

# *“The essence of violin playing”*

Benjamin Schmid on Weill's Violin Concerto

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*How did you come into contact with Weill's Violin Concerto?*

**Schmid:** I came across the piece first at a performance given by my teacher Ernst Kovacic, who has played it frequently. Naturally, I was very interested in the name as I was familiar with it from the Brecht operas and from the songs that I have always adored, some of which have even found their way into jazz music. I repeatedly encounter jazz musicians who take Weill as their basis for improvisation because his art of song is at its very highest level.

*□ it is this pivotal point between traditional material and new perspectives.*

Yes, and then I learned this piece that I possibly would now put right at the top of my list of favourite violin concertos because it is sophisticated music. The form is sophisticated; it is a long concerto that is really something for an active listener to listen actively to, being served comprehensible music on an intellectual platform. And so it is this pivotal point between traditional material and new perspectives – for example the harmonies in the first and in the last movements – which come into contact with each other here, and which always have so many interesting elements for me. If we take a look at the form of the piece, we encounter something unusual: it is actually unusually long. There are these two relatively abstract outer movements that are also much longer, and then there is the so-called middle movement. These sections of the inner movement naturally have a particular appeal for me because their

rhythm is formulated very succinctly. Turning to the *Notturmo*: the idea of integrating two expansive xylophone solos, and turning it into the main instrument in that movement with the violin really being allowed to imitate the xylophone, naturally requires a great deal of imagination on the violinist's part, and that is a good thing. I find this rhythmic succinctness incredibly fascinating, and then there is also a cosy bit in the middle that demands a lot of you in a cantabile-like passage, or where you can show off your skills as a violinist. This *Notturmo* is naturally just around the corner from Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du soldat*, even at the end where the double bass is allowed to finish on its own. There are parallels, but they are wonderful and only hinted at. At best, you can call it inspiration, and certainly not copying. Then there is that highly virtuoso cadenza, where the soloist can really "roll up their sleeves" abstractly in almost "Bartókesque" manner – in the chords, figuration, ligatures and fantastic espressivos. It is really virtuoso stuff, and then closes with the afore-mentioned stretto which whirs unbelievably, and as a reward there is this Serenata where Weill finds wonderful wind scoring as an accompaniment. At the beginning it has an almost tango-like touch. The violin is then simply allowed to stretch out over the top. It is naturally one of my favourite movements – it is simply wonderfully beautiful and pure without ever becoming tacky or sentimental. That is something we always encounter in Weill's songs, this greatness. And that is why I count it among really great art, because something that is touching is written in a very honest way and it doesn't ever come even close to being tacky.

*It is difficult to find a concerto with more cantabile.*

I have learned and read that Weill was also very interested in dodecaphony and experimented with it. It was highly important for him; he was only 25 years of age. This is reflected very clearly in the outer movements; it takes quite some time before you manage to find yourself. But here too, the beginning is again wonderfully cantabile; it is difficult to find a concerto with more cantabile. It also enters the very core of violin playing – the connection of two notes, and that is the absolute essence of most passages in this concerto. I would call it a very "violinistic" concerto. And also how he moves from the first movement to the coda, there is a transition from the very

climax-like tutti, where the wind playing becomes frantic, and the violin finds its way out of this commotion in a cadenza and bridges into the cantabile, which in my eyes is already the coda – incredibly beautiful. In the final movement there is another favourite passage of mine: I simply have a weakness for pure beauty. Again, it is before the concluding part where almost postmodern moods are created, where the accompaniment in the winds is only allowed to wobble to and fro between two notes, and the soloist spins his relatively simple thoughts over the top. I consider this prophetically postmodern, or rather I can hear a kind of Pat Metheny in there, and so on and so forth. It is highly interesting, before it then becomes really virtuoso again at the end, where he also speeds up again properly and there is not a dry eye left in the house in this tarantella-like final movement – which in turn incidentally also reminds me of Bernstein's final movement in many respects, although this was written later. There are very interesting parallels. It is possible to examine the greats of their time in parallel again and again.

*This is precisely why I play the violin: because I think that the violin is able to connect two notes more beautifully than any other instrument.*

*How “violinistic” is the solo part?*

**Schmid:** The solo part of Weill's *Violin Concerto* is extremely “violinistic”. First and foremost, as I mentioned above, there is that cantabile which unfolds in most places throughout the concerto, whether it is the beginning or the conclusion of the first movement, or the Serenata, or the middle section of the *Notturmo*, or that incredible interlude before the coda in the final movement. These are passages where you can and must display the highest art of tonal connection. You must be able to bow very, very elegantly. And this is precisely why I play the violin: because I think that the violin is able to connect two notes more beautifully than any other instrument.

*You are also a jazz musician. Did this help you in finding Weill's style and his inflection?*

**Schmid:** As a start, I would have to say no to that. I consider it to be a very classical violin concerto as far as its realisation is concerned. It doesn't have an improvisational part. There are so many references and links with tradition as material in this violin concerto that you simply have to approach this concerto as a very good classical violinist.

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Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler  
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