

Why does one write a Concerto?

By Hans Gal

Hans Gal, at present a lecturer at Edinburgh University, is both composer and musicologist. Born in 1890 in Austria, he took his doctorate in Vienna in 1913. Besides his orchestral work, of which several have been heard at Bournemouth under Mr. Schwarz, he has written operas, songs and chamber music.

He won the Austrian State Prize in 1915 for his first symphony, and later became lecturer in counterpoint, harmony and musical form at the University of Vienna.

The first English performance of his 'cello concerto, with Anthony Pini as soloist, is to be given at the Winter Gardens on April 12th. This article on concerto composition has been written specially for the first issue of Winter Gardens Society Magazine by Dr. Gal.

A composer of our time, who by a stroke of ill-luck has ventured upon writing a concerto, finds himself in a quandary. He is involved in an uphill struggle, both against the rooted habits of a public that expects a concerto to be one of its popular favourites, and against the reluctance of famous, well-established soloists to invest any of their precious time in the study of a new, untried work, the possible success of which is always a matter for speculation.

The virtuoso, who appears in a symphonic concert, is expected to draw audiences. If he is famous enough, he will probably be able to pull through even an unknown work. Experience shows, however, that he does it only in very exceptional cases. Why should he take an undeniable risk, quite apart from the additional toil and trouble? Much better to stick to his old, well-tryed, reliably effective repertoire. It is different with a gifted young artist who is still at the beginning of his career, and who would have nothing to lose but perhaps much to win by performing a new work in which he is not in close competition with his more famous colleagues. He would perhaps be much more inclined to take the plunge. Very rarely, however, a management is adventurous enough to accept the double risk of introducing an unknown artist together with an unknown work. It is a vicious circle, as one will easily understand. And how difficult to break!

There is, in addition, another complication. The number of concertos the public seems to have accepted as desirable warhorses for a soloist is depressingly small. These favourites are being played up and down the country and all over the world all the year round. There are still more than a dozen pianoforte concertos that may be regarded as popular ; there are hardly more than half a dozen violin concertos of a similar appeal ; but' cello players can go a long way with two concertos, Haydn's and Dvorak's, to which may be added as a second choice Boccherini's, Schumann's and Elgar's. And if a violoncellist takes from a dusty shelf, say, Saint-Saëns's, Lalo's, D'Albert's concertos, some people will probably sniff at his choice. It is difficult to imagine how things can go on like this, though it makes the life of violoncello players comparatively uncomplicated.

In view of all this it seems amazing that concertos are still being written. Why does a composer do it?

This question I can only answer from my own, personal point of view. But I have reasons to assume that some of my colleagues have similar feelings. A concerto, to my mind, is one of the most thrilling, most fascinating problems of composition, a problem of form, style and expression that demands the utmost experience and technical resourcefulness. This problem has been solved by the great composers in different ways, but its essence remains the same everywhere and whatever the style



Anthony Pini

of the music may be: how to arrive at an ideal balance of symphonically-conceived music and the relaxed playfulness of a brilliant solo part as the central, commanding feature. It is possible to dodge the main difficulty by ignoring one of these two main factors, but the result is never entirely satisfying in an artistic sense. On the one hand, there are concertos of the older, purely virtuosic type, which are rather extended solos supported by an orchestral accompaniment, with some *tutti*s thrown in for better weight. Even Chopin's two beautiful pianoforte concertos belong to this category. This type of concerto is too much focussed on virtuosity and ornamental elegance to give full scope to the music as such, as a pure substance: there is too much rambling, and the solo seems to behave like a spoiled princess with a humble, self-effacing retinue. But aesthetically the opposite proceeding seems to me hardly preferable: a symphony with a solo instrument *obligato*—of which there are frequent examples in contemporary music. This conception of a concerto, to my mind, contradicts the very meaning of a type of composition, the purpose of which is to give a noble setting to a spirited, fascinating individuality on the platform.

The peculiar position of the solo part implies a most stimulating element of improvisatory spontaneity, the most characteristic instance of which is the *cadenza* in the classical concerto, but which practically pervades the whole structure. However closely built the musical substance may be, there must always be sufficient scope and time for the graceful or expressive or dreamy or purely brilliant exuberance of that capricious character who is the centre of events, and who is in danger of losing all his glamour whenever he becomes a mere part of the orchestra. The success of a concerto depends, more than on any other condition, upon whether the composer has been able to make this central character stand out as an interesting, original figure, and whether he has succeeded in giving his music the peculiar shape and texture suitable for this purpose.

Having spoken about dodging before, I may as well confess that I have myself committed an act of dodging in the above explanations: I have discreetly bypassed even the mentioning of my Violoncello Concerto, the impending performance of which in Bournemouth has caused the Editors of the Winter Gardens Society magazine to ask me for an introductory article. Well, the composer is subjected to certain inhibitions with respect to talking about his own work. Much as he would desire the public to share his own favourable opinion, he definitely prefers to leave the pleading to his music without further comment.

I was unable to attend the first performance of this work in Göteborg, some months ago, so I am most anxious not to miss it at Bournemouth. The magic event of hearing for the first time in reality, what so far had only existed as an act of one's imagination, remains an indescribably exciting experience, however often one has gone through it.

[*Winter Gardens Society Magazine*, No. 1. Bournemouth, 1954, pp. 9-11]