Frank Martin

"Petite Symphonie concertante" for harp, harpsichord, piano, and two string orchestras

FRANK MARTIN WAS BORN IN GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, ON SEPTEMBER 15, 1890, AND DIED IN NAARDEN, THE NETHERLANDS, ON NOVEMBER 21, 1974. HE COMPOSED THE "PETITE SYMPHONIE CONCERTANTE" IN THE YEARS 1944 AND 1945 AND DEDICATED THE SCORE TO PAUL SACHER, WHO COMMISSIONED THE WORK. IT WAS SACHER WHO CONDUCTED THE FIRST PERFORMANCE, ON MAY 17, 1946, WITH THE COLLEGIUM MUSICUM, ZURICH.

THE SCORE CALLS FOR THREE SOLOISTS—HARP, HARPSICHORD, AND PIANO—ARRANGED FROM LEFT TO RIGHT ON THE STAGE, RESPECTIVELY, AND TWO STRING ORCHESTRAS, THE FIRST BETWEEN THE HARPSICHORD AND PIANO, THE SECOND BETWEEN THE PIANO AND HARP.

Frank Martin was a composer of intense seriousness who had little sympathy, as a young man, with the frivolity that overtook French and German music after the First World War, and he took a while to find his way. Born and educated in Switzerland, he fell first under the spell of Bach, and was just catching up with Debussy and Ravel when the French themselves were turning against that style. He explored folk song from all over the world, including Bulgaria and India; he adopted Schoenberg's twelve-note method in a few pieces; and he dabbled for a while with jazz. It was not until the late 1930s, in full middle age, that he found a style that fully expressed what he was trying to say, and he stayed loyal to that style for the rest of his very productive life. His most successful works, including the oratorios *Le Vin herbé* (based on the legend of Tristan and Isolde) and *Golgotha* and a group of concertos, date from the 1940s.

Martin is certainly a neo-classic in his attachment to strong rhythms and to the quest for technical perfection. He wrote extensively about the art of composition, and was a notable teacher in Switzerland, Germany, and Holland. Like many Swiss, Martin held the German and French traditions in balance and drew freely on both. He took very seriously the composer's responsibility to seek a satisfying, finished form for each work, which he did not hesitate to call "beauty." His musical language combines echoes of folk song and Baroque practice with sophisticated chromatic harmony, somewhat in the manner of Bartók or Prokofiev, retaining an orientation to a goal, namely a tonal or modal center around which the music performs its elaborate formal dance.

When not setting a text which essentially guided the shape of the music, he liked a technical challenge, such as writing concertos, especially with an unusual combination of instruments. He composed two piano concertos, a cello concerto, a harpsichord concerto, and various pieces with such instruments as trombone or saxophone as soloist. His Concerto for Seven Wind Instruments, Timpani, Percussion, and String Orchestra from 1949 is one of his more popular pieces, and the present *Petite Symphonie concertante*, from 1944-45 is an excellent example of Martin accepting the challenge of combining unusual soloists. In this case the soloists are harp, harpsichord, and piano, and the idea came from that great Swiss conductor and patron of the arts, Paul Sacher, who wanted a piece that featured all the strings: bowed, keyboard, and plucked.

Sacher had established himself as a conductor and scholar, with a passion for the work of living composers, when he married, most felicitously, into the family of Hoffmann-La Roche, manufacturers of, among other potions, valium and lithium. Never have pharmaceutical profits been turned to such fine artistic purpose as in Sacher's hands. He promoted the work of Stravinsky, Bartók, Honegger, Hindemith, Britten, and many other living composers, and was especially supportive of his fellow Swiss. In addition to commissioning new works and directing his ensemble, the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, he established in Basel a foundation which now houses one of the greatest collections of 20th-century music manuscripts in the world.

In the early 1940s Sacher was in Zurich, leading the Collegium Musicum, the group that premiered Frank Martin's *Petite Symphonie concertante* in May 1946. The aesthetic of the work and its instrumental line-up were particularly to Sacher's taste. Martin was convinced that it would rarely be performed in the original form, so he re-orchestrated it for full orchestra without soloists under the title *Symphonie concertante*, but to his surprise it was the latter version which turned out to be the rarity, while the original version was frequently played in its first few years and is one of Martin's works most often found in concert programs even today.

Martin tackled the unequal sonority of harp, harpsichord, and piano by combining all three only in the fully scored passages, and elsewhere treating one of the three as a soloist with the other two as accompaniment. Thus the opening entry of the harpsichord can be heard clearly against the lighter tread of the harp and the piano, both of whom have their turn in due course. Martin had studied the harpsichord as a young man at a time when it was still a rare instrument and was usually treated in new music as a novel sonority with no suggestion of its conventional role in Baroque music. He exploits its sharp percussive attack, and while the harp part calls for great dexterity from the player, the piano part is lighter than that of familiar warhorse piano concertos. Indeed it is the interplay of the three instruments that reveals Martin's high skill as a composer, and he also draws great richness from his string body divided into two separate groups, with solo players drawn from those sections too at times.

Although the music runs continuously, the piece falls into two broad divisions, each preceded by an Adagio section that provides thematic ideas for the quick music to which it leads. The first "movement" feels at many times like a passacaglia or a set of variations, since Martin presents two prominent themes, each based on a steady pulse, and each repeated in successively different registers. The first theme includes all twelve notes of the chromatic scale, but Martin has no intention of treating it in a rigorous serial fashion. It is simply a theme, which he harmonizes in an expressive way. Once the tempo moves up to Allegro the soloists enter in turn. Its second main theme is slightly slower, followed by a series of variations upon it and a return to the first theme spelled out solemnly by the piano.

The close subsides to a point where a persistent note in the accompanying strings refuses to resolve as the ear demands. Instead it settles into the chords, on the harpsichord, that introduce the second "movement." This is slow at first, the bare melody articulated by the harp. The piano joins them, exchanging some wonderfully florid elaborations with the harpsichord. The Allegro that follows is a brisk march, based on the same theme that the harp had so carefully set out in the slow section, and its steady tramp-tramp builds strongly to an exciting close.

When asked if, as a composer, he felt a responsibility before God, Martin quoted Haydn: "Often, when I have had to struggle against troubles of every kind, when my physical and spiritual energies fail and it's difficult to follow one's path, a very private thought has sounded in my ear: 'There are very few on earth who are happy and satisfied; troubles surround men on every side, and perhaps your work will somewhere give comfort and peace to a distressed soul.' That's my reason for pressing on."

"Isn't that a marvellous thought?" comments Martin, going on to quote another passage from Haydn: "No one can imagine what it costs me to compose, no one can know the long days of struggle when I can't think of a single idea." We forget that Haydn's seemingly effortless music did not come into the world easily, and we can equally forget that Martin too suffered long agonies when embarking on a new work. But the vitality and richness of pieces such as the *Petite Symphonie concertante* make it hard to believe that he could ever have had to wait long for inspiration to come.

Hugh Macdonald