

Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, BWV 1041

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

B: March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Germany

D: July 28, 1850, Leipzig, Germany

Though the date of Bach's Violin Concerto No. 1 cannot be precisely traced, it is generally thought to date from about 1720. However, some modern Bach scholars, notably Christoph Wolff, suggest it might have been composed as late as 1730, when Bach held dual positions in church music and orchestral music in Leipzig.

Scored for solo violin, strings and continuo (approx 16 minutes).

In the field of instrumental music, we quickly remember J. S. Bach as a great keyboard composer who left a string of masterly fugues for both harpsichord and organ, along with numerous chorale preludes, suites and virtuoso variations. But in the preface to his edition of this violin concerto, scholar Georg von Dadelsen quotes a recollection by Bach's admiring son, C. P. E. Bach: "In his youth and until the approach of old age, he played the violin cleanly and penetratingly."

In fact, J. S. Bach sufficiently mastered the violin to gain a position in the ducal orchestra at the small court of Weimar by the time he was 23 and moved to the concertmaster's chair five years later. While he left only two solo concertos for the violin, the A minor Concerto is a major work that shows his thorough knowledge of string technique.

During his years in Weimar, Bach came into contact with the violin concertos of Vivaldi and transcribed several of them into keyboard concertos. When he began composing his own concertos, he adapted the Vivaldian model to his own personal style, especially in creating orchestral accompaniments that were more contrapuntal and participated more fully in the evolving thematic dialogue. The opening movement of the A minor Concerto offers an excellent example of this. The orchestra begins with the customary opening ritornello, stating 4-5 interrelated thematic ideas before the solo violin enters with a more animated theme. The soloist retains a prominent place throughout the movement, while the orchestra enters periodically with bare suggestions of its opening theme in an energetic, constantly churning stream of music.

The slow movement brings the listener to one of Bach's poignant aria movements, with the soloist playing a series of lyrical, ever-more elaborate phrases over a constantly repeated rhythmic figure in the bass line. Each phrase of the melody is separated by lengthy rest, as though the soloist were taking a deep breath before proceeding.

The finale is the concerto's showiest movement. It is set in a rhythm suggesting a lively jig and in addition to several quick scale passages, the soloist is called upon to undertake a display of *bariolage* – the technique of rapidly rocking the bow between two strings to play an intricate passage.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Bach's Violin Concerto in A minor on June 1, 2002, with Itzhak Perlman conducting and performing the solo.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Bach, Violin Concerto in A minor, BWV 1041, Itzhak Perlman, violin, Daniel Barenboim conducting the English Chamber Orchestra, EMI 74720.