



BEETHOVEN BRAHMS

Violin Concertos

Jascha Heifetz, Violin

**NBC Symphony Orchestra
Arturo Toscanini**

**Boston Symphony Orchestra
Serge Koussevitzky**

Historical Recordings 1939 • 1940

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): Violin Concerto

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Violin Concerto

The violin concertos of Beethoven and Brahms have more in common than D major – a convenient key for the violin to play in. Both of them were given rather rocky starts but they survived to become the best loved and most respected works of their kind, the two concertos by which all leading violinists are measured. When Beethoven's serenely classical concerto was first performed at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna on 23rd December 1806, the soloist Franz Clement played each of the three movements separately, and in between he entertained the audience with tricks such as playing the violin upside down. No wonder the concerto had to wait many years before it found its ideal interpreter. He was Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), the Hungarian-born violinist and composer who came to dominate the musical scene in Germany and England. He first played the Beethoven Concerto as a teenager and had such a success with it in London in 1844, with Mendelssohn conducting, that he single-handedly established it in the repertoire. Joachim was later a close friend of Brahms, so it was natural that the composer from Hamburg should write him a concerto, and that he should give the finale a Hungarian tinge. Brahms sketched out a four-movement work of symphonic proportions, rather like his *Second Piano Concerto*, but replaced the slow movement and *scherzo* with a highly original *Adagio* in which the violin shared solo honours with the principal oboist. The first performance, in Leipzig on New Year's Day 1879, with Brahms conducting, was a success but, despite the efforts of Joachim and his pupils (including two women, Marie Soldat and Leonora Jackson), the work made slow progress. The Viennese violinist Hellmesberger called it a concerto 'against the violin' and the Spanish virtuoso Sarasate said he was not going to stand around doing nothing at the start of the slow

movement, while the oboe had the best tune in the entire piece. Gradually, however, the concerto's quality asserted itself, with such soloists as Fritz Kreisler, Bronislaw Huberman and Adolf Busch making it one of their war-horses.

At the time the present recordings were made, the Lithuanian-born virtuoso Jascha Heifetz (1901-1987) was recognised as the finest violinist in the world. He had been especially popular in his adopted country, the United States, for more than 20 years, having burst upon the scene in 1917 with a New York recital which is still talked about. Although he was a top RCA Victor recording artist, he had made relatively few concerto records and they had all been done in England, with Sir Thomas Beecham and the young John Barbirolli conducting. At the end of the 1930s executives at RCA Victor determined to start recording Heifetz with the great American orchestras. Rather than reunite him with Barbirolli, who by now was in charge of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony, they opted first for the aristocratic Boston Symphony and its charismatic conductor Serge Koussevitzky, sensing that two musicians from the Russian empire ought to get on well together. Koussevitzky (1874-1951) was then at the height of his powers and had been in charge of his orchestra since 1924. On 11th April 1939 he and Heifetz combined to give a patrician, technically immaculate account of the Brahms *Concerto*; and the RCA Victor engineers, used to working in Symphony Hall, played their part by making the sound as realistic as possible. Indeed, anyone who wants to know what Heifetz sounded like in the concert hall will find this performance a good guide; the old 78rpm recording is kind to his tone and the pleasant acoustic lends an extra bloom. The oboe soloist in the *Adagio* is presumably

Louis Speyer. Heifetz plays the cadenza by his teacher Leopold Auer, with amendments of his own.

The other recording here, made a year later, has been a favourite with the public since it was released but has had the connoisseurs split down the middle. Its conductor Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957) was the greatest, most famous maestro the world has known. By sheer force of personality and exceptional musicality he had raised himself from an Italian orchestral cellist to a colossus whose word was law with orchestras the world over. The National Broadcasting Company had created an orchestra specially for him in the late 1930s and in December 1939 he had electrified radio listeners across America with a Beethoven symphony cycle. He was also RCA Victor's most valued artist. Toscanini was not a natural concerto accompanist but he had often worked with Heifetz and Adolf Busch, a more rugged but also more profound player than Heifetz and a renowned Beethoven interpreter. Busch might have combined well with Toscanini in the studio, as he had in concert, and by coincidence he had just arrived in America as an immigrant from war-torn Europe; but it was natural that the record company men should want to play their two

aces and they had long decided on Heifetz. The interpretation recorded on 11th March 1940 is classically proportioned almost to a fault, with Heifetz and Toscanini breezing through the great work and rather neglecting its spiritual content. The dry acoustic of Studio 8-H (which the conductor liked) did not work any magic but this new transfer by Mark Obert-Thorn presents the performance in more sympathetic sound than ever before. Once again Heifetz used Auer's cadenza in the first movement; he played an amended version of Joachim's link into the final *Rondo* and a mixture of Joachim's, Auer's and his own ideas in the final cadenza. His colleague William Primrose, who was at the front viola desk for the sessions, wrote: 'I ... was genuinely touched and moved and filled with admiration at the way he performed his task. To play a work that demands so much from the soloist, with a conductor such as Toscanini who had a lofty reputation for his conception of Beethoven, and to play with such accuracy and virtuosity as he did that day, was no mean thing. It was a heroic occasion.'

Tully Potter

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings. Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity. There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny brass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.

The Naxos Historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.



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AAD

Ludwig van
BEETHOVEN
(1770-1827)

Johannes
BRAHMS
(1833-1897)

Playing
Time
76:39

Jascha Heifetz, Violin

BEETHOVEN: Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 1 | Allegro non troppo
(Cadenza: Auer-Heifetz) | 38:34 |
| 2 | Larghetto
(Cadenza: Joachim-Heifetz) | 21:14 |
| 3 | Rondo: Allegretto
(Cadenza: Joachim-Auer-Heifetz) | 8:47 |
| | | 8:28 |

NBC Symphony Orchestra
Arturo Toscanini

(Recorded on 11th March, 1940,
in Studio 8-H, Radio City, New York.
Matrix Nos. CS-048066-1/67-2R/68-1/69-2/
70-1/71-2/72-1A/73-2/74-1.
First issued on Victor 17441/5-S in album M-705)

BRAHMS: Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 4 | Allegro ma non troppo
(Cadenza: Auer-Heifetz) | 37:57 |
| 5 | Adagio | 20:55 |
| 6 | Allegro giocoso, ma non
troppo vivace | 9:04 |
| | | 7:48 |

Boston Symphony Orchestra
Serge Koussevitzky

(Recorded on 11th April, 1939,
in Symphony Hall, Boston.
Matrix Nos. CS-035424-2/25-2/26-3/27-2/
28-1/29-2/30-3/31-2/32-1.
First issued on Victor 15526/30-S
in album M-581)



Archivist & Restoration Producer: Mark Obert-Thorn



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Cover Photograph: Jascha Heifetz with violin (Lebrecht Collection)

