HK Gruber
“Aerial,” Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra (1999)

HK Gruber’s reputation as a composer of craft and imagination and a performer of irreverent energy is based in a lifetime of immersion in the musically saturated city of Vienna. As a child, he was a member of the famous Vienna Boys Choir for several years before a mentor suggested, given the size of his hands, that he should also take up the double bass. His professional career as a bassist began with Frederic Ceña’s new music ensemble, die reihe, and he was principal bass of Vienna’s Tonkünstler Orchester before starting his long tenure in the bass section of the Austrian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Forty years as a professional double bassist gave him the financial security to compose without the added complications of seeking and fulfilling commissions beyond those projects that really appealed to him.

Gruber has said that playing in an orchestra was the best education a composer could want, given that he could ask any of his accomplished colleagues about the nuances of their instruments, and could hear from within the ensemble the orchestral strategies employed by composers ranging from Haydn to Stravinsky. Gruber has also become a sought-after orchestral conductor, leading many of Europe’s important ensembles; in 2009 he was appointed composer/conductor of the BBC Philharmonic.

HK Gruber studied bass at the Vienna Hochschule für Musik along with composition and theory. His principal composition teachers included Alfred Uhl, the Schoenberg pupil Erwin Ratz, and Gottfried von Einem, and he was strongly drawn to Stravinsky’s music. Like many composers in the 1960s trying to find new avenues outside of the academy and traditional concert hall, in 1967 Gruber, Kurt Schwertsik, and others founded the MOB art & tone ART Group for performing their own work and that of the iconoclastic Argentine composer Mauricio Kagel. Much of its repertoire had strongly irreverent, theatrical leanings under the influence of older German melodrama (via such works as Schoenberg’s Pierrot lunaire) as well as the performance art of the 1960s-era Fluxus movement and John Cage’s “happenings.” Gruber’s compositional style was indelibly marked by the music of Hanns Eisler and the Kurt Weill/Bertolt Brecht collaborations, especially Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera).

By the late 1960s Gruber had achieved recognition as both a composer and as a cabaret-style actor and singer, parallel pursuits that led to such works as his Frankenstein-Suite (1970) and his “musical spectacle” Gomorra (1976). He rewrote the former in 1978 as the orchestral “Pan-Dämönum” Frankenstein!!, which was premiered by Simon Rattle (just twenty-three at the time) and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic with the composer himself as “chansonnier.” Suddenly he found himself with an international hit on his hands. Frankenstein!! has been performed hundreds of times all over the world in both orchestral and chamber versions and has also been staged. Most performances, including one by the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra led by Gunther Schuller in August 1980, have featured the composer as soloist.

For instrumental soloists seeking new concertos, Gruber’s penchant for theatricality in his music has been an irresistible draw. In the midst of fulfilling a commission for an ensemble work in the 1980s, Gruber received a message from Yo-Yo Ma, who told him that if the piece happened to be a cello concerto, he would be the soloist, and already had a premiere lined up—so how could the composer refuse? Ma gave that first performance of Gruber’s Cello Concerto with Boston Musica Viva, Richard Pittman conducting, at Tanglewood in August 1989. Gruber wrote his percussion concerto into the open... for Colin Currie and the BBC Philharmonic; his Piano Concerto was commissioned for Emanuel Ax by the New York Philharmonic, who premiered it under Alan Gilbert’s direction in January 2017.

Gruber knew Håkan Hardenberger from a number of occasions when the trumpeter was soloist with the Austrian Radio Symphony Orchestra, but Hardenberger’s request for a commission seemed to come out of the blue. Hardenberger relates that when the two got together to discuss the piece, “Nali [Gruber’s nickname] was...particularly curious about deconstruction and alienation combined with beauty and poetry” in the trumpet’s sonic vocabulary. Gruber also asked if he’d be willing to play multiphonics—specifically singing and playing a note at the same time—and whether he’d play a cow’s horn, which Hardenberger had identified as the origin of the trumpet in Sweden (Hardenberger’s homeland). Hardenberger balked at the cow’s horn, but months later Gruber found a recording on his answering machine of Hardenberger playing that limited, raw-sounding instrument. Its archaic and unstable sound thus became part of the soloist’s arsenal in Aerial. It also lends further visual novelty to the live concert experience. Along with cow’s horn and standard trumpet (sometimes played in non-standard ways), Gruber also called for piccolo trumpet in B-flat.

Over four decades, Hardenberger, a frequent collaborator of BSO Music Director Andris Nelsons (himself a trumpet player), has been one of the most prolific commissioners of new works for his instrument, requesting concertos from such composers as Harrison Birtwistle, Toru Takemitsu, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Arvo Pärt, and many others. In addition to Aerial, Gruber also wrote Busking (2008), a concerto for trumpets, accordion, banjo, and string orchestra, for Hardenberger.
Aerial’s title comes from the idea that both movements are aerial views of a landscape. The first is the far north, a nod to Hardenberger’s homeland of Sweden. “Done with the compass—Done with the Chart!” from Emily Dickinson’s poem “Wild nights—Wild nights!” (no. 269), suggests something unfettered and brilliant, but Gruber surprises us with a slow movement that lets the listener focus on the subtle and surprising flows of instrumental color, especially within the solo part. At the start of the concerto, the solo trumpet’s first sounds are multiphonics: the player plays a note while singing another pitch; by changing the sung pitch, yet another note emerges (via the magic of acoustics). Gruber asks for other actions seemingly designed to discomfit the virtuoso. Pitch bending and pulling slides to destabilize pitch and timber foreshadow the inevitably out-of-tune, raw sound of the cow’s horn.

The delicate harmonic backdrop often has an almost jazzy, bluesy quality, unexpectedly heightened with the move to the cow’s horn, which is given a long, lyrical line, although its range is necessarily narrow. Moving from cow’s horn to piccolo trumpet, the solo part ratchets up in virtuosity, and the orchestra too becomes more active to the end of the movement.

The aerial view depicted in “Gone Dancing,” in Gruber’s mind, shows a planet from which all inhabitants have disappeared, leaving only a sign reading “Gone Dancing.” We’re asked to imagine Fred and Ginger for the lush but pointillized version of dance music from Hollywood’s golden era that begins the movement. The soloist leaps continually through an enormous pitch range while toggling rapidly between open and stopped notes with a plunger mute and negotiating a wide and subtle array of dynamics. This precision and accuracy are matched in the glittering, occasionally overpowering orchestral music.

The second half of the movement is marked Prestissimo, the trumpet (initially muted) and orchestra exchanging phrases of a clearly Middle Eastern melodic flavor. Shifting among several meters (7/8, 8/8, 10/8, etc.), the rhythm evokes the region’s dance music, and the vast orchestra calls forth an amazing array of color and texture. The soloist runs through a variety of mutes and plays the last several pages on piccolo trumpet. The solo part is marked ffff almost throughout these last pages, but the orchestra gradually dissipates and a final sustained note leaves the subdued trumpet entirely alone.

Robert Kirzinger
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THE FIRST UNITED STATES PERFORMANCE OF “AERIAL” was given by soloist Håkan Hardenberger with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Daniel Harding conducting, on March 8, 2002, in Los Angeles.