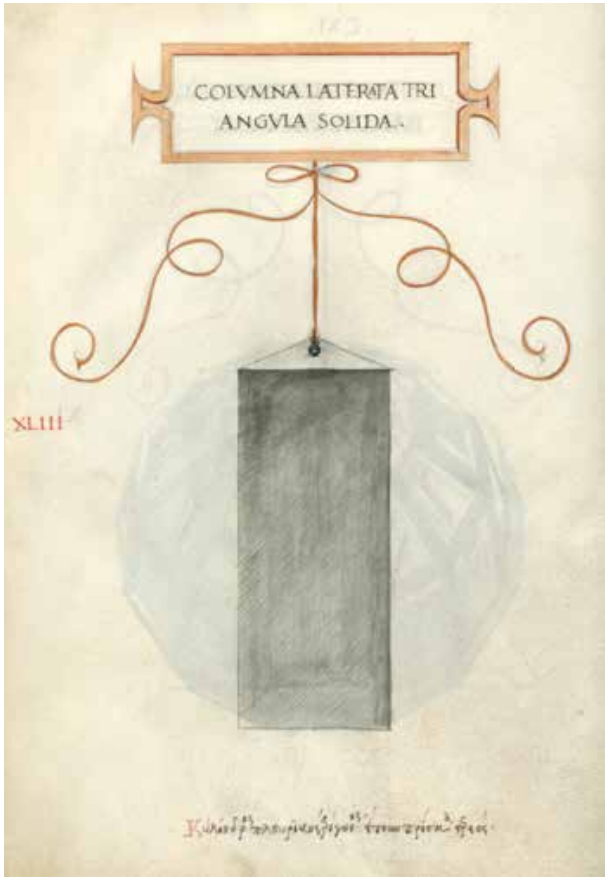

Leonardo da Vinci (zugeschrieben), Columna laterata triangula solida

Gavin Plumley

Links to the Past, Thoughts for the Future

Continuing a Musical Tradition

Human Concerns

Studying the lives and works of composers can be a frustrating task. There are many gaps in the information left behind, particularly as history becomes more distant: autograph scores are lost; letters are left undated; and musicians rarely prove reliable. We might think that dealing with a work from 1935 would provide an easier task, given the availability of technology, both then and now. But when faced with a composer such as Alban Berg, a man obsessed with codes and ciphers, writing music that followed an abstruse and highly involved compositional technique, things are never what they seem.

The story of Berg's Violin Concerto, his last completed work, has an accepted and often repeated form. American violinist Louis Krasner saw the composer's opera *Wozzeck* in New York in 1931 and, having been overwhelmed by the experience, decided to commission a violin concerto from Berg, which he thought could 'break down the prejudice against 12-tone compositions as being rigidly intellectual and devoid of human concerns, which was the opposite of the truth'. Krasner approached Berg in February 1935 and the composer really had no choice but to accept, given that his second opera *Lulu* was still in its inception and the valuable royalties from *Wozzeck* were beginning to dry up, following the advent of the culturally proscriptive Nazis in Germany.

Then, as the accepted account continues, Manon, the daughter of Alma Mahler and architect Walter Gropius, died of polio on 22 April. Her death provided the necessary inspirational spark for Berg's Violin Concerto, which he dedicated 'to the memory of an angel'. It was completed in short score that July at Berg's Waldhaus

in Carinthia, before he wrote out the full orchestral version. And unlike the third act of *Lulu*, the Violin Concerto was finished by the time Berg died at the end of 1935, the tragic result of an abscess caused by an insect sting he had suffered that summer. That, at least, is the traditional account of the genesis of Berg's Violin Concerto for Louis Krasner, who gave the premiere at the 1936 ISCM Festival in Barcelona, as well as several subsequent performances.

On the surface, Berg's music corroborates such a reading, with Manon's story – birth, life, illness and death – seemingly adumbrated by the work's two bipartite movements. The arrival of Bach's chorale 'Es ist genug' at the end of the second movement, carefully derived from the final four notes of Berg's 12-tone row, provides a lament. And it caps a work whose manifest subjectivity, quivering here as lyrical regret, trumpeting there as outspoken grief, suggests, as Berg's pupil and confidant Theodor Adorno wrote about the *Lyrische Suite*, that this is also a 'latent opera'.

Performances of the Violin Concerto certainly provoke passionate responses and skilfully answer Krasner's wish to 'break down the prejudice against 12-tone compositions'. Part of the work's success is rooted in its tone row, which not only features the first four notes of the Bach chorale, but also contains an ingenious alternation of triads, both major and minor, providing the quasi-tonal basis for the Concerto. But just as this row spawns highly complex variations across the two movements, so the work's programme is much more involved than it first appears, as revealed when we look beyond the published score and into Berg's sketches and correspondence.

The final chorale, for instance, may suggest a memorial, but Berg had already decided to include a set of chorale variations in the Concerto by March 1935, a month before Manon's death. And why, if the work was inspired by her tragic demise, are there so many references in the score to the number 23, which Berg derived numerologically from the letters in his surname and his full christening name, and the number ten, representing Hanna Fuchs, the inspiration for the *Lyrische Suite* and one of a handful of women with whom Berg had affairs during the last ten years of his life?

Looking further back in Berg's biography, the Concerto also contains an allusion to a Carinthian folksong, the rather risqué text of which refers to a girl called Mizzi, the same nickname as for the kitchen maid with whom Berg had fathered a child in 1902. And why did one of the sketches for the Concerto include 'frisch, fromm, fröhlich, frei' (fresh, devout, happy, free), the motto of the Turnerbund, the gymnastics association banned in Austria, due to its strong links with the Nazi Party? Taking all of this and the Bach quote into account, Berg's Violin Concerto throws up many conflicting clues, but as Chris Walton writes in his myth-debunking *Lies and Epiphanies*, 'none of this is mutually exclusive'.

Walton goes on to suggest some potentially dishonest reasoning for Berg's dedication of the work to Manon. The composer was doubtless eager to please her mother Alma, who had been loyal to Berg for many years, not least when she was one of the *postillons d'amour* during his affair with Hanna, the sister of Alma's husband Franz Werfel. After Manon's death, a truly tragic event in Alma's life and no doubt reminding her of the death in 1907 of her and Mahler's daughter Maria Anna ('Putzi'), she wrote emotionally bullying letters to Berg and his wife, asking how they could have abandoned her in her hour of need. The Violin Concerto, dedicated to Manon, would certainly have put an end to such concerns and, furthermore, persuaded Alma not to reveal the truth to Helene Berg about her husband's extramarital affairs.

And then there are the strange political details too, with links to Alma Mahler's wider Viennese circle and suggesting some opportunism on Berg's part. Alma, whose half-brother-in-law Richard Eberstaller was a prominent Nazi sympathizer, also had notable associations with the Austro-Fascist party, who were in power in 1935 and the leaders of which Berg may have been keen to appease, via Alma, in order to secure a more comfortable situation for himself. And if Austro-Fascism gave way to Nazism, as it eventually did in 1938, after Berg's death, he had once been disposed to working with them too, at least according to a 1933 letter to his wife, in which he says 'it would be a colossal triumph for me to be engaged by the Nazis'.

These less than appealing suggestions, perhaps underlined by Berg's inclusion of the Turnerbund's motto on the initial sketches for the Violin Concerto, have, however, been disputed, not least by Douglas Jarman, who notes that 'frisch, fromm, fröhlich, frei' is, in fact, reversed as 'frei, fröhlich, fromm, frisch'. This reiterates Berg's use of retrograde forms (often within palindromes) as acts of disavowal in his other scores. 'In Berg's music, such reversals', Jarman writes, 'are consistently associated with negation or denial'. But whatever version of events we accept, there is no doubt that Berg's Violin Concerto is far from one-dimensional in its aims.

And what about that quote from Bach? That could well be Berg declaring himself part of the grand tradition of Austro-German music, an arguably conservative gesture by a radical composer, further designed to placate those who might call his music 'degenerate'. But in looking back over that tradition, Berg's plural, equivocal work also reveals his anxieties at the time, when the culture he so dearly

loved – represented in effect by the figure of Manon Gropius – threatened to vanish in a handful of dust. Such thoughts reverberate through the evanescent sound of the violin's open strings in the final bars of the Concerto, derived from the first, third, fifth and seventh notes of the original row and recalling the same gesture from the opening of this beguiling, bewildering work.

Nature and Heroism

Berg's idol (and Alma's late husband) Mahler's First Symphony likewise begins with a simple musical gesture. Marked 'wie ein Naturlaut' (like a sound of nature), an A, the note on which an orchestra customarily tunes, sounds across several octaves, suggesting the dawn of a new world or, more specifically, the start of a new symphonic project. For a man who would repeatedly declaim that 'tradition is sloppiness', Mahler began his First Symphony in the mid-1880s by rubbing the slate clean. And yet, like Berg's Violin Concerto, this First Symphony has clear links to the past, perhaps even to Bach, given that the majority of the music was written in Leipzig.

More obvious associations emerge, however, when the opening of Mahler's First Symphony is compared to the beginning of the last of Beethoven's symphonies, with its trembling hum and falling fourths. The choice of D minor as the tonic builds further links to that Beethovenian model and, certainly, Mahler follows his *per ardua ad astra* scheme, both here and in later symphonies. But what of the choral intervention in Beethoven's Ninth? Where has that gone? Mahler would later include many different voices in his symphonies, but what we have in the First Symphony is the mere suggestion of a voice, with the birds of the forest, chiefly a cuckoo, in the opening bars and various wordless passages from Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*.

As well as these musical elements, Mahler makes reference to various literary and visual sources, including Jean Paul's *Titan* and *Siebenkäs*, E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier* and a woodcut of a hunter's funeral by Schubert's friend Moritz von Schwind. After the first performances of the Symphony, the premiere having taken place in Budapest on 20 November 1889, Mahler removed these references, including the subtitle 'Titan'. He preferred the illusion of abstraction to the possible threat of critical indignation at the work's programmatic basis – Mahler had clearly learned his lessons from Bruckner's less-than-happy experiences in this regard – yet these elements still exist within the fabric of the First Symphony, just as with the many sources lurking behind Berg's Violin Concerto.

The first movement, in a kind of sonata form – extended introduction, repeated exposition, brief development and multifaceted recapitulation – uses 'Ging heut Morgen übers Feld' from the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* as its principal melodic material. The peppy nature of the tune is often threatened by darker forces, announced by distant trumpets during the introduction, though sunny triumph is guaranteed by the close and the second movement's Ländler, a bucolic spin on the minuet or scherzo structures of the Classical era, keeps us firmly outside, with the sun blazing down.

Death is, however, always present in Mahler's idylls and the third movement strikes a much darker note, even if tinged with irony. This is either a funeral in the manner of caricaturist Jacques Callot, the inspiration for E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Fantasiestücke*, or it may depict the animals in Moritz von Schwind's woodcut, as they carry the hunter to his grave. Such strange obsequies are accompanied by the sounds of Mahler's Jewish childhood, before he underlines the subjective nature of this music with a quotation from the lovelorn 'Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz', again from the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. Finally, the funeral procession drifts over the hill and into the distance.

Just as the first movement begins with a statement echoing the equivalent moment in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, so does the Finale. Mahler referred to this eruption as 'Inferno' and it takes 20 minutes of the greatest musical might for D major, the ultimate goal of the work – as in Beethoven's Ninth – to reign absolutely. When he came to write his Second Symphony, opening with another funeral march, Mahler said he was bearing to the grave 'the hero of my D major Symphony'. But perhaps the real hero of the First is Mahler himself, who brings together a vast range of musical and extra-musical impulses to create one riotous celebration in sound, thereby continuing and reforming the grand tradition within which he – and Berg after him – dared to stake a place.

Gavin Plumley is a writer and broadcast specializing in the music and culture of Central Europe. He appears frequently on the BBC and has written for newspapers, magazines and concert and opera programmes worldwide. Gavin is vice-president of the Gustav Mahler Society UK and will lead a complete survey of Mahler's songs at the 2017 Oxford Lieder Festival. He has also written widely about Berg's life and work and recently presented the *Lyrische Suite* on stage at Wigmore Hall, which was relayed live on the internet. Gavin is the commissioning editor of English-language programme notes for the Salzburg Festival.

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