

“A work that has tremendous charisma”

Thomas Zehetmair on Frank Martin's Polyptyque

How did you first come across Frank Martin's work Polyptyque for violin and two string orchestras and what were your initial experiences with the work?

Zehetmair: I received a request for a performance in the 1980s and so I took a look at the work. Right from the outset, I was fascinated and touched by it. Then I studied and rehearsed it, and subsequently performed it with the Bremen Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra. Every time I play this concerto, I find it a very stirring experience and I notice that the audience shares this experience.

What do you think is the reason for that?

Zehetmair: *Polyptyque* is based on scenes from the Bible which greatly inspired Frank Martin to write this work. He was in Siena at the time and observed an altarpiece, the *Maestà* by Duccio. Martin was incredibly captivated by the individual segments of the altarpiece. The solo violin in *Polyptyque* virtually adopts the character of what Jesus announces, which is naturally an unbelievable responsibility for a violinist. The two orchestras – it is written for solo violin and two string orchestras – should be spaced slightly apart from one another, and so they shouldn't completely swamp each other. This creates the effect of a dialogue between the orchestras and also between the violin and the two orchestras.

The most impressive scenes from the Passion.

Polyptyque has six individual movements which were inspired by six panels or scenes from the Maestà by Duccio that was on view in Siena. Why did Frank Martin choose these six particular scenes, in your opinion, even though the Maestà is made up of a much greater number of scenes?

Zehetmair: I think the pictures were chosen because of the form involved – the individual movements of *Polyptyque* are highly contrasting. Martin wanted to use one picture as the inspiration for each movement, and he chose these six pictures. They represent the most impressive scenes from the Passion of Jesus, and the music makes them audible.

As a soloist, can you play this work at all without this overriding structure from the Bible, this pictorial background? Every movement of the work bears a title which reveals what it is based upon.

Zehetmair: Neither the soloist nor the conductor can approach this work without closely examining the story in the Bible and the background of the piece. It isn't a sparkling, virtuoso violin concerto, although the concerto isn't easy to play either. The main difficulty is finding the correct character, in the presentation of the piece as well. Any kind of soloist allure is entirely inappropriate. The same applies when you conduct it – I have often performed the work as both soloist and conductor. The most important task is to look for and find the character of the individual movements.

You have said that the violin part symbolises the voice of Jesus.

Zehetmair: Not always, but it assumes the role in principle. The third movement, for example, is titled *Image de Juda*, i.e. Portrait of Judas. The music here sounds more like a mood than a scenic description (as, for example, prevails in the Palm Sunday scene of the first movement). The inner sense of being hunted as experienced by Judas is powerfully represented in the 7/8 bar composed for the purpose. In this movement, the violin is not highlighted, but is integrated into the orchestral writing instead; it practically imitates what the orchestra played before. Otherwise, there is mostly a stark contrast between the violin and orchestra. The violin is played very lyrically with very stirring, long notes; sometimes it also has a narrating, preaching sound, though. And so the violin sometimes sounds like a prayer, and sometimes like a sermon. The orchestra displays the reactions among the listeners and also the reactions of the disciples. When preparing to play this work, you have to study this aspect precisely in order to recognise the function of the soloist, and it is worthwhile because *Polyptyque* is a work that has tremendous charisma.

The writing is wonderful for the violin.

Would you describe the work as a violin concerto at all? As far as its character and style are concerned, it is anything but a classical violin concerto. It is rather a dialogue between orchestra and soloist, and is not about the exclusive presentation of the soloist.

Zehetmair: Outwardly, this work doesn't take the form of a violin concerto, which usually consists of three movements: *quick, slow, quick*. *Polyptyque* is a work with six movements. The violin is highly exposed as it adopts the role of Jesus who speaks and announces to the people. The orchestra has a very important function, however, as I have already explained. The work is not a violin concerto in the sense of Wieniawski or Paganini. It is actually quite the opposite. Nonetheless, the violin is very determinative, very important. The writing is wonderful for the violin.

How has your interpretation of the work changed over the years?

Zehetmair: Every time I explore the work, new aspects come to the fore. It is a work that you like to return to, and you need to prepare very carefully for every performance. The work is inspiring for the violinist – not necessarily as regards its technical demands, but more in terms of the content. You don't have to be religious in order to play the piece, but you do have to undertake an intense exploration of the message behind it, and to empathise with its world.

Is your interpretation influenced by the fact that you perform the work as a conductor and violinist? What difficulties arise when you perform the work as both its conductor and its soloist?

Zehetmair: It is one of the few 20th century works that allow you to perform as a violinist and also conduct at the same time. Many passages are played by the orchestra alone, and these I conduct. In this sense, it is manageable as it has a clear form, and it is therefore perfectly feasible to perform the work as its soloist and to conduct at the same time.

The work is written for solo violin and two small string orchestras. How would you explain this unusual orchestral scoring? Why didn't Martin write for a large orchestra, for a chamber orchestra, or just for one string orchestra?

Zehetmair: The scoring of two orchestras which practically face one another – with the soloist in the middle – creates a great many opportunities for dialogue. One of the orchestras or the violinist plays a phrase which is then adopted by the other orchestra, while enhanced or contrasted. This opens up incredible possibilities for a complex representation of the Bible scenes chosen by Martin. Perhaps the two groups of Jesus' disciplines and the people inspired Martin to write the piece for two orchestras. There is also wholly individual contrapuntal playing by the two orchestras – a wonderful dialogue, or a conversation between the orchestras and the soloist. The functions of the individual groups of instruments are different each time in the individual movements, but I believe that the whole composition is written very economically. The compositional techniques used by Martin are applied with incredible versatility and concentration. The richness of this piece is directly perceived by the listener and I believe that this is something that touches the listener as well: this combination of the expression of moods and the entirely artistic interlacing of the orchestras, the material, and the contrapuntal techniques. This touches the listener on wholly different levels, on an emotional level, but also on an intellectual level. Martin achieved this very artistically.

