

Electric Violin Concerto

program notes

As a young violinist growing up in the 70's, I was raised on the classics—Led Zeppelin, Hendrix, the Beatles—as well as the other classics my teachers at Juilliard were hoping I was studying. One day I looked in the Schwann catalogue, which lists every classical recording available, and realized there were pages and pages of different versions of each major violin concerto. I thought, who in their right mind would buy my version when they could get Heifetz or Milstein or Perlman? I decided at that moment that my path would be different. I loved the music of the classical repertoire, but I noticed that all those great concertos, from Vivaldi and Mozart to Brahms and Tchaikovsky, were all written in the popular style of their day, and great as they are, I wanted to write and play music my non-Juilliard friends would like, music that would speak to kids raised on rock and TV and film scores, the music on the radio, the jazz/rock/pop music of my generation. So even before I graduated from Juilliard I took a left turn and was playing in jazz clubs. I joined a rock band and realized I needed a different kind of violin. Over the course of several years and several bands I developed an electric violin which essentially functioned as an electric guitar, with six strings (2 lower strings than a violin) and the ability to use the amps and effects available to electric guitarists. Most of all, I learned to play and improvise in the rock, pop, jazz, folk and other non-classical styles all around us.

To me, the electric violin, especially with distortion, sings with a warmth and texture not available with the acoustic violin. It's obvious parallel is the electric guitar, but it also reflects all the husky vocal character of saxophones, trumpets and blues singers. The electric violin is to the acoustic violin what a blues or rock singer is to an opera singer.

Many of the great violin concertos were written by violinists such as Paganini, Vivaldi and Wieniawski who created idiosyncratic works which featured their particular strengths and techniques—pieces which were often very difficult for other violinists but which were, for the most part, natural for themselves to play. My models were the concertos I loved most—Sibelius, Prokofief, Brahms, Tchaikovsky. These amazing works are pieces which ought to speak to every generation. The problem is that the voice is not a voice which kids recognize and the language is not really their dialect. It can be understood, certainly, but it isn't natural for a young audience. I wanted to write something which might parallel what Gershwin did with Rhapsody in Blue: a piece which was interesting and involving but which was full of accessible melodies and contemporary vernacular, in his case jazz, in mine, rock. In this concerto, my goal was no less than to create a large work which mirrors the classic works of the repertoire, but in a contemporary vernacular idiom.

The concerto is in the classic form: 3 movements—fast, slow, fast. The 1st movement, as in the classic model, is the most substantial, with a great deal of development and a cadenza as the centerpiece. There are 2 contrasting musical ideas, one a fast, aggressively driving rhythmic motif, restless, earthbound and full of outbursts, and the other a more spiritual, upwardly arching, slow, lyrical melody. In the recap this yin and yang is married joyfully together, the lyrical melody flowing over the driving rhythm, but the restlessness pervades and the movement ends with a distinct sense of non-resolution. The 2nd movement is a peaceful little melody in a passacaglia form, like a theme and variations, with the addition of a Zappa-like bridge. It features a solo cello from the orchestra. The 3rd movement is a lighter dance-like piece in 11/8 with a contrasting African-influenced middle section. I use the acoustic violin for it's folk-like character. There is a great deal of improvisation in the solo part and a few opportunities for improvisation from the orchestra. The orchestration includes 3 saxophones and features a drummer to accentuate the sense of groove, which is central to the entire work.

--Tracy Silverman, Nashville, TN, March 2002