

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)

Complete Violin Sonatas

Chamber music features prominently in the output of Alfred Schnittke, not least for violin and piano. While his output for the medium covers the extent of his composing, almost all of these works were directly inspired by violinists Mark Lubotsky and Gidon Kremer.

It was Lubotsky who, in November 1963, gave the première of the *First Violin Concerto* (1957). Although that piece is frequently uncharacteristic, Schnittke yet retained it as the official starting-point of his catalogue, describing what followed as a wrong direction only righted with the *First Violin Sonata* (1963) that Lubotsky first performed in April 1964. By this time, Schnittke was incorporating elements of serial (twelve-note) technique into his works, though its use is never dogmatic. The sonata is among the most engaging of his earlier pieces, whether in its original guise or as the *Sonata for Violin and Chamber Orchestra* from 1969.

The opening movement is essentially a prelude to what follows, with the violin sounding an expressive theme that takes on greater force at the piano's insistent prompting. The music gains in intensity, before an equivocal close with violin *pizzicati* against moody piano chords. The second movement starts with capricious interplay between the two instruments that makes way for a lyrical violin theme over a tripping accompaniment. The initial music returns more reticently, presaging a speculative rhythmic motion on the piano that quickly gains in energy and which brings an impassioned recall of the lyrical theme in its wake. An unexpected piano cadence leads directly into the third movement, in which the violin unfolds a long-breathed melodic line against an ironic piano accompaniment, heading to a brief climax before fading out in the violin's highest register. The finale then takes off with a propulsive idea on piano to which the violin responds with alacrity. A transition leads into a new idea, strutting and shot-through with an acerbic irony. The music winds down before the violin suddenly alights on a held chord, the piano responding with stark

interjections before a quizzical recall of the initial idea brings the piece to an uncertain close.

The success of this collaboration led to Schnittke writing both the *Second Violin Concerto* (1966) and the *Second Violin Sonata* (1968) for Lubotsky. Given its première in February 1969, the latter work brings to a head the disruptive manner that had been growing apace in the composer's music. While its subtitle *Quasi una sonata* has clear historical connotations (notably with the two *Op. 27* piano sonatas by Beethoven), the sonata is marked by an often violent confrontation between the instruments that cuts across the single movement and denies any attempt at a more integrated whole. Although it may be written against the medium, something that Schnittke himself seemed to acknowledge when he transcribed the piece as a *Trio Sonata* for chamber orchestra in 1988, the sonata remains one of his most distinctive works and continues to be among the most performed.

An angry piano chord is followed by a brusque response from the violin, the two separated by a silence that is itself a vital constituent of this work. From here the music unfolds by means of a wide range of gestures on both instruments, the violin in particular deploying the gamut of technical and expressive means at its disposal while the piano part ranges from the considered to the dismissive. The earlier stages are more concerned with finding common ground between these relative extremes, the violin's contribution gradually taking on a rhetorical force that the piano can only counter with its increasingly aggressive response. Mid-way through the piece the piano has a cadenza-like passage of *tremolo* chords spread across the keyboard, the violin's lyrically sustained response bringing a measure of rapport between the two instruments. It proves to be short-lived as a capering motion takes hold of both, contrasted with melodic snatches of an almost Classical poise, as the tension builds with increasing intent to a climax in which the piano chord from the opening underpins a seething response from the violin. This at length

collapses into a piano cluster, with the violin left musing anxiously as the music fades to a close.

During the 1970s Schnittke came into contact with the violinist Gidon Kremer, for whom he wrote a succession of major works including the *Third* and *Fourth Violin Concertos* (1978 and 1984), and the *Fifth Concerto Grosso* (1991). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, he settled in Hamburg where Lubotsky (who had emigrated two decades before) was also living. Their collaboration was renewed with the *Third Violin Sonata* (1994), of which Lubotsky gave the première at a festival in Moscow marking Schnittke's sixtieth birthday. By this time the composer (who had suffered two major strokes in 1985 and 1991) had evolved an inward and austere idiom in which more is suggested than is actually stated. The present sonata is no exception, though it is worth pointing out that behind the music's inscrutable façade, the expressive focus is as intent as with either of the earlier sonatas.

The first movement is again a prelude to what follows, though here the interplay of violin and piano is of the starkest. The second movement contrasts ideas of a respectively lively and reflective nature, with the difference between them gradually though discreetly explored as the music unfolds. A sudden and unexpected pause brings about the third movement, typical of the later composer in its inward intensity and sparseness of texture allied to a melodic directness that is the more affecting in context. Towards the close the piano is largely reduced to a discreet chordal underpinning of the violin's *cantilena*, interrupted by lunging gestures that launch the finale. What follows here is as oblique a rounding-off as could be imagined, the alternately

forceful and speculative gestures coalescing into a brief culmination that leaves questions of formal and expressive closure pointedly unresolved.

Surprising as it may seem, the *Third Sonata* shares stylistic parallels with the *Violin Sonata* Schnittke worked on during 1954-5 and which was only relocated and performed after his death. Although there are only two movements, the work does not seem incomplete; rather the movements complement each other in their reticent demeanour. The influence of Shostakovich (whose *Tenth Symphony* had made a notable impact on the younger composer) is often detectable, yet there is an individual input suggestive of a real musical personality in the making.

The first movement commences with a ruminative theme for the violin over a flowing piano accompaniment. This takes on a greater though unforced intensity as it proceeds, soon arriving at a rhythmically more active idea whose main elements are teasingly exchanged between the instruments. There follows an inventive development of the musical material, with the rhythmic profile of the latter theme bringing about a heightened reprise in which the opening theme is recalled with especial poignancy on the way to a searching close. The second movement opens with a pensive theme on piano, to which the violin replies with a thoughtfulness that suggests a folk-music inflection. There follow three variations – the first brisk and nonchalant in manner, the second limpid and elegant in tonal shading, the third lively and incisive in rhythmic profile – before the theme returns subtly varied to round off the piece.

Richard Whitehouse



Carolyn Huebl

Violinist Carolyn Huebl is in demand as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral leader. She is currently on the faculty of the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University. Since her appearance with the Detroit Symphony at the age of seventeen, she has performed as a soloist with orchestras and given recitals throughout the United States, as well as in Argentina and Canada, winning critical acclaim. As violinist with the Blakemore Trio, she has performed in important chamber series across the country, including at New York's Merkin Hall. Formerly Assistant Principal Second Violin with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, she often appears as concertmaster with the IRIS Chamber Orchestra.



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Carolyn Huebl, Violin
Mark Wait, Piano

Mark Wait

Mark Wait is Dean and Professor at the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University. In 1989 he was the pianist in a performance at Alice Tully Hall of Elliott Carter's *Double Concerto for Piano, Harpsichord, and Two Chamber Orchestras*, conducted by Robert Craft. In 1993 he recorded Igor Stravinsky's solo works for piano as part of Robert Craft's recorded cycle of the composer's complete works, and his recording of Stravinsky's *Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra* with Robert Craft and the Orchestra of St Luke's is available on Naxos (8.557506). Most recently, his recording with the Nashville Symphony of Elliott Carter's *Piano Concerto* (Naxos 8.559151) was nominated for a 2004 Grammy award for Best Classical Album, and Wait was a 2004 Grammy Nominee for Best Instrumental Solo Performance with Orchestra for the same recording.

