
Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, op. 36



Title	Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, op. 36
Date	1934 – 1936
First performance	6 December 1940, Philadelphia
Duration	ca. 31 min.

Schönberg seems not to have been interested in the concerto form for a long time; apart from an early Notturmo for violin, harp and string orchestra, he first made his name with songs, chamber music and symphonic works until he crossed the borders of the major/minor tonal system, following an original formal approach for every new composition – the challenges of a virtuoso concerto seemed scarcely compatible. It was not until he developed the “method of composing with twelve tones related only to one another” that he began to occupy himself seriously with the genre over time.

First drafts are dated 18 February 1922; a further attempt followed in 1927, perhaps as a response to Alban Berg’s Chamber Concerto for piano, violin and 13 wind instruments, premiered that same year. However, the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, op. 36 was not begun until Schönberg had emigrated to the USA and afterward; it was launched as a weighty contribution to the history of the genre.

No less a musician than Jascha Heifetz was intended for the premiere; Schönberg had already sent him a few pages to try out in 1935. In a letter, he asked the great virtuoso for his impressions and announced the immanent completion of further parts of the concerto: “perhaps not as difficult as the first movement, and perhaps somewhat more agreeable – always, of course, within my style.” Heifetz eventually declined to play the premiere.

On the recommendation of his brother-in-law Rudolf Kolisch, Schönberg turned to the violinist Louis Krasner after finishing the composition; Krasner had already premiered Berg’s Violin Concerto in 1936. He was impressed by the great gesture with which the work fit into the tradition of concerto literature and he was attracted by Schönberg’s idiomatic writing for the violin and the challenge of the multitude of its technical difficulties (flageolets, complicated double-stopping, etc.). Schönberg (who had tried out all the new fingerings on the instrument) was glad that Krasner mastered the allegedly unplayable score. He performed the premiere on 6 December 1940 with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski.

The audience’s reaction can be described as mixed, at best; some listeners walked out of the concert, there was applause and whistling after the first movement (which the conductor countered with an energetic appeal to the concertgoers). The critics wallowed in clichés about contemporary music.

However, apart from Stokowski and Krasner, strong advocates were among the orchestra musicians; one violinist stated enthusiastically in a newspaper report that “the entire work is extraordinarily consistently wrought, there are no hackneyed or banal phrases, no mixing of

styles. The work has such a unity that it will turn out to be perfectly natural and simple after several hearings.”

Even if Schönberg’s violin concerto has not attained the popularity of comparable works by Brahms and Beethoven, it has still become established in the repertoires of many great violinists. Its formal layout is modelled on the classics of the genre; the structure, based on a single twelve-tone row, lends the work a sonic signature, perceptible as a recurring intervallic concentration of the individual motifs, allowing Schönberg to give new content to traditional forms with and, moreover, to embed even virtuosic passagework deeply in the compositional texture.

The opening movement develops in a dialog between the solo violin and the cellos from a semitone motif; gradually, the other instruments join while the violin widens its range until, after a passage of double-stopping in thirds, the entire ensemble erupts in the first fortissimo. The second theme which soon follows stands out with airy figures in the violin, beginning a lively interplay with the orchestra. The movement’s tripartite layout corresponds to classical first-movement sonata form, the middle section having a waltz-like character. The recapitulation is marked by the return of the semitone motif, but not in the solo violin; the trombones play it distinctly. The other elements of the exposition – double stops in thirds, airy second theme – return in their original sequence, until the movement closes after a cadenza for the solo violin, a short stretto and a last appearance of the opening motif. Schönberg never mentioned extra-musical backgrounds to his violin concerto. The context of its creation, its deep roots in the classical tradition and the proximity to his piano concerto (for which a programmatic draft is preserved in the sketches), have given rise again and again to speculations regarding the work’s possible association with his exile situation.

If that conjecture is sound, then the second movement perhaps stands for wistful remembrance. A songlike melody in the violin opens the *Andante Grazioso* over tranquil orchestra accompaniment; seen as a whole, melancholy, pensive soloistic sections alternate with essentially orchestral passages. Along with the often recurring cantilena, reminiscent of a rondo form, the characteristic semitone motifs from the outset of the concerto recur again and again.

The finale opens in clearly marked march rhythm, broad swaths evoking a bellicose ambience, such as when the violin enters into heated interaction with the percussion. Here, the violin must accomplish the extraordinary; in a cadenza *accompagnata* lasting 70 bars, the work’s entire motivic material seems to focus on the solo instrument.

The resolute impetus of the final movement again suggests a programmatic connection with Schönberg’s life situation; the work is dedicated to “my dear friend and comrade in arms Dr. Anton Webern,” which lends particular credence to that interpretation.

The final bars bring the soloist and orchestra together in a great closing gesture.

Eike Feß | © Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien
www.schoenberg.at