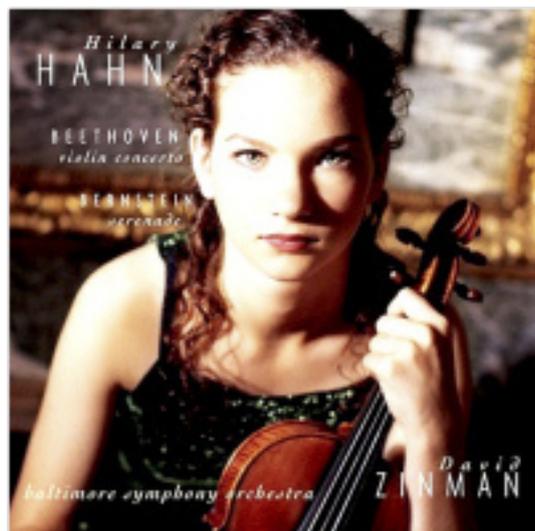


## CD REVIEW 98

BEETHOVEN Violin Concerto  
BERNSTEIN Serenade for violin, strings, harp and percussion.  
Hilary Hahn, Baltimore SO, David Zinman.  
Sony Classics SK60584 (DDD) (74 36).



Having just suffered Joshua Bell's ghastly performance of the Beethoven Concerto at the 2002 Proms I have turned to this elegant and exquisite performance recorded in 1999.

It must be emphasised that a poor performance can damage a work even if played by a star. Bell's performance was riddled with strange tempi, an awful first movement cadenza which was stylistically opposed to Beethoven, and, instead of taking the usual 42 minutes, his performance was 12% overlong. The finale stopped and started and, as one critic described, was like torn washing hanging on a sagging line.

Hahn's performance has none of these faults and it is the best recording I have heard for a very long time, second only to Neveu.

It is very good because it is pure Beethoven. The performer gives us what is written and, as in Hahn's Bach recital, you can follow the printed music since it is faithfully realised.

Secondly, there is no excess, no empty gestures, no playing to the gallery, no showmanship, no eccentricities- just glorious Beethoven.

Zinman starts the proceedings with a wonderful controlled orchestral opening. When the soloist enters it is not in an exaggerated blaze of pomp (Look at me, I'm the soloist!) but is so natural. The intonation is perfect, the variety of colour simply spellbinding and every detail is there as Beethoven indicated.

Recently, I have been told that no performer religiously sticks to the score and that all take some byways or advantages. Rubbish! You will find none here!

The legato playing from both the soloist and orchestra is amazingly good. The climaxes are very well-done flowing naturally from the music. The balance and the recorded sound is excellent.

What I also admire is the wonderful way that the main theme of the opening movement is captured in all its beauty with what I have always considered a hint of sadness. One does not usually refer to Beethoven's music as moving, but this is. The quiet episode eleven minutes in is so beautiful that only a hard hearted individual would fail to respond to its ethereal beauty. The accompaniment in the orchestra is truly superb.

The soloist writes, "The Beethoven is, for me, one of the supreme compositions written for any instrument, and its seamless combination of high lyricism and dramatic depth has appealed to me since the first time I heard it".

I have often thought the work to be autobiographical. The opening drum beats are heart beats. It is Beethoven's heart and despite all the criticisms of him, he had a good heart. The range of emotions in this perfect work are varied and the joyous conclusion seems so at odds with Beethoven's tragic life.

Yet Hahn does not pile on any emotion. It just flows. Its simple utterance is all the more touching. It is when the Joshua Bells' of this world want to over-dramatise it and stretch it out that the music loses its power.

The work was not well received at its first performances. Critics said it had a continuity problem. In other words, it did not flow. Yes I have heard performances like that but this is not one of them.

In my days as a school teacher, I found that children who knew nothing about real music (a recent report states that 65% of children cannot name one classical composer) loved this piece which surprised me. But then in 1844 the 12 year old Joseph Joachim played it in London under the baton of Felix Mendelssohn. He played it hundreds of times and supplied cadenzas. In this performance Hahn played the Kreisler cadenzas.

The *largetto* is a type of soliloquy. Like a Jane Austen novel nothing really happens yet the music is never banal. It seems to be Beethoven's self-assessment but this movement is lovely. It soars and sighs and is often heavenly.

The Rondo is high spirits and Hahn keeps it moving.

This serenade may also be a self-portrait or a divertimento. I liked Leonard Bernstein. He was loquacious but a great communicator. At the time of its composition Bernstein was undergoing a self-assessment and reading Plato. He did not know whether he wanted to be a conductor, a composer or a writer of musicals. Fortunately, he stuck to all three and while people may applaud *West Side Story* as a master piece, *On the Town* is a very fine piece.

Lenny should have called this work *Symposium* after Plato. The philosophers appear as the main characters in this piece. Phaedrus praises Eros the god of love. Aristophanes is the story teller, Eryximachus talks about the science of love (has everything got to be understood scientifically?), Agathon tells of love's power and Socrates visits Diotima being interested in her speech on love. What follows is a Greek orgy or a New York dinner party with elements of jazz and seedy music.

The music is enjoyable but it is a hybrid work.

Buy the CD for the Beethoven.

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