

The Decade of the Violin Concerto: New Music and the Performer in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT

The 1930s saw an unusually rich harvest of violin concertos. An examination of this group of works provides a singular and seldom-considered angle from which to view the music history of the interwar period. In spite of the widely divergent styles and personal approaches, the works are united by certain factors that result from the choice of genre, with an attendant set of historical and technical constraints. In addition, the violinists who commissioned and performed the concertos influenced the compositions to a greater extent than often realized; therefore, in order to understand the works, we must take into consideration the artistic personalities of the respective performers as well. Many of the concertos were written for a new type of soloist, mostly from the younger generation, who had made a firm commitment to new music – something that some superstar violinists were unwilling to do. The concertos offer good opportunities to study the relationships between composer and performer, still a somewhat neglected topic in musicological studies.

KEYWORDS

1930s, violin concertos, style, performers

In his essay “Contrasts and Common Concerns in the Concerto 1900–1945,” David Schneider observes:

Few concertos have figured prominently in accounts of general musical development in the first half of the twentieth century, which have given pride of place to works in more prestigious genres (for

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example opera, string quartet or symphony) than the concerto – suspect in modernist circles for its conventions of acrobatic display and popular appeal . . . Yet, if the genre-defining requirement of athletic virtuosity mixed uneasily with high-minded modernist aesthetics, the tension between them was extraordinarily productive . . .¹

In fact, many of those “high-minded modernists” were very interested in concerto-writing, and many of them turned their attention to the genre in the 1930s in particular. Most, if not all, were pianists by training, but if they did not write for their own instrument, they favored the violin as the solo instrument of choice in their concertos. Schneider’s observation about the tension between virtuosity and modernism is supported by the common perception that the violin concertos of the modernist masters incorporate more traditional elements than we would find in earlier compositions by those same masters. The Bartók and the Berg violin concertos are cases in point: Berg, as we all know, used quotes from traditional music (folksong, Bach), and made his twelve-tone row *almost* tonal by building it from a superimposition of triads. As for the Bartók concerto (BB 117), it has been customary to see in it, since Bence Szabolcsi, the beginning of a mellower, “warmly melodic” style – a “late style” for Bartók, as it were.² However, it would be arbitrary and wholly unjustified to call those works any less “modernistic” than their predecessors; Bartók and Berg can hardly be said to have become “unfaithful” to their artistic personalities just because they embraced a more melodious idiom. Rather, we should say that they gave modernism itself a new direction by widening the scope of the stylistic means they employed. It is widely known that Bartók asked Universal Edition to send him scores of the then-recent violin concertos of Berg and Szymanowski when he was embarking on his own concerto.³ He obviously did not do so because he was in search of a model. He wanted to be informed of what his colleagues were doing because the concept of a “contemporary violin concerto” itself was a vital issue. When Zoltán Székely told Bartók he wanted a “real” violin concerto,⁴ Székely did not only mean that he wanted a three-movement work as opposed to a one-movement theme and variations; by making his request, Székely, a composer himself, emphasized that the traditional three-movement concerto form was still relevant in the 1930s and well worth cultivating. The Bartók concerto takes its place in an impressive list of violin concertos from the 1930s that includes works by Stravinsky (1931), Szymanowski (no. 2, 1933), Berg (1935), Prokofiev (no. 2, 1935), Schoenberg (1936), Ernest Bloch (1938), William Walton (1939), Samuel Barber (1939) and others. Some of these composers (Schoenberg, Berg, Bartók) never contributed to the other eminently classical orchestral genre, namely the symphony (even Stravinsky did not do so in his mature years until he received his two American commissions that resulted in the Symphony in C and the Symphony in Three Movements.) By comparison, the piano concertos of Stravinsky and Bartók, written for the composers’ own concert use, could become much more of an arena for innovation than did the violin concertos, written for other

¹The *Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*, ed. by Simon P. KEEFE (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 139.

²Bence Szabolcsi’s introduction to *Béla Bartók: His Life in Pictures*, ed. by Ferenc BÓNIS (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1964), 62.

³Vera LAMPERT, “Zeitgenössische Musik in Bartóks Notensammlung [Contemporary music in Bartók’s music collection],” *Documenta Bartókiana* vol. 5, ed. by László SOMFAI (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977), 144.

⁴Cf. László SOMFAI, “Három vázlat 1936/37-ből a Hegedűversenyhez” [Three sketches for the Violin Concerto from 1936/37], in id., *Tizennyolc Bartók-tanulmány* [Eighteen Bartók studies] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1981), 105.



performers to play. To mention another classical genre that found continuation in the 20th century, the string quartet was much cultivated by Bartók and several of his contemporaries, but Bartók's contribution to the genre provides the best example of how the form, movement structure and general idiom of the string quartet had to be reinvented afresh each time, so we cannot really speak of the string quartet *form* playing a major role in 20th-century modernist composition. Violin concertos are therefore a rather special case.

We may wonder whether the violin concertos of the 1930s have enough in common to give the term "violin concerto in the 1930s" some real meaning beyond a simple chronological coincidence. I submit that it is possible to find similarities among these otherwise very different works – similarities that go beyond the obvious, i.e., the scoring for violin and orchestra or (in the majority of cases) the three-movement structure.

The violin, a "melody instrument" par excellence, *needs* to have "melodies" to play. "Melody," however, is a rather elusive concept. In the entry on melody in the 2001 edition of the *New Grove Dictionary* (which has not yet been updated in the online version), Alexander Ringer defined it as "pitched sounds arranged in musical time in accordance with given cultural conventions and constraints" and, after offering a historical and ethnomusicological survey of the various structures underlying melody across different points in time and space, he concluded that after the emergence of *Klangfarbenmelodie* in Schoenberg and Webern,

the unrestrained explorations of musical space at the expense of temporal factors raised serious questions about the very future of melody. It was one of the more ironic quirks of history that turned the herald of "absolute melody" [that is, Webern] into the revered godfather of an avant-garde that has decreed the *virtual demise of melody* [my emphasis, P. L.] as a primary factor in musical experience.

It is clear from Ringer's examples and his commentaries on those examples that what makes a melody a melody – here I am paraphrasing his conclusions and extrapolating from them – is

- (a) continuity: connection among pitches which, in performance, manifests itself in long legato lines;
- (b) internal logic: symmetrical (or asymmetrical) subdivisions, balance or a planned alternation between conjunct and disjunct, or ascending and descending intervals;
- (c) harmonic implications; and finally (this follows in part from the first three points),
- (d) adherence to certain melodic "types" or "families" of melodies, an idea that Bence Szabolcsi, who was one of Ringer's mentors, developed at length in his magisterial *History of Melody*.⁵

There is no doubt that a melody, however original it may be, always builds on, is reminiscent of, or incorporates elements of, other, earlier melodies in some ways. A melody helps the listener relate a piece of music to previous musical experiences, to the point that one could almost propose the following definition of what a melody is: a melody is a sequence of notes that reminds us of something else, which is a paradox since one usually looks for originality and novelty in a melody whereas the whole beauty of a melody has to do with the fact that it resonates with something we already have inside us.

⁵Bence SZABOLCSI, *A History of Melody* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1965).



Thus, since the whole *raison d'être* of a violin concerto is to offer melodies, a violin concerto as a genre is also all about connecting with the past, about seeing how a composer, no matter how “avant-garde,” is willing to acknowledge tradition and to build on it, continue it, rather than abandoning it.

It appears that Szabolcsi’s well-worn phrase about the “warmly melodic” style of the Bartók concerto is applicable to the vast majority of his contemporaries as well; the need for melodies in a violin concerto is felt, and satisfied, across the entire stylistic spectrum, regardless of the huge differences in tonal or atonal language and general aesthetics that separate these composers. That being said, the next task is to describe these melodies in terms of their traditional and innovative features. It seems that we cannot very well compare these melodies in terms of tonal or harmonic structure – by far the most frequent form of analysis we see – but rather in terms of phrase structure, periodicity and the use of registers on the violin.

To start with Bartók, the unforgettable opening theme of his concerto is a perfect four-line “quatrain,” to borrow a term from Szabolcsi’s contemporary and colleague Dénes Bartha, that in addition borrows a characteristic feature of new-style Hungarian folk song, namely the fact that the second line repeats the first one a fifth higher.⁶ Significantly, the melody begins on the G string (the first note, in fact, is an open G) and rises from there.⁷ Is it a coincidence that several other concertos from the period also exhibit some if not all of these same characteristics: melodic symmetry, periodicity and rise in register? The solo violin parts in Berg, Schoenberg, Szymanowski, Prokofiev, Walton and Bloch all begin on either the G or the D string and ascend gradually to the higher strings – as do the Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius concertos (though not the Mendelssohn!).

With respect to periodicity, the concertos run a wider gamut, though even Berg arranges his tone row, disguised as a tower of superimposed thirds, in two symmetrical melodic phrases, the first one ascending, the second descending. Walton, a composer classified as a traditionalist, perhaps predictably, writes a perfectly symmetrical eight-bar period, and so does Prokofiev who, however, introduces a singular twist by squeezing a motif that is five quarter-notes long into measures of $\frac{3}{4}$, ending up nevertheless with a regular phrase of 4 + 4 bars. Szymanowski, like Bartók, begins with a folk-inspired phrase repeated in an identical form in a higher transposition (in his case, a third, not a fifth), but then he takes an unexpected turn by abandoning this clear periodicity in favor of an “unending melody” that, however, can easily be broken down into motifs that are repeated, transposed or otherwise transformed. And even Schoenberg, whose style is the most uncompromising in this group, follows a similar melodic logic, rooted in tradition, working with a small number of rhythmic figures subjected to extensive *thematische Arbeit* or thematic development (Examples 1–4).

⁶Cf. Dénes BARTHA, “Thematic Profile and Character in the Quartet Finales of J. Haydn,” *Studia Musicologica* 11 (1969), 35–62.

⁷We know that the two-note pickup, which contains the open G, was an afterthought on Bartók’s part that is not present in the sketches, but this only reinforces my point: starting from the lowest note on the instrument strengthened the sense of “starting at the beginning” that some of the other concertos also share. Cf. the first sketches published in facsimile and transcription in SOMFAI, “Három vázlat,” 105–106, and the reproduction of the beginning of the solo part in FERENC BÓNIS, *Béla Bartók: Pictures of a Life*, transl. by Judith SOLLOSZY (Budapest: Balassi, 2016), 422 (Plate 695).





Examples 1. The respective opening theme in Szymanowski's Violin Concerto



Examples 2. The respective opening theme in Prokofiev's Violin Concerto



Examples 3. The respective opening theme in Schoenberg's Violin Concerto



Examples 4. The respective opening theme in Berg's Violin Concerto

Another way in which a concerto in the 1930s can be considered a “real” concerto in the classical tradition is the presence of at least some vestiges of sonata form. Of course, one has to be flexible in one’s definition of sonata form in the twentieth century, but as long as one can find an alternation of primary and secondary thematic areas, central development sections and, most importantly, a clear moment of recapitulation where the piece audibly reconnects with its beginning, one may speak at least of *some* version of sonata form. Here again, Bartók went out of his way to provide a textbook example of sonata form, even if in the recapitulation the thematic returns are somewhat disguised by melodic inversion. Another composer who scrupulously respects the external framework of sonata form is Prokofiev, who repeats two out of three themes from his exposition verbatim in the recapitulation. In both cases, this structural layout anchors the movement in tradition while composers may feel free to shape the other aspects of the music – especially harmony – in original ways. The other composers may stray further from the textbook, but at least some hallmarks of sonata form are generally still present, because the



Table 1. Violin Concertos and their soloists

Composer and Work	Date	Violinist
Igor Stravinsky	1931	Samuel Dushkin
Karol Szymanowski, no. 2	1933	Paweł Kochański
Alban Berg	1935	Louis Krasner
Sergei Prokofiev, no. 2	1935	Robert Soetens
Arnold Schoenberg	1936	Louis Krasner
Béla Bartók ("no. 2")	1938	Zoltán Székely
Ernest Bloch	1938	Joseph Szigeti
Benjamin Britten	1939	Antonio Brosa
Karl Amadeus Hartmann	1939	Karl Neracher
William Walton	1939	Jascha Heifetz

genre itself demanded the kind of contrast – tutti vs. solo, lyrical vs. virtuosic – that sonata form, with its primary and secondary themes, was designed to provide.

In many ways, the Stravinsky concerto – the earliest of the major 1930s concertos – falls outside this pattern. It does not follow the three-movement format of most of the other concertos but is, instead, in four movements. Stylistically it includes many Baroque echoes, but its movement layout (Toccatà—Aria I—Aria II—Capriccio) is wholly original and the opening Toccatà, obviously, does not engage with sonata form the way other opening movements do.

Who were the violinists who inspired such a great outpouring of violin concertos during the years immediately preceding World War II? It is a very instructive list, one that reveals a great deal about musical life during the interwar years. Among the champions of the concertos on our list (see Table 1), we find only two undisputed international superstar soloists: Joseph Szigeti and Jascha Heifetz. But we will not find names like Bronisław Huberman, Jacques Thibaud or Fritz Kreisler. Instead, we find several artists who, while no less accomplished than those superstars, did not enjoy the same celebrity status in the publicity-driven world they lived in, a world we still live in today. Rather, they were typically younger men (yes, all men), often if not always of the same nationality as the composers they championed, artists to whose careers a world première by a prominent contemporary composer could give a decisive boost. Thus, Samuel Dushkin's principal claim to fame, throughout his long life, was his association with Stravinsky, just as Louis Krasner was known, above all, for giving the first performances of both the Berg and the Schoenberg concertos. Zoltán Székely, whose solo career got off to a very promising start in the 1920s and 1930s, changed course when he joined the New Hungarian String Quartet and for decades he was better known as a chamber musician than as a soloist. Szymanowski's violin concertos were premièred by the composer's friend and fellow countryman Paweł Kochański, Hindemith's by Ferdinand Hellmann, a concertmaster of the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam (we have to note that Székely also served as concertmaster there for a short time),



Prokofiev's by a French violinist named Robert Soetens. Britten's Violin Concerto was premièred by a Spanish violinist named Antonio Brosa, whose performance at Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic under John Barbirolli launched his international career, according to his biography. Karl Amadeus Hartmann's *Concerto funebre*, which has been receiving an increasing amount of attention lately, was premièred in St. Gallen, Switzerland, by Karl Neracher, the concertmaster of the local orchestra.

None of this is to imply that any of these artists were in any way inferior to their colleagues with wider name recognition, but it also needs to be stressed that many of the universally acclaimed violin gods were happy to stick to the classics, leaving contemporary music to those who had a special ambition in that field. Therefore, when critics bemoan what they perceive as a gulf between composers and audiences, they should also address the gulf between composers and certain performers, who did not help the cause of new music as much as they might have. This is not to deny a performer's right to focus on what they do best, whether it is old or new, it is only to point out that the concertos under discussion were written at a time when artistic paths diverged, and specialization became the norm.

If we compare this situation to the nineteenth century, we find that even then, celebrity violinists did not always take to new works immediately: the Brahms concerto was premièred by Joseph Joachim, certainly a celebrity, while it took somewhat longer for the Dvořák, Tchaikovsky or Sibelius concertos to become part of the repertoire of the major stars. The difference is that in the twentieth century, violinists like Dushkin, Krasner or Székely took an active role in approaching the great composers and actually *commissioning* the works, creating what was clearly a "win-win" situation. As Krasner told Berg:

If you undertake to write a Violin Concerto, it certainly will have to be a very serious, deliberate and communicative work for the violin – for the violin is a lyrical and songful instrument which I know you love. Think of what it would mean for the whole Schoenberg Movement if a new Alban Berg Violin Concerto should succeed in demolishing the antagonism of the "cerebral, no emotion" cliché and argument.⁸

It is significant that Krasner thought it was a concerto, of all things, that could bring about the desired breakthrough for twelve-tone music, and if one may suspect that there was something self-serving in the argument, there was more than a little general truth in it. A violin concerto *had* to be emotional, and, in the case of Berg, history proved Krasner right, since the Berg became a universal staple of the violin repertoire (even though it remained a special case and probably did not fulfill Krasner's prediction that it would "demolish" anti-twelve-tone prejudices). Also, Krasner's argument holds true for all modernists, twelve-tone or otherwise, who turned to the concerto genre in the 1930s: the glamour of a virtuoso soloist could not help but increase the attention these composers gained from the public, and the need for "melodies" and classical structures, that, by necessity, went with the choice of genre, was not too high a price to pay and certainly did not force the composers to make any undue concessions to the public taste.

There were two violinists on anyone's short list of superstars, who premièred new concertos in the 1930s: Joseph Szigeti and Jascha Heifetz. These two artists, who rate individual chapters in

⁸Louis KRASNER, "The Origins of the Alban Berg *Violin Concerto*." *Alban Berg Studies 2* (Vienna: Universal, 1981), 107–117. Quoted in Anthony POPE, *Berg: Violin Concerto*. Cambridge Music Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27.



every reference book on famous violinists, are sometimes described as polar opposites. For instance, Harald Eggebrecht in his book *Große Geiger* [Great violinists] calls, in the same sentence, Szigeti a “musician’s and composer’s violinist” and Heifetz the “presumably pure virtuoso.”⁹ Szigeti, Bartók’s friend, sonata partner and the dedicatee of the First Rhapsody (BB 94a), premièred the Violin Concerto by Ernest Bloch in December 1938, with the Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of Dimitri Mitropoulos. He reprised it with Willem Mengelberg and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra on 9 November 1939, less than eight months after Zoltán Székely premièred the Bartók concerto in the same venue with the same orchestra and conductor. (Both performances, Székely’s Bartók and Szigeti’s Bloch, are available as recorded live.) Bloch’s grandiose, 36-minutes long concerto has been described by the composer himself as being inspired by native American melodies, but as the work’s analyst Joshua Friedlander has recently shown,¹⁰ the quotes are not direct, and are combined with other (French, German and Jewish) influences, reflecting the complex background of this Swiss-born resident of the United States. The indirect nature of the folk influence seems to point to a certain parallel with Bartók’s assimilation of Eastern European folk elements, although the very big difference is that unlike Bartók, Bloch was not an ethnomusicologist and he did not base his transformations of his folk-music sources, whatever their origin, on the scholarly analysis of a large corpus of melodies, but used very subjective, yet suggestive, approximations instead.

Bloch is not an easy composer to place within the conventional narrative of modernism vs. conservatism within twentieth-century music, which may be a sign that there is a fundamental problem with that conventional narrative in the first place. Certainly not atonal and avoiding the kinds of harmonies that have been called “dissonant” in Bartók’s music, he at the same time expressed new feelings and discovered new violinistic and orchestral timbres. Exactly one year after the Bloch premièred, and once again in Cleveland, Jascha Heifetz played the first performance of William Walton’s Violin Concerto under the direction of Artur Rodziński.

Harald Eggebrecht’s assessment about the fundamental differences between Szigeti and Heifetz seems to be borne out by the respective concertos they premièred. It is also striking that there was no transference among the various violinists and their repertoires: the violinists associated with one or the other work on our list hardly ever played another work from the list. We have not heard of Dushkin playing Berg or Krasner, Stravinsky. This is, to some extent, unsurprising, given the deep ideological divisions that separated the various stylistic orientations at the time, yet it also reminds us of the fact that the performers participated in, and reinforced, those ideological divisions. It also reminds us that what we perceive today as *the history of twentieth-century music* is in reality a mosaic of many separate “micro-histories.” It was only in the early 2000s that the “concertos of the 1930s” began to be perceived as a group that one can consider together – by Gil Shaham no less, one of the unquestioned violinist superstars of our time, who has written an

⁹Harald EGGBRECHT, *Große Geiger: Kreisler, Heifetz, Oistrach, Mutter, Hahn & Co.* (München: Piper, 2000), 122.

¹⁰Joshua FRIEDLANDER, “The Cultural Influences of Ernest Bloch’s Violin Concerto” (D.M. Diss., Florida State University, 2015).



article about the phenomenon in *The Strad* magazine and embarked on a major concert and recording project devoted to it. To date, Shaham has released two volumes of “Violin Concertos of the 1930s” on CD: the first, a double album, contains works by Barber, Hartmann, Berg and Britten; the second volume consists of the Prokofiev Second Concerto and the Bartók.¹¹

After this very sketchy, obviously incomplete and grossly arbitrary survey of the 1930s concertos, we have to come back to Bartók and try to situate his concerto within the group of its contemporaries. The great stylistic differences notwithstanding, it is not surprising to find that, just like his colleagues, Bartók *had* to start with a big melody and avail himself of the framework of sonata form in order to ensure the diversity in character that the genre called for. Most definitely, he complied with Székely’s wish for a “real” concerto by fulfilling those requirements and did so to a greater degree than was the case in other genres. Bartók’s piano concertos, for instance, have much less in common with the nineteenth-century canon (perhaps because the piano was his own instrument while the violin was not); but the string quartets, too, while they are commonly said to constitute the most complete twentieth-century response to Beethoven, they go their own way in every respect. In the violin concerto, on the other hand, the constraints were too powerful to avoid. The piano could be treated “percussively” in a concerto, but the violin could not. It is a testament to the range of possibilities in twentieth-century music that Bartók, Berg, Bloch, Britten, Hartmann, Hindemith, Prokofiev, Schoenberg and Szymanowski all found ways – different ways in each case – to reconcile observance of these constraints with expressions of each composer’s own, unmistakable, artistic personality.

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¹¹Shaham’s article appeared in *The Strad* magazine on 26 February 2014. He also speaks about the topic in a video interview: https://youtu.be/ge1xB_y4kJc (accessed 10 September 2017).

