

Alban Berg
Violin Concerto

ALBANO MARIA JOHANNES BERG WAS BORN ON FEBRUARY 9, 1885, IN VIENNA AND DIED THERE ON DECEMBER 24, 1935. HE WROTE THE VIOLIN CONCERTO, HIS LAST COMPLETE WORK, IN THE SPRING AND SUMMER OF 1935, FINISHING THE COMPOSITION ON JULY 15 AND COMPLETING THE ORCHESTRATION ON AUGUST 12. LOUIS KRASNER, WHO HAD COMMISSIONED THE CONCERTO FROM BERG, GAVE THE FIRST PERFORMANCE ON APRIL 19, 1936, IN BARCELONA, AT A FESTIVAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC; HERMANN SCHERCHEN CONDUCTED THE ORQUESTRA PAU CASALS. KRASNER, WHO MADE THE WORK KNOWN ALL OVER EUROPE AND AMERICA, ALSO INTRODUCED IT IN THE UNITED STATES, AT CONCERTS OF THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA ON MARCH 5 AND 6, 1937, WITH SERGE KOUSSEVITZKY CONDUCTING.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO VIOLIN, THE SCORE CALLS FOR TWO FLUTES (BOTH DOUBLING PICCOLO), TWO OBOES (ONE DOUBLING ENGLISH HORN), THREE CLARINETS (THE THIRD DOUBLING ALTO SAXOPHONE) AND BASS CLARINET, TWO BASSOONS AND CONTRABASSOON, FOUR HORNS, TWO TRUMPETS, ONE TENOR AND ONE BASS TROMBONE, BASS TUBA, TIMPANI, BASS DRUM, CYMBALS, SNARE DRUM, TAM-TAM (LOW), GONG (HIGH), TRIANGLE, AND STRINGS.

On August 12, 1909, Alban Berg wrote to Helene Nahowski, whom he would marry two years later, that “this morning a wasp stung me in my right hand, middle finger. It began to swell and has now become so thick I can hardly move the fingers; quite painful. Well that’s life in the country.” In the next day’s letter he writes, evidently from experience, “My hand is not better yet, I ought really to keep it very quiet so that the inflammation won’t spread to the arm.” Twenty-six years later to the day, Berg drew the double bar on the last page of his Violin Concerto. Soon after, the wasps got to him again, and this time Berg, all his life a bundle of ailments, allergies, and hypochondriac fantasies, did not recover. Carbuncles developed, then boils, then an abscess on his back, and then blood poisoning. He received a transfusion—the donor was a Viennese laborer, and Berg expressed the hope that it would not turn him into an operetta composer—but, with sulfa drugs not yet available, nothing helped. On December 23 he said, “Today is the 23rd. It will be a decisive day.” Ever since his first attack of bronchial asthma on July 23, 1908—at age twenty-three—he had been superstitious about the number 23. Helene Berg sought to help her husband by moving the clocks ahead so as to convince him that the critical day was past. In vain: Berg survived the critical 23rd, but only by an hour and a quarter.

He was two days older than his adored Gustav Mahler had been at the time of his death. The score of his opera *Lulu*, a project he had harbored for thirty years, was nearly finished. The last completed work was the Violin Concerto for whose sake, and rather to his own surprise, he had interrupted work on *Lulu*. Two summonses had called the concerto into being. First, the Russian-born American violinist Louis Krasner (1903-1995) commissioned such a work from Berg. Krasner knew and liked the lyrical quality of Berg’s early Piano Sonata; then, in Vienna early in 1935, he had the opportunity to hear the Galimir Quartet play something more recent and representative, the *Lyric Suite* of 1925-26. Not only was Krasner impressed by the *Lyric Suite*, he also fell in love with, proposed to, and married Adrienne Galimir, the second violinist in the quartet, which then consisted of a brother and three sisters. Berg was reluctant to commit himself to the idea of a concerto, saying that the world of Wieniawski and Vieuxtemps was not his world, to which Krasner sensibly replied that after all Beethoven and Brahms had written violin concertos, too. Still more telling was Krasner’s suggestion that Berg was the man to demonstrate the lyric and expressive potential of twelve-tone music. For a while, Berg stuck to his rather guarded position, but he formally accepted the commission, and friends observed that he lately acquired the new and strange habit of attending violin recitals.

The second summons was a tragic one—the death on April 22, 1935, of Manon Gropius, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Alma Mahler-Werfel by her second husband, the architect Walter Gropius.* Manon, singularly gifted, gentle, vivacious, and beautiful, seems to have been loved by everyone who came in contact with her. She was studying to be an actress when struck down by poliomyelitis, which led to

spinal paralysis and so to her death. Berg, shaken through and through, suddenly saw how the concerto might be a Requiem for the beloved Manon. The title-page says at the top "*Für Louis Krasner*" and at the bottom, "*Dem Andenken eines Engels*" ("to the memory of an angel"). "Angel" carries a specific reference in that Max Reinhardt had planned to have Manon make her debut as an angel in his Salzburg production of *Everyman*.

In June, Krasner was able to spend some time with Berg at the composer's country house on the Wörthersee—just opposite Pörschach, where Brahms had written his Violin Concerto, as he was fond of pointing out—and he spent hours improvising for him so that Berg might get to know the strengths and characteristics of his technique and style. Until then, Berg had been the slowest of the great composers, and his catalogue is very small. But the Violin Concerto poured out of him with a speed and urgency and ease he had never before experienced. On July 16 he was able to write to Krasner that he had finished the composition of "our" concerto the day before. "I am perhaps even more astonished than you," he added. "I was, to be sure, industrious as never before in my life and must add that the work gave me more and more joy. I hope—no, I believe confidently—that I have succeeded."

In 1935, Berg was just past the height of his fame and public success. He would have been at the zenith if the establishment in 1933 of Hitler's regime had not suddenly choked off the performances in all the German theaters of his opera *Wozzeck*. Losing what had become a substantial source of royalties caused Berg serious financial hardship, and throughout 1934 and 1935 he was obliged seriously to consider selling his country house and the little Ford convertible he had proudly bought with *Wozzeck* earnings in the fall of 1930.

His father, whom he resembled to an uncanny degree, was a bookdealer who had come to Vienna from Nuremberg in 1867, and the whole family crackled with literary, theatrical, musical, and artistic talent. Berg's sister, Smaragda, was the only other member of the family to pursue a professional career in music: she became a superb, much sought-after vocal coach, among whose pupils was Frida Leider, the great Isolda and Brünnhilde of the pre-Flagstad era. Alban's and Smaragda's older brother, Hermann, who emigrated to the United States, where he joined the New York firm of importers, Geo. Borgfeldt & Co. Inc., was responsible for a creation perhaps even more significant than *Wozzeck*, *Lulu*, the *Lytic Suite*, and the Violin Concerto, and certainly one of wider circulation, for it was he who gave the world the teddy bear.

It was Smaragda who spotted a newspaper advertisement on October 8, 1904, announcing that Arnold Schoenberg would be teaching some night classes in harmony and counterpoint, and another brother, Karl, known as Charly, who secretly took some of Alban's songs to the already celebrated, indeed notorious Schoenberg for evaluation. Schoenberg accepted Berg as a pupil, and Berg studied with him in a nourishing, trying, often exceedingly dependent relationship until 1910. Those aspects of their friendship hardly changed over the years. For a time after his father's early death in 1900, Berg had had to support himself by means of a job in civil service, but an inheritance from an aunt made him modestly independent in 1906. In 1908 he completed his Piano Sonata, the first work to which he assigned an opus number and which he counted as the real beginning of his career as a composer. There followed a string quartet in 1910, Five Songs with orchestra on texts by Peter Altenberg in 1912, Three Pieces for Orchestra in 1913, and the completion in 1922 of *Wozzeck*, on which he had begun work in 1914. In 1911 Berg had married Helene Nahowski and moved into the apartment he was to occupy for the rest of his life, and which was still Helene Berg's home when she died in 1976. Berg served briefly in the army, wrote some criticism and analysis, and after the war assisted Schoenberg in setting up the Society for Private Musical Performances in Vienna. *Wozzeck* was the turning point. The performance under Hermann Scherchen in Frankfurt of concert excerpts in July 1924 made his name widely known. The first complete production followed in Berlin under Erich Kleiber's direction in December 1925. Still more significant was the production in March 1929 in Oldenburg, then a city of some 400,000. It made the point that *Wozzeck* was not just something for the big houses, and within a few years, Berg's opera was in the repertory of some thirty European theaters. In March 1931, Leopold Stokowski introduced *Wozzeck* in Philadelphia and New York.

Meanwhile, Berg led his life, traveled to hear performances of his music, carried on a copious correspondence, read voraciously (Balzac, Strindberg, Ibsen, Kafka, Karl Kraus, Shakespeare, Goethe, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil were special favorites, but there was also room for Jack London and the

Styrian poet, Peter Rosegger), played with his albino dachshunds, laughed at the movies of Buster Keaton and of Laurel and Hardy, cheered himself hoarse at soccer games, was delighted to receive a visit from George Gershwin, and wished in vain that the Austrian government's tobacco monopoly, which had called its more luxurious grade of cigarette "Heliane" after an opera by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, would name its cheapest working-class brand "Wozzeck." Honors began to come his way, but when the City of Vienna offered him the honorary title of Professor (and that is a big deal in Austria and Germany to this day), he turned it down: "Too late," he said, "Alban Berg is quite enough." He himself became a teacher. His most famous pupil was that formidable polymath, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, who eventually wrote a brilliant and characteristically idiosyncratic study of his master. On the other hand, the parents of an extraordinarily gifted English boy refused, on the advice of his teacher, to allow him to go to Berg, for it was feared he would be a bad influence: Benjamin Britten never got over his chagrin.

Of course the most important thing was Berg's music. He spent as much time as he could in the country house where he could concentrate so well and which, with typical black humor, he called his concentration camp. (During his final illness he commended the choice of the Rudolf Hospital for its convenience on the grounds that it was already halfway to the Central Cemetery.) At any rate, he added to his catalogue the Chamber Concerto for violin, piano, and thirteen wind instruments, the *Lyric Suite* for string quartet, the concert aria *Der Wein* on a poem by Baudelaire, most of *Lulu*, and the Violin Concerto. Twelve days before his death, wracked by fever, he was able for the first time to attend one of the many performances of the five-movement Symphony he had drawn from *Lulu*: it was the last music he heard. The Violin Concerto he never heard at all. After Berg's death, the program committee of the International Society of Contemporary Music, an organization on whose juries Berg had repeatedly served, asked Krasner to play the concerto at the festival scheduled for Barcelona in April 1936. Schoenberg's most famous pupil, Anton Webern, was to conduct, but, emotionally upset, unable to get along linguistically or in any other way with the Catalan orchestra, allowing himself to become hopelessly bogged down in detail, he withdrew at the last moment, and Hermann Scherchen, with minimal chance to study the score and of course with next to no rehearsal time available, came to the last-minute and heroic rescue.

Berg casts his concerto in two movements, each divided into two parts. The music starts in utmost quiet as harp and clarinets with solo violin begin some exploratory preluding, gently drifting at first—the violin's entrance is just a touching of the four open strings from G up to E and down again—but gradually taking on a firmer sense of direction. A clear cadence is reached and, with a simple accompanying figure to set the pace, the first movement proper begins. When the violin next enters, it again begins on the open G-string, but moves up this time into a higher register. Virtually every choice of pitch that Berg makes in the concerto is related to this particular ordering of the twelve notes of our chromatic scale. The ones to which the four strings of a violin are tuned, each bearing either a minor or a major chord, they are the scaffolding of Berg's chosen series. The last four notes take on special meaning later. It is clear from the outset that both a place for traditional tonal harmonies and a specifically violinistic element are built right into the material.

The two movements of the concerto can be said to represent respectively a portrait of Manon Gropius and a drama of "death and transfiguration." The Andante, which Berg thought of as a Praeludium, soon leads to a wistful Allegretto. This is music full of pictorial reference: the sweet thirds in the violin are to be played "*wienerisch*" ("Viennese"), a more bumpkin-like passage is to be "*rustico*," and the hiccup of the yodel is heard. There is even room for quotation when, after a couple of contrasting episodes (Trios to this scherzo, really), a Carinthian folk song is tenderly passed among the horn, the solo violin, and two trumpets:*

The second movement enters violently and with an intensity of dissonance Berg has so far avoided. Berg sets up a powerful contrast between the cadenza-like freedom with which he wishes the opening projected and the strictly rhythmic style that takes over later on. A dotted rhythm ominously commands this scene. A demanding cadenza halts the forward thrust for a moment, but when the orchestra re-enters in full force, it pushes the music toward an immense climax. The storm subsides, and the violin is heard quietly but decisively playing a Bach chorale, accompanied only by the bassoon and a few of the orchestral strings. At a point when the first movement was far advanced and the basic compositional material of the concerto was long since determined, Berg was still looking for a suitable Bach chorale that he might somehow introduce. When he found one, it was so right he could hardly believe it: not only was

the text perfect, but its first four notes were the last four of his own ordering of the twelve notes. It is, moreover, Bach's most adventurous, chromatic, tension-laden chorale harmonization, so that it fits uncannily with Berg's own harmonic style. It comes from the Cantata No. 60, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort* (*O Eternity, Thou Word of Thunder*), and the melody itself is by the 17th-century Mühlhausen church musician, Johann Rudolf Ahle. The words, by Franz Joachim Burmeister (1633-72), are as follows:

Es ist genug!
Herr, wenn es dir gefällt,
So spanne mich doch aus!
Mein Jesus kommt:
Nun gute Nacht, o Welt!
Ich fahr' ins Himmelhaus,
Ich fahre sicher hin mit Frieden,
Mein grosser Jammer bleibt darnieden.
Es ist genug! Es ist genug!

It is enough!
Lord, if it please you,
Unyoke me now at last!
My Jesus comes:
Now good night, o world!
I travel to my heavenly home,
I travel surely and in peace,
My great distress remains below.
It is enough! It is enough!

Berg's and Bach's harmonizations alternate and subtly intersect. Variations follow the playing through of the hymn, beginning with the melody in muted cellos and harp. The solo violin, also muted, joins in and is in turn joined by a single violin from the orchestra, then another, and more and more. Berg even asks that at this point the violinist "audibly *and visibly*" assume leadership of the strings. Louis Krasner stated that to Berg, this was "the real cadenza" of the concerto, and that he thought of the passage as one in which one seemed to perceive the solo through an ever-stronger magnifying glass until one violin, grown to overwhelming dimensions, entirely fills the room. The other strings drop away as gradually as they had entered until only the soloist is left. The Carinthian song is heard as if from a great distance, but it is the chorale, garlanded about with a filigree of solo strings, that leads the work to its serene close: "My great distress remains below." The last music we hear is a scarcely audible recollection of the prelude on open strings where it all began.

Michael Steinberg