op.50 F major Violin Romance of 1805 might be considered preparatory. The Violin Concerto conveys a tenderness and warmth rarely encountered in Beethoven's music and was also composed surprisingly quickly, his pupil Carl Czerny remarking that he wrote it 'pretty well straight through'.

The first performance, given by the popular virtuoso Franz Clement (1780-1842) under Beethoven's direction on 22nd December 1806, was played virtually at sight, since the composer had been working on the piece up until the last possible moment. Furthermore, the Concerto was split up, with the first movement coming before the interval, and the rest following after Clement's performance of his own virtuoso compositions on one string with the violin held upside-down. Despite all of this, the Concerto was fondly inscribed 'Concerto par Clemenza pour Clement, primo Violino e Direttore

al Theatro a Vienne dal L.v.Bthvn., 1806' ('Concerto by Clemency for Clement, Leading Violinist and Director at the Theatre in Vienna'). The dedication, however, went to Stephan von Breuning, an old friend with whom Beethoven used to share violin lessons and living quarters in his student days.

Critics were unsure quite how to react to the piece at first, but a review that appeared on 8th January 1807 in the *Zeitung für Theatermusik* accurately reflects the contemporary mood: 'A division of opinion exists about Beethoven's Concerto. Some acknowledge it has much beauty in it, while others feel that its continuity seems often broken and that an endless repetition of common place phrases is fatiguing... One fears that if Beethoven pursues his present path, he and the public will come to no good end.' Unaccountably neglected for many years, the Violin Concerto won a permanent place in the repertoire almost overnight as the result of an historic concert given by the twelve-year-old Joseph Joachim (who would later play a crucial part in the composition of Brahms's Violin Concerto in the same key) in London in 1844, under the direction of none other than Felix Mendelssohn.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the Concerto is its understated revolutionary spirit, from the opening *sotto voce* strokes of the solo timpani, to casting the first movement's central development section as a time-suspending sequence of poetics, whose only imposingly dramatic statement is held back until the pedal-pointed transition into the recapitulation. No less unusual is Beethoven's sublime, seemingly inevitable use of a velvety *pizzicato* (a technique then usually reserved for 'special effects') in the slow movement, and the unexpectedly playful nature of the finale, complete with boisterous hunting-horn calls.

Notes by Julian Haylock

Photography by Miri Davidovitz

Cover painting by Temima Edgar 'For Arnon'



## ROBERT DAVIDOVICI Violin

Celebrated for his concerto, recital and chamber music performances in the USA, Canada, Europe, South America, Australia and Asia, violinist Robert Davidovici is acclaimed on five continents as a virtuoso who combines spectacular technique, wide-ranging repertoire and magnificent artistry with an exciting, compelling stage presence. The *Boston Globe* has said that 'he is a terrific violinist. His technique is of the "wow" variety, his tone as huge as he cares to make it.' The *Montreal La Presse* wrote: 'Robert Davidovici is a born violinist in the most complete sense of the word. His Prokofiev Concerto was played with that perfect balance of lyricism and satire that the composer himself talks about, and sonorities that not even a Milstein has.'

In January 2013 Robert Davidovici recorded the Szymanowski Violin Concerto No.2, the Lutosławski *Partita* and the world première recording of the Kletzki Violin Concerto in London with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Grzegorz Nowak. He returned to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in October 2013 to play the Beethoven Concerto in their London concert series at Cadogan Hall, after which they recorded their second CD (this disc, containing the Beethoven and Mendelssohn Violin Concerti). In February 2015 Robert Davidovici recorded the Brahms and Tchaikovsky Violin Concerti with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, again under Grzegorz Nowak, as their third CD collaboration. A few days later they performed the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto at Cadogan Hall with the RPO.

The reviews for the first CD with the RPO, under Grzegorz Nowak, released in the autumn of 2013, comment on 'the fantastic performance of the Kletzki Violin Concerto and Robert Davidovici's full-blooded tone being just what the work deserves. The opening of the Szymanowski Violin Concerto No.2 sounds as hazy and languid as it's ever been, and the concerto's deliriously upbeat final bars really hit home. Davidovici and Nowak close the disc with an unusually entertaining, neo-romantic take on Lutosławski's late *Partita*. The quieter moments swoon and the busting *Presto* coda provides an emphatic close to a well-planned release. Brilliant sound' - *TheArtsDesk.com*. 'First rate. Paul Kletzki's Violin Concerto is the real treasure here; it appears on disc for the first time and is much more than a historical curiosity. It never suffers by comparison with the other works here' - *The Guardian*.



In February 2007 Robert Davidovici was soloist at the Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall in the American première of the Kletzki Violin Concerto (1928) with the American Symphony Orchestra conducted by Leon Botstein, following which *The New York Times* commented on the 'excellent' performance.

Born in Transylvania, Romania, Robert Davidovici began his studies with a student of David Oistrakh. He went on to study with Ivan Galamian at the Juilliard School, where, upon graduating, he became a teaching assistant

to the Juilliard String Quartet. Robert Davidovici is the recipient of several distinguished First Prize honours, among them the Naumburg Competition and the Carnegie Hall International American Music Violin Competition.

He has collaborated in concert with such esteemed artists as Yo-Yo Ma, Isaac Stern, Lynn Harrell, Yefim Bronfman, Cho Liang-Lin and Emanuel Ax, among others. Carnegie Hall has featured Robert Davidovici as part of their American Music Masters series and he was the subject of a television special on WGBH Boston.

*The New York Times*, in describing Robert Davidovici's performance of Bach's Solo Sonata No.1 said that '...he played cleanly and without affectation. Contrapuntal lines emerged clearly because multiple stops stayed in tune, and a fast, tight vibrato helped keep the music from sounding expressive in a 19th-century manner. This was, in fact, excellent Bach.' In describing his performance of the Bernstein *Serenade*, *The New York Times* stated that 'it would have been hard to imagine a sweeter performance', whilst the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented that 'Robert Davidovici lingered lovingly over the poetic passages of the Tchaikovsky Concerto, and ignited the fiery ones with passion'.

In addition to his solo engagements, Robert Davidovici is Artist-in-Residence and Professor of Violin at Florida International University in Miami. He is a guest professor at leading music schools around the world, most recently at the Musashino Academia Musicae in Tokyo and at the universities of Washington, British Columbia and the Australian National University.



His multifaceted career has included being Concertmaster of such orchestras as the Osaka Philharmonic, Vancouver Symphony, Residentie Orchestra (The Hague) and Cincinnati Symphony as well as with the Grand Teton Music Festival, Chautauqua and Colorado Music Festival orchestras.

*Fanfare Magazine* commented on his first CD that 'Davidovici handles the five compositional styles with confidence. His tone is ripe, his intonation dead on, and he plays with aplomb. This is an impressive disc debut.' He has recorded as a violin soloist with the London Symphony Orchestra for Cala Records. His CD *Mélodie - The Art of Robert Davidovici* was selected as one of the Top 30 CD releases in Japan in 1995. His playing may also be heard on New World Records, Centaur, Clavier and Meistermusic. His CD recording of transcriptions of Chopin's *Nocturnes*, was released in May 2004 in Japan by JVC Victor.

For further information, please visit [www.robertdavidovici.com](http://www.robertdavidovici.com)



## GRZEGORZ NOWAK Conductor

Grzegorz Nowak is the Permanent Guest Conductor of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) in London, promoted to this position in January 2015 after serving for seven years as the Orchestra's Principal Associate Conductor. He has led the Orchestra on tours to Switzerland, Turkey and Armenia, as well as giving numerous concerts throughout the UK. His many recordings with the RPO include Mendelssohn's 'Scottish' and 'Italian' symphonies, Shostakovich's Symphony No.5, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Dvořák's symphonies nos.6–9, all the symphonies of

Schumann and the complete symphonies and major orchestral works of Brahms and Tchaikovsky.

Grzegorz Nowak's recordings have been highly acclaimed by the press and public alike, winning many awards. *Diapason* in Paris praised his KOS live recording with Martha Argerich and Sinfonia Varsovia as 'indispensable...a must have', and its second edition won the Fryderyk Award. His recording of *The Polish Symphonic Music of the XIX Century* with Sinfonia Varsovia won the CD of the Year Award, the Bronze Bell Award in Singapore and a nomination for the Fryderyk Award; the American Record Guide praised it as 'uncommonly rewarding...67 minutes of pure gold' and hailed his Gallo disc of music by Frank Martin with the Biel Symphony Orchestra as 'by far the best'. His Hänssler Classic recording of Czerny's Symphony No.6 (world première recording) was praised as 'delightful... marvellously colorful... memorable' by *Classics Today* and as a 'great musical discovery' by Musical Heritage Society.

while Weill's music with Anja Silja won two Classical Internet Awards and *Classics Today* wrote 'this is the finest recording of *The Seven Deadly Sins* currently available... simply marvellous... tremendous recording'. *The Gramophone Magazine* praised his ASV recording with the London Symphony Orchestra as 'outstanding...superbly caught'.

Grzegorz Nowak's career propelled him to international heights after he won the prestigious Ernest Ansermet Conducting Competition in Geneva, winning first prize. He also won the Grand Prix Patek Philippe, Rolex Prize, Swiss Prize and American Patronage Prize, and received the Europäische Förderpreis für Musik awarded in Basel for the 'European Musician of the Year' which was awarded by a committee chaired by Pierre Boulez.

As a recipient of the Serge Koussevitzky Fellowship at Tanglewood, Grzegorz Nowak honed his skills with such masters as Leonard Bernstein, Seiji Ozawa, Erich Leinsdorf, Maurice Abravanel and Igor Markevitch, before assisting Kurt Masur with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Since then, he has conducted the world's finest orchestras and served as Music Director for such orchestras as the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, Polish National Opera in Warsaw, SWR Radio Orchestra in Germany, Sinfonia Helvetica and Festival Musique & Amitié Festival in Switzerland and is currently the 'Director Titular' of the Orquesta Sinfonica de España and Orquesta Clásica Santa Cecilia in Madrid. He is Artist-in-Residence at the Florida International University in Miami and was honoured with the Distinguished Teacher Award during his tenure as Professor at the BGSU University in Ohio, whilst the University of Alberta honoured him with the title of Honorary Professor.

Grzegorz Nowak has performed alongside many of the most widely respected soloists of our time, including: Martha Argerich, Yefim Bronfman, Nigel Kennedy, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Mstislav Rostropovich, Gil Shaham, André Watts, Krystian Zimerman, and has worked with such singers as Janet Baker, Kathleen Battle, Marilyn Horne, Gwyneth Jones, Sherrill Milnes and Anja Silja.

For further information, please visit [www.grzegorznowak.com](http://www.grzegorznowak.com)





## Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Artistic Director and Principal Conductor: Charles Dutoit

Its first London concert was reported to have filled the hall 'with golden tone which enveloped the listener'. Since that 1946 performance, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) has enjoyed almost 70 years of success, upholding the legacy of its debonair founder Sir Thomas Beecham. Now under the inspiring leadership of Artistic Director and Principal Conductor Charles Dutoit, the Orchestra continues to bring first-class performances of a wide range of musical repertoire to worldwide audiences.

The Orchestra has always prided itself on the artistic calibre of its conductors, including Rudolf Kempe, Antal Doráti, André Previn and, more recently, Daniele Gatti. Other highly regarded artists who regularly take the podium today include Permanent Guest Conductor Pinchas Zukerman and Permanent Associate Conductor Grzegorz Nowak.

The Orchestra's London home is Cadogan Hall, in which the intimate environment is ideal for orchestral performances. Also key to the Orchestra's schedule is the annual concert series at Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall and regular performances at the prestigious Royal Albert Hall. Further afield in the UK, the Orchestra enjoys established residencies in Croydon, Northampton, Hull, Lowestoft, Reading, Crawley, Ipswich, High Wycombe, Aylesbury, Scunthorpe, Guildford, Cambridge, Southend-on-Sea, Cheltenham, Dartford and Bexhill-on-Sea, as part of its extensive regional touring programme. *RPO Rewards* is an app for smartphones and tablets that allows music-lovers to book tickets for selected RPO concerts at a number of UK venues.

Complementing these performances, RPO resound, the Orchestra's vibrant community and education programme, pioneers projects that are designed to promote engagement with and access to music-making. Launched in 1993, RPO resound is still one of the most celebrated programmes of its kind in the UK.

The Orchestra also enjoys a busy schedule overseas, undertaking several international tours each year. Recent highlights have included performances in Switzerland, Italy and Austria, as well as gala concerts in Moscow and St Petersburg and a tour to Florida.

Alongside its thriving live performance schedule, the Orchestra records prolifically for film, television and all the major commercial record companies. It also owns its own record label. To find out more about the RPO's music performances and recordings, including its numerous other classical music CDs, please visit: [www.rpo.co.uk](http://www.rpo.co.uk).

'The RPO do sensuousness uncommonly well. The end result was rich yet delicate, with wonderfully liquid woodwind solos and an exquisite sheen on the strings.' *The Guardian*

'Hats off to the RPO who sounded reborn.' *The Independent*

'The strings are highly impressive ... the RPO offers muscular brass and first-class woodwinds. The rhythmic intricacies and sharp contrasts in mood and tempi were dextrously handled by Dutoit and the musicians delivered the music with fleet bravura.' *Chicago Classical Review*