

Laugh Perfumes
Concerto for Amplified Violin and Orchestra
Program Notes by Douglas Geers,

Laugh Perfumes was commissioned by the 2006 Festival Unicum especially for its theme "The stage—a place for new music." *Laugh Perfumes* directly embodies this concept, as it transcends the traditional ideas of a violin concerto by incorporating visual and theatrical elements. The work has also been written expressly for violinist Maja Cerar, who has forged a unique path and high international profile among contemporary virtuosi through the bold use of multimedia and theater in her performances.

The primary inspiration for *Laugh Perfumes* is the influential classic 1912 work *Pierrot Lunaire* by Arnold Schoenberg, a work for soprano and chamber ensemble which in its eccentric expressionist beauty draws from stock characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte* theater tradition. In *Laugh Perfumes*, the violin soloist becomes the focal point representing Pierrot figuratively. The orchestra represents Pierrot as well, embodying the wildly varying ranges of his thoughts and emotions through musical means of texture, dynamics, and rhythm. Meanwhile, *Laugh Perfumes* intensifies the bonds between soloist and orchestra through visual and dramatic elements. A large sculpture onstage represents the Moon, which is the object and the cause of Pierrot's desire and demise, and special focused lights represent moonbeams. The soloist interacts with the visual objects both musically and physically to portray Pierrot and his obsessions, including traversal of a ramp that leads back into the orchestra. Together, the image of the moon, the movement of the soloist, the lighting effects, and the music itself create an unpredictable path of vivid, sweet, and uncanny scenes from *Pierrot Lunaire*. These include visions of sensuality, intrigues, and nostalgia. The character of Pierrot is drawn as a well-meaning but psychologically unstable soul searching for meaning and comfort in a complex, sinister world, and the multiple "scenes" of the concerto follow Pierrot from his discovery of the Moon through to his final attempts to achieve complete union with it.

Unlike most concertos, the violinist in *Laugh Perfumes* wears a small microphone on her instrument. The microphone is attached to a small speaker near her initial position onstage. The amplification is used to allow for the softest violin sounds to be audible in the concerto setting, even while the soloist moves to numerous positions onstage. The musical materials for the piece take advantage of the intimacy possible because of the violin's amplification, and include exploration of both fine nuances and extremes of tone color. The concerto's themes and harmonies are completely original, but were developed with the use of melodic, rhythmic, and timbral materials derived from *Pierrot Lunaire*. However the *Laugh Perfumes* themes create their own unique sound world, with overt references to *Pierrot Lunaire* shimmering through in fleeting moments.

Formally, *Laugh Perfumes* has a "fractal" organization based on a seven-note motive from *Pierrot Lunaire*. That is, the composition has seven major sections, each based on the tonality of one pitch from the following motive, which appears in the first measures of *Pierrot Lunaire*: G# - E - C - D - Bb - C# - G. Each of the seven main sections of *Laugh Perfumes* further divides into seven sub-sections, and these also follow the same pitch contour (although transposed) of the motive above. The seven large sections of the work may be thought of as "movements" of the piece, but most occur *atacca* in performance, so that the orchestra rarely falls to complete silence between sections.

Concepts for the character and actions of Pierrot in *Laugh Perfumes* are strongly related to the characterization of Pierrot in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. This vision of Pierrot is quite dark, with macabre scenes and black humor. Some writers have said that Pierrot became a symbol of the figure of the artist in many symbolist and expressionist early twentieth century works depicting him; and we have used this notion of a creative but psychologically disturbed persona in *Laugh Perfumes*. Our Pierrot is obsessive, and he wants to possess the Moon, which is his inspiration and a source of paranoia. He is willing to transgress laws and moral codes, but also has a heartfelt nostalgia for his distant home.

The Seven Major Sections of *Laugh Perfumes* are as follows:

1. Awaking in the Moonlight
2. Stealing Rubies
3. Absinthe Dream
4. Moon Obsession
5. Nostalgia
6. Cult Ceremony
7. Apotheosis

Laugh Perfumes

A Violin Concerto by Douglas Geers,
Written for Maja Cerar

Overview of the Work

1. General Concept

Laugh Perfumes expands upon traditional ideas of a concerto by incorporating visual and theatrical elements (movement by soloist, props, lighting effects, and video). The concerto is inspired by the influential classic 1912 work *Pierrot Lunaire* by Arnold Schoenberg, a work for soprano and chamber ensemble which in its eccentric expressionist beauty draws from stock characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte* theater tradition. In *Laugh Perfumes*, the violin soloist becomes the focal point representing Pierrot figuratively. The orchestra represents Pierrot as well, embodying the wildly varying ranges of his thoughts and emotions through musical means of texture, dynamics, and rhythm.

2. "Multimedia" Elements in *Laugh Perfumes*

Laugh Perfumes intensifies the bonds between soloist and orchestra through visual and dramatic elements. Together they are in concert with the visual elements, in magnetic polarity to the video projected on a large screen and silk ribbons hung behind the orchestra. The video content represents the Moon, which is the object and the cause of Pierrot's desire and demise.

Although the orchestra members will remain seated, the violin soloist will move to several locations on the stage. She will pick up objects, including long, silky strands of cloth (tethers), and will move them. Some of these tethers will be attached to a barely visible cable and lifted into the air to become moonbeams. Special focused lights will also be used to represent moonbeams. The violinist will bow the tethers and the light beams, enacting Pierrot's obsession with the Moon. In addition, a rising walkway will be placed in the orchestra between the podium and the video screen, and the soloist will move towards and away from the video images during the piece.

Using these and similar devices as well as the music itself, the concerto alludes to vivid, sweet, and uncanny scenes from *Pierrot Lunaire*. These include visions of sensuality, crime, and nostalgia. The character of Pierrot is drawn as a well-meaning but psychologically unstable soul searching for meaning and comfort in a complex, sinister world.

3. Musical Elements in *Laugh Perfumes*

Laugh Perfumes is scored for a moderate-sized orchestra (winds in threes) and has a duration of approximately eighteen minutes. In performance the violinist will wear a small microphone on her instrument, and this will be attached to a small amplifier/speaker near her. The amplification will be used to allow for the softest violin sounds to be audible in the concerto setting. Aside from this, the music of *Laugh Perfumes* is entirely acoustic (no electronic sounds).

Musical materials for the piece include completely original themes and harmonies, which were developed with the use of melodic, rhythmic, and timbral materials derived from *Pierrot Lunaire*. The *Laugh Perfumes* themes are quite different from those of *Pierrot Lunaire*, which shimmer through in fleeting moments.

Laugh Perfumes

A Theatrical Violin Concerto

Scenario of the Composition

1. The Concerto's Musical Form:

Laugh Perfumes has a "fractal" organization based on a seven-note motive from *Pierrot Lunaire*. That is, the composition has seven major sections, and each of these divides into seven sub-sections, which each divide into smaller sections. The major sections of the work may be thought of as "movements" of the piece, but will all occur *atacca* in performance, so that the orchestra never completely stops between sections.

2. Concept of Pierrot in *Laugh Perfumes*

Concepts for the character and actions of Pierrot in *Laugh Perfumes* are strongly related to the characterization of Pierrot in Arnold Schoenberg's work, *Pierrot Lunaire*. This vision of Pierrot is quite dark, with macabre scenes and black humor. Some writers have said that Pierrot became a symbol of the figure of the artist in many symbolist and expressionist early twentieth century works depicting him; and we have used this notion of a creative but psychologically disturbed persona in *Laugh Perfumes*. Our Pierrot is obsessive, and he wants to possess the Moon, which is his inspiration and a source of paranoia. He is willing to transgress laws and moral codes, but also has a heartfelt nostalgia for his distant home.

3. The Seven Major Sections of *Laugh Perfumes*: (each section is 2-2.5 minutes in duration)

8. **Introduction** of Pierrot character & his lunar obsession
 - During the introductory music the general sound world appears, featuring brass instruments playing a gentle harmonic texture. This "music of the unconscious" grows stronger, and the solo violin enters with its first theme. The soloist and a solo cello are featured.
 - Pierrot's character is established, and here we establish the tension between Pierrot and the figure of the moon.
9. **Stealing the Rubies**
 - The violinist "stalks" the stage as the music becomes darker and tense with the same kind of mood. The section ends with a woodwind chorale and then a quiet, high violin solo.
 - Items are revealed that the violinist "steals". Among these are the long tethers that are tied to the moon later.
 - Items revealed may reference the "crimes" from *Pierrot Lunaire*: hanging, goring Harlequin's head, stealing rubies, etc.
10. **Absinthe Dream**
 - The music moves from gently swirling colors to an energetic, upbeat mood that soon becomes tinged with excessiveness. The energy becomes increasingly erratic and unstable, culminating in a feverish spiral that spins out of control and collapses.
11. **Moon Obsession**
 - Pierrot's obsession with the moon takes control of him. He yearns to unite with the moon. He turns to it, entreats it, and eventually tries to reach the moon and pull it down.
 - During this section, the tethers get attached to the moon and Pierrot "bows moonbeams" (beams of light).
 - Music in this section is quiet and impressionistic in general, with one very brief outburst in the middle. This section ends with a crescendo of violin, timpani and gong.
12. **Nostalgia** for unreachable places and unrecoverable past
 - Pierrot is sorrowful at not being able to "acquire" the moon, and turns to a yearning for his distant home.
 - Music here uses motives inspired by Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. It is very active and contrapuntal for its first minute, then is quiet. After a brief reprise of contrapuntal music, it ends with a woodwind chorale.
13. **Cult Ceremony**
 - Pierrot enacts an occult rite to try to soothe his troubled soul, but instead is led to a disturbed, irrational state of mind.

- During this section, the violinist moves & holds the violin like Pierrot holding up his heart, like a priest with a cross or monstrance or human body.
- This section rises from the gentle end of section 5 and grows, ending with a frenzied energy.

14. **Apotheosis**

- After the frenzy of section 6, section 7 is a coda. The music here slowly follows a path upward and inward toward the solo violin. After a momentary tutti climax, instruments stop playing one-by-one. At the very end, an ethereal bed of high strings glows around the solo violin, which falls to a low note and twitters there, ending very quietly.
- This section represents Pierrot's merger with the moon (It will be ambiguous to the audience whether this is his salvation or his suicide).
- During this section, the lighting in the hall will grow darker and darker. Meanwhile, the orchestra musicians, after they stop playing, will switch off their music stand lights, intensifying the darkening affect. Some of the musicians will turn their music stand lights on and off irregularly as the violinist rises towards the moon, creating a "clicking crickets and flickering stars" effect.

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