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FINDING SOUND USING ALBAN BERG'S
VIOLIN CONCERTO

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Introduction

I first encountered Alban Berg's Violin Concerto when I was 17. I was in my local CD store searching for recordings of violin music, specifically for music written after 1900. I had a few criteria: I wanted music I hadn't heard of by familiar composers or music by composers I hadn't heard of at all. This CD¹ had both, as it also contained Arnold Schoenberg's Violin Concerto. I knew of Schoenberg but I didn't know his Violin Concerto and I didn't know Berg *or* his Violin Concerto, so this recording fit my search goals perfectly. I purchased it, took it home to take a listen, and set it aside for a while as I wasn't immediately convinced of its merits.

At the time that I first encountered the Berg, I had only recently started to socialize in a group of composition students who were very dedicated to converting me to contemporary music. I had been part of a very conservative group of friends, to whom even Stravinsky and Shostakovich were considered to be too modern sounding, though in relation to my orchestral peers, I was much more flexible in my approach to contemporary music. I had grown up hearing my father play Anton Webern's Klavierstücke and Pierre Boulez's Piano Sonata, among other modern works, and these were not presented as being out of the ordinary, which for many in my peer group is what they sounded like. Thus it was an anomaly to me to be surrounded by people in my age group who were excited about *anything* that sounded out of the ordinary.

When I speak about contemporary music, I am mainly referencing music written after the 1900s that is outside of the standard repertoire. As an orchestral musician, I had played or been to concerts of works by most of the standard composers. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, "contemporary music" is used as a blanket phrase for non-standard repertoire, repertoire that isn't heard or played frequently and that a lot of audiences would choose not to

¹ Berg, Alban. *Berg: Violin Concerto; Schoenberg: Piano Concerto; Violin Concerto*. Perf. Henryk Szeryng, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Cond. Rafael Kubelik. Universal Classics, 2004. CD.

attend performances of (excluding the new music enthusiasts, naturally), as well as pieces that pedagogues and music students are ambivalent or uninterested in playing.

‘Contemporary music’ in this paper therefore covers not only pieces that have been recently composed, but also works that are seldom performed due to their technical difficulties, to their perceived audience reception, or due to the performers’ perceptions and prejudices.

Discovering and Performing Contemporary Music

My interest in learning and performing contemporary music had been sparked the previous year by this new group of friends I had made at the Tanglewood Young Artists’ Institute. I was there for the orchestra camp; they were there for composition. It was the first time I was involved in working with peers who were interested both in playing and listening to modern music. Previously, I had participated in premiers of orchestral works: compositions by local composers that were generally memorable only in relation to their lack of inspiration and innovation. Both of the youth orchestras I played in at the time had commissioned works from a local female composer and my memories of these pieces center around how incredibly derivative her works were of Aaron Copland’s and that her imagination extended only so far as to include a 5/8 or 7/8 bar every once in a while in order to create a “folksy” feel. My summer camp prior to Tanglewood was the NYS School of Orchestral Studies with the Philadelphia Orchestra, but the PO didn’t play much contemporary music in their summer residency, so the most adventurous music (i.e. not terribly so) was played by the camp wind band. At Tanglewood, there was not only the Festival of Contemporary Music with the Tanglewood Music Fellows, but there were also solo and chamber concerts featuring contemporary music.

This was complemented by the composition camp, where they enlisted members of the orchestral program to play in their composition recitals. Each composer had clearly come from a different background of composition, and I was so impressed by many of the styles

that I became curious. I wanted to know where they were drawing their inspiration from as it obviously did not lead directly from the music I was familiar with. I was missing a whole level of music that I had never heard of and didn't know existed.

After Tanglewood, I became quite interested in learning pieces that were outside of the standardly taught repertoire. Since I was already interested in playing different repertoire than my peers (I have always disliked it when, during orchestra breaks, half of the violinists start showing off their Tchaikovsky, Sarasate, Wieniawski, or Paganini), this fit well with my personality. One of the composers I had met at Tanglewood was a classical guitarist and we started planning a program of works for violin and guitar. The theme of the program was little known pieces by well-known composers and beautiful pieces by unknown composers. This concert started a small tradition of playing with my friends in the same vein: contemporary works for violin and x-instrument along with a smattering of unfamiliar works by familiar composers. For each concert we would trawl the music libraries in Manhattan, Oberlin, and Boston for new pieces to consider and then we would have a reading session in order to choose among the works discovered. This led to a competitive but fun environment where we strove to be the person to find the most music to make it on to the program.

These concerts bled into my regular music lessons as well. I wasn't so interested in playing the Romantic repertoire anymore; I wanted to learn sonatas and concertos composed after the 1900s as well. It was because of this that I purchased the Berg and Schoenberg concertos. On listening to the recording, I realized that I was not at a technical level to perform either, but I ordered the music for the Berg anyway, in order to have it available when I *could* take the time to learn it, an opportunity that arrived my third year of college at New York University.

Choosing Berg

When I started to study the Berg, I had two plans for it: the first was to perform it at the string concerto competition and the second was to play it for my junior recital. I particularly wanted my recital at school to include works that are not frequently played and I was also adamant about studying music that no one else would be practicing around me. Again, I did not wish to be one of twenty-five violinists working on the Tchaikovsky or Sibelius concertos. Convincing my teacher was simple: he was thrilled that I wanted to play something different.

Although my first listen to the Berg had not evoked any particular emotion, other than finding it far easier to listen to than Schoenberg's concerto, on returning to it, I was greatly intrigued by the piece. I had an immediate attraction to several places: for example the first statement of the Carinthian folksong in the 1st movement (fig. 1)² and the first statement in the solo violin of the *Hauptrhythmus* [RH] in the 2nd movement (fig. 2). I was also fascinated by how much the solo violin appeared to be more a part of the orchestra than a completely separate and virtuosic soloist. Of course, the part is separate from the orchestra, but it is also integral to the orchestra in the same way that many of the orchestral parts are also soloists.

This separation and connectivity really resonated with me. I had already decided that I wanted to focus on being an orchestral and chamber musician rather than a soloist (this stemming from the realistic viewpoint that since I wasn't already a soloist at 19, I wasn't headed for a solo career), and the solo as part of the orchestra appealed to me more than concertos where the violin is obviously at the forefront with the orchestra taking a secondary role as long as the violin is playing. In the Berg, there seemed to be much more of a partnership between the soloist and the orchestra, more of a conversation between equals than a solo-accompaniment relationship.

² Please see Appendix for all figures.

Studying the Berg provided a new challenge for me. Although my contemporary concert series had prepared me for the atonality of the work, I had not yet performed anything of such length and breadth. I had become accustomed to the sound of contemporary works and in that sense the Berg sounded relatively “tame” in comparison to some of the works of Ligeti or Carter I had heard, but that didn’t necessarily prepare me for how to structure learning and memorizing the piece. I had to prepare in a very methodic fashion, in a more focused way than I was used to learning things.

First Learning Experience: Notes and Memorization

I started off merely by playing the violin part on the piano. I wanted to have a clear idea of what each interval was going to sound like and the best way of doing that was to practice with the piano. I spent quite some time with this, learning exactly what to listen for and where to place the intervals. Luckily, there is nothing especially rhythmically difficult in the solo part, it is only in combination with the orchestral reduction that things become unclear, so I did not have to work especially hard with the rhythmic structure of the piece.

I continued in the same vein, transferring my focus from the piano to the violin. Now that I knew the contour and sound of the piece, I had to find how to play it on the violin. Of course, this is more difficult than working with the piano where all the notes are defined. Intonation is also defined on the piano, whereas on the violin it can become much fudgier. At the same time, my technique was not as advanced as it has since become and some things were technically beyond my abilities. I was not really able to wrap my fingers around the 8^{va} sections of the 2nd movement (figs. 3 and 4), nor was I comfortable playing the chords in the cadenza, and my teacher and I were not able to figure out how to play the harmonics in mvt. I, mm. 192-196 (fig. 5), so I learnt them an octave above written. It wasn’t until the next year, when learning a composition written for me by one of my friends from Tanglewood that I learnt where the harmonics actually existed.

One of the difficulties I faced actually stemmed directly from my orchestral training. As an orchestral musician, we are trained to take the page at 100% face value. Everything that is written on the page should be followed as exactly as possible. One of my coaches from the Philadelphia Orchestra, William de Pasquale said “*Pianissimo* means that you should always strive to be softer than your stand partner: if you can’t hear your stand partner, you are too loud, and if you can hear your stand partner, they are too loud.” By the time I was studying at NYU, I had started to really internalize this and other admonishments from teachers and conductors to always play the dynamic and phrasal directions exactly. This is also true for solo playing, but not to the same extremes as in orchestral playing. My orchestral training told me to take everything very literally, but solo playing does not allow for this sort of liberty. Solo playing requires an extra level of bravura that my playing lacked.

Memorization also posed an interesting conundrum. I found the most difficult things to memorize to be chordal passages and the fast passages in thirds (mvt. I, mm. 170-172 in particular, see fig. 6). Of all the technical challenges, these passages in thirds particularly stumped me. It didn’t seem to matter if I practiced them slowly – the alternating major, minor, and augmented intervals somehow didn’t wish to stick in my brain in the order that Berg composed them. It was easier with descending thirds than with ascending thirds, but I still had trouble with the order; I had similar difficulties with the ending of both movements where I would accidentally reorganize the order of the intervals. Another place I had difficulty memorizing and performing was between mm. 184-190 in the second movement (fig. 7). Here also, I had a hard time retaining the notes and rhythms (so far I have not once performed this section correctly despite being able to play it perfectly well in practice).

I think one has to memorize the notes so well as to be able to write them out with the correct enharmonic pitches. I know for myself, so much of how I memorize music is based on the sound of the intervals and the melodic line that frequently I don’t actually know what

the pitches are. This leads to memory slips, because I don't have a visual image of the music, I just have an image of the aural contour. I realize this can be as much of an asset as it is a problem. Because of memorizing based on the aural contour, I learn very quickly by repetition and am also able to read music rapidly since I can imagine what it will sound like. However, unless I am also able to visualize the music as I play it, I don't have it fully memorized. I know the music in my muscle and aural memory, but it is not as comfortable as if I can also accurately write down what I am playing. This is something that I regret not taking the time to do with the Berg – I think it would have significantly improved my performances as well as improving my confidence in my knowledge of the piece.

After memorization, I struggled most with sound production. As mentioned, finding the proper solo sound was quite challenging for me; in particular, finding a *pianissimo* that was loud enough to be heard, while also being able to produce a contrasting *fortissimo* without becoming harsh and scratchy. This also fit in with my attempts to find a sound in the high register that my teacher would accept as “beautiful”. Although we worked a lot with this in lessons, it is much harder to reproduce in the practice room without the reference point of another person.

One of the things that really stood out for me is the conversation that takes place between the violin and the orchestra. From the very start of the 1st movement, where the clarinet and solo violin alternate symmetrical rising and falling patterns of eighth notes, to the passing around of the chorale melody (CH) in the final movement, there is a continuous ebb and flow between the violin and the orchestra. The beginning bars are perhaps most striking in that for every phrase that rises, another phrase descends. This rising and falling of notes has always reminded me of breathing, with each phrase increasing in the dynamic level to become a deeper breath – first in the orchestra and then in the solo violin. This feeling of breathing continues as the first full statement of the row is made in the violin. Here the

statement is made very simply; for me this is a very neutral place in the piece: merely a plain series of rising notes followed by the same plain descending answer. The orchestra just nods its head in agreement (mm. 11-27, fig. 8).

Putting Together a Performance

My first performance experience was at the NYU String Competition. I only had ten minutes in which to prove my abilities, which meant that the jury would be stopping me and asking for different places. The jury consisted of the orchestra director (a bassist), the chief conductor (a violinist), the head of the string department (a violist), one of the violin professors, and one of the cello professors. Since we were all quite sure that the winner would be a graduate student, this freed up a lot of the competitive pressure that might otherwise have been felt.

I was playing with the pianist for my recital – a composition student, Conrad, who was also a pianist and one of my music library co-workers. When I had been looking for a pianist, I had asked my chamber music pianist from the previous year, Noah, but he was too busy preparing his final recital and didn't want to be bothered learning an additional recital. So I had turned to the composition students in order to find someone who not only had experience playing the piano, but who would also be excited about performing contemporary music. While this meant that I sacrificed some of the technique and nuance of a more proficient pianist it also meant that I gained someone with enthusiasm. We had rehearsed incessantly and played for my teacher on multiple occasions.

Sometimes these rehearsals were incredibly frustrating. In one, my pianist was just playing the opening bars as if they were an arpeggio exercise. I asked for some phrasing – not by changing the dynamics, but by holding the top note the slightest bit longer before relaxing into the descent. He gave me a crescendo and held the top note too long. “No, no, I meant just a little.” I tried to demonstrate it myself, but he couldn't hear the difference. My chamber

pianist happened to walk by; “Noah, could you please play the first bars here for Conrad?” Noah played exactly the way I wanted them. But then, how to explain it to Conrad? There was no crescendo to lean into the top note, Noah didn’t change the rhythmic value of the top note, yet somehow there was direction into the top note that made it more like taking a quick breath in and then deeply releasing it. Conrad couldn’t understand this at the time and I didn’t really either, or at least not enough to be able to explain it.

There were other places that led to more amusing frustrations. One rehearsal of the second movement led to both of us rolling on the floor with laughter after we realized how terrifically amusing it was that even after twenty-five attempts at bars 125-126 (fig. 9), I still couldn’t count three beats rest, even though, if I played alone, I had the right numbers of rests, if I sang my part I had the right number of rests, and I fully understood that my part was in unison with the orchestra!

In performance, things were slightly tenser. Conrad was particularly nervous and forgot half of the things we had discussed in rehearsal. In a way, this was helpful for my performance. If other people around me are very nervous, I find it much easier to take a more natural and relaxed stance in order to try and calm them. I have found this to be true in many of my performance circumstances. I feel as though I have to be stronger than those more nervous than me, to set an example with my cool, and to lead with my collectiveness. Thus, in the moments before performing the Berg for the competition jury, I was much less agitated than Conrad. I cannot say much about the performance itself, as I generally remember little of my performances unless I make a mistake. I don’t remember which parts they asked me to play, though I recall being stopped at some point in the first movement to proceed to the second movement and I don’t believe I played the entirety of that either. Afterwards, Conrad and I went for a drink and then we returned to our ordinary school lives, so I was much surprised when during a chamber rehearsal two days later, I received a text from one of my

friends saying only “Congratulations!” We were so surprised that we stopped the rehearsal immediately to check a computer for clarification. I had not won the competition – that honor went to a graduate student – but I was the alternate winner. This certainly lifted my spirits as I continued my preparation for my recital.

On the day of my recital, my feelings were slightly different. Again my performance is somewhat of a blur in my memory and there are only two things that I distinctly recall. The first was that Conrad beat me to the downbeat in mvt I, m. 163 (fig. 10): a place I had asked him so many times to wait at so that I would have time to jump from the first finger G \sharp on the G-string to the high C \natural on the E-string. I was so furious that he didn’t wait for me to lead this moment that from that point on I started to shake. I had managed to control my shaking for most of the piece previously, but after that I felt a lot less in control of my bow-hand. The second part I clearly remember is having a memory slip during the chorale variations. I couldn’t recall at all what the next note was and had to surreptitiously (I hoped) peer over Conrad’s shoulders to find my place and continue with the piece. I am sure many wonderful things happened as well, but they did not register in my brain afterwards. I was very happy to put the piece aside and start playing new repertoire, though.

Returning to Berg

I picked up the Berg again at SNOA almost three years later. I chose to play it for the Solo Mock Audition, because I wanted to have the experience of working on and performing an entire concerto again. I wasn’t interested in the competitive aspect so much as in being able to prepare and perform a piece that I already had experience with. I felt like the Berg was different enough from the normal concerto repertoire that the jury would be interested in hearing it, but also chose it because it is something that I really enjoy playing. I was also curious as to what the jury would have to say about this piece. I didn’t have any illusions of winning; I just wanted to have an enjoyable performance experience.

Writing about Music

I was also interested in using the Berg as the subject of this paper. My original intention was to keep a recorded diary of my practicing and method of working. This proved too difficult to manage (not owning a recording device made it complicated) and I discarded this idea. Instead, I decided to write about my memories of working with the piece. Since I chose in advance to use this piece for my paper, I was able to focus extra during rehearsals and practice sessions in order to remember what things led to difficulties and what things worked. However, I was still faced with the difficulty of describing my performance work in a written form. While I am all in support of writing about writing or writing in scientific settings, I have always struggled with the concept of writing about art forms. In a conversation with one of my colleagues, I was trying to express my frustration at not having the descriptive capabilities on paper that I have on my instrument. He was able to translate my meaning with the following metaphor, “writing about music is like painting about words.” This really resonated with my feeling that the vibrancy of performance is lost when written about. Of course it is possible for me to write about the experience of performance, but it is the performance that should be experienced not the writing. Writing cannot reach the same level as the performance can. In writing about my own performance, I also become much more critical about my playing in a negative way than I do when I am performing. It is much harder to find a way of describing the things that work than describing the things that don’t work and the focus therefore narrows in to what doesn’t work.

In reading about the violin concerto, I found there to be two main styles of writing about it. The first style involved making a dry analysis of every hexachord, interval, inversion, etc., in order to describe the 12-tone aspects of the work. The second style was to analyze it based on Berg’s fascination with numerology and with the importance of numbers referring to different people in his life. Neither of these methods really resonated with me as

methods of viewing the piece. Although imagery can be an important aspect in the presentation of a work, I find it less useful to imagine the Carinthian folksong as relating to Berg's fickle youth than to look at it as an aspect of the melodic part of the scherzo movement. For me it doesn't add meaning to my performance, just as knowing exactly how Berg extracted its notes from his tone row doesn't impart further understanding to my performance.

This reflects a fundamental issue with writing about music. One can choose to focus on the theoretical aspect, thereby producing papers that are only intelligible to those also versed in the study of music theory (unfortunately, my theory education was insufficient for me to fit into this category) or one can write papers focusing on the historical situation in which the composer wrote his work. Since this involves a lot of hypotheses about what the composer meant in composing one thing over another, it results in a paper that is more about speculation than about the music itself. In this sense, if the reader knows how to decipher the analytical paper, the reader will be able to reconstruct the piece of music better than the reader will through the historical paper.

In my performance of the piece, however, neither approach is relevant for me. I am more interested in the *sound* of the music, in the progression from one musical idea to the next, and in the conversation between the solo part and the orchestral parts. These things are difficult to write about as any written description of sound is going to fall far short of the actual production of sound, any statement about the musical progression lacks the aural reference, and a conversation cannot be complete without the audible aspect. This is not an insurmountable difficulty; it is merely to make a note that analysis of a musical work in a written form cannot ever reach the level of the music itself and will always fall short of the meaning imparted by a live or recorded performance. This is an important clarification to

make since my focus is on the sound of the concerto rather than theoretical or historical factors.

Describing Sound

When it comes to describing sounds in music, we are faced with the problem that there is no universal language with which to explain sound. Theoretically, it is possible to reduce music to numbers that correlate to the pitch and in this way it is possible to reconstruct the *written* notes, but this doesn't explain the *sound* of the notes. There is a comparison to be made if we look at linguistics, another area of study where the focus is on sound. Here, however, there is a distinct way of explaining the sound, namely the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The IPA allows for sounds to be explained in such a way that they are clear and easily replicable in any language. If I wish to write a paper about consonants in Moroccan Arabic, I can do so using the IPA and anyone who is knowledgeable in the IPA can reconstruct exactly how the sounds are produced from my description of them. With music, there is no equivalent to the IPA that can be universally recognized by musicians. Theoretical analyses attempt to come close to this, but live music is not dry in the way that a theoretical analysis is. Live music involves emotions and phrasing that cannot be boiled down to numbers. While it might be argued that the IPA cannot imply these features inherent in spoken language either, it is possible to remedy this through the addition of diacritics (to mark differences in dialects) and phrasing markers (to mark intonation and contour). With this in mind, I will attempt to write about what the sound of the Berg Violin Concerto means to me in my studies and when I perform it, despite being fully aware of how limited my descriptive resources are.

When talking about the sound of the Berg there are certain things that could be naturally linked to the programmatic nature of the work. For example, the 12-tone row with its ascending thirds and whole notes can quite easily be interpreted as the rising of Manon

Gropius' soul into heaven, especially in its final statement in the second movement. The challenge for this paper then is not to focus on these clichés, but to find a way to describe the music without referencing the historical program, to talk about the music for the music's sake. I am interested in discussing what the music means to *me*, not what the music meant in the past. Possibly these things cannot be separated.

A Personal Description

In an attempt to put into words what the different sections of the Berg mean to me when I perform them, I have made the following table in which I try to use different metaphors to explain the sorts of emotions or ideas I am considering in my mind when I play this piece.

Mvt. I, mm. 1-10: Introduction	Alternating gentle breaths between the orchestra and the violin solo. Each measure is a complete inhalation and exhalation that grows in strength before relaxing into m. 11. There is the feeling that this has been happening forever and could continue until the end of time.
Mvt. I, mm. 11-29	The syncopations in the orchestra are like nods of the head, the violin makes a first rising statement with the 12-note row, the orchestra nods again in agreement and in one more long exhalation the violin descends in mirror image.
Mvt. I, mm. 30-83	A simple melody that is built up with each repetition, like using more and new words to elaborate on a concept, until it becomes <i>too</i> complex and has to break down in a return to the original simple expression. However, even that is now embellished (mm. 79-83) and feels more pained than the first statement.
Mvt. I, mm. 84-103	A return to the calming breaths of the introduction

Mvt. I, mm. 104-136: Scherzo-Wienerisch	A light dance that alternates between a cheerful and bucolic side (mm. 106-117) and a more pensive, inward-focused side (mm. 118-125). The optimistic cheer prevails in the end.
Mvt. I, mm. 137-154	This cheer is reinforced by a determined and grounded statement that is similar to saying “Here I am. I will stand my ground whatever happens.” This thought subsides once more...
Mvt. I, mm. 155-160	...into a calm orchestral interlude before...
Mvt. I, mm. 161-175	...the calm is broken with another light and sweet burst of energy like the sudden reflection of sun-light through a prism casting rainbows across a room. This lasts until the return of the scherzo melody, which ends the phrase with an ecstatic sigh.
Mvt. I, mm. 176-228	The wienerisch is revisited, but with both more vigor and delicacy. Like a child’s music box being opened, the Carinthian folk-melody appears...
Mvt. I, mm. 229-end	...only to speed up into a forceful rush of excitement, like a dance in which the tempo increases until the dancers collapse from exhaustion, before ending the movement on slightly ominous chords reminiscent of Fate knocking on the door.
Mvt. II, mm. 1-23	The light and thoughtfulness of the first movement is left behind with the first bars of the second movement, which explode in a fierce gypsy cadenza full of passionate abandon.
Mvt. II, mm. 24-60	The sudden temper exhibited in the opening is held captive, although sparks are occasionally let loose as the violin weaves its way around the <i>Hauptrhythmus</i> (RH). At first the rhythmic repetition keeps everything contained, but the temper is close to

	<p>the surface, like boiling water escaping from under the pot lid in hissing spurts. Although the heat is turned down at m. 43, the water still simmers and some of the steam continues to escape.</p>
Mvt. II, mm. 61-95	<p>The steam releases into another improvisatory gypsy cadenza, which starts calmly, proceeds through a brilliant toss of the hair (mm. 73-76), before settling into the chordal section (mm. 80-89). This chorale seems to start with hope, but quickly descends into a feeling of abandonment, until it is disrupted by the arpeggio passage at m. 90, as if to say “Ha, tricked you, all the sadness was just a joke!”</p>
Mvt. II, mm. 96-124	<p>But the sadness and anger return with the orchestra and the RH. This time, the temper is wilder and the RH is unable to keep it under control. Like an argument, it escalates, the insults fly, until m. 120 when <i>all</i> the forces are unleashed. Every stone that can be thrown is hurled into the lake in a reckless fury.</p>
Mvt. II, mm. 125-135	<p>If the five bars leading up to m. 125 are a culmination of all the anger and pain, of all the stones thrown, then mm. 125-135 are the breaking point, the point of collapse into tears, the release, the ripples from the stones moving out from the epicenter, widening, dissipating, and finally disappearing, until nothing is left of the outburst but an emptiness, the lake itself...here the Bach chorale quotation enters, and it could not be more true that “Es ist genug!” “It is enough!”</p>
Mvt. II, mm. 136-195	<p>But a lake is never perfectly still, so the chorale and its variations are forever in motion, like a fish swimming through the reeds,</p>

	floating momentarily, continuing, rushing to get away from a potential threat, but always moving.
Mvt. II, mm. 196-end	From m. 196, the violin reflects on the past first by restating the Carinthian folk melody, and then, in the coda (m. 214-end), by retuning to weaving around the chorale until the corner is reached and on the other side is the original 12-note row. But this is not a jubilant discovery; rather it is the saddest, and yet it is accepting of everything that has occurred previously. The last phrase in the violin solo raises its gaze to the end of the universe and remains suspended there, while the orchestra completes the final exhalation.

Second Learning Experience: Sound and Nerves

For my SNOA edition of the concerto, I had considerably less preparation time. Of course, I had already laid the groundwork for the piece at NYU, so I did not need to start completely from scratch; however, I wanted to study each bar more fully than I had previously. This meant that my practicing was much more intense, more focused. Since I was only going to have 20 minutes to rehearse with the pianist before the audition, I also had to be even clearer about what happens around the violin part. I was surprised at how quickly my fingers remembered everything, especially as I hadn't written very much in my music to remind me of fingerings, bowings, etc. (As I have grown older and hopefully wiser, I have started to understand the benefits of putting markings into music, even though I still despise how it clutters up the page).

This time around, sound featured prominently in my practicing and in my lessons. At NYU, I was concentrated more on the notes and the rhythms, now I focused on the quality of the sound I was producing. This has been the theme in my lessons this year – finding a sound

that is present but beautiful. We were working particularly on my *forte* sound on the E-string, where I have a tendency to become quite harsh and strident. Finding a bow stroke that involves a relaxed but weighty elbow is one of the things we have been working on, as well as a slower vibrato in order to sound less frenetic.

This agitated sound has also been an area I have been working on, not only in my playing, but also in my personality. When I play for other people, I experience such a level of nervousness that my sound quality also changes to reflect this anxiety. Even if I am playing for someone I know really well, my sound is still affected by this anxiety, to the extent that my listeners can audibly distinguish it and comment on it. “But to me, you sound scared,” one of my colleagues said after I had played the whole Berg for him from memory. It wasn’t my intention to sound scared and I was quite surprised at being so nervous playing for him, but still I could tell from the first notes that I was a lot more nervous than I had expected or planned to be.

When it came to the performance day, I was quite nervous. My pianist was coming especially for the mock audition, so I didn’t have the opportunity to meet with him before going on stage. Already the run through was nervous on my part. There were a few places where I realized that I wasn’t as sure of the accompaniment as I had thought I was. The performance was a major improvement, though it was not the highlight of my performances of the piece. There were several places that I struggled over a bit, firstly with memory slips and then with misplaced bowings or fingerings that confused me. Every time I was able to continue as if nothing had happened, picking it up easily from the next bar, but I was never completely comfortable throughout the performance. This was obviously apparent to the jury, who’s two sentence comment ran: “Impressive work on Alban Berg’s Violin Concerto, one of the hardest in the violin repertoire. Technical difficulties sometimes got in the way of

artistic expression.” This last comment may have stemmed from either the skittering of my bow due to nervous shaking or to the thin sound that also resulted from my nerves.

It is hard for me to identify this nervous sound in my playing, I think partly due to it being so much a part of my personality that I don't notice it. I notice it more when I am performing for people, because then I have a clear physical sensation of nervousness, namely experiencing shaky hands and 'butterflies' in my stomach. But these are also things I experience in daily life, only I think when I am performing I am more likely to identify them as nervous characteristics than I do when I experience them on a quotidian basis. If I am identifying the physical experience as "being nervous" then it becomes more difficult to control or ignore. When I am in the practice room, I don't identify as being nervous, though I may be shaking just as much as I do on stage. Although I am less aware of my anxiety when I am practicing, it is quite possible that my sound would still come across as nervous were someone to hear me play.

The focus on producing a better sound in the high register comes from the acoustic fact that higher pitches already vibrate faster, so a nervous or fast vibrato becomes even more noticeable at a higher pitch. Trying to control this by using more bow pressure just results in a harsher sound, a sound with a hard, brittle edge to it. Theoretically, I understand this; however, it is much harder to adjust these things while playing, especially if the concentration is disturbed by the identification of nervous energy. Since the E-string is already designed to have a piercing quality, it is quite difficult to moderate the sound so that it is not too strong while at the same time maintaining a brilliant tone of the sort necessary to convey the mood of the opening to the second movement.

At the same time, we worked on finding a sound that would convey warmth. The Berg is definitely not a cold concerto; it is full of lyricism and feelings. To this effect, we worked on slow vibrato and very legato bowings. This sort of sound is very important for the

opening: it needs to be soft and simple, but it also needs to be warm. It is an introduction to something very heartfelt, much like a meeting of old friends after a long time apart, and so it requires warmth and simplicity.

My newest challenge was to play the harmonics in the correct octave and getting them to speak appropriately. The adjusted octave meant that, rather than being all artificial harmonics in fourths, most were now in thirds and fifths. The thirds especially are much harder to produce due to the shortened length of the string. My violin has always particularly disliked harmonics (I think it objects to them on principle) and it is, therefore, quite difficult to get the notes to sound clearly. Even after extended practicing, I would be lucky to get half of the notes in mm. 192-195 to speak. This rate of production decreased exponentially in conjunction with performance nerves.

While it is relatively easy to comment on the difficult areas, it is much harder to write about things that worked, both technically and in relation to sound production. One of the reasons for this is that often when I achieve the ‘right’ sound, I don’t really know what it is that I have done differently. Is it that I used more or less bow pressure, more speed, less speed, or a different vibrato? Generally in my lessons, my teacher would ask for a particular type of sound, for example, in mvt I, m. 173 (fig. 11) she wanted me to play the B \natural like a sigh of relaxation – “haaaa”; it is possible for me to produce this, since I did it in my lesson, but it is much more difficult to explain *how* I did it and also to find that sound again in the practice room. If I try to explain it, I understand that it partly has to do with the amount of time between the last triplet 16th of the previous bar and the placement of the B \natural downbeat. Additionally, I use a fingering in this place that involves a slight portamento from the G \sharp to the B \natural . If the shift is made too rapidly, then the B \natural will sound forced, on the other hand if there is too much of a portamento, the shift will sound contrived as well as interrupt the flow of the phrase. Finding the place in between is the goal, but it can be quite hard to achieve.

Ignoring the Historical Programme

It was only after all this work practicing and performing the Berg that I started to read about the piece. I had chosen not to do the research before performing the work partly because I like to approach pieces without too many prior conceptions about them. Similarly, I also am not prone to listening to many recordings of a work while I am studying it. Usually it only takes one or two listens to a piece for me to decide whether or not it is something I want to learn. After that, I rarely do a lot of listening to a piece once I have started to really work on it. In the same way, I don't like to read much about a piece that I am studying. So my knowledge of the programmatic aspect of the concerto went only so far as having read the preface to Douglas Jarman's critical edition of the concerto (Universal Edition, 1996). Thus, I was aware of the reason for its dedication to Manon Gropius and that the work was commissioned by Louis Krasner, but I was not using the history of the piece to inform my playing to any greater extent than this.

Overreliance on programmatic narrative is another grey area when it comes to the interpretation and analysis of a piece of music. In language, at least, when one person produces a sentence, the listener will comprehend most of the meaning and intent of the speaker. There may be a certain level of misunderstanding, but this should be able to be cleared up by further explanation. If, however, a musician performs a piece with the intention of telling a particular story, the only person who hears that story is the soloist. If there are program notes to elaborate on this story, then the listeners may convince themselves that they heard that particular story in the performance of the music, or they may decide that the soloist failed to represent this story. However, it is not the music at all that is producing a reference point for this story; it is the performer or the listener who is superimposing the story onto the music. In the same way, a composer might have a "secret program" for a piece, such as is claimed for the Berg (and shown in other works of his such as the *Lyric Suite*), but that

“secret program” is only given meaning by being written about. It cannot be *heard* in the music alone – someone who has no previous knowledge of Berg’s use of the notes H F (B \sharp F) to represent his relationship with Hanna Fuchs (Pople 61) will not hear this combination and be able to say, “Oh of course – that is a reference to Hanna Fuchs, now I understand everything.” Without being told about it, a listener can only experience their own made up story or the emotions they feel while listening to a piece. A performer may try to tell the story of *The Three Little Pigs* while playing the Berg Violin Concerto, but the audience will not be able to recognize it from the notes and sounds. Music can express emotions, but it cannot tell stories.

When I play a piece, I am therefore not looking for a story to tell so much as for emotions that represent different characteristics in the piece. When I play the first movement scherzo, I focus more on producing a light cheerful feeling than on imagining that “this part captures the vision of the lovely girl in a graceful dance which alternates between a delicate and dreamy character and the rustic character of a folk tune” (qtd. in Pople 33). If I manage to convey a light, perhaps slightly frivolous emotion in this *wienerisch* section, then the audience will understand my meaning better than if I try to “tell a story” or if I give them program notes. It may be useful for some performers to imagine a story to complement the music, but unless the piece either has words or is so programmatic as to animate the story with “mickey-mouse” techniques, there should be no illusions that the music will transmit this meaning to the listeners.

Conclusions for Future Performances

All these areas of focus, on learning the notes, on memorization, on finding the right sound, and on finding the emotions with which to characterize the music, are what need to be combined in order to provide a complete presentation of the Berg Violin Concerto. What I have discussed here will inform future work on the concerto if I have the opportunity to play

it again. There are several things in particular that I would like to make sure I cover next time I study the Berg. I will continue to focus on the quality and production of the sound, but most of all I would like to be more comfortable with my memorization. I think I have yet to completely memorize the piece and this has led to memory issues in performance beyond what can just be attributed to nerves. In future work, I would like to focus particularly on performing from memory in uncomfortable situations. Possible scenarios include playing for a recording device or playing the complete concerto after a break in which I am only allowed to stand and wait (in order to simulate the period before a concert or performance). These are both situations that have the potential to cause nerves without requiring the presence of an audience. Additionally, there are some places in which I really need to examine and memorize the accompaniment in order to not be alarmed by “unexpected” sounds. This is particularly true in places where the solo part has held notes over the orchestral interludes. Furthermore, I would like to be able to find a consistent way of combating nerves in my playing, so that it is possible for me to relax into playing rather than become tenser from it. This is a challenge not just for working with the Berg, but also for all areas of my playing.

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Appendix: Musical Examples³

una pastorale

220

sogenannter „Überschlag“ zur Hornmelodie

Dasselbe zur Trompetenmelodie

225

Fig. 1: mvt. I, mm.218-225; Carinthian folk-melody

35

Pesante, ma quasi a tempo

mp

(zweitaktig)

Fig. 2: mvt. II, mm. 35-36; Hauptrhythmus

8^{va}

Fig. 3: mvt. II, mm. 4-5; 8va (Lorkovic, Jarman 269)

8

20

tr

sempre ff

loco

Fig. 4: mvt. II, mm. 18-22; more 8va

a tempo (rustico)

Flag

p

195

Fig. 5: mvt. I, mm. 192-195; harmonics!

³ Except for Fig. 3, all musical examples are taken from the 1938 Universal Edition violin part and full score. Fig. 3 is copied from Lorkovic, Jarman 1989, due to the 1938 versions still containing incorrectly notated pitches.

170

f

poco a poco calmando

dimin

poco

Fig. 6: mvt. I, mm. 170-172; passages in thirds.

185

f (appassionato)

Höhepunkt (des „Adagios“)

loco

190

poco a poco

(ohne Br) (ohne 2.VI nur mit der 1.VI)

mf (cantabile)

dimin

Fig. 7: mvt. II, mm. 184-190

poco rit. - - - - - **10** - - - - - molto riten. - - - - - a tempo

Fitzgerald-Cherry 29

1. *pp*

2 Kl. **2**
4

B&Kl. *mp poco espr*

1,2 Fag. *p*

KFag. *mp poco espr*

Hr. *mp*

Solo-Vl. *poco rit.* - - - - - **10** - - - - - molto riten. - - - - - a tempo
dimin., aber deutlich kadenzieren -

Br. *arco*
m. Dpf. get.
2
4
pp

1 Kb. Solo *Solo*
pp espr.

15

1,2 Fag. *pp* *rall.* - -

KFag. *pp*

1. *m. Dpf.*

3 Hr. *pp, dolce (ppp)*

4. *p*

Pk. *p*

Solo-Vl. **15** *H* *rall.* - -

Br. *get.*
ppp, ma espr.
Dpf. ab!

1 Kb. Solo

Fig. 8: mvt I, mm. 9-26

Fig. 9: mvt. II, mm. 122-126; showing the beats rest between mm. 125-126

Fig. 10: mvt. I, mm. 160-163; showing the leap into m. 163

Fig. 11: mvt. I, pickup and mm. 173-179; relaxing into the B “haaa”