Alban Berg's Violin Concerto: A Short History of its Reception
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Abstract:
Since its world premiere in 1936, Alban Berg's Violin Concerto has retained a stable place in the repertoire, an unusual feat for a work based on twelve-tone principles. It is all the more remarkable to note its early success despite unfavorable conditions surrounding its first performances. Though Berg (1885-1935) had already been recognized for his compositions internationally, this work (perhaps along with the event of his death before the premiere) accelerated his worldwide recognition as an important contributor and innovator of contemporary music. Today it is viewed as the composer's most popular work, combining serialism with Mahlerian romanticism. As a whole, the Violin Concerto deviates from Berg's usual style in a number of areas, including genre, form, and tonal organization, as well as the inspiration and motives for accepting its commission. While its emotionally-charged program and romantic approach assuredly contributed toward its early success, it is difficult nevertheless to justify its popularity as a work that seems to devote itself to pacifying twelve-tone technique. Throughout this essay I will examine various historic critical evaluations of the work and argue why it has been publicly well-received in spite of its predominant, idiosyncratic use of serial techniques. I will focus primarily on its first three performances along with their reception and compare these initial reactions with more recent viewpoints.

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