

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra

Joseph Bohuslav Foerster: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra

for violin and orchestra | 35'

2 2 2 2 – 4 2 3 0 – timp, tr, hp, cel, str

World première: 22.10.1911, New York Hippodrome; Jan Kubelík, vln, cond.

Nahan Franko

Dedicated to Jan Kubelík

Together with his younger colleagues Vítězslav Novák, Josef Suk and Otakar Ostrčil, Josef Bohuslav Foerster must be considered one of the leading Czech composer of his generation after Leoš Janáček. In 1888 he married the famous opera singer Berta Lauterer; when she found employment in Hamburg in 1893, he followed her. When Gustav Mahler attracted her to the Vienna Court Opera in 1903, Foerster joined her in the Austrian capital, and soon he enjoyed Mahler's keen sponsorship. (Mahler to Foerster: "When I get a job as independent concert conductor, I will perform all your symphonies.") In 1918 Foerster returned to Prague, where he was recognized especially as a highly respected teacher. His compositional creativity extended to all musical genres. Among his composed 190 works are five symphonies (1888, 1893, 1895, 1905, and 1929), of which the *Fourth symphony "Easter Eve"*, considered generally the highpoint of his creativity, became the most popular by far.

*When I get a job as independent concert conductor, I will
perform all your symphonies. (Gustav Mahler)*

Foerster composed his *Violin Concerto No. 1, op. 88*, in 1911 for his compatriot, the legendary Jan Kubelík (1880–1940). Foerster's autobiography, *Der Pilger* (*The Pilgrim*), appeared in a German translation in 1955 in a condensed version, edited by his friend František Pala and based on the two-volume Czech original edition: *Poutník* (*The Pilgrim*), Prague 1942, and *Poutník v cizině* (*The Pilgrim Abroad*), Prague 1947.

In these comprehensive memoirs the composer recounts the following. "I was living in Vienna when Frau Schebek approached me: 'Come with us tomorrow to the concert, Kubelík plays!' I knew of the world-renowned Czech violinist, but never heard him perform, since due to a peculiar set of circumstances he had never appeared before a Hamburg audience. I was glad to accept the invitation and entered the Musikvereinssaal a few minutes before the beginning. I remembered that Kubelík had been a student of my father at the Prague Conservatory, and thus I thought of introducing myself to the master. [] With the help of the concert director Skrivan I succeeded to get through and advance to the first room. A few people unknown to me were in the room. Through the closed door of an adjacent room one could hear the sound of a violin. Somewhat embarrassed I knocked at the door and entered. Kubelík turned around and looked at me. I gave him my name, and his face lit up. He welcomed me cordially and responded to my apology that thus far I had not had the occasion of hearing him with a touchingly simple remark betraying the great artist he was:

'Then you have not missed anything.' His remark touched me as much as the words with which he remembered my father. When I was ready to leave the room, I was held back by his request: 'Why don't you write a violin concerto for me?'

I responded: 'I'd love to, but I believe only a violinist can write a good violin concerto.'

'Are you sure? And what about Beethoven and Mendelssohn? They wrote the most beautiful violin concertos, but were not violinists.' I was defeated.

'You are right, master, I will write a violin concerto for you.'

We agreed that I would send the concerto in three months to Kubelík's

address in Monte Carlo, where he planned to relax for a few days. We departed as friends, he moved to the stage and I to the box of the Schebek family. Kubelík was in high spirits during the performance, the audience was enthusiastic. Now I faced a task that was intriguing and frightening at the same time. Virtuoso caprices, the traditional passage work and arpeggios were not my cup of tea; rather, a concerto was for me a symphonic problem. And that's the way I conceived and composed the work. For an artist his work is synonymous with joy, and if the work is successful, he feels rewarded a hundred times for all difficulties. I had the impression that I had succeeded with my composition, and thus turned the draft into a piano arrangement and send it to the agreed address.

A little later I received laudatory reviews of the American press. Only one of them stuck in my memory, a report from the Czech newspaper in Chicago, in which an anonymous journalist reported how, after the dramatic and tense beginning, the second theme moved the hearts of the listeners, bringing tears to their eyes with its Czech character.

Days and months passed. There was not even a confirmation from Monte Carlo that the work had arrived. The next vacation I spent in Zruc. One evening when we played some music Kubelík's name was mentioned, and I told my friends the entire story of the origin of my first violin concerto. Frau Schebek listened with apparent calm, but when I ended she said with a smile:

'My dear, that's not the way to do it. Let me take care of it. I will go to Bychory tomorrow, and you will see.' And thus it happened. When we came back from an evening walk the next day, the carriage with the returning Frau Schebek rolled into the castle courtyard, and a moment later I held in my hand a letter from Kubelík. He informed me that he would perform the concerto and asked

me to visit him in Bychory. When we gathered for the evening meal, I was pleased to learn that Kubelík had already studied the work, even played it from memory, and that he was glad about Frau Schebek's visit, since he had meant to write to me, but was unable to ascertain where I spent the vacation. Kubelík was about to depart for America and he had already announced my concerto as a novelty of his program in New York. Since thus far I had not received his reaction to my work, I had postponed scoring it. This meant it was high time to complete the concerto and transfer the score to the individual parts.

The next day I was in Bychory. I was welcomed in the idyllic little castle surrounded by a park and on the first evening got to know Kubelík's family and his guests. After dinner I expected that Kubelík would talk about my concerto. The guests conversed about all kinds of things in several European languages, but not a word was said about music. I interpreted Kubelík's silence as a postponement caused by sensitivity. There were several guest bedrooms in the castle, but my cordial host had a bed moved into his spacious library, handed me the keys of all cabinets that were filled in part with precious works and said: 'That's where you belong.'

The sound of a viola woke me up early next morning. In the floor above me Kubelík was already busy with some technical etudes, but to my great surprise not on the violin. Later he explained to me that by practicing on the viola he reached the desired results faster and with greater reliability. We spent the morning on a walk in the beautiful forest next to the park. In the afternoon – it was a hot summer day in August – we escaped to a swimming pool, and the evening passed by as the day before – without music. It was not until the evening of the third day that Kubelík got to the point of my visit:

'Please come, we want to perform your concerto.' The guests and the family accompanied us to the salon, and soon there sounded Kubelík's magic instrument. The impetuous Allegro, the slow movement and the capricious finale were rendered with fiery eloquence, greatest intimacy of feeling, and virtuoso lightness. We got along excellently until the moment, when Kubelík asked me for the score. It was not finished, and there were only three weeks before his departure. I wanted to leave immediately, but Kubelík insisted that I stay: 'Just work here and let nobody disturb you; here in the country you will feel better than in Prague.'

An understanding was reached with Universal Edition, the publisher of the concerto in Vienna, that the concerto would be reserved for Jan Kubelík for the entire first year.

I stayed in Bychory one more day. At the crack of dawn I went to work, but the guests – and there were always a lot of them in Bychory, including many a friend – came constantly to my residence in the library and distracted me from working on the score. Quietly I packed my belongings, and already a day later sat down with my work in the little house of my brother Victor in Mnichovice. [□] After a week I was finished and handed the score to a copyist: Kubelík wanted to read through the work with orchestra accompaniment, since there would be only one rehearsal in New York.

In accordance with Kubelík's wishes I arranged everything first with my friend Kovačovic, then with the orchestra of the National Theatre, where the rehearsal was to be held in secret and without witnesses. Then I returned to Bychory. [□] Oskar Nedbal [the great conductor who had suddenly arrived on the scene] was curious to hear my violin concerto, and thus we played it for him with Kubelík. Two days later our entire group got together in the National Theatre. I prepared the orchestra, then Kubelík appeared with his friends at 9 am. Several opera singers from the National Theatre meanwhile had taken their seat in the stalls of the theatre; they had read the announcement of the rehearsal on the blackboard. Kubelík appeared in front of the curtain and performed all three movement of the concerto with the orchestra conducted by me. The ad-hoc audience thanked him with applause.

When we met back-stage, he kissed me and thanked me in his simple and cordial manner: 'Only now I know your concerto.' He was surprised by the colourfulness of the orchestration that never covers up the soloist. Especially the unusual use of the celesta in a few measures of the first movement intrigued him so much that he said to me: 'The celesta is delightful, I want to have it in America, even if I had to purchase one there or bring it over.'

Soon I received the news from New York about the performance of my concerto in the gargantuan Hippodrome. Skrivan, the impresario, even included in the letter a photographic copy of the receipts of the evening in

form of a list; for a Czech musician it was an enormous amount. A little later I received laudatory reviews of the American press. Only one of them stuck in my memory, a report from the Czech newspaper in Chicago, in which an anonymous journalist reported how, after the dramatic and tense beginning, the second theme moved the hearts of the listeners, bringing tears to their eyes with its Czech character.

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An understanding was reached with Universal Edition, the publisher of the concerto in Vienna, that the concerto would be reserved for Jan Kubelík for the entire first year. A year later Kubelík performed in Europe again. On the program of his first Viennese evening was my violin concerto, Oskar Nedbal conducting. [□] The Musikvereinssaal was sold out, as was the case with all of Kubelík's Vienna concerts. Greeted by rousing applause, Kubelík appeared on stage, bowed repeatedly and positioned himself in the foreground. He was in a state of unusual excitement in the first few measures, but, as soon as the cantilena began, he calmed down; the vibrating sound of his instrument pervaded the entire hall with emotion. In the slow movement the violin indulged in pain-relieving song, and the finale sparkled with the lights of his tremendous virtuosity. The success was extraordinary.

During the intermission I looked for Kubelík to thank him personally. To my horror I found him sick. A resident physician had given him an invigorating injection to enable him to continue with the concerto. Indeed, Kubelík had performed the concerto without incident; only a small group of friends knew about the difficulties under which the performance took place. [□] Years passed, Kubelík travelled the world triumphantly.

One day – it was already during the World War – he surprised me with a visit. 'Dear friend, I have written a violin concerto and need someone who looks through it and advises me on instrumentation. Are you willing to accept me as a student?' The request filled me with joy. The next day I left the remote

village of Hietzing, where I lived at the time, to go to his residence in the quiet Heugasse. There my friend showed me the draft of his now-famous concerto in C major. In the first Allegro we changed a few passages at the beginning, removed unnecessary measures, and began writing the orchestral score. Kubelík's genius made me admire him sincerely. Soon he had absorbed all my advice and completed the task measure by measure with the confidence of an experienced composer, without being disturbed by transpositions and with a keen sensitivity for harmonic colors and their nuances. While working we experienced some hours of elation, during which we left earthly things behind."

The première of Foerster's *First Violin Concerto* took place on Sunday, October 22, 1911 in the Hippodrome in New York. A review in the New York Times on the next day under the title *Kubelík's Second Concert* (p.11, col.4) mentions neither the orchestra nor the conductor. But a conductor is mentioned for the first concert in the Hippodrome on October 15, 1911 (New York Times, October 16, 1911 [p.11, col.4] with the headline *Jan Kubelík Reappears*), namely, Nahan Franko (1861–1930) who conducted a small unnamed orchestra. (From 1904 to 1907 Franko had been the first American-born musician to be engaged as permanent conductor at the Metropolitan Opera.) None of the concerts was praised by the critic. (We are grateful to Chris Schiff of Bates College in Lewistown, Maine, for the information about the New York concerts.)

The piano reduction of Foerster's *First Violin Concerto* was published in 1912 and the score in 1913 by Universal Edition. In the *Führer durch die Violinliteratur* by Albert Tottmann and Wilhelm Altmann (Leipzig, 4th edition, 1935), the concerto is listed in the highest category of difficulty and characterized by the following commentary: "Cadenza by Jan Kubelík. Noteworthy. The slow ballad-like movement is followed immediately by the partly rustic finale."

The *First Violin Concerto* was Foerster's first solo concerto. Living in Prague since the foundation of the Republic of Czechoslovakia in 1918, he composed in 1925–26 his *2nd Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 104* – a work which, however, did not reach the popularity of the first and, for that reason, is not discussed in the relevant literature. In 1930 he composed a Cello Concerto (without opus number) and in 1945–46, already advanced in years, a *Capriccio for Flute and Small Orchestra, Op. 183b*.

From the preface of the *Repertoire Explorer Miniature Score*

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