

# THE BEETHOVEN VIOLIN CONCERTO IN D MAJOR, OP. 61\*

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## Abstract

The Beethoven Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61: Some Twentieth-Century Viewpoints

In 1806 Beethoven was persuaded to write his monumental violin concerto in D Major, Opus 61, for Franz Clement, leader of the theater orchestra at Wien. Clement had been a child prodigy, and was considered to be a remarkable violinist with a prodigious memory, but was, as well, something of a charlatan in that some of his public performances were said to be circus-like. He performed the Beethoven Concerto by sight-reading (though there is some dispute about this) with an unrehearsed orchestra, and he divided the work up, inserting a sonata of his own after the first movement, playing his sonata with the violin up-side-down, and on one string. The first performance was a benefit concert for Clement, but it is not known whether Beethoven consulted Clement about the violin part. The piece, written in haste, was not met with very enthusiastic reviews (Möser wrote that the thematic material was commonplace, confused, wearisome and too repetitious) and the work had only three performances between 1806 and 1844.

Piano concertos were more popular during that time, and Beethoven was persuaded to write a piano version, which was published the following year, a year before the composer subjected the violin concerto to a final revision. There was no known exchange between the composer and the performer after the initial performance. No violin cadenzas were written by Beethoven, though he wrote cadenzas for the piano version, and violin cadenzas were subsequently written by Joachim, David, Kreisler and many other celebrated violinists. One can really better understand why there is no definite edition of the work, considering the composer's indecision and haste and how improvised the première of the work was.

In 1828 Pierre Baillot played the nearly forgotten violin concerto of Beethoven, which, since its première in 1806, had received only one performance, in Berlin, in 1812. The fourteen-year-old Henri Vieuxtemps played it in Vienna in 1834. However, it did not begin to find its first interpreters and admirers until Joseph Joachim performed it in London in 1844 under the direction of Mendelssohn; both artists were vitally interested in stimulating appreciation of the classical masters. As late as 1855, Louis Spohr (who rejected the late works of Beethoven), said to Joachim after a performance of the Beethoven Concerto that he supposed it was fine in its own way, but he would rather hear Joachim play a "real" violin piece.[1]

This negative judgment was conditioned by the artificial bravura practices of the early 19th century; concertos were written for the purpose of displaying the player's pyrotechniques, sometimes leading to music which was bizarre, sentimental and eclectic. Spohr wrote his first five violin concertos before Beethoven completed his, and neither Spohr nor his contemporaries gave attention to the merits of Beethoven's Concerto. The Beethoven Concerto was not a display piece, and found slow acceptance by virtuosi, who had, during

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that era, their own concerti primarily in mind, with the desire to showcase their particular virtuosic strengths. Beethoven's towering musical concepts, mirroring the spirit of reform, democracy and revolution, and his idiomatic treatment of the violin and pianistic thinking, had to wait for a later era to be appreciated.

Beethoven was aware of the conflict between his vision and the performance practices of contemporary violinists, and assigned four staves to the violin solo, in order to leave room for alterations; in many places the four staves are filled. Beethoven had studied the concerti of his contemporaries and predecessors; while Rode's technical propensities were too intricately violinistic to appeal to Beethoven, the influence of Viotti's characteristic use of broken octaves and Kreutzer's elaborating of a melodic line in triplet passages were put to good use in the concerto.

Joachim was the most widely accepted interpreter of the Beethoven Concerto, and his cadenzas are still played. The interpretations of Vieuxtemps and Sarasate were compared unfavorably to Joachim's. Vieuxtemps was said to slide up and down the strings à la Paganini, and Sarasate's elegant and immaculate style was not suitable, according to Flesch, for such a large scale composition. The interpretations of Ysaÿe (the last eminent violinist in the tradition of the Liszt-Rubinstein interpreter) were also characterized by the attitude of his generation that textual fidelity should be secondary to expansiveness of feeling and that it was acceptable to take liberties if doing so brought life to the music.

Violin technique developed through time, however, and interpretation began to be discussed more fully as traditional habits began to outlive their usefulness; developments in left and right hand technique and tone production kept pace with a more systematic approach to the violin, parallel to advancements in science and political thought. Included in the developments over the past two centuries would be a greater left-hand mobility, the preservation of uniform tone color within a phrase, and the use of positions not for convenience but with a view to expression and evenness of tone. Sequences are given matching fingerings, bowing and string changes, and the stark tonal contrast between open and stopped strings is avoided, as well as an attempt made always to veil the differences in timbre between strings. These adjustments were all the more necessary because with the introduction of metal covered strings the sounds of the strings became harder still.

The complex of new technical devices included simplifications connected with the elimination of unnecessary movements of the left hand, use of even numbered positions, and rational fingerings. The combined use of the pronation of the hand, with hand, finger and wrist pressures, evolved from the necessity of producing larger sounds to fill the larger halls. Isaac Stern writes of the circle of pressure created by the opposition of thumb and second finger, which is a very different thing from the isolated index-finger, or wrist, or thumb pressure which was taught in the last century. In addition, older halls generally had more reverberations and, therefore, if tempos are sometimes faster today, it may be because a too fast tempo in an older hall would have been blurred for acoustical reasons. Bow speed and pressure, which is responsible for dynamic shading, was not treated in as much depth by 18th century writers as it was by their 19th century successors. Bow management relative to the Tourte bow only began to be formulated in detail in Capet's school, and in the *Methode* by Rode and his contemporaries during the period 1800-1840.

By the last decade of the 20th century, issues such as tempo markings in Beethoven's work, and the inevitable conflict over upper note start of trills [2] have been thoroughly explored by musicologists. Nonsensical adjectives (when applied to music), such as "masculine" and "virile," have fallen completely out of fashion, though they were used and applied liberally not so very long ago. Additionally, the autocracy of the bar line has been subjected to less dogmatic interpretation, and new concepts of dissonance have widened perceptions. A regard for psychological effect and a focus on musical and aesthetic content have become central to interpretation. Beethoven's concerto may be thought of as a portal through which we may view the artistic and intellectual climate of the previous two centuries.

The following table lists examples taken from 20th century pedagogical literature which illustrate the refinements of technique which have evolved since the first performance and represent the most modern concerns about this work. These illustrations may assist in correcting the prevailing type of study which was widespread from the second half of the 19th century, and which had a one-sided fixation on isolated technical points and purely mechanical and gymnastic training. Choices of bowing and fingering are vital factors in artistic playing, and creatively serve and enrich the expressiveness of the instrument, allowing its

full possibilities to come to fruition.

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In terms of clarity of sound, a contribution toward performance practice may be found in a special technique for playing the octaves in the first movement of the Beethoven; Robert Gerle extrapolates from the rule of making a double-stop shift on pairs of strings by using the lower set of fingerings to move into the new position before placing the next shift:

From Robert Gerle's *Art of Practicing the Violin: With Useful Hints for All String Players*, page 102: "On different pairs of strings: the shift is done with the single finger on the middle string and follows the rules of single-note shifts." (b) in Octaves with 1-4:

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#### Example 1 - Gerle, Fingered Octaves

##### (b) in Octaves with 1-4:

The same rules apply as for same-finger shifts:

Violin Concerto: first movement *Beethoven*



Figure 1

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Joseph Szigeti is particularly interested in the question of fingered octaves, the use of which cannot help but contribute to technical security. He is astounded that not one of the many editions of the Beethoven Concerto has suggested a fingered octave solution until his 1963 (Curci, Milan) edition. One bar before the repetition of the theme in the third movement is an especially useful example of this sort of fingering.

From *Szigeti on the Violin*, by Joseph Szigeti, page 81: "Another case in point is the passage in octaves in the Rondo at the third entry of the Rondo theme, where Joachim, Wilhelmj, Hubay and Flesch prescribe the traditional fingering, while I suggest ending it (one bar before the resumption of the theme) with:

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Example 2- Szigeti, Fingered Octaves



Ex. 2

Figure 2

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I.M. Yampolsky compares traditional and fingered octave choices. *The Principles of Violin Fingering*, I.M. Yampolsky, page 80: "In such cases: (a) in fast tempi the rational fingering is the alternation of the 1st and 3rd fingers with the 2nd and 4th, or of the 1st and 4th with the 1st and 3rd, which avoids unnecessary movement of the hand; (b) in passages requiring a cantabile style in moderate tempi, the rational fingering is 1st and 4th fingers, giving a greater number of position changes:

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Example 3 - Yampolsky, "Rational Fingerings"



Figure 3

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Ivan Galamian quotes from the first movement of the Concerto to illustrate new devices for the elimination of slides. However, he cautions violinists that to go to extremes in trying to avoid all slides leaves the playing colorless, dry and cold. One should avoid unmusical slides, but fingering should be used to color the music, and to allow for an expressive gesture or for the sake of better vibrato and richer sound. Galamian taught the modern Franco-Belgium bow hold, which has entirely superseded that of the German style, characterized by a very high right wrist and low forearm.

From Ivan Galamian, *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*, pp. 34-35: "In customary fashion this modern type of extension is put to use in the *creeping* fingering. This is a change-of-position technique which eliminates the shift and is based on extension—occasionally followed by contractions—*followed by a readjustment of the hand*...With this type of fingering it is possible to cover a substantial section of any





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### Example 6 - Yampolsky, Expressive Contrast

The use of the open strings as an important aid to imperceptible changes of position has already been mentioned (see the chapter 'Changes of Position').

The sound of the open strings also plays an important role in artistic phrasing, often serving as a means of strengthening the expressive contrast in a musical phrase. Thus the juxtaposition of stopped and open strings for a single note in a repeated melodic phrase throws it into relief and gives it a variety of tone colour :



Figure 6

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An effective contrast between a stopped string and a natural harmonic on the same note. *The Principles of Violin Fingering*, I.M. Yampolsky, page 103:

### Example 7 - Yampolsky, Effective Tonal Contrast

(a) The replacement of the sound of a stopped string by a natural harmonic on the same note in *the repetition of a melodic fragment* makes an effective tonal contrast :

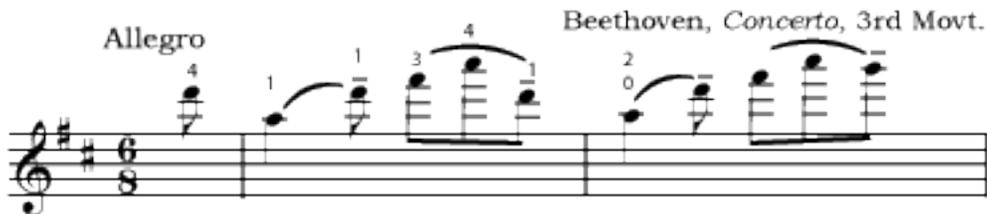


Figure 7

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A greater security of intonation and an avoidance of unnecessary string changes can be achieved by devising a special point of support on the fingerboard. *The Principles of Violin Fingering*, I.M. Yampolsky, page 117:

**Example 8 Yampolsky, Point of Support**  
**Fingering and Intonation**

The purity of the violinist's intonation depends to a certain extent on his choice of fingering. A bad fingering is often the reason for uncertain and inexact intonation, even in technically easy passages. This is the result of the awkward movements of the hand and fingers which are required by such fingerings. For example :



The fingering given above, which requires an extension of the second finger followed by the first finger crossing strings, gives the fingers no point of support, which is the reason for the uncertainty of intonation. The advantage of the following fingering :



is that by doing away with the unnecessary string crossing of the first finger, it gives a natural point of support for the precise movements of the fingers in the given hand position and thus makes for more accurate intonation.

However, the causes of uncertain intonation are not only bad fingering. It is well known that violinists make the same mistakes in intonation when playing the same passages in certain works. This is explained by the fact that such passages are not only technically *difficult*, but *awkward* as well.

Figure 8

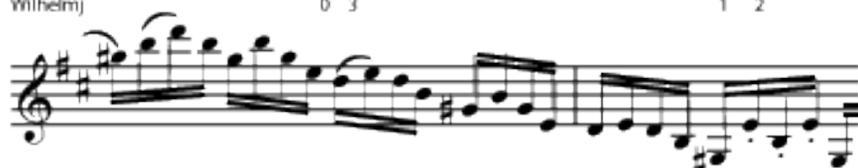
Szigeti is known for his scholarly approach to violin technique, and many of his suggestions are very useful for some violinists. In the first movement of the concerto he has examined what is "natural" versus what is "unnatural" and come up with some very interesting alternatives. *Szigeti on the Violin*, Joseph

Szigeti, page 84:

**Example 9 - Szigeti, "Natural" versus "Unnatural"**

who have tried the traditional 1 and 4 fingering! It is not only difficult passages like the above that can be made easier but simple ones like the following one from the first movement of the Beethoven Concerto that can gain in smoothness by adopting more rational fingerings than those of the past:

Joachim	1 2	1 2 1 0 3	2 1 2
Wilhelmj		0 3	1 2



Hubay	1	1 0 3	4	2 1 2
Flesch	1 3	0 3		3 1 2
Szigeti	3	1 3 2	1 3 4	0 2 3 1 2

*Ex. 12*

It is the unison B (1st and 4th) and the use of the half position (second bar) that solve the problem. This smooth joining together of adjacent positions is at the very root of the problems posed by some contemporary works like the second Bartók Concerto or the Sonata No. 1 (1923). Once one has recognized the basic pattern, everything falls into place, but try and play these with traditional fingerings and they become forbidding.

To return to the question of 'natural' versus 'unnatural' stretched basic positions on our fingerboard - after these several digressions - it is interesting to find the so-called 'Geminiani grip'



*Ex. 13*

**Figure 9**

Szigeti devotes several pages to the conflicting schools of thought regarding the articulation of the Rondo theme. It is unclear in the original score whether the mark above the D is a fingering or an elongated dot, and the manuscript can be made to support either reading. There is an unmistakable slur between the A and D, but it may be in different ink from that of the notes. Thus at least two interpretations of the theme may be considered. From *Szigeti on the Violin*, by Joseph Szigeti, page 145:

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**Example 10 - Szigeti, Articulation**

two 'schools of thought' in this question : the one favours a slur between the A and the D of the theme (G string) :



the other detaches (on one bow) the A from the D.



**Figure 10**

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From *Szigeti on the Violin*, by Joseph Szigeti, page 145:

**Example 11 - Suggestion by Wilhemj (old Peters ed.)**

The slurred approach necessitates either the fingering suggested by Wilhelmj in the already mentioned undependable old Peters edition:



**Figure 11**

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From *Szigeti on the Violin*, by Joseph Szigeti, page 145:

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**Example 12 - Avoiding an Unwelcome Slide: Joachim and Sauret**

with the (to our ears) unwelcome slide, or the Joachim and Sauret fingering



*Ex. 4*

which involves any player who is less than a superb technician in a bumpy and perilous jump from the first position to fifth (between D and F sharp) and back.

**Figure 12**

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From *Szigeti on the Violin*, by Joseph Szigeti, page 146-7:

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### Example 13 - Theme According to Czerny

It is precisely these F sharps that are the danger points and that would invalidate the all-important *tenutos* on the A's and lead to what we all want to avoid : a jog-trot, over-accented delivery something like this:



Ex. 5

Carl Czerny (1791-1857), Beethoven's pupil between 1801 and 1803, in his writings about his master gives the theme of the rondo in its version for Piano and Orchestra, with this orthography:



Ex. 6

with the dots *below* the slur. (By the way he calls it 'vielleicht sein grösstes und schönstes Konzert'.)

Figure 13

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### Endnotes

1. Spohr augmented the orchestra, but did not exploit its possibilities for color or thematic participation. The solo violin dominated autocratically and the orchestra remained subservient. The cello and bass parts were almost always doubled, in the conservative tradition of Mozart and Haydn, and Spohr continued to use the antiquated clarino. His works lacked the spirit of modern polyphony and Beethoven's rhythmic and thematic brilliance.
2. Since Beethoven's fingerings in his piano music show alternate use of both main note and auxiliary note start of trills, the notion that all of Beethoven's trills are to begin on the main note is not absolutely secure; he never completely abandoned 18th century practice in this regard. Examples of upper-note starts can also be seen from measured trills in the Sixth Symphony (2nd movement, solo flute, bar 131) and in the Ninth Symphony (3rd movement, first violins, bar 129).

Also see: Eminent Interpreters of the Beethoven Violin Concerto<sup>1</sup>, an historical timetable with links to

<sup>1</sup>"Eminent Interpreters of the Beethoven Violin Concerto" <<http://cnx.org/content/m13438/latest/>>

photos and bios of artists: Vieuxtemps, Joachim, Sarasate, Wilhelmj, Auer, Flesch, Ysaÿe, Hubay, Kreisler, Szigeti, Galamian, Stern, Perlman.