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2CD

20TH-century violin concertos

| SZYMANOWSKI | BARTÓK |
| MARTIN | MILHAUD | BARBER |

DENE OLDING | XIAO-DONG WANG



20th-Century Violin Concertos

CD 1

KAROL SZYMANOWSKI 1882-1937

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 1, Op. 35

1 Vivace – Andantino – Vivace assai 23'58

BÉLA BARTÓK 1881-1945

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 2, Sz112

[38'50]

2 Allegro non troppo 16'13

3 Andante tranquillo 9'17

4 Allegro molto 13'20

Total Playing Time

62'17

Xiao-Dong Wang *violin*

Adelaide Symphony Orchestra

Omri Hadari *conductor*

CD 2

FRANK MARTIN 1890-1974

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra [30'35]

1 Allegro tranquillo 13'34

2 Andante molto moderato 10'01

3 Presto 7'00

DARIUS MILHAUD 1892-1974

Violin Concerto No. 2, Op. 263 [26'02]

4 Dramatique. Récitatif – Animé 8'54

5 Lent et sombre 10'52

6 Emporté 6'16

SAMUEL BARBER 1910-1981

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14 [23'06]

7 Allegro 10'19

8 Andante 9'07

9 Presto in moto perpetuo 3'40

Total Playing Time

79'59

Dene Olding *violin*

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

Hiroyuki Iwaki *conductor*

Szymanowski and Bartók

Commentators on the music of Karol Szymanowski frequently remark on the ease with which his output can be divided into four periods: the first, dominated by the influence of Chopin and Scriabin; a second, where the composer responded to the prevailing aesthetic of Wagner's legacy; the third, where he turned to the so-called Impressionist techniques of Debussy and Ravel; and finally, a return to the folk music of his native Poland.

Paradoxically, it was the isolation imposed by the First World War which allowed Szymanowski to assimilate many of the diverse cultural elements that had been the object of his attention on earlier journeys to the Mediterranean and North Africa. His studies during the war years included Greek drama, Plato, da Vinci, 13th-century Persian verse and Byzantine history, and it is from this time that many of his most important works date.

Well over half of Szymanowski's compositions have some kind of extra-musical reference: his *Metopes* for solo piano take various stories from the *Odyssey* as their starting point; the *Myths* for violin and piano are also based on Greek legend; and the **Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 1** is based on the program of a poem, 'A Night in May' by Tadeusz Micinski. The common thread here is eroticism, from the 'Isle of the Sirens' (*Metopes*) to the conflict between

medieval Christianity and Dionysianism, which forms the crux of Szymanowski's opera *King Roger*. The first violin concerto is similarly imbued with a strong feeling of physical ecstasy, achieved by the cumulative power of the work's single movement, its extraordinarily varied orchestral palette and its assimilation and integration of late-Romantic chromaticism.

The concerto is scored for a very large orchestra, including triple woodwind, two harps, piano and celeste. Though in one continuous movement, it falls into a number of clearly defined sections. The first makes the composer's debt to Debussy immediately clear, characterised as it is by a shimmering texture punctuated by short woodwind motives and lacking any clear tonal focus. The soloist's first entry is a high cantilena passage reminiscent of some of the music Szymanowski wrote in response to Persian texts; chromatic, sinuous and seductive. The section that follows is a lively scherzo-like passage, a tour-de-force both of virtuosity for the soloist and of scintillating scoring. Both of these sections are, however, quite short, leading to a more extended section where the main melodic material of the work is developed. As a general principle, it is melody that carries the main structural burden in Szymanowski's music, his harmony being frequently colouristic rather than traditionally directional. In the concerto, much of the music is generated out of a simple little motive stated

here by the violin – a pattern of five descending notes followed by one ascending, which through intervallic manipulation becomes a progressively more extended melody. Despite the rhapsodic impression that the piece gives, Szymanowski creates considerable tension by offsetting this extension of melody against shorter episodic interruptions and, with a master-stroke of timing, places the cadenza (written by the work's dedicatee and first performer, Pawel Kochanski) just where the gathering momentum of the piece leads us to expect a climax. When the climax does arrive, preceded by a section redolent of the sound world of *Tristan*, it is with a statement of the slow section's six-note motive, scored with an opulence worthy of Richard Strauss. The concerto ends with a whimsical return to the shimmering soundscape of the opening pages as the solo violin part takes flight and vanishes.

The formal model of the arch is central to many aspects of Bartók's work. His overall output, for instance, has a kind of ternary form, beginning with a style that has its roots in the various late Romanticisms of Liszt, Richard Strauss, Mussorgsky and Debussy. As British musicologist Arnold Whittall has observed, the appearance of the opera *Bluebeard's Castle* in 1918 represented Bartók's commitment to a tonal musical language at the very time that Schoenberg was developing the principles of atonality that led ultimately to the formulation of

12-note serialism. The initial failure of the opera was one factor in Bartók's abandonment of composition for two years, during which time he devoted himself to the collection and study of folk music, most particularly that of his native Hungary. While Bartók never renounced tonality as the primary means of musical structure, his study of Hungarian folk music was a profoundly liberating experience. As he later wrote, that ancient music revealed to him 'the possibility of a total emancipation from the hegemony of the major-minor system' and showed him 'the most varied and free rhythms and time changes'.

The model of the arch informs much of the composer's music, from the structure of whole works through to that of single movements, down to extraordinary symmetries of chord progressions and melodic construction. The opening fugato of the celebrated *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste*, for instance, is a simple arch form moving from a single note, A, and back via a climax on E-flat – as remote a key area as possible. The fourth string quartet is constructed like a palindrome with five sections that could be described as ABCBA. Bartók's **Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 2**, like all of his concertos, is in three movements, of which the first and third share much common material. Furthermore, both of those movements adhere to the principles of Classical sonata form, itself a kind of arch or palindrome.

Indeed, one of the wonders of this work is its ability to reconcile a lofty, Beethovenian Classicism with the earthy vigour of Hungarian peasant music. The work opens with a first subject theme, which is Bartók at his most genial and folk-like, scored for the solo violin over a simple pizzicato bass line. The immediate appeal of the melody is unquestionable, and this is perhaps related to the marking 'Tempo di verbunkos' which appeared in some of the earlier manuscripts of the piece. The 'verbunkos' was a dance, common in the 18th-century as part of the recruiting drives of the Imperial Army. Groups of hussars, accompanied by Gypsy musicians, would perform virtuosic dance routines as a means of luring able-bodied young men into the forces. The ceremony died out with the introduction of conscription in 1849. Just as there is more to a soldier's life than dancing, however, there is more to a concerto than genial tunefulness. Having recruited his listeners, Bartók then presents his second subject group; a theme derived from tightly chromatic arabesques followed by a melody which is a 12-note row, though not used serially. In Bartók's middle period, traditional key relationships were replaced by the opposition of tonal centres, often a tritone (the least diatonic interval) apart. It is entirely characteristic, then, that the development section should begin in the key area of F, as B is the central tonality of the piece. Another Beethovenian touch is evident in the development; what appears to be a new theme

of extreme simplicity and lyricism, given first by the soloist and then taken over by the cor anglais, is none other than the unremarkable figure which accompanies the first theme at the very outset. The recapitulation section of the movement displays Bartók's co-existing preoccupation with arch forms and continual variation, as the themes are all restated, but in inversion.

The central slow movement also takes a cue from Beethoven, as it is a set of variations of which there are six: Un poco più andante, Un poco più tranquillo, Più mosso, Lento, Allegro scherzando and Comodo. The theme itself, a superb singing melody, is centred in the key of G, but significantly contains a number of prominent C-sharps – again the tritonal relationship. The third movement in a sense recapitulates the first, but as we might expect, the composer varies the material to great effect by the simplest means, principally by substituting a time signature of 3/4 for the original 4/4 and subtly varying the contours of the melodies.

The concerto was first performed by Zoltán Székely with the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Willem Mengelberg in Amsterdam in 1939. Bartók himself was not present, however, and it was only in 1943, two years before his death, that he heard the work.

Gordon Kerry

Martin, Milhaud, Barber

If you had strolled up the Route de Malagnou, in Geneva, before the First World War, you would have come across a large house set in spacious grounds, half farm, half suburban villa. Here lived M. Le Pasteur Charles Martin, minister of the Geneva Reformed Church, and his large family (the composer Frank Martin was his 10th child). Games, role-plays and readings were entertainments of a cultured *bourgeois* family. Every member of the Martin family took pride in reading English fluently, and the future composer grew up on Shakespeare and Dickens, as well as German literature. Children in such an environment absorbed civic, educational, even pastoral responsibility. Though Frank Martin, after his (third) marriage to a Dutch woman, was to prefer Holland to Geneva as a place to live, he never denied Geneva's formative effect as his home for the first 50 years of his life.

When he was 11 years old, Frank Martin was taken to the first performance in Geneva of Bach's St. Matthew Passion: 'It was the greatest musical experience of my life,' he recalled, 'and from the beginning to the end, in some measure I lost consciousness.' The influence of Bach was to stay with him, and he became a pioneer of 'early music' in Geneva, playing harpsichord in a Baroque ensemble. Studies at the Geneva Conservatorium under Joseph Lauber gave him a solid grounding, and the music which attracted

him most at first was Romantic: Schumann, Chopin, then Wagner, especially *Tristan*. But, by his own account, it was César Franck who first showed him the way out of 'Classical' music, and particularly the *Prelude, Aria and Finale* of that composer, which marked Frank Martin indelibly. A refined chromaticism was one of his legacies from Franck, and explains his later temporary attraction to the 12-tone system of Schoenberg, which he soon rejected, while keeping some of its features (a theme in his best-known work, the *Petite symphonie concertante* for piano, harpsichord, harp and two string orchestras, uses all 12 tones).

Working in Paris in the 1920s gave Frank Martin closer exposure to the French idiom, especially of Ravel, contributing to a fastidiousness and clarity which marks the surface of all his music. Returning to Geneva, he became a teacher at the Eurhythmics Institute of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, and at the Geneva Conservatorium, where he began, as examination test pieces, a series of Ballades for solo instrument and piano or orchestra, rhapsodic in form, an apprenticeship in some ways for the later concertos (Sigurd Rascher gave the first performance of the *Saxophone Ballade* in Sydney, Australia, in 1938). Frank Martin composed two violin sonatas, one in 1913, another in 1931-2, which he premiered with his close friend Jean Goering.

Frank Martin is often described as a late developer, and it is true that his works until the late 1930s, though craftsmanlike and often beautiful, are eclectic and suggest an unresolved search for a personal style. But with *Le Vin Herbé* (1938-41), an opera-oratorio on Joseph Bédier's version of the Tristan legend, Frank Martin found himself. Musicians were deeply impressed, and some measure of popularity was to follow after the 1946 premiere of the *Petite symphonie concertante*, which became one of the most played contemporary works.

Frank Martin's **Violin Concerto** is a characteristic example of his mature style, which blends and harmonises the tendencies of French and German music. Chromatic oscillating themes on a diatonic foundation, but avoiding strong cadences, recall Franck more than Wagner, but the avoidance of anything flashy or grandiloquent, the refinement of sonority, the preference for exploiting a limited range of musical devices, all of which are completely mastered and integrated into a style – these are Frank Martin's hallmarks. With them goes an imagination at once spiritual and poetic, though largely free of specific images and pictorialism.

The Violin Concerto was commissioned by the Pro Helvetia Foundation on the initiative of the composer's friend Paul Sacher, to whom it is dedicated. The first performance was given in Basel on 24 January 1952. Sacher conducted his

chamber orchestra, whose 25th anniversary the work celebrated, and the soloist was Hansheinzen Schneeberger. On 16 May of the same year Joseph Szigeti played the concerto with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande under Ernest Ansermet, in Paris for a Festival of Twentieth Century Music. The first recording was made, also under Ansermet, by Wolfgang Schneiderhan, who re-recorded the concerto for stereo under the composer's baton. Meanwhile Paul Kling recorded it in the Louisville new music series. We believe the recording here is the concerto's first on CD.

Like many of Frank Martin's works, this concerto forms part of a continuing absorption in a poetic idea, spanning several compositions; in this case it was Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. 'Begun immediately after I composed the five Ariel songs,' writes the composer, '... the Concerto continues, especially at the beginning, their atmosphere, mysterious and with a little fairy magic; it even borrows one motive from them. Other elements intervene, with more lyricism, even pathos; but over and over the character of Ariel reappears: distantly mysterious, at the end of the first movement and in the violin's entry in the second, or lively and fantastic, as at the beginning of the finale. There is nothing deliberately studied about this: I simply remained under the spell of the charms of Prospero's island.' Indeed, Frank Martin's next major work was an opera in German on

Schlegel's version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1952-55).

Frank Martin tells us that he was not thinking of any particular violinist, but of violinists in general. 'I gave myself the task of giving the violin its true role as a soloist, which is to be an individual; whether by its singing expression or the brilliance of its technique, opposing the many of the orchestra, or joining and dominating it.' His main concern, however, was to give the listener the sense, in the midst of episodes of varying character, of continuity of thought; a coherent whole.

Milhaud's centenary was a good pretext for revisiting some of the less colourfully titled compositions of this amazingly prolific man (his opus numbers run to over 400). Milhaud's most famous works remain those composed around the early 1920s when he was a member of Les Six, and was an *enfant terrible* of music. Many professional soloists will speak with gratitude of a work he gave their instrument; the difficulty is in persuading concert promoters to program it. Milhaud's **Violin Concerto No. 2**, for example: idiomatically written for the instrument, and tapping a vein of expression (and of feeling) which will surprise those who know of Milhaud only *Le boeuf sur le toit* or *La Création du monde*. It is effective for the soloist too, and would sit well with the contents of a standard orchestral concert.

Canadian violinist Arthur Le Blanc, who commissioned the concerto, presumably wanted such a work. Milhaud completed it in 1946. His autobiography's list of first performances doesn't say whether Le Blanc played in the premiere, which took place in 1948 at the Paris Conservatoire, where Milhaud was professor of composition from 1947. This was his third violin concerto, if we include the *Concertino de printemps* (1934) as well as the First Violin Concerto (1927). Milhaud had entered the Paris Conservatoire mainly as a violin student, though composing soon claimed more attention. He regarded his Sonata for Violin and Piano of 1911 as his first work worthy of being preserved, and became close friends with Yvonne Giraud: 'a charming and very gifted violinist', as he described her. Another friend of Milhaud's was the celebrated violinist Zino Francescatti, a fellow Provençal.

Whether because he could hardly escape Stravinsky's influence, or more likely because the two composers were starting from similar premises, many things in Milhaud's Second Violin Concerto recall Stravinsky's Concerto of 1931. There is the same salute to the violin's inherent lyricism, its affinity to the human voice – Stravinsky calls two movements of his concerto 'Aria'; Milhaud begins his with a recitative marked 'dramatic'. Motoric rhythms in the fast movements of both composers owe much to a Baroque model; Vivaldi mediated through Bach. Clear alternation between solo

and tutti passages gets the violin out of the way of its orchestral counterparts, making it stand out against winds and brass.

The themes of the 'animé' (lively) sections of the first movement are typical Milhaud: when unselfconsciously folk-like, they recall the unsophisticated love of fun and games which shines through the composer's delightful autobiography *Notes Without Music* (amidst the clear-cut folk-inspired themes of the last movement is at least one suggesting a tribute to his American wartime hosts). The first movement as a whole, however, has a more serious mien, set by the opening, returning after the cadenza to impart an almost elegiac feeling. Christopher Palmer rightly remarks that Milhaud's temper is often closer to central European expressionism than to 'the fastidiousness and formal intellectualism of Latin artists'. There is an expressive density about this concerto, an emotionality which will surprise only those who have not detected the same in *La Création du monde*, or even more in *L'Homme et son désir*.

The slow movement, meditative, achieving at times the intensity of a threnody, is also quite without sentimentality, perhaps because Milhaud's instinctive leaning towards bitonality avoids harmonic obviousness. The dark colourings, the muffled beat of the drum, paint a nocturnal setting.

If music is measured by the tunes it contains, no wonder Samuel Barber's **Concerto for Violin and Orchestra** has been enjoyed more than most American compositions: it contains at least two memorable melodies, both heard one after the other, near the beginning of the first movement. Barber puts himself in the Mendelssohn succession by having the soloist present the long, lyrical first theme immediately – for 27 bars the theme unfurls, eventually returning to its opening note, and giving way to a solo clarinet which begins the second idea – a perky theme containing the rhythm known as the 'Scotch snap'. It is as memorable an opening as in any violin concerto since Prokofiev's First, and it seems ideally suited to the character of the solo instrument, as the first audience must have sensed at a Philadelphia Orchestra concert on 7 February 1941, when Albert Spalding played it on his 1755 Guarnerius (Eugene Ormandy was the conductor). A critic praised the concerto for straightforwardness and sincerity.

A little later, at the New York premiere, Virgil Thomson gave this judgment a slightly different twist, which illustrates the problems Barber always faced with sophisticates. 'Although the concerto cannot fail to charm', he wrote, 'by its graceful lyrical plenitude and its complete absence of tawdry swank ... the only reason Barber gets away with elementary musical methods is that his heart is pure.' Modernists and neo-Classicalists alike had trouble with

Barber's unselfconscious musical language, unconcerned with the externals of style.

The immediate and immense popularity of the orchestral version of Barber's Adagio (1938) made him a bankable music commodity. In early 1939 he received his first major commission, from Samuel Fels, manufacturer of Fels Napha soap and board member of the Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia. Fels had adopted an Odessa-born child prodigy violinist, for whom he wanted Barber to compose a concerto. Nathan Broder, in his biography of Barber, withholds the young virtuoso's name, presumably because of the difficulties over the commission.

The terms were half the fee in advance, the balance on completion. Barber began composing during the summer of 1939 at Sils-Maria, Switzerland. By the end of the summer, he had sent the first two movements to the violinist, who was reported to have found them 'too simple and not brilliant enough for a concerto'. Barber planned a finale with 'ample opportunity to display the artist's technical powers'. The outbreak of war delayed completion, and the finale, when submitted, raised a problem of a different kind. The young violinist did not like the third movement (according to his much later recollection he found it 'too lightweight'). The story given out was that he found it unplayable. Barber's most recent biographer, Barbara B. Heyman, who interviewed Iso Briselli (for that

was the name of the 'prodigy') in 1984, doubts that he could not play it, as he had already made a New York debut playing Paganini's Second Concerto. But the commission fee was in jeopardy, and a demonstration was arranged to convince Fels. Herbert Baumel, a student at Curtis, was given two hours to learn the completed part of the last movement, which he was told to play very fast as Fels, Barber and a few others listened. Baumel triumphantly proved how playable the music was; it was agreed that Barber be paid the full fee, and Briselli relinquished the right to the performance. (It was Baumel who 'saved' the concerto, not Oscar Shumsky, as has been widely repeated from Broder's book. Shumsky later sight-read the completed piece from manuscript.)

The last movement is indeed highly contrasted with the other two, but this is surely due to artistic necessity rather than the effect of war's outbreak, or a sudden change of direction to supply more virtuoso display. Barber must have sensed that after two movements tilting so strongly towards lyricism, something more 'concerto-like' was needed. His own note for the premiere suggests this. After describing the first movement as having 'more the character of a sonata than concerto form', he concludes: 'The last movement, a perpetual motion, exploits the more brilliant and virtuoso characteristics of the violin.'

David Garrett

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