

Kurt Weill (1900–50)

Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments (1924)



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- 1 Andante con moto
 - 2 Notturmo – Cadenza – Serenata
 - 3 Allegro molto, un poco agitato

Isabelle van Keulen *violin*

The Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments was written in Berlin in April–May 1924, immediately after Weill's return from an extended foreign holiday that took him to the mountains of Switzerland, and then on to his first exploration of Italy – an overwhelming experience, as his letters to his teacher, Ferruccio Busoni, and to his family testify. From Rome he returned to Berlin via Vienna.

Intended for, but never played by, Joseph Szigeti, the Concerto had its first performance at a contemporary music concert in Paris on 11 June 1925 (with Marcel Darrieux as soloist, Walther Straram conducting). During the next few years it became the most widely performed of Weill's instrumental works. It retains that position today, and has also been frequently recorded.

Yet it is not a piece that goes out of its way to be endearing. In the first movement there is no relief from the harsh and wintry landscape until towards the end, when the violin removes itself

from a storm-swept scene and initiates, *dolce espressivo*, a passage of rapt and songful contemplation. The movement ends with a brief reminder of the bleakness with which it began.

The second movement is a sequence of three night-scenes – a spooky and quasi-jazzy one to begin with, a military one in the central Cadenza, and finally a Serenata that dreams of Italianate warmth without attaining it.

It is only at the start of the finale that there is a strong sense of arriving in Busoni's beloved Italy. But the tarantella character does not remain festive for long. The more agitated it becomes, the more fugitive is the air of the contrasting episodes – until, all of a sudden, the would-be rondo-form is knocked off its course by a swaggering *alla marcia* theme and its alien harmony. In due course, the pace slackens, and the tarantella rhythm is eliminated.

What follows is the most inward and yet the most eloquent passage in the entire work. Seemingly analogous to the first movement's closing idyll, it turns out to be a moment of respite before the mob returns. The sense of hunters and hunted that had been latent in the opening dance is now conveyed by a toccata-like Allegro that recovers none of the original dance-character, but culminates in a rhythmically distorted and harmonically thuggish assertion of the swaggering march-theme. It is as if the commander of the troops whose distant *reveilles* were heard in the central Cadenza movement has now dispatched them on some absurd colonial

expedition. Amid the uproar, the orchestra eerily anticipates a motif that will later be taken up by the Salvation Army chorus in Weill's music for *Happy End* (1929): 'Geht hinein in die Schlacht!' ('Forward, into battle!'). Here, the soloist responds with scornful fanfares.

Remembering that with Weill's music (as with Shostakovich's) literal interpretations of apparent contemporary parallels can be misleading, listeners may judge for themselves whether the fact that Mussolini and his Fascists had won a massive and unexpected electoral victory on 7 April 1924 has any bearing on the character of the Concerto that Weill began to write that very month.

Previously at the Proms

The only previous performance of this concerto was given by the London Sinfonietta under Lothar Zagrosek, with soloist Nona Liddell, in 1983. The remainder of the programme comprised the *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* and Stravinsky's *Agon* and *Mavra*.

David Harman