

Alban Berg

Chamber Concerto for piano and violin with thirteen wind instruments

ALBAN BERG (ALBANO MARIA JOHANNES BERG) WAS BORN IN VIENNA ON FEBRUARY 9, 1885, AND DIED THERE ON DECEMBER 24, 1935. HE BEGAN PLANNING THE CHAMBER CONCERTO WITHIN A FEW WEEKS OF COMPLETING THE SCORE OF HIS OPERA “WOZZECK,” IN JANUARY 1923. BY JULY 12 HE DIVULGED THE PLAN TO ARNOLD SCHOENBERG, HIS TEACHER, TO WHOM HE DEDICATED THE WORK AS A FIFTIETH-BIRTHDAY GIFT, THOUGH HE DID NOT COMPLETE THE FULL SCORE UNTIL JULY 23, 1925. THE FIRST PERFORMANCE TOOK PLACE ON MARCH 27, 1927, IN BERLIN, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF HERMANN SCHERCHEN.

THE SCORE OF THE CHAMBER CONCERTO CALLS FOR PIANO, VIOLIN, AND THIRTEEN WIND INSTRUMENTS, NAMELY FLUTE, PICCOLO (DOUBLING SECOND FLUTE), OBOE, ENGLISH HORN, E-FLAT CLARINET, CLARINET IN A, BASS CLARINET, BASSOON, CONTRABASSOON, TRUMPET, TWO HORNS, AND TROMBONE (TENOR AND BASS).

Along with Anton Webern, Berg was the most significant pupil of Arnold Schoenberg, and the three composers are generally recognized by music historians as making up the “Second Viennese School” (the first being represented by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert; see the related article beginning on page 29 of this program book). The central musical development in the work of these composers was the establishment of the twelve-note row as the basis of musical composition, though each of them took a somewhat different approach to the row. For many years analysts described Berg’s music as being much “freer” in its use of twelve-tone technique than that of Schoenberg and especially Webern; Berg is supposed to have retained vestiges of tonal writing (especially in twelve-note rows with major or minor triads embedded within them). More recent study by a small host of analysts sparked by the fundamental work of composer George Perle has shown that Berg’s technique, while different from that of Schoenberg and Webern, is no less rigorous, while still opening up different paths for later composers.

Berg composed the Chamber Concerto immediately after finishing his opera *Wozzeck*, one of the seminal stage works of the twentieth century. *Wozzeck*, though largely atonal, had made only the slightest use of the twelve-tone ideas that were still being developed by Schoenberg. The Chamber Concerto was conceived by Berg as an homage to his teacher, to be dedicated to Schoenberg on his fiftieth birthday. Probably for this reason, Berg laid out the score largely in terms of the manipulation of tone rows, using the four principal aspects in which the row might appear—*prime* (or the original form), *inversion* (the original version turned upside down), *retrograde* (the original played backward), and *retrograde-inversion* (both backward and upside down)—not only for variety but as an organizing device.

As with Schoenberg’s work of the same period, the composer seeks to find a means of coherence in a context that no longer supports traditional harmonic relationships. One means of doing this, at first, was pouring the new materials of into the older molds of classical form: theme and variations, ABA song form, rondo, sonata, and so on.

Berg wrote to Schoenberg on July 12, 1923, with the first details of his plan: a piece for piano and violin accompanied by ten (as he then foresaw it) wind instruments, cast as a single movement (though this became three strongly differentiated sections that are essentially separate movements). On September 2 he wrote to describe the completed first section:

I work in the morning, but not very diligently or successfully: of the single-movement, three-part concerto, the first part, a scherzo-like variation movement, is finished. It has over 200 measures, but measures that contain a great deal: 6/4 meter. There’s much contrapuntal writing in it, without, however, weighing down the generally light mood. Or so I fancy!

He foresaw that the second section would be an Adagio and the closing part a sonata movement conceived as a summary of the first two.

If only I can get a lot written here! The consistently beautiful weather lures me outside more than is good for my work. Again I am as taken with the beauty of the countryside as ever. Indeed, more so, and despite my liking for the Salzkammergut region so enormously! It is the big, big sky that appeals to me here. [And for the remainder of the lengthy paragraph he describes the varied images of the sky from his retreat.]

But—what have I gotten myself into?! I intended to write a reasonable, matter of fact letter and suddenly find myself in the middle of a school essay with the likely title: “Summer Evening in the Mountains.”

But the completion took much longer than he had hoped. A letter to Schoenberg in March 1924 reported that he had taken it up again (“And—thank God—it’s going quite well”). Still further delay intervened. On his own fortieth birthday, February 9, 1925, Berg published the following open letter, which accompanied the completion of the short score (even so, he did not finish the full score of the work until July 23):

Dear esteemed friend, Arnold Schönberg!

Composition of this concerto, which I dedicated to you on your fiftieth birthday, was finished only today, on my fortieth. Overdue though it is, I ask that you nonetheless accept it kindly; all the more so as—dedicated to you since its inception—it is also a small monument to a great friendship now numbering 20 years.

Berg’s open letter goes on to describe at great length the varied formal and thematic symmetries with which his concerto is constructed. First of all, he encapsulated in the thematic material the names of his teacher, his fellow student Webern, and himself. It is absolutely typical of Berg to translate personal references into his music in this way. (An even more striking case is the “secret program” of the *Lyric Suite*, in which every bar contains references to the most intense and meaningful love affair of his life.) In the Chamber Concerto he begins with a motto consisting of three musical cryptograms made up of pitches drawn from the names **Arnold SCHönBERG** (A, D, E-flat, C, B-natural, B-flat, E, G, played by the piano), **Anton WEBErn** (A, E, B-flat, E, played by the violin), and **AlBA n, BErG** (A, B-flat, A, B-flat, E, G, played by the horn).

He probably considered it significant that the mottos for “Webern” and “Berg” consisted of pitches already sounded for “Schönberg,” as musical echoes symbolizing the leadership of the teacher for the pupils who come along afterward. Berg confessed, in his open letter to Schoenberg:

I tell you, dearest friend, if anyone realized how much friendship, love, and a world of human-emotional associations I spirited into these three movements, the proponents of program music—if indeed there are still such—would be delighted and the “linearists” and “physiologists,” the “contrapuntists” and “formalists” would come down on me, incensed at such “romantic” inclinations, if I hadn’t at the same time divulged that they too, if so inclined, could find satisfaction.

The “satisfaction” that the “formalists” and similar types could find in Berg’s score comes from the elaborate floor plan of the piece, the most intricately worked out structure imaginable, marked by his obsession (no tamer word will do) with symmetry. The first movement is for piano and wind ensemble, the second for violin and wind ensemble, while all take part together in the finale.

The first movement, a set of variations with elements of sonata form, is set out in units of material based on one or another of the principal aspects: the theme, followed by five variations in prime, retrograde,

inversion, retrograde-inversion, and prime form again. Berg regarded the second, third, and fourth variations as a kind of development and the return to prime form as a recapitulation.

The second movement, featuring the violin, is in ternary (ABA) form, each half of which ends with the inversion of its opening material. There is, moreover, a formal geometrical symmetry at the midpoint (underlined by the entry of the piano, tolling a low C-sharp twelve times), at which the musical material in essence runs backwards to the beginning.

The last movement combines both solo instruments in an elaborate cadenza-like passage leading to a finale that literally combines material from each of the earlier movements in what Berg called a “Rondo ritmico,” to sum up the musical discourse of the whole.

Berg’s motto at the head of the score contains the words “All good things...” with the implied proverbial continuation “...come in threes.” The Chamber Concerto contains numerous references to the number three or its multiples, whether in the number of instruments employed, the number of movements, the number of subdivisions within movements, and—equally significant—the number of composers being honored by musical references: Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg himself. It is thus at once a personal tribute filled with many private references, and Berg’s own first serious achievement using the new musical techniques so recently developed by his teacher.

Steven Ledbetter