



JOEL PHILLIP FRIEDMAN

Concerto (in the Form of Variations) for Viola and Orchestra **Program Note by the Composer***

(NB: these notes are free for use but cannot be altered/edited without the permission of the authors)

As its title suggests, the *Concerto (in the Form of Variations)* combines two "old and venerable forms," as the composer calls them. The work's three-part structure (slow-fast-slow) suggests a multi-movement concerto, while its theme and four variations bind the work into a single whole. "The fun came in combining the two forms," Friedman explains.

"Theme and variations have always held a fascination for me. There is a real beauty and elegance to the form. They also present a challenge: imagine creating a complete musical world out of a tiny fragment (the theme). For me, the form represents a beautiful paradigm for trying to understand the world. While one can try to learn a little bit about everything -- survey the surroundings -- it's also possible to focus on only a tiny corner and exhaustively explore every inch of it's terrain. For me composing variations is an example of the later." Like many sets of variations, the concerto is extremely organic for all of its diversity. It is woven from only a few musical ideas: a thematic shape fashioned from a descending semitone followed by a rising minor seventh; a characteristic harmonic interval of a minor sixth; and a distinctive rhythm – ♩. ♩. ♩♩ (long, long, short-short) – that permeates the work.

The tension between soloist and orchestra places the work in the tradition of classical concertos. According to the composer, "My mind works best when confronted with a dramatic situation, where there are 'characters' involved . . . The concerto has always been thought of as a highly dramatic form with inherent theatrical possibilities. Mozart's concertos are often like instrumental operas."

The dramatic nature of Friedman's concerto is hardly surprising, since he is a theatrical and opera, as well as a symphonic composer. He is co-author of the musical *Personals*, which was voted one of the ten best shows of 1985. One of the longest running shows on or off Broadway, *Personals* was nominated for four Outer Critics Circle Awards (winning one) and four Drama Desk Awards, including Best Score and Best Musical.

The Concerto begins with a cadenza that features the solo instrument over a rhythmic foil of piano, harp, and percussion. The theme is foreshadowed by this atmospheric passage. The accompaniment is fashioned from canons based upon the previously mentioned long-long-short-short rhythm, while the viola, which moves from its lowest register up to "viola stratosphere," introduces thematic and harmonic cells. Knowing virtuoso violist Paul Neubauer would premiere the work gave Friedman the confidence to explore the extreme upper range of the instrument in dramatic fashion.

In a subtle formal twist, the theme for this set of variations is not introduced by "the star," the viola soloist, but by the violins and clarinet. The viola is busy with an obbligato melody that "serenely floats above the fray." This obbligato line eventually descends, dovetailing into and then taking over the theme at its midpoint. After the exposition of the theme comes the first variation, "A Theme and its Shadow." As the viola plays an embellished version of the new main melody an assortment of lower registered instruments simultaneously present a slower, emotionally detached version of this same theme. "Both seem to go on their own way without realizing that the other is there," says Friedman. A quizzically disquieting muted descending figure in the strings periodically interrupts the flow of the variation only to come to fruition as it coalesces into a loud orchestral outburst near the end of the variation.

The second variation is in two parts: "a muted section of suppressed yearning, and a broader lyrical *pastorale*." An extension of the *pastorale* materials serves as a transition to the climax of the work, the third variation. The aggressive, syncopated third variation ("*Ritmico*") is a transformation of the previous variation. The driving rhythms are briefly interrupted by a whimsical, yet sardonic contrasting section that features the viola and the piccolo in a duet before the faster, motoric material returns. After a surging climax, a second cadenza that recalls both the concerto's opening and the original theme leads to the serene final variation ("*Chorale*"). It is as if all superfluous elements have been burned off the theme by the work's previous struggles leaving a slow, luminous chorale that the composer describes as "simplicity itself."

*Jonathan D. Kramer and Joel Phillip Friedman
(Adapted from Jonathan Kramer's original Carnegie Hall program note)