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# Tracing stylistic shifts: the development of German-Austrian violin concertos from the 18th to 19th century

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**Abstract:** This study compares the first movements of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 and Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 to find developments in style in German-Austrian violin concertos from the Classical to the Romantic periods. By analyzing melody, rhythm, ornamentation, cadenzas, and orchestration, this study demonstrates how the music evolved from being clear and improvised to being more lyrical, emotional, and virtuoso-defined by the composer.

**Keywords:** violin concerto; Mozart; Bruch; classical music; romantic music

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, classical music, particularly violin concertos, has experienced a steadily growing audience base in Western countries. According to a Statista report by Evgenia Koptyug, it shows that nearly 7.89 million people expressed strong interest in classical music genres in 2023, and the number of people increased every year from 2019 to 2023 [1]. This paper explores the stylistic evolution of German and Austrian violin concertos from the Classicism of the 18th century to the Romanticism of the 19th century by analyzing and comparing the first movements of *Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major* and Bruch's *Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor*. Through a comparative analysis of their melodic structure, rhythm, cadenzas, and performance techniques, the study offers an in-depth examination of their compositional styles. The findings aim to help violinists, musicians, and music enthusiasts gain a deeper understanding of the stylistic developments and interpretive differences between the Classical and Romantic eras.

## 2 Mozart's *Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major*

Mozart composed this violin concerto in December of 1775 when he was only 19 years old and had already served as a court musician in Salzburg. As the last of his five violin concertos, the *Concerto No.5* is known as the most mature and the most individual one. The work has a rigorous structure and beautiful melody.

### 2.1 The first movement

It begins with Allegro Aperto, which emphasizes a bright and dramatic classical style and marks this movement. The violin solo responds to the orchestra's opening grand theme in a graceful and subtly humorous manner. At the same time, the orchestra provides a rich harmonic background for this solo violin. The movement's structure is sonata-like, featuring a distinct theme, adaptable rhythm [2], and an engaging conversation between the orchestra and soloist. A lively and refined tone is established for the entire concerto by this musical journey, which blends technical mastery with expressiveness.

## 3 Bruch's *Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor*

This violin concerto, the most well-known of Bruch's many compositions, was finished in 1866. He wrote many concertos, but because of its lovely melody and genuine feelings, this one has come to symbolize romantic violin concertos. The composition has received enormous appreciation from both performers and audiences since its debut, and it continues to be one of the timeless works frequently heard in concerts all over the world.

### 3.1 The first movement

The first movement of this concerto is the prelude to the second movement, and they are connected. Many people think that this movement is in sonata form, but it has another form. According to the editor Richard Clarke, the first movement of Bruch's *Violin Concerto No. 1* serves as a rhapsodic prelude, introducing the expressive character of the entire work rather than adhering strictly to sonata form. This movement begins with Allegro Moderato. The beginning of the movement is led by the orchestra, followed by the emotional entry of the violin solo, which gradually unfolds the main theme, and the emotional tension is progressive.

## 4 Composition styles and interpretation performance practice

### 4.1 Tempo

The tempo markers in Mozart's movement are Allegro Aperto and Adagio, with an emphasis on Allegro Aperto throughout. The speed of Allegro typically ranges from 120 to 156 BPM. Many performers perform this movement at a speed of 120-130 BPM. But why would a violinist choose this speed range? Johann Joachim Quantz, in the influential *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen*, proposes a theory of tempo based on the human pulse, which he defines as approximately 80 beats per minute. According to this theory, an Allegro in common time may be understood as three eighth notes, or one and a half quarter notes, per pulse, at that same speed [3]. So based on these data points, it can be inferred from the mathematical steps that 120 BPM would be a standard Allegro tempo in the 18th century. At the same time, Ralph Kirkpatrick believed that small changes in speed are acceptable in practice [4]. However, Mozart's tempo preferences are still unclear, so it's challenging to say whether subsequent performance techniques reflect his personal preferences or broader trends toward faster tempos[5]. Therefore, when playing this movement, performers can follow the speed mark of the piece, and performers can also have their own idea of speed.

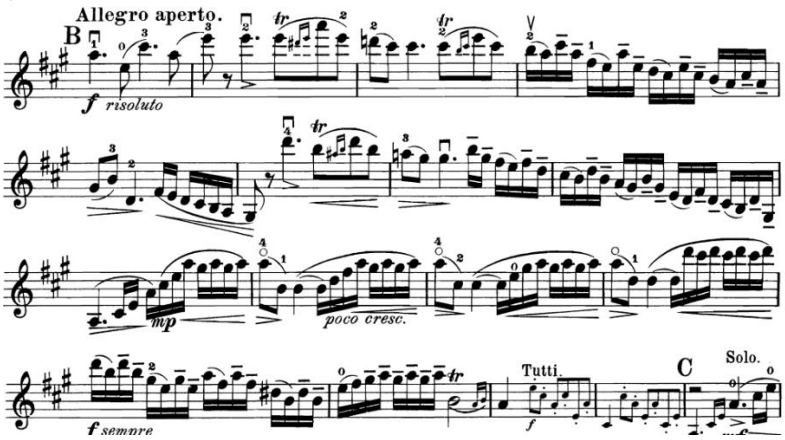
In Bruch's movement, the tempo markings Allegro Moderato and Allegro are clearly indicated. The overall tempo is Allegro Moderato, which generally falls within the range of 116–120 BPM, a tempo commonly adopted by many performers. However, it remains uncertain whether this modern interpretation of Allegro Moderato accurately reflects the intended tempo in the 19th century. Clive Brown mentions that depending on the composer and the situation, the term "Allegro moderato" was used in a variety of ways in 19th century practice, sometimes denoting a slightly slower allegro and other times being used interchangeably with "moderato" or even faster than "moderato" [6]. Although there is not much historical documentation about Bruch's own exact opinion on the tempo of this movement, one of the earliest recordings of Bruch's *Violin Concerto No. 1* can be found on YouTube: a 1925 recording by Albert Sammons [7]. The tempo presented in the recording is not very different from that of modern violinists.

These different choices of tempo naturally affect the structure of the rhythm and melody in the two concertos, and this contrast becomes more pronounced when we examine their rhythm and melody forms.

### 4.2 Rhythm and melody format

Mozart's movement features a melody that is smooth, noble, and full of vitality (see Example 1), with clearly repeated motifs and a strong sense of structural coherence. The rhythm is rich and varied, incorporating patterns such as two eighth notes, an eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes, two sixteenth notes followed by an eighth note, four sixteenth note

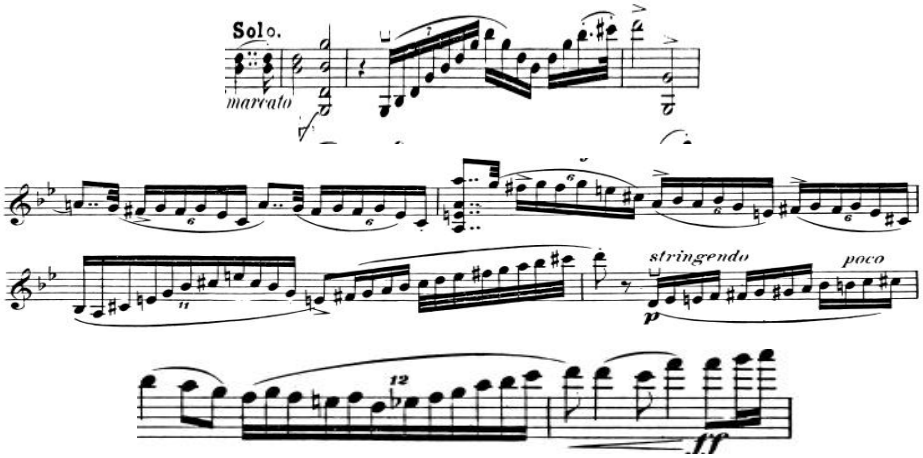
groups, and so on. Among these, the use of syncopation stands out, adding significantly to the movement's energy and rhythmic vitality. Peter E. Keller and Emery Schubert share a similar view, which is that syncopated rhythms were rated as happier and more enjoyable than unsyncopated ones, suggesting that syncopation enhances positive effects and increases arousal [8].




Example 1. Mozart: rhythm and melody type

Bruch's movement has lyrical and expressive melodic composition, often formed by scale-like ascending and falling motion with smooth, well-organized contours. Occasional jumps are utilized to broaden the melodic space and enhance expressiveness (see Ex. 2, three excerpts). The movement employs dotted rhythms, syncopation, and a variety of tuplets—including sextuplets, septuplets, eleven-note, and twelve-note groupings—to create a strong sense of flow and rhythmic intensity (see Ex. 2). The solo parts have a fluid tempo, and the cadenza section is distinguished by an improvisatory character and virtuosic brilliance.

In addition to rhythm and melodic structure, another layer of stylistic difference lies in the way each composer uses an ornament.

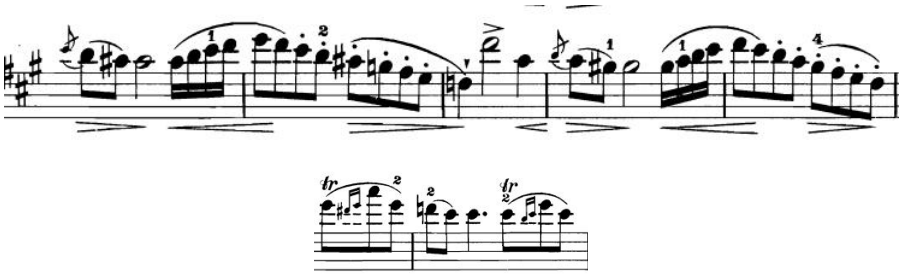



Example 2. Bruch: rhythm and melody type

4.3 Ornamentation

Mozart preferred to use some grace notes and trills in the movements (see Ex. 3). During the process of studying and performing this concerto, it was observed that the appoggiaturas were played differently from those in the modern way. Appoggiaturas generally played half of the value of the next note a few centuries ago[9]. How to play trills more in line with Mozart's ideas? According to École fondamentale du violon, the French translation of *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule* by Leopold Mozart (father of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart), trills are classified into four types: slow, measured,

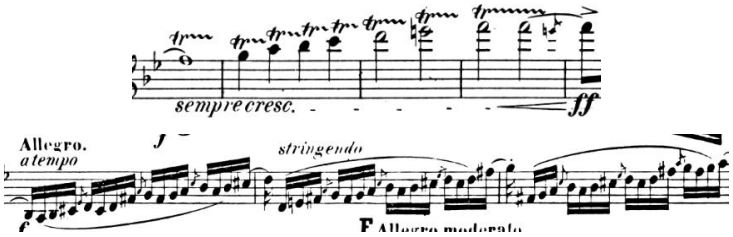
fast, and accelerating. Mozart notes that slow trills are suited to sorrowful or slow movements, while fast trills are more appropriate for passages that convey energy and motion [10].



Example 3. Mozart: grace notes and trills

The ornamentations that Bruch used are like those Mozart used, which used trills and grace notes (see Ex. 4). He used short grace notes. Modern violinists often differ from 19th-century players, who played grace notes before the beat, lightly, and expressively shaped [11].

Although ornamental notes demonstrate the composers' stylistic signatures, the cadenza distinctly reveals their individual preferences.

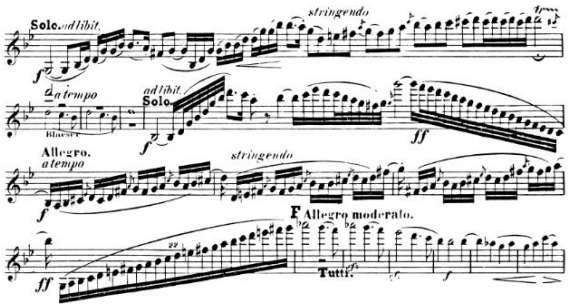



Example 4. Bruch: trills and grace notes

4.4 Cadenzas

Mozart wrote some cadenzas, but he did not write any cadenzas for this violin concerto. Most 19th- and 20th-century violinists, such as Joseph Joachim, Fritz Kreisler, Sam Franko, and Henri Marteau, composed the cadenzas commonly used by performers today. Mozart left behind very few cadenzas, which is because he was a highly skilled improviser. We know almost nothing about the cadenzas he played in his concertos because each cadenza was improvised and rarely repeated, and he rarely performed the same concerto more than once [12].

Bruch's cadenza is at the end of the movement (see Ex. 5). Bruch marked ad libitum in several places in the cadenza. This allows the performer to play this passage very freely. This makes the performance of the cadenza fit the performer's ideas. As Toni Christine Rydman points out, the 19th-century cadenza became more of a vehicle for virtuosity than an extension of thematic development, frequently resembling a brilliant solo interlude [13]. He goes on to say that, unlike the Classical era, which emphasized improvisation, the Romantic period saw a decline in improvisational practice, with most composers preferring to write out their cadenzas rather than leave them to be improvised by the performer [14].

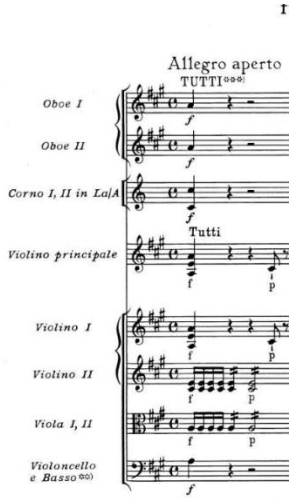



Example 5. Bruch: cadenza (Solo)

4.5 Other aspects

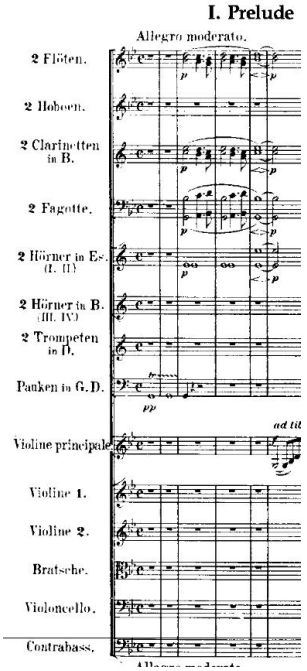
Size of the Orchestra

According to the symphony orchestra's score, Mozart's Violin Concerto features nine accompanying sections (see Ex. 6). It can be inferred that the size of this orchestra is usually around 20 people. Although there is limited information about the number of people in the concerto orchestra during Mozart's time, Dennis Wu pointed out in his lecture that in the 18th century, the orchestra did not have strict regulations on the number of people other than the part settings, and the number of people could be increased or decreased according to actual conditions during the performance. Indeed, in some videos of Mozart's violin concertos, it can be seen that the number of people in the symphony orchestra ranges from 20 to 30.




Example 6. Mozart: nine orchestral instrument sections

Unlike Mozart, Bruch's orchestration involves twenty accompanying sections (see Ex. 7). Judging from this scale, the size of the symphony orchestra will be around 40 players. During the 19th century, the orchestra expanded in size and instrumentation, because of dramatic improvements in traditional instruments and the invention of new ones. As a result, the types of musical instruments are more diverse than those in the 18th century as shown in the picture.




Example 7. Bruch: twenty orchestral instrument parts

## 5 Differences and developments

In the German-Austrian region from the 18th to the 19th century, the Violin Concerto underwent a significant stylistic transformation from Classicism to Romanticism. Mozart's concertos emphasize symmetrical structure, clear melodies, and regular rhythmic language, often using syncopation and distinct rhythmic combinations to create a sense of flow. In terms of ornamentation, Mozart favored trills and appoggiaturas, which typically fall on strong beats, carrying emotional tension and traditionally occupying half the duration of the principal note. The cadenzas were usually improvised by the performer, reflecting the Classical period's emphasis on rationality, balance, and the freedom of improvisation.

By Bruch's era, the concerto had come to place greater emphasis on lyricism, emotional expression, and technical tension. Melodies became more song-like, rhythms more complex, and combinations such as free legato, sextuplets, and septuplets were frequently employed to enhance expressiveness. The treatment of appoggiaturas also evolved; 19th-century performers often interpreted them as brief, anticipatory, and light ornamental notes, reflecting a stylistic trend toward refinement and virtuosity. Bruch's cadenzas, however, were pre-composed by the composer and marked ad libitum, showcasing the Romantic period's heightened focus on the composer's control and individual expression. Additionally, the size of the orchestra expanded significantly with the times, and the instrumentation became more varied and intricate.

| German-Austrian Region | The 18th century Classical (Mozart) | The 19th century Romantic (Bruch) |
|---|---|---|
| Overall Style | Clear, Balanced, Structured, Stately | Lyrical, Expressive, Emotional |
| Melody and Rhythm | Regular, Balanced | Flexible, Expressive |
| Ornamentation | Standardized | Personal, Stylistic |
| Cadenzas | Improvisational | Control and individual expression |
| Size of Orchestra | Adjust the number of people according to the pieces | The types of instrument parts have increased |

## 6 Conclusion

Through the analysis of the first movements of Mozart and Bruch's violin concertos, we can clearly observe the numerous changes in structural layout, emotional expression, and performance style during the transition from Classicism to Romanticism in the violin concertos of the German-Austrian region. These stylistic differences suggest different interpretations for contemporary violinists: Mozart emphasizes clarity and balance, while Max Bruch emphasizes emotion and freedom. Recognizing these differences will help to strengthen the performer's stylistic interpretation and expressive delivery. This not only aids in a deeper understanding of compositional techniques and aesthetic concepts across different periods but also provides significant reference points for performers in their interpretation of the works. Future research could further extend to the stylistic evolution and performance practices of concertos by other composers, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the rich possibilities in musical expression and personalized interpretation.

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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