

“an absolute breakthrough in his compositional force”

Ernst Kovacic on Haas' Violin Concerto

You are closely linked to Georg Friedrich Haas' Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. How did you first come into contact with the piece – and the composer?

Kovacic: I premiered Georg Friedrich Haas' piano concerto *Fremde Welten* as principal conductor of the Vienna Chamber Orchestra. After that, he gave me several pieces for solo violin which he had written while studying, and we met up frequently as a result. On one occasion he brought along his *Violin Concerto*. As I was familiar with several of Haas' previous works, I felt that this piece was an absolute breakthrough in his compositional force.

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Would you say that this was the first work where Haas found the style that he still pursues today?

Kovacic: Yes. I must say that I was yet to become acquainted with many of Haas' early compositions at the time, but it seemed to me that a union of his structural ideas and a compelling, dramatic force spoke for the first time from within this work. From the very beginning through to its major climaxes, the *Violin Concerto* has an extremely logical progression that finishes at the end with a feeling that the solo violin is “lost”. If you listen to the piece with ears that are attuned to traditional violin concertos, it is also a treasure trove that

reveals new ways of combining the solo violin with the orchestra.

How does Georg Friedrich Haas handle the solo violin in the concerto?

Kovacic: I would begin with a negative definition: he doesn't use a single traditional form of instrumental playing. Everything is new, developed out of his harmonic and dramaturgical concept. There is only one solitary place, after the orchestra has come to rest on a chord following certain shifts in tempo, where the violin begins at a very high pitch and then plays descending scales – I consider this the only “violin-like” figure. However, the violin loses itself in this idea, trying to go ever higher until it finishes in a kind of despairing cadenza.

The piece is very demanding and technically challenging for the solo violin, also with regard to the tricky intonation of the micro-intervals. When you play with the orchestra, you have to coordinate your playing very well; the violin is supposed to integrate itself into the overall sound. The traditional form with which we are familiar from classical and romantic concertos, and which presents a solo violin accompanied by the orchestra, is not extant in this sense. Haas uses the entire world of sound, and so you need to be very good at realising sounds in order to master the extreme jumps, the intervals. But everything is suitable for the violin, and the writing isn't at odds with the violin; it is wonderful to play.

The orchestra sometimes obliterates the soloist.

How would you describe the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra?

Kovacic: Haas' *Violin Concerto* displays tremendous inventiveness in this respect; there is a very large number of surprising elements. The orchestra as a collective is dominant for the audience here, but the solo violin enters into intimate relationships with a very large number of individual instruments, for instance with the *konzertmeister*. Sometimes the violin is the driving force, and sometimes it is carried along by goings-on in the orchestra. A great many

different situations emerge that create a vibrant relationship between the soloist and orchestra: the orchestra sometimes obliterates the soloist, but the solo violin also experiences loneliness. Out of an incredible sound, only a high note suddenly remains as the violin reappears. Then at the end, the orchestra gradually leaves the violin on its own again: the accordion is the last instrument to play with the soloist – a very glassy and immobile sound; everything has frozen.

Time and space are experienced more consciously.

How would you describe the significance of time and space in the concerto?

Kovacic: I think in Haas' *Violin Concerto* the audience can experience time and space in a different way than in a piece that is tied to a certain metre. Time is experienced more consciously, as is space. From my perspective as a soloist, major rhythmic shifts, accelerandi and ritardandi play an essential role in the work. The violin does not play in these passages. To some extent, my playing has a great deal to do with waiting for the moment when I am able to regain orientation. I notice that time is passing, but it passes me by. This is the case at the end, for example. There is tapping in the percussion which extends into the cadenza played by the solo violin. I am playing something, but I also notice that I am not really there, that time is passing me by. This feeling often appears in the piece.

At the beginning of this cadenza played by the solo violin which you just mentioned, there is the following explicit marking: "ohne Koordination mit dem Orchester", so "Not coordinated with the orchestra".

Kovacic: That's right, the rhythm continues relentlessly in the orchestra. I notice it, but cannot coordinate with the orchestra. It's as if I am somewhere else and am therefore unable to latch onto their time. The process of separation begins here and continues right to the end.

And so as the soloist, are you disconnected from the orchestra by the end of the concerto?

Kovacic: Yes, although when I am playing – as I have already said – I experience this in the sense that I am being left alone. The phrases grow increasingly shorter. You almost cannot make the *col legno battuto* and *pizzicato* sound at all, nor the final chord either. And so it is also as if the violin were falling silent because you suddenly become aware that you are alone. The violin enters at a height where Georg Friedrich Haas no longer writes any pitches; he just writes notes without leger lines. I'm up there somewhere, lost in the cosmos, and then slowly I make my way back down to earth, and I find myself among very incantatory, vocal lines that slowly disappear – that's how I experience it. I lose my voice because nobody answers any longer.

Are there any places in the work where the solo violin is not lost among the orchestral sound?

Kovacic: Yes, of course. There is a regular alternation between disappearance and reappearance. In the first few minutes, Haas included a great many passages where the violin is propulsive, active through figuration. It is really a kind of leading voice in those places. The tone clusters in both the violin and orchestral parts can be seen as overtone constellations. The solo violin casts a shadow of sound over the orchestra, and this shadow moves with the orchestra. However, the violin line is very present and is given a certain colour by the instruments and the chordal situation.

A beautiful hilly landscape would have a different sound □

Is the violin part challenging for you personally and have you encountered any difficulties as far as the sound, technique or emotions are concerned?

Kovacic: As a violinist, what do you want? [laughs] You want to be challenged. The piece is technically demanding; the aspects of rhythm and intonation are naturally combined very powerfully with the emotional intensity here. The musical lines are sometimes very angular and sharp-edged – I reckon that a beautiful hilly landscape would have a different sound. What you find here is more like a mountainous region with rugged ascents and

descents, or sides that have been cut like metal. This involves some difficult technical sections, but as a musician you want something like that. That is what makes your work a real treat. It is a pleasure for both your fingers and your soul.

*Has your own interpretation of the Violin Concerto changed over the years?
You premiered it back in 1998 and you continue to play the work even today.*

Kovacic: Playing a work over and over again is like climbing different sides of a mountain. You come across familiar things, but you also discover new approaches, new beauty. I think a lot about small details, such as the final chord of the concerto, whose pizzicato fades away. I would actually like to play a chord here which – although it is pizzicato – lingers slightly. I still need to find a solution to that.



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