

In the Beginning: Concertino for Viola & Chamber Orchestra

By Alexandra Lehmann

Orchestration:

Solo viola

Woodwind: flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon

Brass: French horn, trumpet

Percussion: timpani, cymbal

Strings: violin 1, violin 2, viola, cello, double-bass

Why a viola concertino based on *Bereshit* (Genesis)?

I wanted to compose for my beloved viola. Having had chamber music for woodwind published by Forton Music, it was time to focus on my instrument. However, not merely the viola as musical object; but the viola as a presence in my personal history. My viola.

So where did this bring me? To the beginning...to the support of my family and the inspiration from my viola teachers. There would be a movement dedicated to, and reflective of, each family member. As a viola player, I have been shaped by the teachings of Christos Michalakakos (Conservatoire de St-Maur, France), Prof. David Chen (Rubin Academy of Jerusalem, Israel), and Michael Beeston (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

My musical language is a fusion of the cultures and sounds of my life; inflected with the airs of Scotland from my childhood; the musical heritage of France where I lived as an adolescent; the viola cannon, from Bach's *Suites* and *Sonatas and Partitas* to Brahms' *Sonatas for Viola & Piano*, Walton's *Concerto for Viola*; and the Jewish chants from the synagogue.

But why *In the Beginning*? 'In the Beginning' is the literal translation of the first book ('Genesis') from the *Torah*, i.e. the five books of Moses. Although not particularly religious, and certainly very unsure of what God is (but convinced that we have no idea of what it is, if there is something), I am interested in religious concepts and feel a deep connection with Judaism. So I wanted to go right back to the start: the creation of the world in the original Hebrew language, which I would endeavour to translate not only literally, but according to my interpretation. And I wanted to express this understanding through music with a viola concertino.

1st Movement: 'Day One: Day and Night'

This movement is dedicated to my mother, aka Manou for her grand-children, for it all begins with our mothers and I would not be where I am without her support.

Once I was asked what was my favourite chord. After a few seconds' thought, I answered the open strings of the viola. I love that 'chord': from the depth of the C to the slightly pleading A, it is my idea of absoluteness, core. The open perfect 5th is also how I imagine 'God': perfect yet incomplete, assertive though void. So, I decided God would be represented by the perfect 5th, with variations according to the musical discourse.

The movement, and Concertino, starts with a high harmonic A on the solo viola; a pure,

uncorrupted sound, joined by non-vibrato flute and 1st violins; to recreate that initial existence of 'the skies and the earth'. But the pureness of creation is abruptly thrashed by the 'confusion' on Earth, with furious semiquavers on cello and double-bass in 5/4 interrupted by aggressive and dissonant intervals in violas. The bassoon has descending scalar lines with repeated, accented quavers; a motif that returns at ominous moments throughout the Concertino; because life is scarred by confusion.

The strings build-up in their chaotic fury, whilst the bassoon becomes more and more insistent; until the oboe (similar to the Jewish *shofar*) announces the presence of God over the madness below. Finally, 'the spirit of God hovers over the face of the waters' and all is calm in 12/8 as the viola, the spirit of God, descends over the seas.

Perfect fifth on the French horn as there is 'light', where the solo viola plays *bariolages* and the flute and clarinet ascending, chromatic rays whilst the trumpet plays a triumphant, bright tune.

As there was chaos followed by order; so 'God [differentiates] between the light and the darkness'. Always these opposites, of which Jews are reminded during the Saturday evening celebration of *Havdala* when we look at the shadow of our fingers on our palm to remind us that life is joy and sorrow. To represent 'darkness' the solo viola and upper strings play harmonics over eerie *col legno* off-beat lower strings and a descending double-bass into the depths.

And so 'light [God called] 'day' and the darkness he called 'night", ending the 1st movement with the sounds of mysterious night and glorious day.

2nd Movement: 'Day Two: The Heavens'

Dedicated to my late Grande-Tante Yvonne, who passed away at the ripe age of 107. Yvonne was an exceptional woman who safe-guarded with great courage her husband and children when they fled from Nazi Paris and hid in Occupied France. Yvonne was one of these rare people who, despite the horrors of humanity during WWII, only saw the good in others. I have never met someone so positive. If there are 'Heavens', Yvonne will be there.

The movement starts with the unsettled and brooding 'waters' (*tremolo* strings *con sordini*, threatening cymbals and timpani, flutter-tonguing flute); when God says "There will be an expanse [spreading] within the waters". Cue solo viola, which starts with double-stopping in close intervals and gradually 'expands' separating the 'waters' of the lower strings from the ascending flute, violins and clarinet.

The *shofar*-oboe is joined by the brilliant trumpet and heralding French horn in perfect 5ths, leading to 'the waters below the expanse'. Whilst the viola continues with double-stopping in sequence (12/8), the violas and cellos play swaying quavers below a lyrical bassoon melody. Once again the French horn and oboe play perfect fifths, leading to the 'waters above the expanse' where the clarinet and flute playfully take the bassoon's melody over *pizzicato* upper strings to represent the pitter patter of rain.

Finally, we are told that 'God called the expanse Heavens'. I like to imagine it as a parallel world;

after all scientists have talked about parallel universes, so why not? The double-stopping viola becomes hymn-like chords with a simple, devotional French horn chant.

3rd Movement: 'Day Three: the Seas, the Land, the Vegetation

This movement is for my brother, Fabrice, who is concerned for what we are doing to our world and works for sustainable development.

'And God [oboe perfect fifths] said Let the waters under the Heavens line into place'. Strings, timpani and cymbals rumble and roll until they fall into 'line'. God calls them 'Seas', when the solo viola plays a soaring melody over the calmer waters.

Then there is contrast. The 'dry [is called] dry 'Land' ' and I imagine its creation just as traumatic and violent as we, its future inhabitants, will act and inflict on it. The descending, menacing chromatic semiquaver motif returns in the bassoon; time-signature is unsettled going from 5/8, 3/8 to 2/8; and an accented, foreboding fugal passage is played by violas and violins over obsessive and driving pedal tonic Bb in cello and double-bass.

Yet this Land is also to give 'grass, herb [and] fruit tree'. The mood lightens temporarily from Bb minor to A major, before going to G minor because the scars on the face of the Land (I imagine volcanos and seismic shifts) unsettle this bounty. The viola soars over with a plea that brings an E minor Jewish-inflected melody in 3/4, in homophony with French horn and clarinet, with cross-rhythmic accompaniment in strings and flute. I think that if there is a God, his Earth-song would be an appeal for more care and compassion. Yet that threat (us?); a final bassoon descending, ominous motif; is still there.

4th Movement: 'Day Four: Greater and Lesser Lights'

Now as I said, I love the viola. Hence, I decided that instead of having a solo viola (non-accompanied) moment as a cadenza at the end of a movement; I would give the viola its very own bespoke movement. And yes, the rest of the orchestra would have to do nothing but just listen to the viola (thankfully my movements are short).

So what to do? Well, when I practise there is nothing that fills me with more complete contentment than Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas*. And the jewel in that crown, the piece I would take with me to play on a desert island, is the 'Chaconne' from *Partita No. 2*. When I play that piece, I am in another place: it's so spiritual, beautiful, emotionally intense and yet controlled. This movement was going to be my thank you to Bach and be in the form of a *Ciaccona*. Furthermore, considering the number of hours, days and months it took me to learn (I'm not going to say 'master') the 'Chaconne', I thought it was a fitting movement to dedicate to my viola teachers. We musicians (and yes, I do include viola players in that category), would be nowhere without the support of our instrumental teachers (so please, Mr/Mrs Prime Minister, keep our music provision going!).

Thus, my *Ciaccona - cadenza* movement, in G major-ish, starts with the viola's open strings (perfect fifths) and the 'expanse' style chords from the 2nd Movement. The first variations represent the 'Greater Light' (the sun) with its rays, bold heat, and warmth. For the 'Lesser Light'

(the moon), the music returns to the mysterious 'darkness' of the 1st Movement: G minor, L.H. *pizzicato* and *p, spiccato* double-stopped quavers; followed by high tessitura *pizzicato* for the stars, in G major. When the 'Lights [become] for festivals' a modal G major/minor Jewish-sounding monophonic melody sings as for Shabbat; finishing with a shortened version of the chords at the start and going *attacca* on a downward open-string chord into Day Six...

5th Movement: 'Day Six: Adam and Ishah'

Hang on a minute...what about Day Five? Well, that will come afterwards. At this point in the Biblical and musical narrative, I felt it was a good time to introduce Adam and Ishah.

This movement is dedicated to my sister, Mahaut (a medieval French name, as some of you may be wondering). I thought this psychological drama would resonate with her.

I don't like the expression 'to kill two birds with one stone', especially as I'm a bird-watcher and lover; but metaphorically this is what happened. At this stage of the Concertino (which has taken about two years to complete due to teaching overtaking my life in term-time), my AS students were faced with an exam board's brief of composing a fantasia. Understandably, they looked at me slightly quizzically as they had never come across the term. Therefore, I decided to combine my teaching duties with my composition for enjoyment, and figured that a fantasia would be fitting for the narrative of 'Day Six': evil v good, destruction v creation, tyranny v benevolence.

It starts where the 4th Movement ends: the two lower strings of the viola, which become the basis of a C minor chord and its embellishment that will remind violists of Bach's 'Adagio' from *Sonata no. 1*. The whole movement is for (solo) viola, flute and bassoon, as the exam brief asked for a trio; and I felt it would be pertinent for these instruments to express the opposites and contradictions involved in God's human creations.

God makes 'Adam [which can be literally translated as Earth-being] in our image'. Here we don't yet know Adam's attributes; it's solely an act of creation, of existence (grand, perfect fifths/ fourths in bassoon and flute).

The viola then becomes march-like as the bassoon takes the ominous, descending chromatic motif, because 'Adam [will] descend on the fish [...] the birds [...] the beasts [...] and the crawling things on the earth'. That word 'descend' does not bode well, and indeed how much harm have we done to these creatures.

Now the next section was a discovery for me, and I found the concept quite intriguing. The *Torah*/ Bible says that God 'created Him male and female' (from what I understood). I've interpreted the male as destructive, and the female as caring and creating. This doesn't mean that men are one thing and women another, for the terms are 'male' and 'female' and for some reason I see this as the darkness and light that exists within all of us. So as the viola returns to the 'Adagio'-style fantasy, the bassoon (male) has repeated, *staccato* pedal notes and the flute (female) soars over expressively and passionately.

I then decided to skip to a later passage in the Book, to where God takes 'from one of [Adam's] ribs

[...] and build[s] [...] into an Ishah', which literally translates as Female-man (man being *ish*). Is God separating the female from the male into two distinct beings; i.e. woman and man? However, did he leave a bit of female-male within both men and women? Anyway, at this point I thought a fugato would portray the creation of this Female-man well, with the viola starting on a subject derived from Bach's 'Prelude and Fugue C major' for *clavier*.

God then 'blessed them' and tells them to 'conquer and rule' on other creatures and eat 'fruit [and] herbs' (interesting to note that animals are not mentioned). I find the verb 'conquer' alarming: the viola returns to the ominous, male-destruction march, whilst the bassoon plays a distorted version of the perfect fifth (what was God thinking?!) and the flute sings the female, imploring melody.

However; maybe knowing that we had the potential to not 'conquer' as benevolent guardians, but as tyrannical and destructive despots; God tells us that 'all the living things of the earth and all the birds of the skies and all that creeps on the earth has a living soul'. They're not male-female forces: they have a 'soul' that is 'living'. But, with the re-appearance of the fantasy in the viola, the flute's (female) plea, and the bassoon's (male) ominous motif, I don't think we have fulfilled our role as caretakers well.

6th Movement: 'Day Five: Soul Living Creatures & Day Seven: God Sanctified the Seventh Day & 'What is Your Name''

Day Five is a celebration of all these wonderful living creatures. It's dedicated to my daughter, Clara (a bassoonist and flautist), who is an animal-lover and passionate about how we should respect wildlife. It is the longest movement.

It begins with the rollicking waves in cellos and double-basses with the perfect fifths of God's voice in the oboe and clarinet. When the 'waters teem with soul living creatures', the cellos ascend and descend in swells over cross-rhythmic double-bass. The French horn, representing a whale, has an expressive and lyrical melody, interrupted at times by the cymbal. The melody is taken by the solo viola and later both instruments play in parallel as the waters become calm. I wanted to portray the grace and majesty of these wonderful 'living creatures'.

Change of key (far too many flats!) and it's the turn of the 'birds [that] fly over the earth across the expanse of the skies' with *pizzicato* upper strings and solo viola playing a playful, merry tune. The flute takes over the melody, whilst the viola has rapid scalar patterns with trills. The oboe plays bird-like 'tweets' and the clarinet 'cuckoos', as the flute goes higher in the register (flying high) and the viola accompanies with 'oom-pah-pah' light, *staccato* quavers.

These 'living creatures' come in all sorts, including 'the great crocodiles [and] the creeping things that swarm the waters'. The bassoon plays a variation of the ominous motif; not because the crocodile is evil, I hasten to add, but because of our fear of some of these creatures here represented by the crocodile. The 'creeping things' are depicted with semiquaver, semitone repeated figures in the first violin, the time-signature is back to the unsettling 5/4, and the viola plays harsh, dissonant chords to show our anguish.

All these creatures, from the beautiful to the scary, are 'blessed' by God. This is the climax of the

movement (and maybe Concertino), with all animals featuring in this final section and leading to a glorious *tutti* section when 'God saw that it was good'. It's a celebration of the 'living creatures', with a trumpet and solo viola triumphant duet reminiscent of the optimism in the 1st Movement, flute representing the skies with the rays of sun; oboe, clarinet and French horn declaring God's joy; the bassoon a more consonant and appeased descending motif; and the strings, timpani and cymbals the undulating seas.

At the end of Day Five there is a C-G homophonic, held interval: the perfect fifth of God that is neither major or minor; empty, vacant? We arrive at 'Day Seven: God Sanctified the Seventh Day & 'What is Your Name'. As I explained beforehand, due to teaching commitments I can only compose during school holidays, so two years had passed since the start of *In the Beginning*. Just as I was finishing 'Day Five', my beloved father passed away. It was a sudden and devastating illness that took his life away in a matter of weeks. My mother, siblings and I were by his hospital bedside as he took his last breaths. Many of you reading this will have gone through a similar life-death event. My father was the rock of the family; he was what my mother described as our "home". I can't tell you how angry I was. How could this happen to my father; a man who was so extraordinary: extraordinarily kind, extraordinarily generous, extraordinarily intelligent, extraordinarily funny, extraordinarily engaged in making this world a better place? So 'Day Seven' is dedicated to my father, who, ironically, never rested. But I suppose that the solo viola is my tender song of love and sadness to my cherished father, over the empty fifths in the orchestra. Where was that God? What is It anyway and what is Its point?

And that was the question Moses asked God in *Shemot* (translation 'Names'/ in Bible called 'Exodus'). The woodwind sound a Chorale-style harmonised 'And Moses said to God', as if a recitative. The strings *ff* and with accents shout the syllables of Moses' question: 'What is your name?'. I know Moses would have been politer. But it's my question, it's me shouting at God as I left my father's hospital bed, walking down the corridor so filled with anger and frustration. The question is dissonant and ends on a diminished 7th *crescendo*. Woodwinds monotonously and dispassionately narrate again in Chorale fashion, but with a slight melismatic, anguished augmented second at the end: 'And God said'. The viola solo finishes the movement, and Concertino, unaccompanied in a symbolic 1/1 metre and majestically with chords as God's response, whose words are spread one a bar: 'I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE'. There are no 3rds, just the empty perfect fifths and fourths of an answer that is bare; and the augmented 2nd plea of God's creation.

In the End...

I'm not interested in being inventive, finding a new musical language or exploring uncharted harmonic frontiers. My aim is to create music I know my family, who are music-enjoyers but not professionals (apart from Clara), would enjoy; and speaks directly to all of us in an uncomplicated manner. I want to give melodies, because for me music is part-melody. Music is also part-harmony; and I want to remain loyal to Bach and his beautiful chorale harmonisations (surely his *Chorales* are music's Bible?), whilst portraying the harshness of life, even at its beginning, with dissonances. Prof. David Chen, a master of a teacher, told me something that I will never forget and repeat often (even though I can't remember his exact words): 'Life is like Music: when there is too much suffering (dissonance), we want to tear our hair in despair because it's too much; but if all is bliss (consonance), it becomes boring. What matters is to know how to go from these difficult

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moments (dissonant chord and hold it...), to peace and serenity (...and resolve to consonant chord).'