

## Analysis of Berg's "Violin Concerto"

Alban Berg, along with Anton Webern, was one of the three composers of the Second Viennese School pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg. The most Romantic of these three hallmark European modern composers, Berg successfully combined late Romanticism elements with adaptations of Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique. Berg wrote his most famous and widely performed instrumental work, the Violin Concerto, in 1935 and its premiere was held shortly after his death in 1936 by renowned violinist Louis Krasner. Berg's last ever composition, the Violin Concerto sums up his entire musical outlook and style more than any one of his pieces.

Engraved "To the memory of an angel," Berg dedicated the piece to Manon Gropius, the daughter of Gustav Mahler's former wife, Alma Mahler, who died at the age of eighteen from polio. The concerto lasts about twenty-four minutes and has only two movements instead of the traditional three. Further, each movement has two parts. They are I. (a). Andante, lasting 16 pages and (b). Allegretto, lasting 31 pages, and II. (a). Allegro, lasting 30 pages and (b). Adagio, lasting 20 pages. Thus, the two large movements are roughly equal in length with an overall circular effect in the sub-movements' lengths, being that the longest movements are in the middle and the shortest on the outsides.

Each of the movements and sub-movements can be easily interpreted as portrayals of Manon Gropius. The most obvious and indisputable reflection on the girl's death can be heard in the final Adagio section of the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, in which Berg quotes J.S. Bach's cantata "O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort," BWV 60. The cantata translates to "O Eternity, Thou Thunderous Word," and is the first cantata of the larger book of cantatas,

“Ernstliche Betrachtung Der unendlichen Ewigkeit,” (or “A Serious Consideration of Endless Eternity”). The violinist plays the melody over the cantata’s text “It is enough! Lord, if it be thy Will, give me rest!” (actual German: “Is Est Genung!”) The melody is highlighted by the stark orchestration and the violin’s crescendo from the preceding consistent piano dynamic markings, as well as its melodic alternation with the woodwinds, as seen in measures 1-11 of the last sub-movement, Adagio.

Another quotation used by Berg that also poignantly portrays Manon’s death is the Corinthian folk melody “Ein Vogel auf’m Zwetschgenbaum,” which is quoted from measures 200-213 of the final sub-movement Adagio, as well as in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement’s 2<sup>nd</sup> sub-movement, Allegretto, between measures 214-227. The lyrics to the folk melody translated are: “A bird on the plum tree has wakened me, Tridie, tridie, iri, tulie! Otherwise I would have overslept in Mizzi’s bed...” Mutzi was Manon’s nickname. The rest of the poem makes allusions to death and the afterlife with remarks regarding the Devil and the rosary, a type of prayer meant to thank God for the salvation found in Death and also to comment on its eternal mystery.

These two important quotations help firmly shape Berg’s message, as it were, of the meaning of death inspired by Manon Gropius. Though these quotations are only the two most obvious instances of remarks upon death, among more nuanced and subtle orchestral choices, it is equally important to further remark upon the interesting circular effect Berg instilled, as seen in the movements and sub-movements’ lengths, but also within the subsections themselves. Berg was famous for his developing variation technique, which he considered to be his biggest compositional tool, owing largely to his exclusive Schoenberg education. That is, every single musical idea must stem from an

original kernel that usually occurs in even the first few measures of most of his pieces (for example, the famous Piano Sonata, Op. 1, in which the two opening gestures inform the entire rest of the sonata). In the Violin Concerto, one can easily see Berg's definitive developing variation technique beginning in the first sub-movement. The introduction (roughly measures 1-10) is brought up again in measures 84-103, arguably as one large transition to the second sub-movement, Allegretto. Here, a circular and developing variation technique is apparent within the very first sub-movement. Of course, the intro is not merely restated in measures 84-103, but developed via importing and superimposing music from the section directly after the intro (approximately between measures 11-37).

Every sub-movement likewise develops upon material usually presented at the very beginning of the sub-movement and features an overall circular effect, with a return to each sub-movement's respective opening material in a new manner towards its codetta. These circular effects, articulated in the smallest possible structural sense, i.e. even between phrases of periods within each sub movement, are, on the largest scale shown by the repetition of the very beginning Introduction material of Movement I in the coda of the final movement.

Lastly, as a member of the Second Viennese School, Berg's use of the twelve-tone technique is worthy of mention. The opening, in measure 15 particularly, articulates the primary twelve tone row in the violin: G-B-flat-D-F#-A-C-E-G#-B-C#-E-flat-F. This row perfectly sums up Berg's culmination as a uniquely post-Romantic and modern composer. Unlike the inherent and rather disconcerting quality of the twelve tone row in general as used by Schoenberg, Webern and the like, Berg's row is almost tonal in its opening G minor triad, followed by a "Dominant 7" harmony with the D overlapped with

the added F#-A-C following. What follows is a C augmented triad. If viewed as overlapping triads, an E major triad then follows, then a G# minor triad, followed by a 025 and an 024 chord (using pitch class sets here is more efficient and accurate than attempting to label the chords B-C#-E-flat and C#-E-flat-F). Thus, Berg has managed to make an almost tonal (at least in the first two harmonies) setting of the twelve-tone row, lending the concerto an element of its indisputable humanistic and heartfelt emotional charge. This accomplishment is difficult to achieve adhering to twelve-tone technique and marks Berg's biggest strength as a composer in the views of many.