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# ALBAN BERG'S VIOLIN CONCERTO: A SHORT HISTORY OF ITS RECEPTION

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## Alban Berg's Violin Concerto: A Short History of Its Reception

Since its world premiere in 1936, Alban Berg's Violin Concerto has retained a stable place in the repertoire, an unusual feat for a work based on twelve-tone principles. It is all the more remarkable to note its early success despite unfavorable conditions surrounding its first performances. Though Berg (1885-1935) had already been recognized for his compositions internationally, this work (perhaps along with the event of his death before the premiere) accelerated his worldwide recognition as an important contributor and innovator of contemporary music. Today it is viewed as the composer's most popular work, combining serialism with Mahlerian romanticism. As a whole, the Violin Concerto deviates from Berg's usual style in a number of areas, including genre, form, and tonal organization, as well as the inspiration and motives for accepting its commission. While its emotionally-charged program and romantic approach assuredly contributed toward its early success, it is difficult nevertheless to justify its popularity as a work that seems to devote itself to pacifying twelve-tone technique. Throughout this essay I will examine various historic critical evaluations of the work and argue why it has been publicly well-received in spite of its predominant, idiosyncratic use of serial techniques. I will focus primarily on its first three performances along with their reception and compare these initial reactions with more recent viewpoints.

### ***Reputation***

Prior to the Violin Concerto's posthumous premiere, Berg's reputation and financial success were threatened by the growth of the Nazi party in Germany. Its rise to power initiated the banning of several of his works, most notably the opera *Wozzeck* (1922), which had become one of his primary sources of income due to its frequent programming among European opera

houses.<sup>1</sup> Its critical acclaim was highly unexpected by the composer, who had grown accustomed to opposition as a result of his modernist tendencies. Nevertheless, the new political regime viewed the opera as “cultural Bolshevism,” and in 1933, Universal Edition cut Berg’s stipend in half due to the work’s shortage of royalties.<sup>2</sup> While his future looked rather bleak in Germany and surrounding areas, his colleague and mentor Arnold Schoenberg labored to promote their respective works in America. Despite these efforts, Berg was too preoccupied with the completion of his latest project, the opera *Lulu*, to agree to commissions that Schoenberg could arrange for him, though he did decide to sell his manuscript of *Wozzeck* to the Library of Congress.<sup>3</sup> These single business deals, however, could not fully offset the effects of Germany’s bleak political situation.

### ***Composition history***

Though Berg’s popular and financial success as a composer was minimal before *Wozzeck*, he had received admiration and sympathy from Schoenberg and his followers. Perhaps the most obvious catalyst for their support stemmed from the infamous *Skandalkonzert* in 1913, which featured works by Schoenberg and his school and culminated in a riot during the performance of Berg’s *Five Orchestral Songs*, Op. 4. The incident resulted in a lawsuit and placed him at odds with the public. It was not until *Wozzeck* that he established a favorable reputation in Europe, yet his newfound success was somewhat short-lived due to increased political control. By 1935, Berg’s need of financial stability positioned him to agree to his second-ever commission.<sup>4</sup> The request came from an eager Russian-American violinist named Louis Krasner (1903-1995), who was influenced by Berg’s style and now desired a concerto for which he would initially receive performing rights. Early in their meetings, Krasner reasoned

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Monson, *Alban Berg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), 185.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Pople, *Berg: Violin Concerto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Monson, 311.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 323.

with the composer why he should be compelled to write such a work:

The attacking criticism of 12-tone music everywhere is that this music is only cerebral and without feeling or emotion. If you undertake to write a Violin Concerto, it certainly will have to be a very serious, deliberate and communicative work for the violin—for the violin is a lyrical and songful instrument which I know you love. Think of what it would mean for the whole Schoenberg Movement if a new Alban Berg Violin Concerto should succeed in demolishing the antagonism of the “cerebral, no emotion” cliché and argument.<sup>5</sup>

After much persuasion to begin work on the proposed concerto, Berg eventually confirmed the commission for a sum of 1500 dollars.<sup>6</sup> Biographer Karen Monson suggests that the composition of a concerto also would have appealed to Berg because of the form’s “dramatic implications,” as evidenced by earlier works including *Der Wein* and the Chamber Concerto.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Berg stated that the process would be “long” and “drawn-out,” perhaps indicating a degree of hesitancy regarding his effectiveness in a less familiar genre.<sup>8</sup>

The impetus for the composition of the Violin Concerto ultimately came from the tragedy of 18-year old Manon Gropius’s death. Biographer Mosco Carner goes as far to say that “it would be ludicrous to suggest that without the tragedy . . . the Violin Concerto would not have come into being.”<sup>9</sup> Both the composer and his wife had developed a close friendship with Alma Mahler and her daughter Manon, whom they would call “Mutzi.”<sup>10</sup> The shock of her sudden death prompted Berg to incorporate the work’s programmatic subtitle, “To the Memory of an Angel.” Now properly inspired, he proceeded from his slow, rather reluctant start to complete the score in the course of only three months or less.<sup>11</sup> In preparing Krasner’s part, he removed any deficiencies in writing idiomatically for the violin by diligently attending solo concerts,

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<sup>5</sup> Pople, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Monson, 324.

<sup>8</sup> Pople, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Mosco Carner, *Alban Berg: The Man and the Work*, Rev. ed. (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1983), 155.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Pople, 41.

collecting fragments from published violin concerto scores, and listening to Krasner himself improvise virtuosic passages. Upon the work's completion on August 11, Berg told the violinist, "I have never worked harder in my life, and, what's more, the work gave me increasing pleasure."<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, only a few days after his achievement, he received a wasp sting that would prove to be fatal. Like Schoenberg, he seemed to be superstitious regarding numbers, particularly 23, and only an hour after that date in December he passed almost four months before the concerto's first performance.<sup>13</sup>

### *Reception*

The concerto's world premiere took place on April 19, 1936 in Barcelona, Spain. Though Anton Webern was scheduled to conduct, he concluded a day before the concert that he was not comfortable proceeding because of musical disagreements with the orchestra. It seems probable that these "disagreements" were at least partially due to lack of proper communication between conductor and ensemble because of the German-Spanish language barrier, though Webern appeared to have known some Spanish.<sup>14</sup> Pople also notes that the efficiency of rehearsals was hindered by Webern's emotional involvement with the score, it being his deceased friend's final work.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately another conductor, Hermann Scherchen, was involved in the same festival and agreed to direct the premiere despite having only thirty minutes of rehearsal time with the Orquesta Pau Casals before the performance the next day.<sup>16</sup> His enthusiasm for the new composition is evident in his remark to Krasner that he should perform from memory because "one does not play a thing like this from the music."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Pople, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Steinberg, *The Concerto: A Listener's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 95.

<sup>14</sup> Monson, 336.

<sup>15</sup> Pople, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

The reviews following the premiere were largely positive. Krasner recalled the audience's initial reaction after the last notes had sounded:

There was an awed and breathless silence in the entire auditorium. After long, motionless moments, Scherchen picked up the score and held the large manuscript high in the air above his head. The audience sprang to its feet and responded with cheers and tumultuous applause. On stage, Scherchen, the orchestra players and I stood immobile and spellbound.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin Britten, who was present during its performance, spoke highly of the new work and referred to it as “sublime” and “shattering,” placing it above any other piece he heard while attending the festival.<sup>19</sup> Egon Wellesz noted in an article that Scherchen's performance of the concerto was “perfect” and marveled that the conductor had obtained access to the music only a day prior to the concert.<sup>20</sup> Most researchers of the concert attest that ultimately it was the inspirational performance of the conductor and violinist that granted the premiere's high level of success.

For the concerto's second performance less than a month later, Webern was now in a position where he felt comfortable resuming the role of conductor, leading a more familiar group with the BBC Orchestra in London. According to Krasner, the ensemble was well-prepared with the music before Webern's arrival, yielding a smooth, understanding relationship during rehearsals.<sup>21</sup> Lewis Foreman notes, however, that within the BBC sentiments were less assuring; for example, its Music Executive Owen Maise wrote bluntly after the performance that he perceived Webern unfit to conduct in any setting. Another member, Kenneth Wright, while seeming to agree with Maise on certain points, remarked that Webern still “obtained a remarkably good performance of the concerto.”<sup>22</sup> Observations from the audience concerning the

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<sup>18</sup> Nathaniel Vallois, “A Matter of Life and Death,” *Strad* 118, no. 1405 (May 2007): 33.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: the Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 426.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 425-426.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis Foreman, “Webern, the BBC and the Berg Violin Concerto,” *Tempo* new series, no. 178 (September 1991): 8.

conductor's performance were unfavorable as a whole, though they did not seem to overshadow the popularity of the work itself. Berthold Goldschmidt, who was well familiar with Webern's style, was critical of his stick technique, while attesting that Krasner "played beautifully."<sup>23</sup> Britten again was present, remaining enthusiastic about the concerto but deeming Webern as unsuccessful.<sup>24</sup> Another important observer was fellow British composer Constant Lambert, who went as far as saying that the concerto was "the most beautiful and significant piece of music since the war."<sup>25</sup> This high level of optimism voiced by its spectators seemed to echo Krasner's prophetic words to Berg.

Fortunately the performance of the London premiere was recorded and is still available today. Upon listening, one can find merit to both critical reactions of its interpretation; though the playing is convincing, there are moments during the concerto's more rhythmically complex passages where orchestra and soloist seem slightly disjointed. One may reason that many recorded historic premieres often bear this quality, especially when conductors are given a limited window of time to polish the ensemble. Moreover, it would be difficult to fault Webern's performance without visual evidence, nor is it necessary since it obviously did not detract from the public's high regard for the concerto. Where Berg had found critical success among musicians in England, he would continue to find it to a more profound degree posthumously.

One other significant early performance that deserves attention is the Vienna premiere on October 25 of the same year. Krasner, who had performing rights for the first two years, would continue playing the solo part. The increasing influence of the Nazi party, however, made the Jewish violinist's position unstable in German-speaking areas. Vienna Philharmonic director Otto Klemperer, also a Jew, perhaps felt even more pressure by following through the performance of a piece associated with "degenerative art." To make matters worse, the majority

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<sup>22</sup> Foreman, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>24</sup> Mitchell and Reed, 426.

<sup>25</sup> Foreman, 9.



of the orchestra itself was resistant to the idea. The growth of opposing factions culminated in a historic premiere, and once more, Krasner's words are telling:

The direct counterstroke of the Philharmonic musicians—unprecedented, unimaginable, and of historic dimensions—was yet to come. As the Concerto's concluding high tones for solo violin and fading soft chords for orchestra melted away to an eerie silence—and almost before any applause could be heard—the entire orchestra membership arose as if on command, turned abruptly, and marched suddenly off the stage. Otto Klemperer and I were left aghast and alone to turn and acknowledge the response of the audience. We were alone, but for one notable and extremely significant exception. Arnold Rosé stood up and remained erect, standing tall and solitary by his Concertmaster's chair. He applauded and gripped our hands...<sup>26</sup>

Pople observes that it was Klemperer who saved the performance with his charismatic persona and popularity among audiences.<sup>27</sup> The success of the concert despite such adverse circumstances testifies to the public's approval of the concerto. Following the Vienna premiere, Krasner continued to promote the work elsewhere in Europe and in numerous cities throughout the United States. After the expiration of his performing rights, other violinists began to take up the work, most notably Joseph Szigeti and Ivry Gitlis.<sup>28</sup> In more recent decades, prominent soloists have endeavored to record the work, including Anne-Sophie Mutter, Isaac Stern, Yehudi Menuhin, Arthur Grumiaux, and Itzhak Perlman.

As the original twelve-tone school of Schoenberg faded with the rise of subsequent generations, new schools of thought began to provide a more direct challenge to Berg's hybridization of tonality. Prior to World War II, public sentiment had not seemed to waver in its enthusiasm of the Violin Concerto, as evidenced by Aaron Copland's assessment. In his book entitled *Our New Music* from 1941, he places the concerto "among the finest creations in the modern repertoire" and continues his approval by describing it as "sensuously lyrical, violently dramatic, and profoundly erotic."<sup>29</sup> Dissension became more apparent post-war, however. While

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<sup>26</sup> Pople, 44-45.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

some stood by the work, including American composer and critic Virgil Thomson, who in 1949 predicted the work's increased utility,<sup>30</sup> others raised objections. Ernest Newman likened the work's combination of harmonic languages to "falling between two stools."<sup>31</sup> In the late 1940s, composer Pierre Boulez argued that the concerto's use of tonal harmonies from its Bach chorale quotation is incompatible with its underlying serial scheme.<sup>32</sup> Pople observes that following the time of Boulez's argument, Europe's twelve-tone experts upheld the same assessment, though their writings in reference to the Second Viennese School tend to ignore rather than attack Berg.<sup>33</sup> Since serialism has become a fairly antiquated compositional style, popular opinion has stabilized in Berg's favor. As musicologists have had more ample opportunities to properly analyze his works, they continue to recognize the extraordinary combination of intellectualism and emotionalism that defines his compositional language. Berg scholar Douglas Jarman speaks of this paradox: "The bringing together of elements that would normally be regarded as mutually exclusive—tonality with atonality, subjective autobiographical elements with objective compositional constraints, quotation and reference to popular style with rigorous and integrated handling of all musical parameters—is a constant feature of Berg's music."<sup>34</sup> Most musicologists will now acknowledge his prominence as one of the most influential twentieth-century musicians on current generations of composers.

### *Reflection and analysis*

Upon analyzing the Violin Concerto, one may question whether it is the infusion of traditional German romanticism or perhaps the work's historical interest and idiosyncratic use of

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<sup>29</sup> Aaron Copland, *Our New Music: Leading Composers in Europe and America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1941), 56.

<sup>30</sup> Virgil Thomson, "Gloomy Masterpiece," in *A Virgil Thomson Reader*, 330-331 (New York: Dutton, 1981), 331.

<sup>31</sup> Steinberg, 104.

<sup>32</sup> Pople, 95-96.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Jarman, "Berg, Alban," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

programmatic features that is primarily responsible for its overwhelming success. Polymath Theodor Adorno, one of Berg's students, indicated that its popularity over his other works was partially due to the fact that it was written quickly, thus avoiding the usual high level of labor and constraint in his writing process.<sup>35</sup> Another potential factor that Adorno mentions is the work's polarity of consonance and dissonance, used to convey positive and negative emotion within its storyline.<sup>36</sup> Musicologist Thomas Clifton also identifies this characteristic by considering the concerto a model of tonal reconciliation.<sup>37</sup> A more contemporary view from violinist Leonidas Kavakos suggests that the combination of romanticism, Baroque elements, folk music, and Impressionism within twelve-tone principles renders it among the century's most significant compositions.<sup>38</sup> In order to construct an informed opinion about its reception, it is necessary to examine both its programmatic and purely musical elements.

The concerto contains two movements dividing into two sections each, taking somewhere from twenty-five to thirty minutes to perform. Through the contrasting characters of its four parts, one may easily hear the workings of a program without even being informed of one. Most indicative are its quotations, one of a Carinthian folk tune and the other of a Bach chorale. The cadenza that begins the second movement is also arresting, with its clashing of harmonies in the orchestra against the pyrotechnics of the violin. It has been observed numerous times that the formal structure of the work's program (regardless of the subject one assigns) resembles Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*, which Berg seemed to admire.<sup>39</sup> As for the concerto's subject itself, the "angel" Manon Gropius is the obvious primary inspiration, though biographers have been quick to manufacture other possible sources. Michael Steinberg, among others, senses

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<sup>35</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, translated by Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>36</sup> Adorno, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Clifton, *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 247.

<sup>38</sup> Leonidas Kavakos, "Berg's Violin Concerto," *Strad* 120, no. 1435 (November 2009): 70.

<sup>39</sup> Monson, 327-328.

that there is an underlying program in which Berg and his idealized love are the subject<sup>40</sup>; he had continued, in fact, a long-term affair with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin (the secret dedicatee of his *Lyric Suite*) until his death, despite maintaining what appeared to be a healthy marriage with his wife Helene. While this plot does not bear as much credence as Manon's, it continues to intrigue Berg scholars. Musicologist Chris Walton even speculates that the resemblance of the concerto's original row form to the melody of Brahms's song "O Tod" ("O Death") could be more than a coincidence (Berg was recently exposed to the song through Schoenberg) and imply the possibility of a self-requiem.<sup>41</sup> While programmatic interpretations may vary, it is agreed that the music effectively portrays the sequence of peace, conflict, and resolution. I am of the opinion that part of the concerto's enduring appeal stems from its dual identity as a programmatic and absolute work. Regardless of one's preference, it can be enjoyed with or without its suggested storyline since it is not as extra-musically dependent as most of the composer's output.

Among early audiences, it is likely that the concerto's program was less of a factor on its positive reception than the music itself. To understand the work's critical reactions, it is essential to introduce a few of its most prominent musical characteristics. The opening, a slow prelude marked *andante*, must have been particularly surprising among concertgoers who were already familiar with Berg's compositional style. Musically, it is the least complex section of the piece, and, as expected, it provides the clearest examples of the work's basic row forms. From the start, there is an unusual juxtaposition of serialism's characteristic tonal ambiguity combined with the incorporation of quartal harmonies. Example 1 shows the simplicity of the opening 4 measures:

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<sup>40</sup> Steinberg, 97.

<sup>41</sup> Chris Walton, "Bach, Brahms, Schoenberg: Marginalia on Berg's Violin Concerto," *Musical Times* 149, no. 1903 (Summer 2008): 85-86.

## Example 1: Berg, Violin Concerto, mm. 1-4

Violin

Andante (♩ = 56)

Introduktion (10 Takte)

*pp*

*poco cresc*

*p*

This “open string” motive provides the basis for the entire work’s beginning *and* ending, with the pitch B-flat upheld as the “root” note in both instances. Example 2 displays another important feature: the prime form of the concerto’s tone row as it appears in the part of the soloist:

## Example 2: Berg, Violin Concerto, mm. 15-18

*pp, ma espress.*

Beginning with the violin’s fundamental G, it proceeds upward in a stack of minor and major thirds, a pattern disrupted toward the top by smaller intervals. These last four notes in fact match the first four of the Bach chorale “Es ist genug!” featured in the concerto’s final section. This remarkable ordering lends itself to an abundance of triadic harmonies while also justifying the programmatic Bach reference. It is even more astonishing to note that Berg discovered the



inventing an instrumental theme. You can hardly imagine the lengths to which I went in order to remove this defect in his talent.”<sup>44</sup> Despite his instructor’s disdain, his listeners must have been refreshed to discover a more palatable side of dodecaphonism against the startling expressionism of Schoenberg and the cold pointillism of Webern. The infusion of romantic melody instead became an ideal way for Berg to convey expression without compromising the integrity of serialism.

After decades of performances, Alban Berg’s Violin Concerto has retained a distinctive position in music literature. It belongs to an exclusive category of works that are controversial not for breaking conventions and shocking audiences, but for the reverse effect of conservatism through the unexpected melding of conventions, delighting traditionalists while disappointing newer schools. Some praise the music’s original approach while others question its sincerity. In the case of the Violin Concerto, time has proven its secure status as a twentieth-century masterpiece. While its complexity has been a source of admiration among analysts, it possesses at the same time a simplicity and purity of style that have warranted it as one of the twentieth century’s most popular concertos for the violin. It is more accessible than Schoenberg and Webern’s respective styles (and arguably more “human”), yet no less cerebral. I am convinced that its powerful integration of old and new, as well as the universality of its themes, has secured its appraisal as a landmark of twentieth-century art music that will continue to captivate audiences.

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<sup>44</sup> Carner, 10-11.

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