

SCHOENBERG'S VERKLÄRTE NACHT

The secret to this piece lies in finding appropriate colourings and mastering its technical demands, as conductor and Chamber Orchestra of Europe cellist **WILL CONWAY** explains



Will Conway

Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night), regarded as Arnold Schoenberg's first important work, is a mainstay of the string repertoire.

The piece was inspired by Richard Dehmel's poem of the same name in which a man and

a woman walk through a forest on a moonlit night. She tells him she is pregnant with another man's child. His acceptance of the child and the changed situation transfigures their love as well as the night. The work's single movement has five sections that correspond to the structure of the poem.

Originally written in 1899 as a string sextet (using two violins, two violas and two cellos), *Verklärte Nacht* is one of the first examples of programme music for a chamber ensemble. In 1917, Schoenberg made this arrangement for string orchestra, which he revised further in 1943. There is also an excellent arrangement for piano trio,

made by Eduard Steuermann, a Schoenberg pupil, which was published in 1993.

I was introduced to this piece as a student while playing in the London Youth String Ensemble, better known as 'Fred's band', run by the inspiring Fred Applewhite. He made me an offer I couldn't refuse: learn the part thoroughly or leave. Happily, I chose to work hard on a piece that has served me better than any other throughout my career. It is a 'must-learn' for all string players, as it comes up time and again both in performance and audition.

In any version, this music is very exposed and challenging. The wonderful nocturnal atmosphere that permeates *Verklärte Nacht*, coupled with the virtuosic requirements of the individual parts, makes this work doubly difficult in terms of projection, a common worry in performance, especially for cellists. At times the style of the piece demands both subtle colouring and soloistic projection – which are not always automatic companions.

BARS 50–54 – BARS 136–138 – BARS 229–239 – BARS 259–265 – BARS 310–315

INSTRUMENT: CELLO

The key discussion with your fellow string players will be whether you want to adopt a 'free bowing' policy, which automatically brings the potential for more resonance, or whether you want to restrict the bow changes and observe the longer phrase markings in the score. Both approaches will work if they are sensitively applied, but they offer very different results. Using the printed bowings and phrasings brings a certain organisation and grading of the sound already calculated by the composer. By adopting free bowing, it could be said that what you gain in resonance you lose in intensity. I find that a combined, intelligently graded use of bowing that fits the ever-changing intensity and colour of the score works best.

For me, the ideal way to learn any cello part is to study it within the context of the score. When I know whether my part is of prime importance or of secondary importance, it makes it easier to decide how to play a particular passage in terms of projection and bowing. It also helps to know when to choose fingerings that are easier but less expressive (versus potentially riskier but more expressive) and how I can fit with other parts.

example 1 >

The bowing at bar 50 is probably best split into two bows – you can start with either an up or down bow. I usually start with a down bow and use two bows per bar. With the mute on here the resonance and projection are reduced. In the third bar the connection between the B flat and F works well going up the D string. Make sure the B flat is expressive and long enough before you leave it – timing is everything here! A late shift on the new bow will give the right sound.

[1]

mit Dämpfer

50

p mit schmerzlichem Ausdr.

[2]

137

ff

[3]

Sehr breit und langsam

229

f *f* *mp*

236

espress.

mf *mf*

example 2 >

In the up-beat to bar 137, the second cello (and bass in the orchestral version) should attack on an up bow with fast vibrato. After the initial attack, however, sustain the notes for as long as possible. Similarly, with the shorter notes in bar 137 itself, use as much bow as possible with a fast bow speed and hold the notes for as long as you can. This will give the energy required of this section, but sustaining will allow the notes in the passage to project and be heard – the semiquavers are often garbled and too short.

example 3 >

One of the biggest moments for cellos in this piece is in the wonderful D major adagio section (*Sehr breit und langsam*) starting at bar 229, which portrays the anguish of the woman in the poem as she confesses to her lover that he is not the father of her unborn child. In a glowing, if solemn, passage we hear the man offer words of comfort: 'Let the child be no burden to you. See how the universe glistens.' His warm forgiveness brings transfiguration of the child which will in turn change both of their lives. They embrace and kiss as they continue their walk beneath the bright night sky.

Although bar 229 is marked forte, don't forget that the harmony is resolving in this bar and has the effect of relaxing the music. Too often this moment is over-played (guilty!). Give too much too soon in this passage and you'll be in trouble. The sound should be generous and unforced. Given that it must be in tune, the choice of low, medium or high F sharp (being the third in the chord) is important: I usually go for medium-high which helps to project the sound. But this should not be confused with playing sharp and out of tune! Your job here is to colour the chord, the tonic and dominant determining the volume.

To achieve this beautifully singing, resonant note, you will need to strike a balance between several factors: the position of your bow on the string in relation to the bridge; the complementary bow speed (my rule is to use no more bow than you need – it is tempting to use whole bows on everything in the solo and you are left with unvarying intensity, which is ultimately not compelling); and the pressure on the bow, without the right hand squeezing the stick too hard. Allow the right hand to 'breathe' and 'drag' the sound from the instrument. Vibrato or no vibrato? Again, I tend towards using no more than you need. An appropriately pitched note, well supported in the string (that is, with good sounding point towards the bridge), will already have a natural resonance within the chord around it. Use these factors and add the vibrato as the final colouring to your already healthy note.

After the transitional chord at bar 229 make sure your bow distribution is very clear: use half the bow for the up-beat to bar 231, making sure you have some speed in the bow just before changing (to down bow), >

[4]

[5]

example 4 >

which helps to connect the notes better. Go towards the bridge for the top A, keeping the right-hand breathing with a very even bow speed throughout that whole bar. Slow slightly at the end if you want to observe the diminuendo. The viola joins you in octaves at bar 234 – come away from the bridge here and find a sound to complement your partner. In bar 236 I use a slightly more flowing bow speed and don't play so close to the bridge, mirroring the flowing development of the phrase.

In bar 238, I gradually move towards the bridge for the high C sharp with an expressive portamento (3,1,4-3), which can be as slow and late as your taste will allow, adding to the anguish and passion. Make sure you prepare the left arm for this by raising the elbow slightly at just the right moment – it should look and sound effortless.

example 5 >

In a similar vein, your bowing choice at bar 259 in the great love duet between violin and cello should match the violin soloist – one bow or two for each group? Four notes in one bow pays off later in the exchange where the long phrase is better served. A down bow is usually best, as it adds weight to the first appoggiatura, which should have the same degree of sharpness as the violin – unless you are looking to subvert the rosy picture at this point! I stay on the A string for projection and then 'secretly' touch the note with the bow fractionally before playing to check the all-important expressive pitch.

At bar 310 I suggest choosing a fingering that helps to articulate the fast, fluent passagework. I adopt a rather reckless fingering here, where I change position more often than is necessary. But it lies well under the hand and maintains a good, balanced hand position – and it certainly adds to my excitement, if no one else's. Practise this passage with a metronome: although it doesn't inform you of everything, it at least gives you a realistic framework that closely resembles the inflexibility you will experience performing this passage. I have found that metronome practice, as part of an overall strategy of learning, is extremely valuable for these reasons, with the aim being to define the boundaries each work presents and then to work towards a freedom within those boundaries. You don't want to discover that you can't keep up with the pulse in a rehearsal. It could cost you potentially valuable work in the future or more importantly prevent you from contributing fully to a performance.

These are just a few of the many exposed and wonderful moments in this piece that you can only truly savour if you are in control of what you are doing. If you are preparing this piece for an audition make sure the basics are right. Good intonation and rhythm, in this piece as in so many others, are the prerequisites without which the door to where you want to be will remain firmly closed. Open that door, however, regardless of how successful others have deemed you to be, and exciting challenges and immeasurable pleasures await. ■