

Violin Concerto No. 1 in F# minor, Opus 14 **Henryk Wieniawski (1835-1880)**

Of the Wieniawski's - there was a younger brother Josef and a nephew Adam, both composer/ pianists of sorts, and his mother Regina was a trained pianist, sister to the concert pianist Edouard Wolff- Henryk was by far the talent. His prodigious violin playing was first commented on at the age of 8, after which he astounded the Paris Conservatoire with his audition in 1843 winning the First prize in violin in 1846. After his Paris debut, with his brother Josef at the piano, he left for a five-concert engagement in Russia, where he was highly praised by Vieuxtemps, who was court composer in St. Petersburg. He returned to Poland in 1848 and feeling the need to further his musical studies he re-enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire in 1849 to study harmony with Colet, and was awarded an 'accessit' prize in 1850. All this by the time he was fifteen.

Second only to Paganini, Wieniawski's contribution as a violin virtuoso ranks him at the top of his generation of players. He combined a Slavonic temperament with French School technique, tossing off technical fireworks as easily as he moved audiences to tears. This reputation was endorsed at the top of the profession. *Emotional qualities... "brought to heights never before achieved"* Kreisler. *"Without doubt the greatest violinist of his time"*. Anton Rubinstein. *"I was electrified by his playing. I have never heard anyone play the violin as he did, either before or since. His wonderfully warm, rich tone, his glowing temperament, his perfect technique, his captivating elan - all this threw me in to a kind of hypnotic trance."* Sam Franko, violinist in the Paris orchestra. Other superlatives were on the lips of Leopold Auer, Moser and Joachim. It was with this backdrop to his existence that he wrote his compositions. The first concerto being the most momentous of the first group of 14 works, is marked by passages of extreme virtuosity, often over shadowing the musical content. The second concerto, an outstanding composition in every way, is more representative of Wieniawski's compositional style. It is a combination of the technical advances of Paganini with Romantic imagination and Slavonic colouring. Dedicated to Sarasate this work more so than the first concerto is an indispensable part of the violin repertory. Indeed, all his compositions are centered on the violin as a showpiece, with several Mazurkas and Polonaises that mark his Polish descent. There are, however, only 24 registered Opus numbers corroborating the view that he was definitely more the performer than the composer.

Wieniawski's life was spent primarily touring as a virtuoso. Enjoying success after success, he followed Vieuxtemps with a stint as court violinist in St. Petersburg, and later succeeded Vieuxtemps a second time as a music professor in Brussels. His world travels resumed in 1872 with a two-year tour of North America. He gave 215 concerts the first year with Rubinstein, and continued the breakneck pace to exhaustion the second year with Paulina Lucca. This pace

seriously compromised his health as he suffered from a heart condition. November 1878 provides a touching story of his concert of the second concerto in Berlin. He broke down during the performance and was carried from the stage. The great violinist Joachim, who was in the audience, hurried back stage and then emerged a few moments later with Wieniawski's violin. "Although I cannot play my friend's wonderful concerto, I shall play Bach's Chaconne". The slightly recovered Wieniawski embraced his colleague on the stage after the performance.

Although shattered in health, Wieniawski continued a tour of Russia to earn money but had a similar lapse in the "Kreutzer" sonata in December in Moscow. He was admitted to the Mariinsky hospital in November 1879 and then in February 1880 was taken to the palatial home of Madame von Meck, Tchaikovsky's famous patroness. A benefit concert followed to raise money for his life insurance policy, which was about to expire, leaving his family in dire need. He died two months before his youngest daughter Irene was born surrounded by friends and supporters.