

Lachen Verlernt
Analysis by David Mitchell

“Lachen Verlernt” is a single movement work for solo violin by Esa-Pekka Salonen dedicated to Cho-Liang Lin. It was commissioned by the La Jolla Chamber Music Society's SummerFest in 2002. According to Salonen's program notes, “The title Lachen Verlernt (Laughing Unlearned) is a quotation from the ninth movement of Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, *Gebet an Pierrot* (Prayer to Pierrot). The narrator declares that she has unlearned the skill of laughing and begs Pierrot, the ‘Horse-doctor to the soul,’ to give it back to her. I felt that this is a very moving metaphor of a performer: a serious clown trying to help the audience to connect with emotions they have lost or believe they have lost.”¹

This piece is an excellent example of idiomatic writing for the violin. For example, there are double and triple stops throughout. They are normally difficult for violin players. In this case, the double and triple stops are easy because Salonen uses intervals that are close together on the fingerboard in a plaining fashion. He creates the triple stops by pairing a double stop with an opening string.

The first triple stops occur in measures 16-23. They are nearly all major or minor thirds with an open E string. This open E string helps the violin player because he does not have to worry about one of the notes in the triple stop. The open E is virtually automatic. The other notes that create these thirds are relatively close together and they are played in the upper positions of the violin fingerboard where the notes are close together. Salonen uses these thirds in a plaining fashion. This makes the triple stops

¹ Esa-Pekka Salonen, “Lachen verlernt (Laughing Unlearned) - 2002 (10 minutes),” Esa-Pekka Salonen Website, <http://www.esapekkasalonen.com/compositions.php?id=221> (accessed April 03, 2010).

even easier to play because the violinist can simply hold the third and move it up and down the fingerboard.

Salonen also uses open strings to facilitate large leaps and fast passages. A good example of this occurs in measures 114-119. In these measures, there are continuous thirty-second notes. They would normally be difficult on any instrument. Here they are easy for the violinist because approximately fifty percent of the notes are open strings. This makes it easy for a violin player to play fast and sound smooth because the notes can ring over each other. This creates a smooth legato sound. In fact, open notes are in nearly every measure of this piece.

The extensive use of open notes can create a boring and static harmonic language. In this case the rhythm becomes more important. For example, Salonen introduces a variety of rhythmic motives in the exposition, measure 1-23. There are long notes (tied halves) and very fast notes (thirty-second and triplet thirty-second notes). There are also triple and duple subdivisions of the beat as well as dotted notes. These rhythmic motives are extensively developed as the piece progresses.

The thirty-second notes in the first measure become the focus of development from measures 114 to the end of the piece. That is approximately thirty-four measures of development dedicated to a half beat that occurs in the first measure of this piece.

This type of development is a feature of this piece that makes it a good one for composers to study. The opening motivic and rhythmic ideas (measures 1-23) are sparse and limited in melodic range. As the piece progresses the melodic ideas are expanded vertically and horizontally, and the harmonies are fleshed out. A good example of this occurs in measures 51-65. The triple stops in measure 14-23 return in these measures. They are now sixths and sevenths with an open G on the fourth string of the violin. This is the distance of two octaves plus a third; therefore, the harmonies are expanded vertically. The motivic idea is also expanded horizontally from eight to ten measures.

The first seven measures return in measures 62-72. The melody is almost the same as the beginning. Although it has been harmonized and expanded from seven to ten measures with some added sixteenth note scalar material. Measures 62-72 are another example of development by Salonen that employs vertical and horizontal expansion of the opening material.

In his program notes, Salonen describes “Lachen Verlernt” as a Chaconne. Salonen wrote, “Lachen Verlernt is essentially a Chaconne, which in this case means that there is a harmonic progression that repeats itself several times. The harmony remains the same throughout the whole piece; only the surface, the top layer of the music changes.”² The harmonic progression that Salonen refers to in his program notes is not very clear or easy to hear in this piece; therefore, it is not a significant feature. This piece sounds like a theme and variations because the opening material undergoes continuous development.

The most significant features of this piece are its masterful thematic development and the idiomatically creative exploitation of the violin. A harmonic analysis of this piece reveals that there are octatonic, whole tone, and acousitic collections. They give this piece a sense of continuity because they have several characteristics in common, but that can be found in most post-tonal compositions. The most important lessons that this piece can teach a composer are how to write idiomatically for the violin and how to develop motivic material successfully.

² Salonen, “Lachen Verlernt,” 1.