

MERGING THE OLD AND THE NEW

MARGARET BROUWER'S CONCERTO FOR VIOLA AND ORCHESTRA



From left to right: Margaret Brouwer, Ellen Rose, and Paul Phillips at the premiere of Brouwer's Viola Concerto (photo courtesy of Bob Adams)

by **Laurie Shulman**

Throughout music history, many of the most successful concerti have come about as the result of a fruitful collaboration between friends and colleagues. From Haydn and his Esterháza stars Tomasini and Weigl to Shostakovich with Oistrakh and Rostropovich, there are abundant examples.

One of the most recent is the new Concerto for Viola and Orchestra that New York-based Margaret Brouwer has composed for Ellen

Rose, principal violist of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra (DSO) since 1980. Paul Phillips led the premiere performances in Dallas's superb Meyerson Symphony Center in January of this year.

The two women have been friends since the early 1980s, when Brouwer lived for a couple of years in Dallas. "Ellen and I came to Dallas at the same time," Brouwer recalls. "Because I was still playing violin, we had a lot of mutual musical friends. We worked on several projects together when I was in Dallas.

"The first piece Ellen commissioned, *Dream Drifts*, was very Crumb-like, with extended techniques and ping-ponging sounds between two speakers (at the time we used two tape recorders). I think she commissioned it for a recital at Southern Methodist University. It has been played by several other violists since then."

They stayed in touch and, when Rose had the opportunity to commission a concerto under the auspices of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Brouwer was her first choice.

A native of Ann Arbor, Brouwer grew up in Michigan in a music-oriented family. Her father, a journalist, was also an amateur musician; her mother was a singer. Brouwer was schooled as a violinist and started composing in high school. She thus brings an intimate understanding of string playing to the concerto, as well as considerable experience writing for orchestra. Most important is her specific knowledge of Ms. Rose. “I love Ellen’s playing; she is so wonderfully musical, and she has such a gorgeous, rich sound,” Brouwer declares. “I also admire her fabulous technique and attention to detail.”

Brouwer’s extensive experience as a violinist made it comfortable to be writing for viola. “It certainly helps,” Brouwer acknowledges. “It’s difficult to compose well for string instruments. In the years that I taught [composition], I found that students who had never played one lacked essential knowledge about basic things like bowing. It’s a definite advantage to have played violin.

“The viola provides the rich inner backbone of the orchestra,” she continues. “But that presents a paradox. Because of its great blending quality, it’s easy for the viola to get swallowed up as a solo instrument. That’s the reason I included so many cadenza-like passages in the concerto, with only transparent accompaniment.”

Ellen Rose agrees. “The viola is so easily covered,” she points out. “Walton wrote a beautiful concerto, but his orchestra part is far too heavy.” She cites a passage in Walton’s first movement—reh. 15–16—where the violist is almost *obbligato*: the oboe has the solo voice and the viola is underneath with accompaniment in

sixteenth-note triplets. “When Hindemith wrote his viola concerto, he left out the violins. That was very smart,” Rose opines. “He knew better, because he was a violist himself! Margaret’s orchestral score is sparse, which puts the soloist always at the forefront.”

Brouwer adds, “I also used some instruments uncommon in other viola concertos: harp, marimba, and vibraphone, which I thought would make a nice sound in combination with the viola.”

Combining Old and New

The terms of the commission were fairly flexible. The DSO specified approximate length of twenty minutes and what orchestral instruments would be available. Ms. Rose, however, had an unusual request: that the medieval chant *Ubi caritas* be incorporated somehow into the score. Brouwer was happy to accommodate her. “I often quote from older music. I love the sense of bringing together music from different periods. One of the challenges for composers in the twenty-first century, I think, is to learn from and acknowledge in some way the extremely rich and varied music that has come down to us through many periods of music, including the twentieth century. I am experimenting with overlaying some of these sounds to create my own fresh sound.”

A New Piece Takes Shape

The two worked closely together throughout calendar 2009, when the concerto was taking shape. When Ms. Rose was in New York City last March, she visited Ms. Brouwer so they could try certain passages in the first movement. “I like to have input from per-

Violist Ellen Rose specifically requested that Margaret Brouwer somehow incorporate the medieval antiphon Ubi caritas into her Viola Concerto. The chant lent not only its musical contour, but also its spiritual subtext to the resulting work, particularly in the first movement. This is its first stanza.

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.
Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.
Exultemus, et in ipso iucundemur.
Timeamus, et amemus Deum vivum.
Et ex corde diligamus nos sincero.

Where charity and love are, there God is.
The love of Christ has gathered us into one flock.
Let us exult and in Him be joyful.
Let us fear, and let us love the Living God.
And from a sincere heart let us love each other.

Example 1. Brouwer, *Viola Concerto*, *movt. I*, *mm. 178–97*. (All examples © 2009, Margaret Brouwer. Used with permission.)

178 **G** A little slower ♩ = ca. 108

184

191

repeat octaves as needed to be heard

formers, particularly when I’m not too far into a piece,” says Brouwer. “It’s stimulating creatively to hear a performer play what you’re writing. I always come up with all these ideas. Just hearing Ellen play, I had her sound, her technique in my ear when I continued composing.”

They worked further last summer during the DSO’s residency in Vail. That was when conductor Paul

Phillips got his first look at the score. At the time, he was serving as cover conductor for the Dallas Symphony’s appearances at the Vail Valley Festival. “When Margaret flew out to Colorado, she had quite a bit of the piece sketched,” he recalls. “Much of it existed in piano reduction. Ellen played through large segments of the concerto. We all listened and talked and worked together. I made some suggestions about articulation.

“I remember thinking what a wonderful afternoon it was, because Margaret was very open to the suggestions that Ellen and I made. It was a time of sharing ideas among the three of us. I was delighted with what I was hearing; the piece had a remarkable lyrical quality.” (Ex. 1.)

That experience heightened Phillips’s eagerness to receive the

full score, which arrived in early October, three months ahead of the premiere. “That’s generous for a new work,” he says. “It allowed me to not feel rushed. This time, I was confident there would be sufficient time to prepare.”

Meanwhile, Ellen Rose’s learning and preparation process was arduous. Brouwer completed an orchestral reduction for piano, which Rose shared with a Dallas Symphony viola section colleague, Mittra Angell, who is also an accomplished pianist. Unfortunately Angell broke her arm in September 2009, which left Rose without a rehearsal pianist.

Gabriel Sanchez, another North Texas pianist who specializes in collaborative piano, jumped in when a mutual friend put him and Ellen Rose in touch. “He’s fabulous,” declares Rose with conviction. Rose and Sanchez rehearsed together through the autumn, performing the concerto in the piano/viola version for several soirées in private homes. The audiences varied from Rose’s viola students to gatherings of music aficionados. At a salon in early November 2009, she played through the concerto with Sanchez. That audience included Brouwer and Phillips.

“The concerto was in a much more finished format compared to what I’d heard in Vail,” Phillips remembers. Things were shaping up nicely. Phillips and Rose spent what he calls “a lot of quality time” together in December in preparation for the January performances.

Phillips acknowledges that such close interaction is rare. Though he is an enthusiastic proponent of new music and has commissioned and conducted many premieres, he cited only one prior instance when he was able to work so closely with both soloist and composer in a new concerto—with a very young Renée Fleming in the 1980s, singing *Chansons de Jadis*, an orchestral song cycle by Sydney Hodkinson, with the Eastern Connecticut Symphony.

“This Brouwer concerto was unusual, to have so much time,” he says. “Having composed myself, I know how hard it is to meet deadlines. So I really applaud Margaret for her ability to deliver this to both Ellen and me well in advance. It gave us a lot of comfortable time to grow into the piece.”

Phillips had no prior acquaintance with Brouwer’s music. In preparation for conducting the concerto, he also listened to some of her other music. “I really like her voice,” declares Phillips. “I think she’s got something wonderful to say.”

During rehearsals in January 2010, Dallas Symphony Orchestra members had a similar reaction. Associate Principal Viola Barbara Sudweeks played principal for the Brouwer concerto concerts. “I think it’s a beautiful piece: very listener-friendly and very positive for the viola,” she says. “Margaret Brouwer was really thoughtful in her orchestration. She understands the instrument’s limitations for projection in the middle range, and she never covered the viola. She also has a great sense of using instruments to their fullest: percussion, the bells—our musicians really liked this work. It is a welcome addition to our repertoire.”

The concerto includes a prominent harp part, which prompted Ellen Rose to request that the harp be placed close to the soloist, amid first stand string players. “The harp part is beautifully written,” says DSO Principal Harp Susan Dederich-Pejovich. “I enjoyed the way the harp timbre was always audible, even when other instruments sounded. My colleagues and audience members told me they really liked the supporting role of the harp, as well as solos, during the entire work.”



From left to right: DSO Principal Harpist Susan Dederich-Pejovich confers with composer Margaret Brouwer at a break during rehearsals (photo courtesy of the author)

Example 2. Brouwer, *Viola Concerto*, movt. I, mm. 1–7.

The musical score for Example 2, Brouwer's *Viola Concerto*, movement I, measures 1–7, is presented in three systems. The first system includes the Viola part (marked *f*), the Piano part (with sections for *via section* and *cello/bass pizz.*), and the Vibraphone part. The second system continues the Piano and Vibraphone parts. The third system features the Harp part. The score is marked *Allegro* with a tempo of quarter note = 120. Performance instructions include "Charged intensity alternating with blurred color" and "f. p. marcato".

Critical reception was also positive at the January premiere. *Dallas Morning News* music critic Scott Cantrell summarized: “Brouwer has written skillfully and imaginatively for both viola and orchestra, and the music engages start to finish. How about a recording?”

How about one, indeed.

Story Line

As the movements arrived, Ms. Rose gradually came up with a story line for the concerto. “The first movement clearly starts out with *angst*,” she asserts (ex. 2).

“Some terrible conflict has occurred. The second theme provides a refuge, a safe place, then the turmoil resumes. Later, some doubt sets in, bringing more conflict. The process of relinquishing resentment and letting go of a grudge is gradual. There’s a transition as enjoyment of life returns, with sixteenth-note passages that are lighthearted in comparison to what came before (ex. 3).

“The cadenza is the start of forgiveness, toward a more peaceful ending to the movement,” Rose continues. “Eventually the music moves toward something chant-

like. I hear it as unity of spirit and, at the end, God’s presence. Charity is all about spiritual lives. You have to be able to forgive and forget. The first movement traces that tremendous growth process.

“I hear the opening of the second movement as the first glimpse of a person who becomes a beloved. Slowly, intimacy builds to passion. It concludes with a section about long-lasting love: passion, partnership, and friendship combined.” (Ex. 4.)

Both Brouwer and Rose acknowledge that the finale is completely

Example 4. Brouwer, Viola Concerto, movt. II, mm. 1–15.

Andante ♩ = 72

Like light wind through white clouds

strings with ww. accompaniment

ped. as needed for indistinct atmosphere, but without extreme blurring. Always release entirely at each new pedal marking.

pp

mp

strings

ped. as needed for full sound

different in mood, technique, and effect, with tricky rhythms and a lot of technical wizardry. “The solo part is highly virtuosic,” allows Rose. “It makes great demands on the violist

to negotiate all sorts of technical requirements very quickly in succession, with changing meters. The different technical demands come fast and furious, sometimes within a sin-

gle phrase. Look at bars 81 to 97: *glissandi*, *sul ponticello*, double stops, and runs (ex. 5). All this at a very fast tempo. And all that happens again from 123 to the end.

Example 5. Brouwer, Viola Concerto, movt. III, mm. 81–97.

plus forte any pluck following general contour of SV

Q

old part (moder)

f *p* *f*

string pizz

mp brass

p

81

mp *cresc.*

woodwind

f

cresc.

brass, string ponticello

86

f

woodwinds, strings

mf string pizz

89

dire glas (Toby)

mf *cresc.* *sf*

rich rich, ringing tone

p *stacc.*

harp staccato

woodwind chord

ped. sempre

94

97

“Margaret wanted me to have fun with this movement. So, I had to come up with images or experiences that would take me out of the technical realm

into the interpretive. I envisioned myself playing with our little doglet, Francis. He loves to play tag with my right index finger! I wave it around and he

Example 6. Brouwer, Viola Concerto, movt. III, mm. 1–15.

Allegro ♩ = 132
 With humor and distinct contrasts

The score consists of several staves. The top staff is for the solo part (sotto) with a forte (f) dynamic. The second staff is for low brass, marked with a forte (f) dynamic and the instruction 'explosive, humorous'. The third staff is for the piano, with 'snap pizz.' and 'timp' markings. The fourth staff is for the viola, with 'pizz.' and 'mf playful, light-hearted with a stinging tone' markings. The fifth staff is for the vibraphone, with 'Vibes + un chord' and 'f (bkn. gl.)' markings. The sixth staff is for the woodwinds, with 'mf' and 'right focused' markings. The seventh staff is for the strings, with 'arco rad.' and 'with ringing flow' markings. The eighth staff is for the xylophone, with 'Xylophone' and 'loco' markings.

chases, jumping in the air. Another part of the movement we are playing hide and seek. This all helps tremendously, because I cannot help but smile

when I think of these images.” (Ex. 6.)

Tradition and Asymmetry

Margaret Brouwer's Concerto for Viola and Orchestra is traditional in the sense that it has three movements more or less arranged fast-slow-fast. It breaks from tradition in the absence of an orchestral introduction in any of its movements. The movements are asymmetrical; the first movement is nearly as long as the second and third combined. The opening movement, *Caritas*, also contains the widest variety of music stylistically, the clearest statement of the *Ubi caritas*, and the most significant transformation of musical material.

"The viola entrance after just one measure of orchestra has great emotional impact," observes Ellen Rose. "That holds true for the other movements, too. The soloist cannot rest much, because there are few extended orchestral statements. The violist has to find ways to rest while playing, in order to conserve enough energy for all three movements."

The piece is loosely programmatic. Brouwer drew her second movement title, ". . . *fair as the moon, bright as the sun* . . ." from the biblical Song of Songs, in keeping with the religious subtext. She perceives the overall trajectory of the concerto as proceeding with unrest, then gradually becoming more charitable, compassionate, and peaceful. The slow movement is a love song, and the finale playful and light. She has written:

The concerto musically describes a person (the soloist) who is on an internal journey. In the first movement, the solo part begins in a mood of questioning and anger, contrasted with an orchestral atmosphere of blurred color and melodic fragments that suggest the chant *Ubi caritas*. Under the influence of the orchestra, the *passionato* mood of the soloist gradually dissolves, turning to a mood of compassion and charity with only occasional references to the opening tensions. Near the end of the movement, the solo viola plays *Ubi caritas*, accompanied only by low string harmonics and flute. This is followed by a melody inspired by *caritas*, first in orchestral tutti, and then solo viola. The second movement, . . . *fair as the moon, bright as the sun* . . ., is simply a love song. Opening with soft breathless motion in the orchestra, "like a light breeze through

white clouds," it quickly goes to a melody in the viola that exudes warmth, pleasure, and delight. The name is taken from the biblical Song of Songs (6:10). The same chant, *Ubi caritas*, is referred to near the end of the movement in the lower strings. The last movement, *Blithesome Spirit*, continues the light-hearted mood and becomes buoyantly playful, mischievous, and sometimes a bit jaunty.

Her sense of the concerto's dramatic narrative is remarkably similar to Ms. Rose's, although they never discussed it. Brouwer allows, "She did ask me to incorporate the *Ubi caritas*, which probably had a lot to do with the narrative—but maybe not. My original version of the concerto began with the chant, quiet and subdued. Later, after I heard her play, I decided to change the order and open with impassioned music.

"My first love is sound: orchestral sound, the timbres of individual instruments. I like ringing sounds. They ring more when you use notes within the overtone series. I tend to use a lot of thirds and fifths, which can make my music sound tonal. My system of how I move from one place to another is not traditionally tonal at all.

"I love sounds and colors: the regular way each instrument plays, but also unusual, non-traditional combinations of instruments. I also love to create new sounds for the instruments using extended techniques. Of course I'm not the only composer who does that! There's not a lot of that in the Viola Concerto—a little bit in the first movement cadenzas, but mostly in the last movement. It just depends whether it fits in as an integral part of the music.

"I'm not a composer who starts with the story then makes the music 'go with' the story," she continues. "Some people look at a painting then write a piece about the painting, or read a poem and base their music on that poem. I've never been very good at that. A musical idea comes to me, then the piece grows out of that. As it evolves, I realize what it means to me as a narrative, or an emotion, or whatever it happens to be in that piece."

Margaret Brouwer has come a long way since her days in Dallas in the early 1980s. At that point, she was still playing violin professionally, but composition had become increasingly important to her. “I realized I needed to focus on one or the other,” Brouwer recalls. She left Dallas in 1984 to pursue a doctorate in composition at Indiana University. Her principal teacher there was Frederick Fox. She also worked with Donald Erb, with whom she had studied briefly in Dallas before he left Texas for Indiana, and with Harvey Sollberger. At Maine’s summer Bowdoin Festival, she also worked with George Crumb. She considers Erb and Crumb to have been her most important influences.

“From Crumb, I learned about beautiful sounds through extended techniques. He’s into finding the most out of every instrument. He’s very melodically influenced.”

As for Erb: “I like his strong contrasts. He’ll go from something soft and whispery to a big, loud, powerful passage. The power of his orchestral sound influenced me; also structure, the flow of musical line, and pacing. You don’t want to change events too soon. You’re never bored in Erb’s music. When the next thing happens, it feels inevitable.”

Her first teaching job after completing her doctorate was at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, which Brouwer describes as “a solid liberal arts school with a small music program.” During her

Virginia years, she served as composer-in-residence with the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra for about seven years.

From there she went to the Cleveland Institute of Music. “I loved it at CIM,” she says. “It’s a fabulous school. I ran the new music ensemble there. The caliber of performances was extraordinarily high.”

After serving twelve years as head of the composition department, Brouwer left CIM in 2008. “I’ve been too busy writing music since then to be teaching as well,” she says. Last year, she had two major orchestral premieres: one with Leonard Slatkin leading the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the other with George Manahan and the American Composers Orchestra.

Brouwer currently divides her time between New York and Cleveland, maintaining a residence in both cities. She is currently working on a piece for the Cleveland Women’s Symphony commissioned through Meet the Composer. Five record labels have now issued CDs of Brouwer’s chamber and orchestral works. With her national and international profile rising, and with this important new Concerto for Viola and Orchestra adding to her renown, we can anticipate hearing more of her music.

Laurie Shulman is a Dallas-based author and program annotator. She currently provides program notes for the Dallas Symphony, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Virginia Symphony Orchestra, Charlottesville & University Symphony Orchestra, and Richardson Symphony Orchestra. She is the author of The Meyerson Symphony Center: Building a Dream (2000), a lively chronicle about Dallas’s celebrated concert hall in its socio-political context. Ms. Shulman is a popular and frequent public speaker on music. She also remains active as an amateur pianist playing chamber music. She holds a Ph.D. in musicology from Cornell University.