

AN 'ACCIDENTAL' PREMIERE?

New Information on an Early Performance of
Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto

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An 'Accidental' Premiere?

Presented by Brett Langston

The early history of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto is supposedly well known. He wrote it during March and April 1878 while he was staying at Clarens in Switzerland, with his former student, the violinist Iosif Kotek (1855-1885).

On 17 March 1878¹ Tchaikovsky told Mrs von Meck: "This evening I was seized ... quite unexpectedly with a burning inspiration..."². His letters show that he worked remarkably quickly, and within nine days he reported that: "Today I finished the concerto. It still has to be copied out and played through a few times... and then orchestrated. I shall start the copying out and add the finishing touches"³.

After playing through the concerto with Kotek, Tchaikovsky decided to write a new Andante, although the first movement and finale were considered satisfactory⁴. On 5 April, Tchaikovsky drafted a new central movement, entitled *Canzonetta*, which in his words was: "better suited to the concerto's other two movements"⁵. On 11 April 1878 the complete orchestral score was ready⁶.



Tchaikovsky with Iosif Kotek (May 1877)

The first performance of the concerto was scheduled for 22 March 1879 at a concert of the Russian Musical Society in Saint Petersburg, to be performed by the renowned Hungarian violin virtuoso Leopold Auer (1845-1930)⁷. But Auer and Karl Davydov (the RMS's principal conductor in Petersburg) concluded that the work was too difficult, and the performance was cancelled. Attempts by Iosif Kotek and Emile Sauret to play the concerto in Moscow were also unsuccessful. The concerto quickly gained a reputation as unplayable, and no-one would perform it⁸.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all dates in this article are given in 'new style' (i.e. western European) dates, which were then twelve days ahead of the 'old style' [O.S.] calendar used throughout the Russian Empire.

² Letter 778 to Nadezhda von Meck, 17 March 1878.

³ See Letter 790 to Nadezhda von Meck, 28 March 1878.

⁴ See Letters 795 and 797 to Anatoly Tchaikovsky, 1 and 4 April 1878.

⁵ See Letter 798 to Nadezhda von Meck, 5 April 1878. The original Andante (restyled *Méditation*) later found a home as the first piece in the cycle *Souvenir d'un lieu Cher*, Op. 42.

⁶ See Letter 803 to Nadezhda von Meck, 11 April 1878, and the author's date on the manuscript full score.

⁷ See Letter 1132 to Nadezhda von Meck, 18 March 1879.

⁸ See Letter 1916 to Nadezhda von Meck, 3-4 January 1882. According to the critic Sergey Flerov (writing as "Ignotus") in the *Moscow Register* (Московские ведомости), 20 December 1881 [O.S.], the concerto had been performed in 1879 in New York by the violinist Leopold Damrosch, with piano accompaniment. However, the exact date of this supposed performance is unknown, and it has yet to be corroborated by contemporary accounts.

However, the violinist Adolph Brodsky (1851-1929) became a strong advocate of the concerto, and in 1881 he found an opportunity to introduce it to a Viennese audience: firstly at a special *Novitätenprobe* (a preliminary hearing for new works), and eventually at the third Philharmonic Society subscription concert on 4 December 1881. Despite an unfavourable reception by parts of the audience, and a particularly damning review by the famous critic Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), the concerto was considered to have been successful. Tchaikovsky recalled these events when writing some years later in his *Autobiographical Account of a Tour Abroad* (1888)⁹:

In referring to this outstanding artist [Brodsky], I cannot help availing myself of this opportunity to express publicly the fervent gratitude which to my dying day I shall always feel for him because of the following incident. In 1877 [i.e. 1878], I wrote a Violin Concerto and dedicated it to Mr L. Auer. I do not know whether Mr Auer felt himself flattered by my dedication, but the point is that, in spite of his genuine friendliness towards me, he never wanted to surmount the difficulties of this concerto and in fact pronounced it to be impossible to play—a verdict which, coming from such an authority as this Saint Petersburg-based virtuoso, plunged this unhappy child of my imagination into an abyss of what seemed to be irrevocable oblivion.

One day, some five years after my concerto had been written and published, when I was living in Rome, I went into a café and happened to pick up an issue of the *Neue Freie Presse*¹⁰ in whose feuilleton section there was an article by the famous critic Hanslick about a recent concert by the Vienna Philharmonic Society which, amongst other things, had also featured that hapless violin creation of mine which L. S. Auer had condemned to non-existence a few years earlier. Herr Hanslick reproached the soloist (who was none other than A. D. Brodsky) for having made such a bad choice and lambasted my poor concerto, liberally strewing the pearls of his caustic humour and firing the most poisoned arrows of his irony. "We know," he wrote, "that in contemporary literature there have started to appear works whose authors love to reproduce in detail the most repulsive physiological phenomena, including foul smells. One might describe literature of that kind as stinking. Well, Herr Tschaikowsky has shown us that there can also be stinking music"¹¹.

Having read the above comment by this famous and highly influential critic, I could vividly picture to myself how much energy and effort it must have cost Mr Brodsky to have my "stinking concerto" performed by the Vienna Philharmonic, and how aggrieved and unpleasantly struck he must have been by this attitude of a critic towards a work by a fellow-countryman and friend. I of course hastened to convey my most heartfelt gratitude to Mr Brodsky, and from his reply I found out how many trials and tribulations he had had to get through in order to achieve his goal—and his goal was precisely to rescue my concerto from the abyss of oblivion. Mr Brodsky subsequently played the "stinking" concerto everywhere, and was everywhere attacked by critics similar to Hanslick in their approach and their exclusivity of tone, but still the deed was done—my concerto had been saved, and now it is quite frequently played in Western Europe...

⁹ [https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Autobiographical Account of a Tour Abroad in the Year 1888](https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Autobiographical%20Account%20of%20a%20Tour%20Abroad%20in%20the%20Year%201888) (translation by Luis Sundkvist).

¹⁰ An Austrian daily newspaper founded in Vienna in 1864.

¹¹ In Hanslick's original article: "[in the finale] We see nothing but wild, vulgar faces, hear coarse swearing and can literally smell the cheap liquor. [The writer] Friedrich Vischer once observed, referring to lascivious descriptions in literature, that there are images 'which one can see stink'. Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto suggests the dreadful thought that there might well also be works of music whose stinking one can hear" (translation by Luis Sundkvist).

Brodsky subsequently performed the concerto with great acclaim under the same conductor, Hans Richter, at one of the latter's concerts in London's St. James's Hall on 8 May 1882, and also for the first time in Russia on 20 August (8 August [O.S.]) the same year at the sixth concert in the Art and Industrial Exhibition, conducted by Ippolit Altani, where it was warmly received¹².

Impressed by the young violinist's persistence in premiering the work, despite difficult circumstances, Tchaikovsky then withdrew the original dedication to Leopold Auer and replaced it with one to Adolph Brodsky¹³.

And so history records that Adolph Brodsky was the first person to have performed Tchaikovsky's 'unplayable' Violin Concerto, at a Vienna Philharmonic Society concert on 4 December 1881, with Hans Richter conducting.



Adolph Brodsky

The Mystery

The 21st century has seen a vast and increasing number of historical sources becoming available in the form of online digital copies, many of which are freely accessible to readers worldwide. These include, for example, copies of the German musical journal *Signale für die musikalische Welt* — which was established in Leipzig in 1843, and continued publication until 1941¹⁴. In one such issue, we find an early review of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto:

* In Hannover hatte das letzte Abonnementconcert an Orchestralen die Ouverture zu „Der Beherrschter der Geister“ von Weber und Beethoven's acht Sinfonie zum Inhalt. Beiden Werken wurde unter Capellmeister Frand's Leitung eine höchst befriedigende Wiedergabe zu Theil. Herr Concertmeister Hänlein hatte sich durch die Wahl zweier umfangreicher Violinovitaten gerade keine dankbare Aufgabe gestellt. Es galt wenigstens seine ganze Künstlerschaft einzusetzen, um ein ziemlich steriles, mit Ausnahme einiger hübsch verwertheter slavischer Melodien interesseloses und sehr langes Violinconcert in Ddur von Tschaikowsky einigermaßen über Wasser zu halten. Eine bessere Folie bildete die Fantasie von H. Göz, deren formelle Klarheit besonders wohlthat, wenn auch der eigentliche Erfindungsgehalt kein bedeutender zu nennen ist. Durch Herrn Hänlein's Spielweise kam das Stück zu guter Geltung. An Stelle von Fräulein Börs hatte Fräulein Fillunger aus Frankfurt a. M. die Gesangsvorträge übernommen. Sie gab ihr Bestes in einigen Liedern von Brahms, die sie mit namentlich in der Mittellage klängsünder Stimme sang. Vortrag und Auffassung hätte man im Ganzen noch geist- und lebensvoller gewünscht.

¹² See Letter 2028 to Pyotr Jurgenson, 5 June 1882; Letter 2071 to Sergey Taneyev, 9 August 1882; Letters 2073 and 2076 to Nadezhda von Meck, 15 and 23 August 1882.

¹³ The first edition of the arrangement for violin and piano, published by Jurgenson in October 1879, carried the inscription to Auer. Brodsky's name appears on the later editions of the arrangement, and also on the full score, which was only published for the first time in 1888.

¹⁴ See https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Signale_f%C3%BCr_die_musikalische_Welt.

In English translation ¹⁵:

In Hannover, the orchestral content of the last subscription concert was the overture to "Der Beherrscher der Geister" by Weber and Beethoven's Eighth Symphony. Both works were given a highly satisfactory performance under Capellmeister Franck's direction. Concertmaster Hänslein had not set himself a thankful task by choosing two extensive violin novelties. He needed all his artistry to keep a rather sterile, with the exception of a few nicely exploited Slavic melodies, uninteresting and very long concerto in D major by Tchaikovsky somewhat afloat. A better foil was the Fantasia by H. Götz, whose formal clarity is particularly pleasing, even if the actual inventive content cannot be called significant. Through Mr Hänslein's style of play, the étude came into its own. In place of Fräulein Börs, Fräulein Fillunger from Frankfurt a[m] M[ain] had taken on the vocal performances. She gave her best in several songs by Brahms, which she sang with a voice that was especially beautiful in the middle register. One would have wished for an even more spirited and lively performance and interpretation.

While this concert appears to have been unremarkable in itself, the most astonishing aspect of his review is that it dates from March 1880¹⁶ — almost two years before the concerto's 'official' premiere in Vienna on 4 December 1881.

Nº. 26. Leipzig, März. 1880.

S I G N A L E

für die

M u s i k a l i s c h e W e l t.

Achtunddreißigster Jahrgang.

This raises an intriguing question — could Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto really have been premiered in Hannover in 1880?

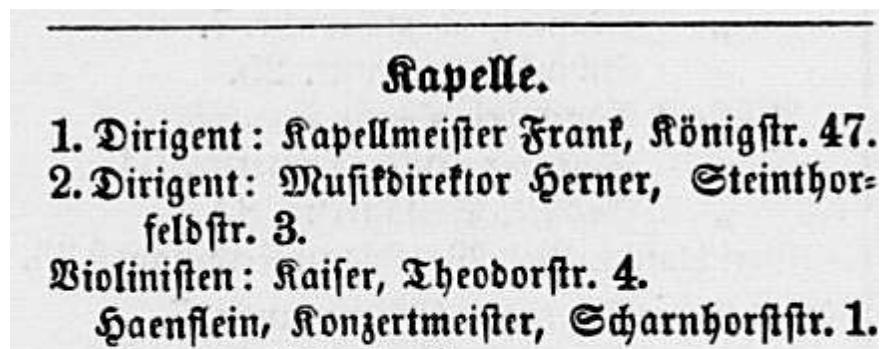
¹⁵ We are most grateful to Genia Blum for this translation.

¹⁶ *Signale für die Musikalische Welt*, March 1880, No. 26, p. 409. Accessed via Google Books

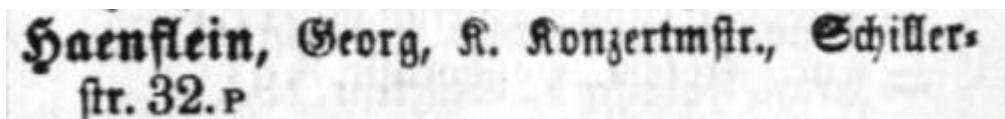
https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/_MMGhQxc4t-cC?hl=en&gbpv=0 (viewed 5 May 2022).

The exact date of the concert is not stated in the article, but this is likely to have been sometime in March 1880, given that this was the last of eight bi-weekly issues of *Signale* to have been published during that month¹⁷. Furthermore, the work described seems unambiguously to refer to the Violin Concerto, and not to either of Tchaikovsky's other short works for violin and orchestra — the *Sérénade mélancolique* in B minor, Op. 26 (1875) and *Valse-Scherzo* in C major, Op. 34 (1877) — could hardly be described as a "very long concerto in D major"¹⁸. The reviewer's comment on the length of the work also suggests that it was performed in full, rather than just individual movements.

As for the performers, "Capellmeister Franck" almost certainly refers to the German conductor and minor composer Ernst Frank (1847-1889), who succeeded Hans von Bülow as conductor at the Hannover Court Opera (Hofoper Hannover)¹⁹. The 1881 *Address Book, Municipal and Business Handbook of the Court City of Hannover and the Town of Linden* lists Frank and Hänslein as the principal conductor ("1. Dirigent") and leader (Konzertmeister) respectively of the city's *Kapelle*²⁰.



The concertmaster's first name is not supplied (either in this section or in the following street listing for No. 1 Scharnhorffstrasse), but a later 1885 directory²¹ reveals his forename to be "Georg":



¹⁷ Nos. 19 to 26. The issues themselves were not individually dated, with only the month shown on the front cover.

¹⁸ The *Sérénade* and *Valse-Scherzo* each last approximately ten minutes to perform, compared with 30 to 35 minutes for the concerto.

¹⁹ See German Wikipedia: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernst_Frank_\(Komponist\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernst_Frank_(Komponist)).

²⁰ *Adreßbuch, Stadt- und Geschäftshandbuch der Königlichen Residenzstadt Hannover und der Stadt Linden* [1881], p. 49. Accessed via the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek http://digitale-sammlungen.gwlb.de/ppnresolver?PPN=810649993_1881 (viewed 5 May 2022). The 1880 edition of the same directory shows the kapellmeister position as vacant.

²¹ *Adreßbuch, Stadt- und Geschäftshandbuch der Königlichen Residenzstadt Hannover und der Stadt Linden* [1885] (p. 443). Accessed via https://digitale-sammlungen.gwlb.de/sammlungen/sammlungsliste/werksansicht?id=6&tx_dlf%5Bid%5D=2517&tx_dlf%5Bpage%5D=467 (viewed 5 May 2022).

Very little information is available online concerning Georg Hänslein (also written as Haenslein), although in 1871 one source mentions him in passing as "an Imperial Russian Chamber Musician"²². This raises the question of how such a relatively unknown figure, rather than a virtuoso violinist, came to perform Tchaikovsky's concerto?

A possible clue is offered in the aforementioned review: "Concertmaster Hänslein had not set himself a thankful task by choosing two extensive violin novelties", suggesting that it was he who selected the concerto for performance. We do not know whether Tchaikovsky and Hänslein were acquainted with each other from the latter's time in Russia, or whether it was the concertmaster's inclination towards Russian music in general that influenced his decision to perform the concerto.

The score of the concerto had already been published by Jurgenson in the autumn of 1879, in the form of the orchestral parts and an arrangement for violin and piano (Opus 35). These editions were amongst those advertised for sale in *Signale für die Musikalische Welt* early in 1880²³:

Verlag von P. Jurgenson in Moskau.			
Neue Ausgaben und neue Compositionen			
von			
P. Tschaïkowsky.			
Op. 23. Pianoforte-Concert. Orchesterpartitur .	Stimmen	18	—
Op. 26. Sérénade mélancolique p. Viol. Orchersterpart./	f. Über erschie- nen.	3	50
Op. 34. Valse-Scherzo. Violine mit Orchesterbegleitung .	.	8	—
— — Violine mit Pianobegleitung .	: : : : .	5	—
Op. 35. Concert für Violine mit Orchester :	: : : : .	22	50
— — Für Violine mit Piano .	: : : : .	13	50
Op. 42. Trois morceaux p. Violon avec accompagnement de Piano	6	60	
Op. 43. Suite in 6 Sätzen für Orchester: Introduzione e fuga. Divertimento. Andante. Marche miniature. Scherzo. Gavotte.			
Partitur 15 <i>M.</i> Stimmen 30 <i>M.</i> 4 händig	12	—	

Although the full orchestral score was not published until 1888, it would not have been difficult to prepare this using the orchestral parts and the violin part from the piano reduction.

in all likelihood both the soloist and conductor were completely unaware that the concerto had never been played in public before, just as Tchaikovsky presumably had no knowledge that the performance was taking place²⁴.

²² Zeitschrift des Oberösterreichischen Lehrervereines (1872), p. 120. Accessed via Google Books

https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Zeitschrift_des_Ober%C3%B6sterreichischen_Le/kfyfN6o9cMC?hl=en&gbpv=0 (viewed 5 May 2022): "Ein Schuler des Herrn Börner, Namens Georg Hänslein, ist bereits kaiserlich russischer Kammermusiker".

²³ *Signale für die Musikalische Welt* (January 1880), No. 4, p. 64. The editions were also available through the publisher Daniel Rahter in Hamburg (e.g. see issue No. 22 from March 1880, p. 350).

²⁴ As previously noted, he seems to have been unaware of Brodsky's 1881 performance of the concerto in Vienna until he happened to read about it in a German newspaper.

Tchaikovsky only visited Hannover once, stopping off for three days from 17-19 March 1889, between conducting engagements in Hamburg and Paris. There is nothing in his diary entries for those dates to suggest that he attended in any concerts or met any musicians (such as Hänslein or Frank) during his brief sojourn in the city.

Conclusion

The world premiere of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto appears to have been given in March 1880 in Hannover by Georg Hänslein, with the city's *Hofkapelle* conducted by Ernst Frank — nearly two years before Adolph Brodsky's performance in Vienna under Hans Richter in December 1881.

There is nothing to suggest that any of the performers involved were aware of the significance of the occasion, or that news of this concert ever reached Tchaikovsky or Brodsky, or any of their close contemporaries.

Further research in contemporary Hanoverian newspapers (not currently accessible online) is needed to ascertain the exact date of this performance, and to confirm the details mentioned in the review in the *Signale für die Musikalische Welt*. We would be pleased to hear from anyone who can provide further information regarding this concert, or perhaps even earlier performances that may have been lost to history.

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Postscript

After this article was originally published on 7 May 2022 a number of people responded to suggest that the violinist's surname may have been Häflein, rather than Hänslein²⁵. This proved to be something of a breakthrough, and it turned out that his performance of Tchaikovsky's concerto had previously been noted by Dr Sanna Pederson in a 2020 edition of her blog 'Music in Berlin, 1870-1910'²⁶, which includes the following:

Georg Häflein (1848-1908) was one of the earlier students of Joachim at the Hochschule: he studied there from 1871-1874. As a teenager he had studied with Ferdinand David from 1862-65, and at eighteen went to St. Petersburg to play in the Italian Opera orchestra until 1871. His fine pedigree was rewarded with a prestigious appointment as concertmaster at Hanover, where Joachim himself had been employed.

²⁵ A difference in typography in the original Gothic 'Fraktur' script that was indistinguishable to the present author's untrained eye.

²⁶ <https://sannapederson.oucreate.com/blog/>

Hänflein's solo career was reaching its peak when he played the Tchaikovsky Concerto. Besides performing as soloist with the Hanover orchestra, he also played several times in nearby Göttingen. In 1878 he played the Spohr Violin Concerto No. 9 on a Museum Concert in Frankfurt, and in 1882 he played on one of the Richter Concerts in London. In 1881 he performed Joachim's Hungarian Concerto in Hanover, and the Bruch G minor Concerto in Göttingen and Hildesheim.

Hänflein was better known for leading a Quartet and Piano Trio in Hanover. The Quartet was in existence from his first year there in 1874 and still giving regular concerts in 1886²⁷.

Dr Pederson concluded her article by asking "What is one to make of this discovery of Hänflein's 1880 performance of the Tchaikovsky Concerto, published the year before?... I can only observe that the early reception of Tchaikovsky's Concerto can be more accurately documented, and this needs to be done because what we have now are contradictory accounts".

A more detailed account of the concerto's first performances will now be forthcoming later this year, and the present author is extremely grateful to Dr Pederson, and also to the other contributors who have supplied further information in response to the original article.

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²⁷ <https://sannapederson.oucreate.com/blog/docs/profiles-in-joachims-students-2-georg-hanflein-1848-1908>. The present author is indebted to Dr Pederson for her permission to reproduce this text.