

**Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Movement: Allegro moderato**

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
1840–1893

“Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto raises for the first time the ghastly idea that there are pieces of music that one can hear stinking... [the finale] transports us into the brutish grim jollity of a Russian church festival. In our mind’s eye we see nothing but common, ravaged faces, hear rough oaths and smell cheap liquor.” This politically incorrect assessment comes from the pen of the dean of nineteenth century music critics, Eduard Hanslick, reviewing the Concerto’s Vienna premiere.

Why did the first performance take place in Vienna and not St. Petersburg? It is difficult to believe that this Concerto, probably the most popular in the literature, was declared to contain passages that were “almost impossible to play” by its first dedicatee, the famed violinist and violin teacher Leopold Auer, concertmaster of the Imperial Orchestra in St. Petersburg. Completed in 1878, it had to wait for three years for its premiere in Vienna where Hanslick was not alone in his opinion.

What Hanslick and the other critics disliked most is what makes the Concerto so appealing today: its athletic energy, unabashed romanticism and rousing Slavic finale. Without diminishing our own enjoyment of the Concerto, attempting to hear it with the ears of its first audience is a fascinating exercise in cultural relativity. First of all, consider the sheer difficulty of the piece. What defeated Russia’s leading violin virtuoso is the stuff teenage prodigies cut their teeth on at Juilliard and Curtis, practicing the killer bits ad nauseam until they get it right or find some other career.

Then there’s the fact that there was no love lost between the two great nineteenth-century imperial behemoths, Russia and Austria-Hungary, who continued to slug it out until the end of World War I. That Tchaikovsky disliked Johannes Brahms, Hanslick’s favorite composer, probably also added fuel to the fire. The vibrant energy of the Concerto seems to have been inspired by the visit of Josif Kotek, a young violinist, pupil and protégé who managed to raise the composer’s spirits. He helped him with the Concerto, giving advice on technical matters.

The Concerto opens with a brief, gentle introduction, paving the way for the lyrical first theme. After some virtuosic fireworks, the emerging second theme is surprisingly similar in mood to the first. The development, full of technical acrobatics, leads into the very difficult cadenza that the composer wrote himself.

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