

Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra
– Launy Grøndahl

Born June 30, 1886, in Ordrup, Denmark

Died January 21, 1960, in Copenhagen, Denmark

This work was composed in 1924 and premiered in Copenhagen by the Orchestra of the Casino Theater with soloist Vilhelm Aarkrogh. It is scored for solo trombone, pairs of woodwinds, horn, two trumpets, piano, and strings.

Danish composer Launy Grøndahl had a remarkable career. He was a student of noted composers Niels Gade and Carl Nielsen. Although he wrote many works, it was his three-decade tenure as conductor of the orchestra of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation that shaped his life more than any other factor.

Grøndahl is primarily known for one work – the Trombone Concerto heard on this program. Listeners might be surprised that this talented composer, practically unknown outside Scandinavia, also wrote concertos for bassoon and violin, as well as works for orchestra, art songs, chamber music, and piano pieces. Grøndahl's musical style is melodic, but it does not eschew some modernistic techniques and angular harmonies. The fascinating combination of traditional and modern styles creates a musical tapestry that is always interesting.

The idea of a concerto for trombone might seem odd to some people, but there have been trombone concertos for centuries. There are hundreds of such pieces spanning from the Baroque period to modern times. In addition to the most familiar one by Rimsky-Korsakov (1878), there are other notable works for trombone and orchestra by Leopold Mozart (1756) and Michael Haydn (1764), father and brother to their more famous relatives. Quite recently, there has been a large number of new works for the instrument, including pieces by Albert Schnittke (1991), Jennifer Higdon (2006), and Christopher Rouse (1991), who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for his Trombone Concerto. Despite the wealth of literature, trombone concertos rarely appear on concert programs.

Grøndahl's Trombone Concerto is one of a large number of Scandinavian works for the instrument composed in the first part of the twentieth century. Written during an Italian vacation in 1924, this challenging and dramatic work is as rewarding for the performer as it is for the listener. Dedicated to the Danish trombonist Vilhelm Aarkrogh, it was inspired by the playing of the trombone section of the Casino Theater orchestra in Copenhagen, of which Aarkrogh was the leader and Grøndahl had been a violinist since the age of thirteen.

This piece begins in the lowest reaches of the orchestra with a stormy chord, which is soon joined by a declamatory and dramatic statement by the solo trombone. Grøndahl dispenses with the traditional exposition of the main themes by the orchestra and plunges the listener into the fray without hesitation. The drama of the first theme soon gives way to the exotic lyricism of the second melody. Of particular interest here is the character of the solo part, virtuosic and impressive in its agility.

Grøndahl's second movement, entitled "Quasi una Leggenda" ("In the manner of a tall tale"), is a mixed-meter *andante* that abounds in beauty. The two contrasting themes, both lovely, are interrupted by a large climax in the center of the movement that culminates with a high B-flat in the solo trombone. The gentle rippling of arpeggios and string chords end the movement quietly.

The *maestoso* introduction to the finale is based on music from the first movement, but soon gives way to a surprisingly light rondo. This playful music is peppered with staccato runs and a blitheness that is seldom heard from the trombone. Despite the light nature of this music, there is an overwhelming sense of authority that is echoed in the orchestra interludes. The final measures display the limits of the trombone's capabilities with a passage that reaches into the stratosphere. A fortissimo flourish concludes the concerto.

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