

Accompanying and the Orchestral Reduction of 20th Century Music

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Abstract: *As the compositional output of our times increases, pianists are finding themselves relied upon as a necessity in order for a new work to be heard by a live audience. It would be, therefore, be advantageous to pianists who display the inclinations of an accompanist, to have some sort of reference guidance in developing their accompanying skills. The focus of this study is the orchestral reduction specifically of the 20th Century. This study aims towards the pedagogical end of successfully guiding a new accompanist as well as a seasoned one, through the possible pitfalls and challenges unique to orchestral reductions of the 20th Century, culminating in the successful performance of that reduction in a manner which upholds the original intent.*

Key-words: *accompanist, pianist, interpretation, concert, orchestral reduction*

1. Introduction

While some considerations remain the same for any instrument or voice throughout all periods, there are many differences that require specific attention due to the sheer mechanics of 20th Century music. The difficulties of reducing an orchestral score lie principally in the nature of the music – music that is not written for the piano. Unless the work was written in „short score (already near to a reduction) and then orchestrated, the task of reducing the score can become a somewhat arduous and unwelcome task for the composer. Unlike many piano reductions done before the 20th century, the composer today is usually responsible for the reduction of the orchestral score to the piano (Pelz 1963, 56).

As some will argue, several of the most difficult reductions come out of the Baroque period from the cantatas and oratorios of Bach, due to the contrapuntal complexities of the day. The solo instrumental works of the Baroque period, however, such as the concert written by Vivaldi, veer away from this thickly layered style, engulfing the soloist as part of the orchestral continuo.

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With many of concerted works of the Classical and early Romantic period, the issues are relatively simple and straightforward. Textures in this style are basically homophonic – reiterated chords, Alberti figurations and relatively thin – simple enough that accompanists can in many cases do an extemporaneous reduction simply by reading from the score. It is when the textures become denser and more polyphonic that difficulties begin to intrude. (Saint-Lambert 1991, 87)

While the reductions of concertos from the Classical period may be difficult to play convincingly, especially in exposed sections like tutti passages that require fast scales and sometimes awkward figurations, the basic construction of the music lies within the confines of melody and accompaniment.

2. Objectives

The inherent nature of a reduction is to serve as a suitable representation of the work, upholding the original musical integrity. With this paradox, the composer is left to decide which lines bear more musical value than others and how to present these musical ideas while leaving out other „less important” ones and still produce a satisfying performance. Some composers will include every minute facet from the original orchestral score, which makes the reduction „unpianistic” and at times, unplayable. In cases such as these, the pianist’s role is elevated to that of an arranger, left to decide which notes to play and which to leave out - so that the same piece performed by two different pianists will sound entirely different. Another option that has been adopted over the past few years is that of adding extra staves containing cue notes; however the playing of these notes necessitates the leaving out of other notes on the grand staff. The decision of which notes to play and which to omit becomes a clever game of assigning importance to one line over another-something that cannot be done arbitrarily (Wristen 1999, 27).

By providing examples of problems that one encounters in orchestral reductions and discussing the possible ways to solve these problems, this study will aim to assist the pianist in applying these solutions to any reduction. Although some of the topics discussed can be applied to a piano reduction from any style period or for any nature of soloist, the complex overlapping rhythmic and textural issues that permeate 20th century music often complicate these universal specifications.

This study aims toward the pedagogical end of successfully guiding a new accompanist, as well as a seasoned one, through the possible pitfalls and challenges unique to orchestral reductions of the 20th century, culminating in the successful performance of that reduction in a manner which upholds the original intent- however traditional or untraditional that may be- of the music as conceived by the composer.

3. Material and Methods

While it may seem to many musicians that it is elementary to discuss the basic problems encountered when one plays an orchestral reduction, it would be presumptuous to assume that all musicians have addressed these factors. Before one could even proceed to untangle the notes that should be played, there must first be a deeper understanding of the primary problems the pianist must solve prior to the production of any sound at the keyboard.

To a beginning accompanist, it is enough to learn the basics of how to play with another person; how to follow or to lead if necessary; how to create the proper balance between the piano and the soloist; how to anticipate the actions of another player while still performing up to a high standard on one's own. Consequently, the problems of accompanying a concerted work can be easily overlooked when faced with the task of simply negotiating the musical score in itself. To an experienced accompanist, buried in the hustle of learning an ever-increasing amount of music in an ever-decreasing amount of time, these problems become something often taken for granted as understood.

3.1. Timbral variety

The most obvious and universal problem with the orchestral reduction is that the piano, while capable of many different timbres and ranges of expression is, after all, only one instrument. This one instrument, however, is expected to serve as several instruments of all different natures – all at the same time. For example, the difference between string instruments and woodwind or brass instruments begins with their basic composition and method of sound production. All of these, in turn, differ from the mechanics of sound production on the piano. The colors produced by an orchestra are so distinct, yet at times also so subtle, due to the diverse natures of all the instrumental sections. Accompanist Bos (1949, 112) explains that is virtually impossible to reproduce orchestral reduction – unless the reduction has been arranged rather than reduced for the piano.

In an arrangement, where the idiomatic nature of the instrument would have been taken into consideration, a purely pianistic approach would be required, however in a reduction, where the essence of the orchestra has been retained, it would be inadequate to simply disregard the timbres of the orchestra altogether. While one cannot exactly reproduce those timbres and colors on the piano, one is capable of imitating them.

3.2. The use of pedal

In the use of pedal, pianist must also remember the limitations of the instrument being represented. While the damper pedal is an advantageous device to use on the piano, orchestral instruments are not capable of sustaining several notes of a moving line in the same manner. Consequently, when the pianist would approach the following line in a solo work or even in the accompaniment of an instrumental sonata, the use of pedal would not only be acceptable, but most likely encouraged. However, when playing the same line found in the reduction of an orchestral score, the use of pedal would only be acceptable if applied in a conservative manner. Relying upon legato fingering in the right hand and the sostenuto pedal in the left hand, this kind of passage could be played without the use of any damper pedal.

The pedal must be used at times in a controlled, precise way – serving the purpose, not just as a „safety blanket when the music gets difficult (Fong, 74). In certain cases, it is impossible to play without the pedal, due to the leaps that are required or notes that need to be held, but do not fit under the hand. The pedal is also helpful in creating greater depth of timbre, opening up the sound of the piano to imitate the fullness of large groups of instruments like strings or bass.

3.3. Articulation

While the pedal is inevitable and necessary tool at the disposal of the pianist, the lines must always remain clear and distinct. Articulation, then, can either help or hinder the performance. Pizzicatos seem an easy enough concept to duplicate, but the result can be a note that is clipped so short it has no resonance, bearing little resemblance to the actual device. A note held slightly longer than a staccato, but still played detached, can serve as a reasonable substitute for true pizzicato, as the sound will project from the piano with presence, without being too short or too long.

General articulation markings of slurs and staccatos are not as difficult to reproduce, as they are used naturally in piano writing. Even tremolos can be imitated in an acceptable fashion, with the help of a little pedal and slight accent on important beats or change of harmony. What does complicate matters of articulation, however, is that the pianist must remember to still follow through with producing the correct timbre of each instrument being portrayed.

In 20th century orchestral writing especially, the brass, wind and percussion sections have become more prominent in their musical contributions by projecting their roles in a more individual manner, expanded from earlier models. This creates a more contrapuntal texture in a busy musical playground of activity.

While there is not much danger of the piano covering an instrument such as a saxophone or trombone, there is a very real trap when accompanying a bassoon or flute or cello – a trap that is easy to fall into and not so easy to climb out. With all attention the pianist must direct to the playing of the notes – infiltrated with thoughts of articulation, correct instrumental representation and appropriate use of pedal – coupled with the fact that many 20th century orchestral scores call for a large orchestra, heavy with brass and percussion, there is a tendency for even the most sensitive pianists to find themselves in an unconscious battle with the soloist for prominence.

3.4. Rubato

“Becoming the orchestra” in a reduction is really all about proportion (Canaday 1974, 98). With rubato, the idea of proportion is even further expanded, as the pianist would not be wise to use rubato the same way as in a solo work – or even in the accompaniment of a sonata or other work written for a soloist and pianist, to be played idiomatically on the piano. The accompanist must recognize and adhere to the difference between orchestral rubato and solo rubato. Orchestral rubato must be accomplished as an ensemble, as a group of musicians moving together under the direction of a conductor and therefore is significantly more structured and controlled than solo rubato. The free, „in the moment” rubato of a single player could hinder the performance as well as detract from a realistic orchestral representation.

Sometimes, the pianist discovers how ineffective the piano can be as a substitute for an orchestra. Despite being armed with all the knowledge of problems to address and ways to avoid them, there are instances when there is nothing more to exclaim than „this would sound much better with orchestra” (Spillman 1985, 39) if the reduction is completed in a way that emphasizes the piano limitation in color spectrum, the piano and soloist simply function as two opposing elements, due to the nature of the music.

3.5. The orchestral role of the piano

In an orchestra, the economy of new musical ideas is not such a problem, as different instruments can be combined in various ways to make the same material sound fresh and interesting. Even at times when the soloist submerges and becomes one with the orchestra, still under the guise of limited musical material, the orchestra is able to accommodate and welcome the soloist as a member. Unfortunately, the piano offers no such variations and the musicality can get lost in the repeated pattern of awkward notes and crude orchestral representation.

While in translation to the audience the end results should sound easy and bright, herein lies the greatest, unstoppable problem of the orchestral reduction: the piano as an orchestra is a daunting nightmare for the pianist and a rarely acknowledged forgiving cushion – more so than an actual orchestra – for the soloist. If the pianist is to truly be a representation of the orchestra, this goes against the nature of accompanying which is to follow the soloist wherever the soloist may lead.

Therefore, if the soloist skips measures or misses an entrance, the accompanist will often „cover” for the soloist so that no mistake is detected by the audience – the orchestra, however, will not be able to follow so freely. Consequently, the flexible accompanist may spoil the soloist, but the orchestral accompanist, while providing a truer representation of an orchestral performance, may sink the soloist. Which is the solution is more kind, remains the greatest paradox of accompanying a concerted work.

4. Results and Discussions

The focus will remain on piano reductions of an orchestral score, in order to carefully diagnose common problems and attempt to solve these in a musically successful way -keeping in mind at all times the nature of the work as one intended for presentation by an orchestra.

4.1. Recordings

Recordings are helpful in determining what should be heard most prominently as well as which instrument is to be represented. By listening to a recording the pianist may be surprised to find inconsequential certain notes that appeared essential on the page. This may be a result of which instrument is delivering the line, the register in which it is placed, or the microphone placement in the recording studio. In addition to listening to the recording, the prudent accompanist should also consult the full orchestral score to determine the correct musical ordering of each line. Another advantage of studying and full score is to help determine which instrument is being represented.

The method for producing sound to imitate a string instrument is different than that used to imitate a wind or brass instrument. In reductions of works from earlier period, depending on the edition, of course, there are often indications in the score as to which instrument or instrumental group would be playing in the orchestra at that time. Reduced scores from the 20th century, however, are often

only available in one edition and the information provided can vary greatly. (Roberge 1993, 928).

Sometimes no delegation of instrumentation is given; sometimes general instrumentation is given with a few articulation instructions; sometimes nearly every note is delegated to a specific instrument and individual dynamic marking and articulation are provided. When there is no instrumental distinction made in the reduced score, the score looks no different regardless of what type of instrument is playing. Although it is impossible for the listener to know exactly which instrument is being represented without knowledge of the score, it is possible to create the correct atmosphere and style the original instrument would produce.

4.2. Orchestral reduction's solutions

While the decision of what should or should not be omitted can be aided by studying a recording, it is also an unfortunate fact that many newer works have not been recorded in their original form with soloist and orchestra. Sometimes, even a recording has been made, it is not easily attainable and therefore cannot be consulted. In these instances, study of the complete orchestral score can still aid in determining which instruments are being represented in each line. As the reduced score may not help in assigning levels of importance to the sometimes – overwhelming abundance of musical lines that are present, the orchestral score – if it is obtainable – can often help with this determination.

In cases where a reduced score is laden with extra cue notes that require the accompanist to „grow an extra hand” or find some way to designate priority – yet there is no recording or orchestral score readily available – the solo part can be key to determining which lines present material essential to the full presentation of the passage.

Dense sections such as orchestral tutti are often full of material too spread out, notated in rhythms better negotiated on instruments other than the piano; and it is often impossible to play all the notes in the form appearing on the page. While some accompanists simply take the easy road of leaving out a great deal of material, there are ways to approach the score so that the performance can be more of a true representation of how the orchestra would sound. Ultimately, every line in the orchestra will not be heard, especially in tutti that are very contrapuntal.

A crucial aspect of executing an orchestral reduction is to always provide the most important elements of the musical score: namely the melodic theme and bass line. While it creates greater interest and contrast when additional incidental themes are included, if these gestures cannot be negotiated and worked into the skeletal structure of the work convincingly – without detracting from the melodic and harmonic structure – they should be omitted or altered appropriately. However, by stripping away a few layers and leaving the ones that would be heard

most prominently even if all voices were present, the pianist can create the appearance of the full harmonic impulse of that melodic line, yet in a fashion that is now more suited to the piano.

5. Conclusions

In music of the 20th century, denser textures are what most accompanists will face when serving as the orchestra in the reduced score for the piano. Therefore, the reduction of such a score becomes a difficult hurdle to clear. If the intent of the reduction is to substitute one person for the orchestra, the goal should be to re-score the music for the piano in such a way that it is pianistically possible – rewritten in an idiomatic manner for the keyboard.

Perhaps the most significant challenge when one begins to unscramble the sometimes-puzzling mess of an orchestral reduction lies in the hierarchy of the musical material. As with all music, every line is not equal; and the accompanist must determine how to voice the often densely stacked lines so that the important ones are always heard.

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