

CD REVIEW 83

REGER

Violin Concerto in A Op 101;
Two Romances for violin and small orchestra Op 50.

Tanja Becker-Bender (violin), Konzerthauseorchester,
Berlin – Lothar Zagrosek.

Hyperion CDA67892 (DDD) 74.39

What a truly magnificent concerto this is!

There has been many great violin concertos such as those by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bruch, Sibelius, Berg, Bartok and Shostakovich but there are also many great violin concertos which are ignored namely Khrennikov, Salomon, Helstead, Rissager, Emborg, Pijper, Bliss, Bax and John Veale.

There are some awful concertos as well and two are by British composers but they get played regularly, but the Reger does not.

There are also some very fine violinists such as Kreisler, Ricci, Heifetz, Ferras, Grumiaux, Milstein, Stern, Neveu, Oistrakh, Rostal, Hahn, Edith Peinemann, Ibragimova, Mordkovitch, Marcovici, Gil Shanhhan and Gidon Kremer.

There are some awful violinists as well but some are undeservedly popular. They are not worthy to be mentioned here.



Tanja Becker-Bender is a very good violinist indeed. I enjoyed her CD of the Paganini Caprices. She was born in Stuttgart and has won many awards and is also a fine chamber player. Lothar Zagrosek, the German conductor, needs no introduction; he is a constantly reliable musician.

Max Reger is pilloried. He was fat, a glutton and a heavy drinker. His music is too academic and bestrewn with contrapuntal techniques, rich chromaticism and too much like Bach are the main criticisms. The fact is that he was exceptionally talented and clever, adroit at modulations and some of his works are superb such as the Piano Concerto, the F sharp minor string quartet and his organ music is only second to Bach. He was brilliant at composing variations such as those by Mozart and Hiller.

He understood instruments and was a marvellous orchestrator. He was not a violinist and yet this

score is perfectly written for the instrument and his score is meticulously detailed as to bowing, strings to use etc.



He was born Johan Baptist Joseph Maximilian Reger in Bavaria on 19 March 1873. Among his many students was the conductor George Szell. Reger composed in many forms and was staggering prolific. Among his many organ works is a set of 52 Chorale Preludes. He died in 1917 of a heart attack.

Paul Hindemith said Reger was the last giant of music. "I am quite inconceivable without him" he said.

This Violin Concerto has been called a monster which is unfair. It lasts just under an hour; it is ferociously difficult but it is very great work. Its technical demands is the reason why many well-known violinists do not take it up and some are consequently abusive about it. Menuhin refused to play it as it was far too difficult. Does that mean that Tanja is a better violinist than Menuhin?

The opening movement is an allegro moderato beginning with a sumptuous theme first heard on the oboe. The extensive orchestral introduction is full of thematic material in glorious orchestration and is richly romantic. The second theme is tender and music of the soul. The violin part is often in thirds and sixths above the staff. The theme at figure 3 is totally sublime. Much of the music is lyrical but not tame, and the climaxes are riveting. Tanja's top notes are secure. At figure 9, there is a violin E on six leger lines. Beauty oozes in the section just before figure 11. The themes are developed in a masterly way. The viciously difficult passage just before figure 15 is nothing short of sensational. There is a majesty from figure 16 onwards, passionate music in a truly romantic and personal vein which is truly fantastic and you need the score to realise their power. The violin gymnastics are staggering.

The cadenza is a tour de force and is followed by a recapitulation of the gorgeous themes in a movement lasting about 27 and an half minutes.

The slow movement is in B flat with a theme to die for. The music positively glows. The themes are tender but neither weak nor mawkish. There are some exciting moments from figure 28 onwards. The violin never gets becalmed but there are hints at sadness, although the concerto never becomes a wallow in a movement of just over 15 minutes.



The finale is a delight and simply brilliant. The con bravura violin theme is very exciting but only appears three times. The second theme is an excellent contrast. No violin concerto has a more infectious and inspiring finale. Fourteen minutes of breathtaking magic!

There will be those who will say it is too long but when they are challenged with the length of a Mahler symphony have a different set of rules. I understand why violinists degrade this piece to hide the fact that they cannot play it

It diminishes them.

The balance is occasionally suspect and I would have liked even more fire in the finale but these are minor points in a truly remarkable music experience.

The two Romances are very beautiful pieces lovingly played as they should be.

I think this concerto is the best violin concerto ever and I am not ashamed to say so.

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