

# André Previn's Quintet for Horn and String Quartet

## Review by Anne Howarth

The house lights dimmed, revealing a dramatic pool of light encircling five empty chairs and stands downstage, setting a scene of intimacy striking in its contrast to both the size of Boston Symphony Hall and the number of people gathered for the performance. The North American premier of André Previn's Quintet for Horn and String Quartet was part of "Our Will to Live," the Terezín Music Foundation's 2019 gala event, and was performed by Michael Winter, horn, Catherine French and Xin Ding, violin, Danny Kim, viola, and Owen Young, cello, all members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. From the first note to the last, the performance was enthralling.

André Previn (1929-2019) was a major figure in 20th-century American music. He made contributions to the worlds of jazz, musicals, film, and classical music as a performer, conductor, and composer. The depth and breadth of his work meant that he touched the lives of many musicians and listeners alike.

The Horn Quintet was commissioned by the Terezín Music Foundation (TMF), which is dedicated to preserving the musical legacy of composers lost in the Holocaust and helping to fulfill their unrealized artistic and mentoring roles with new commissions. Over the years, TMF has commissioned a broad range of composers to write pieces for diverse instrumentation, including solo works, chamber music, and choral settings, all honoring the composers whose voices were silenced prematurely.

This commission was funded by The Omer Foundation and came about as the result of a long and fruitful relationship between Previn and TMF, including solo piano performances and the commission of a quintet for clarinet and strings. Following performances of the Clarinet Quintet by Boston Symphony Orchestra clarinetist Thomas Martin and the Hawthorne String Quartet at the Prague Spring International Music Festival and at Boston Symphony Hall, TMF Executive Director Mark Ludwig approached Previn and asked if he would be interested in taking on another composition project for the foundation. Previn agreed and suggested a chamber work featuring the horn. The resulting Quintet for Horn and String Quartet received its world premiere in May 2018 at the Prague Spring International Music Festival, with which TMF has a long-standing partnership.

For the North American Premier (November 11, 2019), Previn's Quintet was programmed between two impactful pieces by composers interned in Terezín, an infamous Nazi concentration camp where prisoners remarkably created music, art, and a cultural life together. The evening's opening work, *Overture*



André Previn

for *Small Orchestra*, by Hans Krása, proved to be an energetic and idiosyncratic piece written before Krása arrived in Terezín in 1943, re-orchestrated later for accomplished performers at the camp. Previn's Quintet followed the Krása well, both as an homage to the composers and musicians of Terezín and in its own energy and idiosyncratic musical vocabulary.

The untitled first movement of the Quintet begins with a lyrical but up-tempo duet between the horn and cello. String voices enter one at a time, providing support to the horn line above. At times during the movement the horn carries the melody, supported by string accompaniment, and at times the horn speaks in conversation with the strings. The texture of the composition changes frequently, shifting between repeated, driving rhythmic figures, lyrical lines, and interlocking rhythms. Energetic, intense passages contrast with light string

figures. A short, stopped horn melody layers on top of quick running figures in the strings. The final bars of the first movement gain in both tempo and intensity, leading towards the decisive end.

The second movement, titled "There in the Morning," is largely a horn song with string accompaniment. The cello leads the movement with solo double stops that came across in performance as melancholy with disconcerting undertones. Winter's and Young's qualities of sound and musical approaches seemed perfectly suited to each other. Extended passages for the full quintet evoke nostalgia, and an extensive stopped horn melody sounds like a memory or recollection. The movement ends with a muted horn solo quietly reminiscent of the beginning. The brief moments of octave doubling between Winter and French were achingly beautiful, and Winter's soft playing was exquisite.

The third movement, "Working," opens energetically, driven by pizzicato offbeats in the strings. Intense and almost frantic sections intersperse with long horn lines that soar above the activity. I noticed motivic references to traditional horn calls occasionally folded into the texture, and the middle section of the movement reminded me of mechanical gears interlocking. Excitement builds towards the end of the movement, which concludes the 25-minute journey with a spectacular, accelerating horn flourish.

The third piece on the evening's program was *The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke* by Terezín composer Viktor Ullman. That Previn's Quintet was bookended by the music of two composers who perished in the Holocaust made the performance all the more moving.



During the Boston performance, the horn was always very present in the texture of the ensemble. Winter played with a beautiful, warm sound, and his facility with the wide variety of technical passages was impressive and inspiring. From looking at the score in advance, I expected to hear sections in which the horn blended into the texture of the strings, but in execution, the horn always rode above the string sound. In fact, there were moments during which I wanted to hear more volume from the strings, and I wondered if the acoustics of Symphony Hall, which are friendly to horn playing, when applied to chamber music might be partially responsible.

Previn's Quintet is a significant addition to the horn chamber music repertoire. It lies well on the instrument, and though it can be technically challenging at times, there are few sustained demands to exhaust the player. "Everything sits well on the horn for finger and face," said Winter about the piece, "which makes it easy to concentrate on making music instead of having to focus all the energy on just executing the part." Also, "It shows off the range and abilities of the horn well without being unnecessarily difficult." Previn uses both ends of the horn range to great effect (high  $c'''$  to low  $B^b$ ), although he leans more heavily on pitches above the staff than in the bass clef. He takes advantage of the sounds possible on the



Michael Winter

horn and the expansiveness of large leaps, clearly understanding the instrument and the wide range of moods, colors, and characters it can evoke.

Sparse in his musical markings, Previn prefers not to over instruct but rather to trust the performers to interpret the work. As an avid chamber musician, I find this to be a welcome invitation. Overall, the writing is quite expressive, with ample opportunity for players to pour themselves into the material, as each of the performers at Symphony Hall did. Winter noted that after some score study, the parts came together without much difficulty, allowing players to spend rehearsal time on interpretation over logistics. The string parts are fairly difficult, however, and few articulations are marked for the strings, all of which is worth keeping in mind when considering performance colleagues.

This Quintet for Horn and String Quartet would be a good choice for strong college students, accomplished avocational players, or professional players, and Winter notes that because it is not excessively taxing relative to its timing, it should be comfortable to program on a solo or chamber music recital.

The Quintet is well crafted and, according to Winter, rewarding to play. "I have always been a fervent admirer of Mr. Previn," Winter writes. "My first horn CD was of him conducting the Vienna Philharmonic, and I was thrilled to work with

him when he conducted the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra and the BSO. The more I play his music, the more I love it. His compositions are all masterful works of chamber music, and giving the American premiere of his Horn Quintet with my BSO colleagues is a tremendous pleasure."

Violinist Catherine French also enjoyed performing the piece and writes of it, "Previn's Horn Quintet is lyrical, romantic, rhythmic – and a real tour de force for the horn. It features each instrument individually, yet the result is symphonic in scope, displaying the maestro's unique sense of voicing and ability to let the music itself speak above all else."

The parts and score will be available from G. Schirmer, Inc. early in 2020, and at the time of writing, no recording of the piece was available.

Music making is a truly human experience. I've long believed in the power of music to connect us – musician to musician, student to teacher, and performer to listener. I was struck by the ability of Previn's Quintet to connect across generations, spiritual backgrounds, and life experiences. It was impactful in this performance context, and I believe it will be an equally engaging piece on any program. Previn's Quintet is a gift to the horn playing community, and I look forward to the opportunity to play it myself!

*Anne Howarth performs and coaches chamber and orchestral music in the Bosc area. She is a member of Radius Ensemble, Vento Chiaro, Juventas New Music Ensemble, and the Plymouth Philharmonic, and teaches at Tufts University and New England Conservatory Preparatory School.*

