

Walton - Violin & Viola Concertos (Kennedy) [1987]

Written by bluesever

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1. *Violin Concerto: 1. Andante comodo* 2. *Violin Concerto: 2. Vivo, con molto preciso* 3. *Violin Concerto: 3. Allegro moderato* 4. *Viola Concerto: 1: Andante tranquillo* 5. *Viola Concerto: 2: Presto capriccioso napolitana-Trio (Canzonetta)-Tempo I* 6. *Viola Concerto: 3: Vivace* Nigel Kennedy – violin, viola Royal Philharmonic Orchestra Andre Previn – conductor

Walton wrote three concertos for string instruments: the Viola Concerto (1929), the Violin Concerto (1939) and the Cello Concerto (1957). Of them Christopher Palmer has written, "Walton knew little or nothing of strings as a performer. Yet his three string concertos are amongst the finest written this century."

The Viola Concerto

It was Sir Thomas Beecham who suggested, in 1928, that Walton should write a Viola Concerto for Lionel Tertis. According to Susana Walton, writing in her book, *William Walton, Behind the Façade*, Walton was somewhat perplexed and wondered why Sir Thomas thought he should be able to write such a work. At the time Walton confessed that he knew little about the viola except that it made a rather awful sound! "The only piece of viola music he admired and knew was Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*, which he thought quite beautiful, although it was not highly thought of in those days." Nevertheless, Walton rose to the challenge and proceeded with the task, finishing his Viola Concerto at Amalfi. Alas, when he sent it to Tertis, the viola virtuoso sent it back by the next post declaring it too modern. Understandably, Walton was deeply hurt. He thought of transposing it so that it would become a violin concerto but Edward Clark at the BBC sent it to Hindemith in Germany. To Walton's delight, Hindemith accepted to play the Concerto.

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Musical politics then raised its ugly head. Hindemith's publisher, Willy Strecker, the London manager of Schott, wanted to launch Hindemith as a viola soloist (he was a marvellous player) at a Courtauld-Sargent concert. These concerts were extremely fashionable and very successful (each performance had to be given twice). When Strecker heard that Hindemith had instead agreed to play Walton's Concerto at a Henry Wood promenade concert at the Queen's Hall, he was furious. He wrote to Gertrude, Hindemith's wife: "Your husband should make himself harder to get. An appearance with Wood to play a concerto by a moderately gifted English composer - and that is what Walton is - is not a fitting debut. Wood's Promenade Concerts are like their conductor, himself, a worthy institution at which the playing is so-so and never a sensation of the sort I am hoping for."

Thankfully, Hindemith did play the Walton Viola Concerto, which he liked and again quoting Lady Walton, "Playing William's Concerto endeared Hindemith to the British public more than any number of Courtauld-Sargent concerts could have done." Walton later admitted that he had been much influenced by Hindemith's own Viola Concerto even 'borrowing' several bars.

The first performance at that Promenade Concert was not without its difficulties. Walton "offered to conduct himself, although he soon realised that this was a mistake. The orchestral parts were all wrong ... and there was practically no rehearsal time allowed for the Promenade Concerts in those days. The first rehearsal was a shambles ... he had to stay up all night to redo the parts, so he was not feeling his best next day (3rd October 1929). Anyhow, it delighted him to see how well the work went down.

"William used to say that Paul's technique was marvellous, but that his playing was brusque; he was a rough, no-nonsense player. He just stood up and played." Tertis was at this performance and later he sent a letter to Walton apologising for having turned the work down and that he would play it later. Tertis did so in Liège and then at Worcester where Walton met Elgar (in a lavatory as Lady Walton recalls). "Tertis didn't care much for William's work [nor did Elgar], and was heard to mutter that William had murdered the poor unfortunate instrument!"

Of the Viola Concerto, Christopher Palmer commented: "It was a work of such obvious mastery that it probably did even more than *Façade*, *Portsmouth Point* and the *Sinfonia Concertante* - all already behind him - to establish his place in the vanguard of contemporary English music. The concerto exceeded all these in emotional depth, richness and profusion of ideas and technical assurance. The viola is not an easy instrument for which to write an effective concerto. The violin is a multi-faceted personality and it can always ride on top of the orchestra. The luscious cantabile and expressive power of the cello can command attention at all times. But the viola is more introvert, a poet-philosopher, conspicuously lacking in brilliance of tone and ever liable to

be blotted out by an unheeding orchestra. Yet in Walton's Concerto we are never aware of any of these limitations ...

"... (For) the original version of the Viola Concerto [which can be heard in the recording made under the composer by William Primrose in 1946] ... the orchestra is literally that of Brahms: no harp, no percussion except timpani, no exotica of any kind. In 1962 Walton gave the orchestration a major overhaul, using double (rather than triple) woodwind, eliminating one trumpet and the tuba, and adding a harp."

Michael Kennedy has written that "The unobtrusive dramatic presence which Tovey discerned may well be attributed to the existence of an undisclosed emotional programme. The concerto is dedicated 'to Christabel' and probably records feelings engendered by Walton's unrequited passion for Christabel, Lady Aberconway (who remained a lifelong friend). But there is no need to know this to appreciate the lyrical melancholy and poetic longing at the heart of the music."

Kennedy goes on to describe the work thus: "Although Elgar himself disliked the work when he heard it at a Three Choirs Festival, it is nonetheless Elgar's Cello Concerto which is constantly recalled by the ways in which the solo instrument is allowed to achieve prominence. Walton, like Elgar, begins with a ruminative slow movement. The hallmarks of the composer's style can be identified: wide intervals, looping arabesques, and added-note minor-major diatonic harmony together with irregular and syncopated rhythmic patterns. The progress of the first movement is twice interrupted by faster dramatic outbursts. The scherzo flashes by, witty and epigrammatic, leaving the finale as the most substantial movement. Developing from the bassoons' hesitant initial theme, it builds to a fugal climax for the orchestra after which the soloist recapitulates the first movement's amorous principal subject with the finale's main theme as accompaniment. It is one of the most beautiful passages in all Walton's music."

The Violin Concerto

In 1936 Jasha Heifetz took Walton out to lunch in London and commissioned him to write a Violin Concerto for £300, a great honour from the greatest virtuoso of the day. Walton had actually been thinking of writing a piece for clarinet and violin that Benny Goodman and Joseph Szigeti had asked him to do when Spike Hughes, an old friend, introduced him to Heifetz. Lady Walton recalls: "William was delighted and accepted [Heifetz's commission]. It had been William Primrose, the viola player whom William had met at one of Alice's (Alice Wimborne) parties, who had suggested to Heifetz to contact William. The viola concerto was by now thought

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successful, and Heifetz was keen on having a work written especially for him."

"... As usual writing it gave him a lot of trouble [he had refused a lucrative offer to write music for a film of Shaw's Pygmalion to concentrate on the concerto - Honegger picked the commission up]. He said he did not know how to make the violin part elaborate enough, and therefore unworthy of Heifetz. In a panic, he thought he had better give it instead to Fritz Kreisler to play. Eventually he was satisfied that he had exhausted the possibilities of what one could do on a violin. Yet he always thought of it as a rather intimate piece, a bit like the Elgar concerto; as a matter of fact it is in the same key."

The concerto was originally intended for premiere at a British Council sponsored concert at the 1939 New York World Fair (along with other works requested from Bax, Bliss and Vaughan Williams) but when it was found that Heifetz could not play there, it was decided to postpone the first performance since Heifetz wanted exclusive playing rights of the work for two years. When Walton arrived in America he took the concerto to Heifetz who seemed more interested in planting in his garden. "He didn't even play the piece through," Walton told Lady Walton later, "although he did later jazz up the last movement a bit." "William tried to play it to him, but he couldn't get his fingers in the right places."

Walton and Heifetz worked further on the concerto, especially the third movement. When the task was completed Walton said, "I seriously advise all sensitive composers to die at the age of 37. I know I have gone through the first halcyon period, and I am just about ripe for my critical damnation." He need not have worried. The work's premiere was variously hailed as a "stirring performance of a work of character and quality ... personal, intense, direct, straightforward ... The use of the violin is felicitous, from soaring cantilena to brilliance."

Susana Walton goes on to relate - "William wasn't at the first performance, which took place in Cleveland, Ohio [on 7th December 1939 under Rodzinsky with, of course, Heifetz]. War had been declared by then and the house in South Eaton Place was bombed flat. There had earlier been a bomb scare, in the middle of which the score of the Violin Concerto had actually got lost. 'A pity it was ever found, really,' was William's wry comment. Heifetz's own copy of the score, complete with his bowing marks, was later lost in the Atlantic, sunk during a convoy crossing."

Walton conducted the first British performance in London on November 1st 1941 when Henry Holst was the soloist.

Substantial revisions to the orchestration were made in 1943. The concerto has a more substantial element of technical virtuosity than the earlier Viola Concerto.

Michael Kennedy comments: "Like the Viola Concerto, the Violin Concerto is a declaration of love, but this time without frustration. The 'dreaming' (*sognando*) opening theme sets the mood of a great work in which the pyrotechnical demands on the soloist are reconciled with music of ultimate poetical expressiveness. As in the earlier concerto, the first movement theme returns in the finale and the whole work has an Italianate warmth and languor, with the rowdier side of Italy surfacing in the tarantella scherzo."

The lady with whom Walton was in love was, of course, Alice Wimborne. Walton said, "Women have always been important to me ... and I've been very lucky. Alice Wimborne - very beautiful, intelligent, kind, very rich, a grand hostess, very musical ... she had all the virtues. A marvellous woman." Christopher Palmer writes, "Walton was blissfully in love as he worked on the concerto through the late 1930s and it is tempting to relate the solo violin's expression of radiant happiness to its unrivalled capacity for free-ranging lyricism for what someone once called instrumental *bel canto*. We like singing when we are happy."

Christopher Palmer picks up Michael Kennedy's point of Italianate writing. "It was the marvellous light he found overwhelming, the brilliant sunshine and vivid colours of the Mediterranean scene. This quality of light suffuses all Walton's later music - for example, the opera *Troilus and Cressida* and the Cello Concerto - written when he made his home in Ischia off the coast of Naples. Odd intimations of this 'Mediterraneanism' do occur in earlier Walton: in the Spanish stylisations of *Faade*, in the small-orchestra idyll called *Siesta*. But the first full-scale manifestation is surely to be found in the Violin Concerto, specifically in the orchestral textures of the finale's second subject, which shimmer like the blue of the summer sea; nor would the marvellously dreamy (*sognando* is a favourite Walton term) accompanied cadenza towards the end of the movement, with its succulently seductive consecutive 3rds in the solo instrument, be out of place in one of the sea- or sky-scapes in *Troilus and Cressida*. We might remark too in this connection the second movement's marking of '*Presto capriccioso alla napolitana*', and its '*Canzonetta*' trio. Both *napolitana* and '*canzonetta*' bear connotations of light Italian song, there are hints of tarantella, and Frank Howes, in his book on Walton, informs us that this movement was actually composed in Italy."

Heifetz recorded the concerto shortly after its premiere and then re-recorded it in 1950, when he was touring in England. For this recording, the composer was invited to conduct. Before the

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sessions commenced, he made substantial changes in the orchestration but did not alter either the violin part or the thematic material. --- musicweb-international.com

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