

## **PIERRE RODE**

Dr David C F Wright

(1966)

Pierre Jacques Joseph Rode was born in Bordeaux on 16 February 1774, the son of a perfumer, and was a child prodigy being a brilliant violin technician by the age of twelve. He was having tuition from Fauvel by the age of eight. The celebrated horn player, Punto, heard him play and recommended him to Viotti. He was taken to Paris in 1787 where Viotti took a great interest in him and young Pierre became Viotti's favourite pupil. The Bordeaux boy was a very fine violinist and superb performer.

Being a Viotti pupil he made his debut on 5 April 1790 at the Concert spirituel at the age of sixteen playing a Viotti concerto. Rode also became leader of the second violins in the orchestra of the Theatre Feydeau. A month after Rode's debut the concert spirituel closed its doors and other concert societies had also gone out of business. Viotti arranged his own 'spiritual concerts' at the opera theatre, the Theatre de Monsieur. His main aim was to present his own concertos, the theatre being his Bayreuth or Aldeburgh. On a secondary issue he wanted to give his pupils, such as Alday, Rode and Kreutzer some public experience. In fact, Rode gave the premiere of two Viotti concertos at this time, number 7 in D minor and number 18 in E minor. Kreutzer and Alday played their own concertos but Rode's performance of the concertos by his teacher received warm praise. He was described as the most worthy interpreter playing with charm and purity and a rare talent.

But then Viotti went to London leaving Pierre in Paris. Undaunted he composed his first violin concerto which was published in 1794. It was bold and brilliant, a work unlike those of his teacher. He toured Holland, Germany, England and Spain in 1794. He met Boccherini in Madrid and some say that Boccherini orchestrated the first violin concertos of Rode particularly the one in B minor. Everyone flocked to hear Rode. He was a star.

He was appointed a professor of violin at the Paris Conservatoire and, in 1799, was the leading violinist of the Grand Opera for a short while. He was persuaded to become the solo violinist of Napoleon's private orchestra and throughout Paris and France he was adored not only for his tremendous skill but for his compositions. He was more popular and famous than his master. He was said to be the greatest violinist in all Europe and that his played was nothing short of miraculous. His Air Varie, Opus 12 was a concert work for violin but many sopranos took it up, such as Angelica Catalini, as a vocalise to show off their coloratura range! His most popular concerto at this time was number 7 in A minor.

He loved travelling. It was said, "He has no country; he belongs to the world and the world belongs to him!" He was invited to Russia early in 1803 and the composer Boieldieu accompanied him on the long journey. En route through Germany Rode gave concerts in Dresden, Leipzig, Berlin and other cities. Acclaim and adoration accompanied him. He was claimed to be better than his teacher having a more refined style. Louis Spohr was deeply impressed with a performance in Brunswick.

Early in 1804 he arrived in St Petersburg and, again, was the joy and delight of all who met him and all who heard him play. He was presented to Tsar Alexander I who named him The Soloist of the Tsar, at a terrific salary of 5000 silver rubles a year. He played concertos, lead in string quartets (he was particularly fond of Mozart's quartets) and influenced many Russian violinists. His trip to Moscow was also a roaring success. He set standards that the Russians could only try to emulate. Previous violinists visiting Russia were usually of Italian nationality.

His tours and particularly the tour of Russia fatigued him to such a measure that he was never really on top form again. He burnt himself out

Rode had an interest in folk music as did his contemporary Beethoven. His Violin Concerto no. 12, which was dedicated to the Tsar, has a finale meles d'airs russes and the main folk song theme is the one Tchaikovsky was later to use in his Symphony no. 4 in F minor.

The spring of 1808 saw Rode back in Paris. He gave a concert at the Odeon on 22 December but it was not a success. Paris had found another to lavish their praise upon. This was Charles Lafont a former pupil of Kreutzer and of Rode as well and who was to travel to Russia as Rode's successor.

Rode was deeply offended by the public's reaction to him. Music lovers are very fickle. They make more of second rate composers and musicians than the truly great musicians. It has always been so.

Rode retired to live his life privately. He declined to return his own post at the Conservatoire. It was in 1811 that he resumed public performances but this was outside of France. In December 1812 he was in Vienna where he met Beethoven who had a violin sonata half written at the time. In view of Rode's magnificent playing Beethoven set to work on the last movement. This was the Sonata in G Op 96 which Rode performed at the Lobkowitz Palace on 29 December 1812 with Archduke Rudolph at the piano. The music did not suit Rode and Beethoven was disappointed, but Rode played the work again on 7 January 1813 in Vienna.

Louis Spohr joined the critics. As a fellow violinist he felt he had every right to say that Rode's cantabile playing was unsatisfactory and that he was not the player he was ten years ago, that his playing was cold and mannered. People have short memories and always expect the best and condemn that which does not always reach the heights.

Rode was incensed with the French and, consequently, lived in Berlin from 1814 to 1819. He was married in Berlin in 1814. He gave occasional concerts which included his famous Caprices. He moved back to Paris but refused to play there. Why should he cast pearls before swine? In 1825 he met Mendlessohn who confirmed that Rode had been treated very badly by Parisian society. He composed his final violin concerto, number 13, for his friend Pierre Baillot but he was unwell for the premiere and so his student Eugene Sauzay undertook it. The first performance was on 9 March, 1828 at an inaugural concert of the Conservatoire Society, a concert which included the Paris premiere of Beethoven's Eroica symphony.

The concerto was not a success and it reflects the understandable mood of the composer.

He recanted and gave a concert in Paris in the autumn of 1828. He should never have given this concert. Paris was still hostile to him. This reaction broke his heart and damaged his health. He suffered a stroke and returned to Bordeaux where he died at the Chateau de Bourbon near Damazon two years later on 25 November 1830.

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