

## Violin Concerto, Op. 30

OLIVER KNUSSEN

*Premiered on April 5, 2002 by Pinchas Zukerman with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer*

*Scored for three flutes, oboe, English horn, two clarinets, bassoon, contrabassoon, three horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, two percussion, piano, celesta, harp, and strings. (approx. 17 minutes).*

Knussen's Violin Concerto, composed for Pinchas Zukerman, has fast become one of his most performed works. Typically for Knussen, the work looks both backward and forward. It is cast in a three-movement form, with such traditional sounding titles as "Recitative," "Aria," and "Gigue," but there are no breaks between movements, and Knussen seems to take great pleasure in playing with the expectations suggested by the baroque-era titles.

The "Recitative" opens with a sonorous chord played by the chimes, and the soloist holds a high E harmonic. A sharp jab from the harp, piano and strings launches the soloist into a series of cadenzas, with the orchestra interjecting here and there. The association with operatic recitative is clear at first, as the soloist carries the "text" of the story, sometimes speaking slowly but often rushing through in a flurry of notes. For its part, the orchestra takes on an operatic accompanying role initially, supporting the soloist and adding an occasional exclamation point. With each passing moment the orchestra seems to lose patience, however, and its outbursts increase in density and drama leading to a massive climax that is wholly different from any traditional "Recitative."

The first movement closes with the soloist falling to the lowest note on the violin, and a lyrical "Aria" ensues. Each phrase of the melody rises inexorably from the low G to the high B more than three octaves above. The melody might sound somewhat familiar – in fact, the soloist spent most of the first movement playing bits and pieces of it, without ever arriving at this fully formed version. The strings and harp pulsate a gentle accompaniment as the soloist meditates on the melody, varying it slightly with each repetition. The winds interrupt briefly, at first gently, and then more forcefully. The soloist becomes more agitated, and the beautiful "Aria" is momentarily forgotten in a thunderous orchestral climax. The soloist tries to recapture the melody, but it comes out wrong, and upside down (descending instead of ascending). The movement ends with the soloist on the same high E that started the whole work, accompanied only by the basses and a suspended cymbal.

For the third movement, "Gigue," Knussen took inspiration from an old black and white film of a vaudeville clown performing "Pop Goes the Weasel." During this rendition, the clown tosses his violin into every possible playing position, no matter how ridiculous, between verses of the song. To portray this in the "Gigue," Knussen calls for the complete bag of violin tricks, including plucking the strings with the right hand (the usual method), but also with the left hand. Late in the movement the score is marked *alla burlesca* (like a burlesque), and the music becomes even more raucous. Here Knussen

calls for a special bowing technique, as the soloist plays near the bridge of the violin and exerts additional pressure, causing the instrument to emit a wonderfully scratchy noise. As the dance fades away, the music drifts upwards, landing eventually on the familiar high E. The chimes, harp, and piano strike a final chord – the mirror image (inversion) of the sonority that opened the work.

This is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of Knussen's Violin Concerto.

**DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:**

Knussen, Violin Concerto, Leila Josefowicz, violin, Oliver Knussen conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Deutsche Grammophon B0010610.