

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Alban Berg – Violin Concerto

Born February 9, 1885, Vienna, Austria.

Died December 24, 1935, Vienna, Austria.

Violin Concerto

Berg wrote this violin concerto in the spring and summer of 1935; it's his last completed work. The first performance was given on April 19, 1936, in Barcelona; the soloist was Louis Krasner, who commissioned the concerto; Hermann Scherchen conducted. The orchestra consists of two flutes and two piccolos, two oboes and english horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tam-tam, gong, triangle, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Berg's Violin Concerto were given at Orchestra Hall on February 9 and 10, 1939, under the baton of Frederick Stock; the soloist was Louis Krasner, who had played the world premiere three years earlier. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on April 14, 15, 16, and 19, 2005, with Julian Rachlin as soloist and Daniele Gatti conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 21, 1960, with Christian Ferras as soloist and Jean Martinon conducting, and most recently on July 14, 2001, with Leonidas Kavakos as soloist and Sir Andrew Davis conducting.

All works of music balance, in vastly different ways, the public and private concerns of the composer. It's often irrelevant—though tempting—to contemplate how a composer's private life may have shaped a piece of music. Occasionally composers leave clues, some in broad daylight. Schumann's works are full of references to his wife Clara and others, their names or initials plainly woven into the music. Elgar depicted his friends in the *Enigma* Variations, though the central enigma itself still remains a puzzle.

In 1977, musicians were surprised to learn that a piece they had often played, the Lyric Suite by Alban Berg, contained a hidden program revealing Berg's clandestine love for Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, the wife of a Prague industrialist, and that the notes on the page were often governed by the lovers' personal "numbers," or references to Hanna's children, or to lines of poetry they held in special, though secret, affection.

We have since learned that Berg's Violin Concerto presents an even more complicated kaleidoscope of public events and private lives. The cast of characters is a distinguished one. We begin with Alma Mahler. After her husband's death—and following a brief affair with Oskar Kokoshka—she married the architect Walter Gropius. On August 22, 1916, Berg wrote to his wife Helene that he had spent the evening in the Gropius home. He played his piano sonata for Alma and, after a supper of cold chicken, some of his songs; he left at eleven, fearing he had stayed too late, for Alma was pregnant. Six weeks later a daughter, Manon, was born. Two years later, Alma divorced Gropius, and in 1929, she married the novelist Franz Werfel, who was Hanna Fuchs-Robettin's brother.

In April 1934, Manon Gropius contracted polio. Alma was devastated, for Mutzi, as she called her, was “a fairy-tale being; nobody could see her without loving her. She was the most beautiful human being in every sense. She combined all our good qualities. I have never known such a divine capacity for love, such creative power to express and to live it.” (The young writer Elias Canetti, just beginning his career in Vienna, said that Manon “radiated timidity still more than beauty, an angelic gazelle from heaven.”)

In January 1935, a young American violinist named Louis Krasner unwittingly entered the scene. He had been blown away by a performance of *Wozzeck* in New York and later by Berg's Piano Sonata in Vienna. He now approached Berg with a request for a violin concerto. Berg was uninterested at first. He assumed Krasner wanted a virtuosic showpiece—like something by Wieniawski or Vieuxtemps. “You know, that is not my kind of music,” Berg replied. But Krasner introduced the names of Mozart and Beethoven into the conversation instead and argued:

The attacking criticism of twelve-tone music everywhere is that this music is only cerebral and without feeling or emotion. . . . 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.

Several days later Berg agreed, “both dubiously and happily,” knowing how much was still to be done on his opera *Lulu*. Krasner returned to the United States. He heard from friends in Vienna of Berg's presence at a number of violin recitals. On March 28 Berg wrote to Krasner that he would leave for the Waldhaus, his place on the Worthersee, in May, and he would write the concerto there over the summer. Brahms, he mentioned, had composed his violin concerto just across the lake, at Portschach.

On April 22, Manon Gropius died of polio. When Berg heard the news, he called Alma and asked if he could dedicate his new violin concerto to Manon—“to the memory of an angel,” as he later put it, recalling Canetti's snapshot characterization. It's very likely that Berg had sketched nothing before this; he now wrote at lightning speed.

Krasner was summoned to the Waldhaus in early June, and he and Berg played through part 1 together. As Berg began work on part 2, which was to contain an elaborate cadenza, he casually suggested that Krasner stay on and fill up his days improvising around the house. “I played and played, for hours it seemed,” Krasner recalled, “. . . everything that chance brought to my bow, fingers, and mind.” When Krasner returned to the United States, Berg had all the material he

needed: the skeletal score was finished on July 15 and the orchestration by August 12. Helene Berg's claim that the concerto was composed in six weeks (remarkable for a man who managed to write only a handful of large pieces in his entire career) isn't far off the mark. Berg told Krasner, "I have never worked harder in my life, and, what's more, the work gave me increasing pleasure."

On August 28, Berg wrote to Schoenberg describing the division of the concerto into two parts, each subdivided:

- I a) Andante (Prelude)
- b) Allegretto (Scherzo)
- II a) Allegro (Cadenza)
- b) Adagio (Chorale Variations)

Berg also wrote out the unusual tone row that governs the piece—a sequence of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale arranged so as to outline two major and two minor triads in its first nine notes. The tone row is the essential building block for a twelve-tone piece. A row with such obvious tonal references—one that suggests major and minor chords in its lineup of notes—is capable of producing music that is both tonal and atonal. It also enabled Berg to borrow from earlier works—pieces written in the tonal language—and incorporate these passages smoothly into the fabric of the concerto.

We don't know when he decided to place a Carinthian folk song and a Bach chorale in the Violin Concerto. Early in the summer, he asked Willi Reich to track down collections of Bach's chorale settings, although Berg apparently had already set his sights on "Es ist genug" and simply wanted to see Bach's harmonization. It's the ideal choice: the melody begins with the last four notes of Berg's tone row—notes that rise by whole steps, giving Berg a natural bridge into Bach's chorale—and the text made such a fitting memorial to Manon (" . . . I'm going to my heavenly home, / I'll surely journey there in peace, / My great distress will stay below")—that he wrote the words under the notes on the page. He kept quiet about the folk song, and we have recently begun to suspect why.

Here is Willi Reich's introduction, prepared under Berg's supervision, for the publication of the concerto as a birthday tribute to Alma (August 31):

Insofar as a transcription into words is possible at all, the "tone"—a favorite expression of Berg's—of the whole work may be described as follows: delicate andante melodies emerge from the rising and falling movement of the introduction. These crystallize into a *grazioso* middle section and then dissolve back into the waves of the opening. The *allegretto scherzo* rises from the same background; this part captures the vision of the lovely girl in a graceful dance which alternates between a delicate and dreamy character and the rustic character of a [Carinthian] folk tune. A wild orchestra cry introduces the second main part, which begins as a free and stormy cadenza. The demonic action moves irresistibly towards catastrophe, interrupted once—briefly—by a reserved point of rest. Groans and strident cries for help are heard in the orchestra, choked off by the suffocating rhythmic pressure of destruction. Finally: over a long pedal point—gradual collapse. At the moment of highest suspense and anxiety, the chorale enters, serious and solemn, in the solo violin. Like an organ the woodwinds answer each

verse with [Bach's] original harmonization of the classical model. Ingenious variations follow, with the original chorale melody always present as a *cantus firmus*, climbing "misterioso" from the bass while the solo violin intones a "plaint" that gradually struggles towards the light. The dirge grows continually in strength; the soloist, with a visible gesture, takes over the leadership of the whole body of violins and violas; gradually they all join in with his melody and rise to a mighty climax before separating back into their own parts. An indescribably melancholy reprise of the [Carinthian] folk tune "as if in the distance (but much slower than the first time)" reminds us once more of the lovely image of the girl; then the chorale, with bitter harmonies, ends this sad farewell while the solo violin arches high over it with entry after entry of the plaint.

But Reich—and Berg—didn't tell the whole story. For a composer so meticulous in his choice of materials, the suggestive text of the Carinthian folk song can't be overlooked:

A bird on the plum tree has wakened me
Otherwise I would have overslept in Mizzi's bed
If everybody wants a rich and handsome girl
Where ought the devil take the ugly one?
The girl is Catholic and I am Protestant
She will surely put away the rosary in bed!

Berg didn't write these words in his score. In 1982, the scholar Douglas Jarman proposed that the folk song is actually a confession, buried in the ambiguity of musical notation, of Berg's affair with Marie Scheuchl, known as Mizzi, who worked as a servant in the Berg house when Alban was growing up and who gave birth to their illegitimate daughter in the spring of 1902.

There are other puzzles. One phrase of the chorale is repeatedly marked *amoroso*, at odds with the apparent meaning of the music, though decidedly in keeping with the emerging subtext. And then there are the numbers—the same numbers woven throughout the Lyric Suite: ten for Hanna Fuchs-Robettin and twenty-three for Berg. Jarman has traced the ways that the concerto, like the Lyric Suite, honors these numbers, in metronome markings, or the number of measures to a section or a phrase. Although we haven't found an annotated copy of the score filled with the hard evidence (like the one that turned up for the Lyric Suite), it seems clear that this work has led a double life. And so to the concerto for Mr. Krasner and the memorial to Alma Mahler's daughter, we now admit a new layer of meaning, one that Berg never meant us to know. Even Helene Berg, however, guessed that Berg recognized that, in some sense, the music for Manon was his own requiem, too. When she once begged him to slow his uncharacteristically hectic pace, Berg replied, "I cannot stop—I do not have time."

The Violin Concerto was the last work Berg completed, and one he didn't live to hear performed. Berg's health had been poor for years, and he often suffered acutely from asthma and allergies. While he was putting the final touches on the concerto, a wasp sting developed into a painful abscess. Despite treatment, the infection continued. On December 17 he was admitted to the hospital. On the twenty-third (the date that was his number), he said the day would prove decisive. He

died in the early morning hours of the twenty-fourth. Arrangements were made at once for the premiere of the Violin Concerto at that spring's International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Barcelona. Louis Krasner was the soloist. For reasons even more apparent now than then, it was a memorial not only for Manon Gropius, but for Alban Berg himself.

A postscript. Louis Krasner died on May 4, 1995, at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts, at the age of ninety-one. Although he was a champion of new music throughout his career, his commissioning of the Berg concerto was his greatest claim to fame. As the *Boston Globe* noted in its obituary, Krasner's "name will always be as closely associated with it as Joseph Joachim's was with the Brahms" violin concerto.

For the Record

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Berg's Violin Concerto in 1983 with Kyung-Wha Chung as soloist and Sir Georg Solti conducting for London, and in 1992 with Anne-Sophie Mutter as soloist and James Levine conducting for Deutsche Grammophon (1993 Grammy Award winner for best classical performance—instrumental soloist with orchestra).

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