

The Improvised Violin Concerto - Program Notes

The Improvised Violin Concerto unites two disciplines: symphonic composition and improvisational performance art. It is the first concerto to feature an entirely improvised solo part over a through-composed orchestral score.

The piece adheres to three basic principles:

First, the orchestra--a large body of musicians trained to play in perfect synchronization--must not improvise. I cannot envision designing a stable, long-form piece around orchestral improvisation. However, I do score ambient sounds and noise effects, which sound improvisational and thus serve as a link between the orchestra and the soloist.

Second, the violin part must be entirely improvised. Even if a small portion of the solo part were composed, the piece would not live up to its title. The violin must be unbridled, free to introduce its own ideas at any time. And these ideas, and every note therein, will be different in each performance.

Third, the orchestra must introduce and develop themes to provide form and logic. Its score must be essentially symphonic. This affords the violin the ultimate freedom to experiment with and respond to the themes and other musical materials.

To emphasize this sense of freedom, I allow for extreme dynamic variation in the solo part. With the aid of sound reinforcement (via P.A.) and effects pedals, the violin can negotiate even the loudest tutti sections punctuated by fortissimo brass. On the other hand, the violin has the right to remain silent in the softest moments.

To avoid excessive conflict between the violin and the upper-register orchestral instruments (e.g., trumpets, flutes, oboes), I assign much of the thematic material to lower-register instruments such as the bass clarinet, the English horn, the bassoon and the trombone.

At nearly 40 minutes in length, The Improvised Violin Concerto features the longest improvisation ever called for in a classical setting. To perform it well is a daunting task.

Given the length of the piece, I dedicate each of the five movements to basic, widely interpretable elements rather than specific thoughts or images. "Fire," the first

movement, is passionate, intense, and otherworldly--an excellent launching point. "Air," the second movement, stirs up a new kind of energy that extinguishes the embers remaining from the first movement. The playful and jazzy third movement, "Water," introduces the human condition. The fourth movement, "Earth," invokes blues, rock and heavy metal to convey what I call the "salt of the Earth." This movement represents the relationship between Earth and humanity.

The final movement manifests what I call the fifth element, "Faith." It is an invention of humanity, a celebration of the human spirit. After a series of hymnic chord sequences, the movement proceeds through Southern Gospel refrains before morphing into Gospel hoedowns and Buzzard Lope dances. It culminates in a throw-down Jubilee.

The sheet music for the solo violin part contains chord symbols (BAug, Gmaj7, and so on) rather than notes. These chord symbols indicate the harmonies in the orchestra. Otherwise, the solo part contains standard types of information: time signatures, measure numbers, rehearsal letters, tempi, and descriptions of individual sections (like "Impending inferno" and "Evaporation") that inform the soloist's ideas and mood.

--Mark O'Connor, 2011

Notes on Musical Improvisation

Although it's as old as the art of music, the singular art of improvisation confounds and intimidates even the best-educated and most successful classical musicians. Many believe improvisation to be spontaneous, boundless musical invention, which is entirely true only in an approach I have often embraced, namely "free improvisation." In most circumstances, however, improvisation is not boundless but rather adheres to (or at least references) harmonic, metric, rhythmic and temporal guidelines.

Three levels of study define improvisation. First, discipline and years of practice are essential to conceiving of and structuring musical ideas and then learning how to musically transition from one idea to another. Second, an understanding of jazz theory, harmony, rhythm and meters is necessary. Third, an intimate knowledge of chord progressions for specific pieces is an absolute. Knowledge of and familiarity with these chord progressions, rather than mere awareness of them, allows the

improviser to spend less time worrying about technical details and more time being creative.

Mastery over the Improvised Violin Concerto, then, is no mean feat. Unlike a bluegrass tune, which usually has three or four chords, or a jazz tune, which might have 10 or 20, the Improvised Violin Concerto has hundreds of chords and numerous meter changes over the course of a thousand measures. I am, to some degree, surprised that brilliant improvisers like Mozart, Liszt, Paganini and Mendelssohn did not tackle something like this.

In addition to encouraging classical musicians to become familiar with the pantheon of great American improvisers I have studied, I hope this piece goes a step further and inspires in those musicians a keener interest in improvisation.

--Mark O'Connor, 2011