"Singing in the stratosphere"

Christian Tetzlaff on Karol Szymanowski's Violin Concerto No. 1

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Mr Tetzlaff, Szymanowski's Violin Concerto No. 1 is commonly termed the first modern violin concerto. Assuming you agree – what is this reason for this description?

Tetzlaff: [laughs] Modern is naturally a delicate label when it comes to definitions. The concerto is certainly one of a kind, though. Nothing like that previously existed as regards its disposition and content or its treatment of the violin line. So let's just call it an entirely novel piece.

People say that Szymanowski introduced a new kind of expressiveness. How would you define that?

Tetzlaff: In my mind, eroticism plays a dominant role, and if that is called a form of expressiveness, then the description has its justification. In other words, how you are allowed to play it, what sounds you can use, and how the orchestra ensnares you and everything is governed by an underlying ecstatic mood. That's very new.

How would you describe the concerto to someone who isn't familiar with it?

Tetzlaff: Well, as a performer, it is the most lustful concerto: the violin is allowed to sing, wail and wheeze in such an unusual manner.

And I believe that, for the listener, it is so lovely that this piece has created its own form as a result of its reference to a poem. It means that you are surprised the whole time, but its flow is entirely coherent. As yet I haven't worked out how he achieves such a masterpiece, how we know in the final bars that "it must be this way, it must end in this way, and the whole piece is perfect this way". Which is why I say that it is one of a kind. I believe this applies not just to the situation in the violin concerto, but also throughout Szymanowski's complete oeuvre. Of all the pieces that I know, this seems to me to be the one where he found the philosopher's stone.

From a technical perspective, it is not particularly difficult.

While Szymanowski was composing the piece in 1916, he was given advice by a violinist. What can you say about the technical hurdles? How would you prepare a violinist for a performance of the piece, what would you tell them?

Tetzlaff: From a technical perspective, it is not particularly difficult. You do need incredible stamina, though. You need an enormous amount of strength and you need sensuous language – and it also should be treated lovingly. Over the decades the volume level has increased and it has been turned into an opulent, post-Wagnerian piece. Unfortunately, this is entirely wrong.

Anybody who may be familiar with earlier recordings or concerts would never conceive a large part of this composition as a dance. And that is naturally the erotic element of the poem, and also the erotic element of this piece – that the point of reference is rather a dance of the veils by Salome than some massive aria by Tristan.

The piece doesn't have a fixed key: can you say something about the harmony?

Tetzlaff: It is harmony that you still perceive as tonal, even though there is an endless number of layers with fourths or thirds, which means the tonal centre loses itself to some extent. All the chords are still structured tonally in one way or another, though. It is the other influences, or things that happened at the same time – certainly French impressionism with its large numbers of notes that are taken into the basic chord and blur the tonality. The fascinating thing in my mind is that even in the grandest orchestral tuttis, these harmonies are crystal clear and distinctly audible, and every part – up to and including the bass tuba – has its definite place. And the sound, if conducted well, is something that did not previously exist in this manner either – at least not in the sphere of the violin concerto. There is a huge symphonic opus in the orchestral interludes and it sounds fantastic, shimmering and also threatening and profound.

Are there problems with the balance?

Tetzlaff: Yes.

Where?

Tetzlaff: On page 2. [laughs] Well, at a relatively early point in the piece there are scenes where the violin has to play a lot of quick notes at a very low pitch, and you need to spend some time rehearsing that. Then the matter can naturally be resolved. And as a violinist you just have to play extremely powerfully.

The characters are so distinct the whole time.

Powerfully in terms of the dynamics, so you can be heard?

Tetzlaff: Yes.

There are relatively quick changes of mood. It would be wrong to use the word postmodern here, but there are quick motivic lines, and also rapid series of sounds. Was that also new territory, and is it the biggest challenge for the performer?

Tetzlaff: No. The characters are so distinct the whole time. Of course, it is certainly much easier to play shorter scenes melodically. There is a wild, in-between scherzo section, and being allowed to portray other people all the time gives rise to the charm and pleasure of playing. In comparison, it is much more difficult to – let's say – produce a twenty-minute movement in the same way throughout, working everything out down to the last detail, rather than using this theatrical talent.

Which means it is a rewarding concerto for the soloist, in that sense?

Tetzlaff: Yes, certainly.

Have you found Szymanowski's metronome markings successful in practice?

Tetzlaff: Definitely, and I can confirm that the same is true for all metronome markings that I have come across from all composers – because these are the people who have spent the most time working with the composition.

Of course, it is ridiculous to say that metronome marking 112 has to be 112 and not 114 or 110. It's not like that at all. Especially with music that is new, however, and that is mostly the interesting, good music, we need the help of the composer who shows us what this newness is and how we should approach it. After all, if we treat new things with our old gut instinct, then the best elements will always fall by the wayside. We will still have a Beethoven symphony conducted by a specific person, but the basic message is just that the pieces have become much, much more exciting and varied ever since people stopped saying: "He was crazy and the metronome was broken". And that applies to all composers. If they are taken seriously, the music begins to come alive in a totally different way, in a manner that stirs and surprises us.

The concerto has been described as a single-movement work with five phases. Are these phases clearly separate from one another, or is everything rolled into one?

Tetzlaff: It is all quite distinct – the composition always has connections, but these are always clear. The sections also recur within the piece, they are recognisable – woven into one another in a single movement, but as distinct parts. The beautiful thing is that the structure makes the listener feel as if they are embroiled in a large, five-part sprawl, but – oh yes – now this passage has returned in an extended form, and now that passage has returned in an extended form, and so they feel at home in the piece.

Its character is actually entirely different, though – compared to romantic concertos that engage in drama.

Tetzlaff: Yes, owing to the fact that the material isn't steered in different directions like in a development section. Overall, however, it does display a kind of developmental manner of composition, as the parts have been changed subtly when they return at a later stage, and the final tutti refers back to an earlier tutti, in entirely broader ecstasy. Everything is flowing all the time, until the very end.

Another question about performing the work: even though you remain very close to the score, I believe that the piece benefits from the soloist at least implying quasi-improvisational freedom.

Tetzlaff: Yes. I wouldn't ascribe that quality to this piece, though. I believe that it is an approach that is fundamental for a performer. It should always sound as if "this is what I am creating right now". If I tell you something, and even if I am reading a fairy tale that everybody knows, it doesn't make sense to say: "Once upon a time". You want to create every moment so it seems that something has occurred to you just at that moment. Szymanowski gives us a great deal of freedom in this piece.

Could you say that in this composition Szymanowski opened the door to a new understanding of the violin concerto, to a certain extent?

Tetzlaff: Yes, in my mind it is so new – in the treatment of the violin line as well – because such a great deal takes place in the stratosphere, where singing would be quite a challenge.

It's very high in places, isn't it?

Tetzlaff: Yes, and that is precisely the ecstatic exaggeration – of course, you see it everywhere, naturally in Tchaikovsky's music as well. If you make the violin sing beautifully, it seems natural to compare it with a soprano voice. But then the solo soprano gets worked up into such ecstasy that it can go two octaves higher as well.

Why do you think this concerto has only recently become a true part of the repertoire?

Tetzlaff: It's because of the violinists – naturally. If the piece had experienced better conditions when it was composed and during subsequent years, it might have enjoyed a breakthrough. The time wasn't ideal for something like that, though, and then after the war opulent, beautiful music from the current age might not have been what a large proportion of cultural life was seeking. Specifically in German-speaking regions, for the first time they tried to provide particular support and backing for everything that was really forbidden and entirely different.

Composers who were confronted with violinists from the 50s, 60s and 70s were generally faced with a very, very difficult situation because almost everybody treated these compositions very, very sloppily across the board. And a piece by Tchaikovsky or Brahms was able to survive all that, but compositions that contained so much that was new and hadn't yet been heard much before didn't have a chance.

And so, in this respect, is the recording by Pierre Boulez and the Vienna Philharmonic a kind of change in perspective?

Tetzlaff: I don't know. I haven't heard the more recent recording. Thomas Zehetmair has also recorded it and I am sure that he also looks at what Szymanowski writes, and handles it with great understanding. And so I can't judge that. However, we naturally first follow what is there a bit more closely, and as always – if the composer is a good composer – then something interesting is produced as well.

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Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler
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