

Vieuxtemps: Violin concerto no. 5 in A minor ('Grétry')

I – Allegro non troppo

II – Adagio

III – Allegro con fuoco

In terms of instrumental music, the Romantic era was dominated by the rise of the virtuoso, but it is surprising how long it took for significant repertoire to be composed for the violin. The 19th century is bookended by the concerti of Beethoven (1806) and Brahms and Tchaikovsky (both 1878), but there were no significant additions to the repertoire between these dates – leaving aside Paganini's showy but ultimately empty showpieces – until Mendelssohn's concerto of 1844. An instant success, its successful marriage of the lyrical to the virtuosic proved very influential on the emerging Franco-Belgian school of violin playing and composition. Saint-Saëns may be regarded as the foremost of its members, but even the lesser-known Lalo and Ysaÿe have tended to overshadow the contributions of the latter's teacher Henri Vieuxtemps.

Like many virtuosos of the period, Vieuxtemps found his early forays into composition hindered by his reputation as a performer. The high esteem in which he was held as a teacher may also have slowed his recognition as a composer, but the ability to pass on his appreciation for beautiful tone will have made up for this. His works are informed by an abhorrence of virtuosity for its own sake, not least in his seven violin concerti, of which the fifth remains by far the best-known.

Vieuxtemps plays on the listener's expectations with sudden changes of mood and, more significantly, an unusual structure. The soloist's first entry is thoughtful, contrasting with the drama of the orchestral presentation of the main ideas – so far, so Mozartean. The placing of the cadenza (unusually, Vieuxtemps left two to choose from) at the climax of the movement, leading straight into the *Adagio*, is lifted directly from Mendelssohn's concerto. (It is the slow movement, based on an aria from André Grétry's 1769 opera *Lucile*, which gives the work its name.) The biggest surprise comes with the finale, so short at 34 (very fast) bars that it seems more of a coda than a movement in its own right. The supremely lyrical tone Vieuxtemps demands of the soloist is lost in a display of pyrotechnics, though true to form, this remains in service to the restless mood of the music.