

## Viola Concerto by Grażyna Bacewicz

The blend of vigour, directness, honesty, sincerity, wit and a telling inclusion of Polish folk music have made the works of Bacewicz widely enjoyed. Her magnum opus, the *Concerto for String Orchestra*, is performed around the world.

"Beside Sir William Walton's concerto, I favour and love Grażyna's concerto best. It is a work in three traditional movements. The first is maintained in free sonata form and opens with a slow introduction. The viola solo, kept rather dark in colour, is heard for the first time rising above a background of a suppressed thunder from the percussion section. The aural effect is shattering! The melodic line is rather atonal, yet very Bergian and beautiful. It is, however, the second movement which, in my opinion, makes the biggest impression on the audience. It is, perhaps, one of the most lyrical movements ever written by Grażyna. The viola (*con sordino*) combines with harp and celeste in mysterious music-making full of longing for warmth, just to fade away and give room to the orgiastic finale, overflowing in rhythmic excitement and a very Boulezian choice of instruments." – this was written by Stefan Kamasa, who commissioned the work.

You can hear his version on Youtube: Stefan Kamasa (viola) with the Warsaw National Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Stanisław Wisłocki -

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=bacewicz+concerto+for+viola&view=detail&mid=4DCAAB484D2052C9A36B4DCAAB484D2052C9A36B&FORM=VIRE> . Kamasa was a member of the Warsaw Piano Quintet, whose pianist Wladislaw Szpilman was made famous by the 2002 film *The Pianist*.

Bacewicz wrote the Concerto in 1968, aged 59, by which time she was a highly acclaimed and honoured composer. Kamasa called her 'the first lady of Polish music'. Bacewicz started her musical life as a violinist; she had a rich understanding of string playing and writing, with an impressive mastery of all the technical and sonic possibilities. In the first Wieniawski International Violin Competition (1935) she received an honourable mention to David Oistrakh's second, and Ginette Neveu's first prize. She went on to lead the Polish Radio Orchestra (1936-39).

She studied composition with Nadia Boulanger, and combined the two careers for two decades. Her experience as a string player led her to make a brilliant contribution to string chamber music; her compositions include seven String Quartets, five Sonatas for violin and piano, several shorter pieces including folk-influenced items (some in viola versions), two Piano Quintets and a fine Quartet for four violins. She was given special Awards for many of these works. If you are curious about Bacewicz's music, there are a number of good CDs on Chandos Records. Much of her music is published by Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne (PWM) -

<https://pwm.com.pl/en/search/?q=bacewicz&autorid=&title=&kryteria=wszedzie&numer=>

The 18-minute Concerto ranges from an exciting motoric drive to other-worldly; here's my account: the dramatic start of the *Moderato* gives a platform for the improvisatory viola

opening. After some percussion punctuation, the tutti has a strong rhythmical impetus, which energises the soloist; edgy brass join in the fray. Busy string writing is followed by an atmospheric celeste and other colourful percussion. Tutti strings produce more vigour, followed by blazing brass. The well contrasted *Andante* starts with a poignant and heartfelt solo and some pointillist, exotic percussion. The tread of lower strings leads to a shadowy, unearthly atmosphere and then heavy brass take over. Polish music expert Adrian Thomas thinks that this is her most captivating slow movement and describes it as a 'rhetorical recitation'. A growling opening of the *Molto Allegro* ushers in a return to motor energy; it's full of ideas. The music encompasses vitality, nostalgia, sarcasm and irony. Even when it's tense, she is always optimistic and she frequently has a skittish sense of humour.

This is a substantial work with a big orchestra; it's no mean feat to play it or get it played. However, for potentially interested violists, I suggest it offers a rewarding and original opportunity. I haven't found a CD recording on the internet. Kamasa played it with Sir Charles Groves and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, but I doubt it has been performed in the UK in the last 50 years. Getting an orchestra to programme it would be highly newsworthy and the UK Polish community would be delighted.

Diana Ambache

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