

CLASSICAL

Tender is the torment

As the Scottish Chamber Orchestra prepares for Schumann's strange and beautiful Violin Concerto, violinist Alina Ibragimova talks about the struggle of performing the 'incredible work'

David Kettle

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virtuosity – there are no blistering solo cadenzas, for a start. And in the slow, melancholy dance of its final movement, a long way from the kind of sparkling froth that would bring a concerto to its traditionally effervescent conclusion. It's not an

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But despite its magnificence, we're not going to dwell on Brahms's Fourth. In fact, it's hard to when there's a piece in the same programme like Schumann's deeply strange Violin Concerto – with its scarcely believable back story. Even the soloist in the SCO's concerts, young Russian/British violinist Alina Ibragimova, accepts that the concerto is... well, unusual. "It's not very often played," she admits, "but now it's getting more of the recognition that it deserves. I think it's an incredible work."

Ibragimova is a former classmate of Scottish violinist Nicola Benedetti at London's Menuhin School – as teens, the two girls even played the Bach 'Double' Concerto together under Menuhin. She's now firmly established as one of the brightest

violin talents around, admired for forging a highly individual, very distinctive path through the music world, often with unusual pieces like the Schumann Violin Concerto.

So what's all the fuss about? Well, not for nothing has Robert Schumann gained the reputation as an archetypal tortured Romantic genius. He permanently injured a hand, and thereby ruined his chances of a career as a concert pianist, with a mechanism intended to strengthen his fingers; he was sacked as conductor from the Düsseldorf Symphony Orchestra for incompetence. And yet he also wrote some of the most beautiful, achingly vulnerable music of the 19th century. More darkly, Schumann suffered from mental illness all his life – put down variously to the effects of syphilis, mercury poisoning, or a brain tumour – and following a suicide attempt ended his days pitifully in a mental asylum.

He finished his Violin Concerto in October 1853, just four months before his suicide attempt. The concerto's original dedicatee, Joseph Joachim (probably the starriest violinist of the age), thought the piece morbid, a product of Schumann's supposed madness, and never performed it. When he died, Joachim arranged to have the concerto hidden away in the Prussian State Library.

And there the concerto languished – or would have done, had not the violinist sisters Jelly d'Arányi and Adila Fachiri (again, top players of their age, and grand-nieces of the great Joachim) taken part in a seance in 1933, at which they were contacted by a spirit that spelt out its name on their ouija board as Robert



Schumann, asking them to dig out his unpublished, unperformed Violin Concerto and play it.

Independently, the great Yehudi Menuhin was contacted by German music publishers Schott, who had discovered the concerto and wanted his opinion on its worth. He described it as the missing link between Beethoven and Brahms, and immediately arranged to give its world premiere – in San Francisco in 1937 – only to be halted by d'Arányi and Fachiri, claiming the right of first performance based on their ghostly encounter.

Which is where – even more astonishingly – the Nazis step in. Getting wind of a true German concerto that might replace the infuriatingly popular Violin Concerto by the Jew Mendelssohn in the nation's affections, the German regime insisted on a German premiere, with a German violinist. It took place in 1937, in Berlin, with Georg Kulenkampff and the Berlin Philharmonic.

It never did quite supplant Mendelssohn's Concerto, but the Schumann Violin Concerto is now well and truly out there, and it remains a very strange work. In the symphonic grandeur (even pomposity?) of its solid opening movement, in which the violin finds it a bit tough to compete with the orchestra. In a certain lack of showy

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Photograph: Eva Vermandel

virtuosity – there are no blistering solo cadenzas, for a start. And in the slow, melancholy dance of its final movement, a long way from the kind of sparkling froth that would bring a concerto to its traditionally effervescent conclusion. It's not an easy listen – but never less than a fascinating one.

"You really feel the struggle in the piece," admits Ibragimova, "and it's actually an incredibly complex work." She first performed the concerto a couple of years ago, in acclaimed performances with Sir John Eliot Gardiner and the London Symphony Orchestra. "He really brought out the detail in it, and made me think of it very differently," she says. And Gardiner was a stickler for Schumann's strangely leisurely speed indications. "The metronome marks in the piece are very slow," Ibragimova admits, "and you have to be strong not to try and play faster. But that's what makes it a struggle. Everything is very deeply felt, and somehow you can feel that someone's in torment."

Does the piece's colourful background even matter to a

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performer? “Of course it’s important,” Ibragimova says, “and I think the history matches the concerto perfectly. It’s quite angular – and a little bit uncomfortable to play, actually. And a lot of it is in the violin’s middle register, so you really have to push to be heard. I also find I generally get very tired when I play Schumann’s music, more than any other music. There’s so much emotion there, and you have to fill every note with everything you have.”

It’s clearly a concerto that matches the intensity that Ibragimova herself aims to bring to her playing – as she puts it, “a burning desire to do my best”.

And a burning desire, too, to champion what is still a neglected though compelling concerto. It might seem voyeuristic to dwell on its sensational history, but that’s hard to ignore in a piece like this. Is it the product of a damaged mind? Or heartbreaking in its sense of torment? Or simply a beautiful piece of music? There’s one good way to find out. ■

Alina Ibragimova is the soloist in Schumann’s Violin Concerto with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Emmanuel Krivine, Usher Hall, Edinburgh, 10 March; City Halls, Glasgow, 11 March and Music Hall, Aberdeen, 12 March, www.sco.org.uk