

MALCOLM HAYES (born 1951)

Violin Concerto (2013–14)

BBC commission: world premiere

Tai Murray *violin*

My Violin Concerto is about creating space. An unusual approach to the concerto genre, maybe – and different from the ultra-virtuoso tradition epitomised by the great violinist Joseph Joachim in the 19th century, and substantially dominant ever since.

Perhaps there are still different ways of doing things. Maybe the celestial reach of Beethoven's (pre-Joachim) Violin Concerto, and of Bach's several beforehand, is not just down to magnitude of genius, but relates also to the relative sparseness with which those composers wrote for the solo violin. Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* seems to ask a similar question. Although nonchalantly designating his work a 'Romance', he here created what feels like a compressed concerto in all but name, revealing in the process a new way of relating the solo instrument to the orchestra – like a figure in (or above) a landscape. Vivaldi's string concertos, too, have an engaging, open-air freshness of manner that has been rather overlooked by later generations of composers.

My concerto also has a more particular connection. For several years in the 1970s I lived in Stornoway, the main town of Scotland's Outer Hebridean islands. Years of continuous education (without a gap year, sadly) had created a need for fresh air in every sense. I already knew Stornoway and the surrounding Isle of Lewis, and what had been envisaged as a two-year break became a seven-year experience, of much fulfilment and

happiness. The community spirit of Scotland's Gaelic-speaking west coast is richly anti-nostalgic in character, with a relentless pace of convivial living to match (thank goodness I was young). Around all this is the world that my Violin Concerto connects with – a northern-latitude drama of summer light and winter darkness, unfolding in an Atlantic landscape of low hills (with the higher mountains of Harris nearby to the south), inlets winding deep inland from the open sea, huge shifting and re-forming cloudscapes, and immense surrounding distances.

A concerto is a drama too, of a kind deeper than a supposed 'contest' between the soloist and the orchestra. Their relationship here owes something to Sibelius's Violin Concerto – not to its powerhouse virtuoso idiom as such, but to its striking interplay of high-soaring violin and, as if far below, a darkly coloured orchestral landscape. I don't think the bird-song connection in *The Lark Ascending* applies directly to my concerto's solo part. But this does, perhaps, signify a life-form in flight, in the presence of surrounding natural forces that may or may not be threatening to overwhelm it.

The orchestra is quite small – a Mozart-sized woodwind section, with a single oboe d'amore replacing the usual two oboes; a pair of trombones besides horns and trumpets; timpani, and a modest percussion section including crotales (small tuned cybals) and three triangles; harp, piano and strings. While these are quite close to the resources of a Classical or Baroque concerto, the solo part nonetheless makes serious demands on its performer, particularly in terms of high-altitude flight.

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The concerto's single-movement design is a set of double variations, based on two main groups of ideas. The first of these, launched by the soloist, intercuts Baroque-style figuration with a little four-note phrase (first rising, then falling) that comes from a traditional Hebridean song. After some new material introduced



A view of South Harris, Outer Hebrides, near where Malcolm Hayes lived during the 1970s: its open spaciousness influenced his Violin Concerto

by the woodwind, the second group – developed more fully at this opening statement, and therefore appearing less often afterwards – has the solo violin exploring upwards-floating harmonics against long-held orchestral chords. As the design unfolds, an overall three-part shape emerges: the double exposition as described; a central, berceuse- or lullaby-like section with prominent oboe d’amore; and, after a darker episode begun by the trombones, a reprise of the work’s opening, taken up and extended by the solo violin.

Programme note © Malcolm Hayes

INTERVAL: 20 MINUTES

On BBC Radio 3

Piece name Lorem ipsum dolar.

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