

Stylistic features of Vivaldi's bassoon concerti

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Abstract: *The architectural pattern of the Vivaldi concertos follows the plan of the overture in Italian style, with a fast-slow-fast structure, which the composer loosens, each of these sections becoming a part with its own development. Vivaldi is the composer who gave a unitary and coherent form to the instrumental concerto, later crystallized in Classicism: tripartite structure, agogic alternation, melodic inventiveness, rhythmic richness, balance between expressiveness and virtuosity. The formal structure, in itself, is dependent on the tonal factor and consists in the configuration of a unitary thematic block, moved in various tonalities related to the initial one.*

Key-words: *bassoon, concerto, Baroque, Vivaldi*

1. Introduction

Antonio Vivaldi (1678 – 1741) is, indisputably, one of the most feverish promoters of the instrumental concerto, the general structure of his works becoming the archetypal formula of the classical concerto, both in terms of macro-articular organization and micro-formal details. Vivaldi composed about 500 concertos, grouped into five categories of timbral disposing: instrumental itself, for a single instrument with string accompaniment and *continuo*; double concertos, for two solo instruments with string accompaniment and *continuo*; *concerti grossi*, for three or more solo instruments, accompanied by strings and *continuo*; *concerti ripieni*, for orchestral ensemble, without soloists; chamber concertos, in which the instrumental timbre composition is varied, and the instruments provide, in the absence of the orchestra not only the soloist parts, but also the accompaniment (Talbot, *Antonio Vivaldi*, Grove Music Online, accessed 10.07.2020).

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The succession of the three movements of Vivaldi concertos summarizes a rich emotional universe, each of the component structures having a precise role in the dramatic development of the work: *the first movement, in a fast or medium-fast tempo*, has an academic character, being robust and clearly configured in the Exposition segments, with attention to the details in the Development and thematic processing segments; *the second movement, in a slow tempo*, has a lyrical, tragic or elegiac character, depending on the dramatic need determined by the chosen tonality and the contextual affective flow; *the third movement, in a fast tempo*, gives brilliance to the thematic elements, being dominated by instrumental technique, which demands virtuosity abilities. An important defining element is the tendency towards homophony, by limiting the counterpoint expression. This aspect contributes to a greater attention paid to the soloist/orchestra relation and to a more judicious evolution of the soloist instrument (or of the soloist instruments, in the *concerti grossi*), by engaging a more sustained and individualized arsenal of technique and expression than in the case of thematic synergies loaded with polyphonic elements, kept to the minimum limit of their existence. The general tendency towards homophony favors the configuration of a light, fluid, expansive, energy-laden sound discourse.

The timbre distribution of the Vivaldi concertos shows a spectacular diffusion, in a rich and varied instrumental area: approximately 350 concertos are for a solo instrument with accompaniment (of these, 243 are dedicated to the violin, the rest being divided between: bassoon, cello, oboe, flute, viola d'amore, blockflöte, lute and mandolin); about 40 concertos are for instrumental duo, accompanied by strings and *continuo*; almost 30 concertos are for three or more instruments (www.dardel.info/musique/Vivaldi_catalogue.php).

For bassoon, Vivaldi composed 39 concertos, of which, to date, 37 have survived, which have the following tonal distribution: *C major* (13), *C minor* (1), *D minor* (1), *E flat major* (1), *E minor* (1), *F major* (7), *G major* (3), *G minor* (2), *A minor* (4) and *B flat major* (4) (The Bassoon Studio, University of Michigan).

2. Models of thematicism, instrumental writing and formal articulation in Vivaldi's bassoon concertante creation

The general architecture of the baroque concertos includes the bassoon in the orchestra, detaching it in solo moments. This dualism served, in the Baroque era, a practical purpose: the bassoon is a bass instrument, used in the *basso continuo* section, along with cello and double bass (melodic lines harmonized by harpsichord, spinet, organ, theorbo, guitar etc.). The timbre given by the instrument, corroborated with that of the strings evolving in the same register, as well as its versatility is a good argument for which the bassoon was used as an active component in this instrumental section. Thus, the solo bassoon could be used both as a *basso continuo* instrument and as a solo instrument in dedicated thematic structures.

Vivaldi established, through the large number of concert works and their consistency, the tripartite architectural framework of the classical concerto, in which the three component movements follow each other in the form **fast – slow – fast**, the first two movements having a predominantly expository-developer character and the last movement being, in general, an aesthetic conclusion and culmination of the whole work. This is the structure of most concertos. In general, at Vivaldi **the first movement** consists in structural cycles of thematic development. They are organized segmentally, *solo* parts alternating with orchestral *ritornello*. The idea of two opposite/contrasting themes is also born in the Vivaldi concerto pattern. The alternating *solo – tutti* sections can be grouped in expository, developmental or recapitulative areas, in which the *themes* (or *thematic models*) appear in different and various tonalities from the area of dominant and subdominant, related with the main tonal center. This tripartite structure is similar to the architectural form of the *fugue* (as it was organized by Bach, an admirer of Vivaldi) and will be stabilized in Classicism, in the *Exposition – Development – Recapitulation* sonata form. The second movement of the Vivaldi concerto pattern is, in general, an instrumental aria, with a lyrical character, and the third movement is an instrumental-orchestral vertigo of virtuosity, in which we find the tensional climax of the whole work. One of the exceptions to this pattern is the *Concerto in B flat major "La Notte"*, RV 501, which follows a different articular trajectory, through the four-part architecture and programmatic character. This work has the aspect of a *concertante symphony* with obligatory bassoon, and the association with the affective-descriptive factor projects it in a poetical/ dramaturgical space.

2.1. Concerto in A minor for Bassoon, Strings, and Basso continuo, RV 497

In this work Vivaldi uses the standard elements of the typology of his writing: he uses the bassoon throughout the whole concerto, in the *tutti* moments doubling the cello, and in the *solo* moments presenting expansive themes, in which he exploits both the expressive side of the instrument and the virtuoso possibilities. The beginning of the concerto produces the gradual escape of the bassoon from the *continuo* section, by using, as an initial solo fragment, an accompanying writing, transformed, gradually, in a melodic theme, as shown in the Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Concerto in A minor, RV 497, m. 33 – 38; bassoon-continuo

The timbre of the instrument, corroborated with the thematic expression, proposes a mixture of sonorities that take place somewhat dual, supporting each other. Violins are used as a thematic exponent, while the bassoon proposes an aesthetic Universe that is expanding, detaching itself from the place dedicated in the orchestra, to the soloist's desideratum, which he gradually reaches through small climaxes. The charm of this work is represented by this gradual accumulation of *solo* character, the bassoon being "hidden" in the orchestra quite consistently in the first part of the work.

In the second movement, Vivaldi exploits an elegiac sound universe, with tragically intimal accents, in a sober and Requiem-like manner. The ornamental figures in the melody, with the rhythmic movement of the triplets give depth and motion to the artistic expression and the musical discourse (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Concerto in A minor, RV 497, m. 195 – 199; bassoon-continuo

Third movement is a somewhat atypical in the Vivaldi stylistic context, the elements of virtuosity not representing a purpose in itself, as happens in most of the composer's genre works. In this final movement of the concerto, Vivaldi emphasizes the possibilities of expression of the instrument in an alert tempo context, rather than giving it pure brilliance and overflowing incisiveness. As one can see in the example below, the instrumental writing is emphasizing the melody, not the apotheosis of virtuosity.



Fig. 3. *Concerto in A minor, RV 497, m. 262 – 267; bassoon-continuo*

2.2. *Concerto in C major for Flute, Oboe, Violin, Bassoon, and Basso continuo, RV 88*

The aspect of instrumental timbral disposing and the use of the bassoon as a dual exponent (thematic complement, but also part of the *basso continuo* section) is revealed in the *Concerto in C major for flute, oboe, violin, bassoon, and basso continuo*, RV 88, chamber music work, in which the instrument is used as a cello substitute, as it appears in the Vivaldi concerto pattern (Figure 4).

Fig. 4. *Concerto in C major, RV 88, m. 4 – 7; flute, oboe, violin, bassoon*

The figurative role of the bassoon, both in singularity (accompanying the solo sections of the flute-oboe couple) in *piano*, and joining the violin and harpsichord (the harmonic exponent) in *forte* is highlighted by the timbre conjunction between the two segments. This typology represents a baroque standard, the *piano-forte* differentiations being made not only by using the dynamics, but also with the instrumental timbre tool (more instruments = *forte*; less instruments = *piano*).

This chamber concerto, viewed as a whole, is a solo work dedicated to the flute, the other instruments (oboe, violin, bassoon and harpsichord) representing the accompanying ensemble, as a substitute for the orchestra. The interesting element to note is the way Vivaldi treats the instruments (other than the *solo* flute): the oboe and violin are both subjects of thematic complementarity, the harpsichord provides the harmonic fundament, and the bassoon is a permanent bi-functionally instrument, accompanying the flute (thus molding its sound expression depending on the context) and being the cello/double bass substitute in the other sections of the work.

The role of the bassoon in this concert is dual, and the *solo-tutti* disjunction is more pronounced than in other concertos. The bassoon is an active participant in the thematic discourse, even if it is a secondary instrument in this context.

2.3. Concerto in G major for Oboe, Bassoon, Strings, and Basso continuo, RV 545

This concerto is one of the works that propose timbre and register diversity in the context of instrumental works with orchestral accompaniment. The two timbre entities (*soli* and *tutti*) are permanently opposed, in a continuous dialogue of the *proposta-risposta* type in the two extreme movements (the *solo* moments being played by oboe and bassoon, without accompaniment), while the median movement belongs, thematically, exclusively to soloists, the orchestral ensemble being present only in the position of harmonic supporter, through the *continuo* section.

From an emotional point of view, the concerto proposes an ascending, curved tension path. Thus, in the first movement, **Andante molto**, the predominant character is bright, dominated by benevolence, with tensional ascent, determined by the thematic development and accumulation, through the prism of modulations, but also of the cheerful musical discourse, somewhat "grounded". The second movement, **Largo**, is an artistic moment of reflection, dominated by lyricism, in which the soloists have the opportunity to explore a rich ornamental world, especially if we take into account the fact that both

sections benefit from rehearsal marks. The third movement, **Allegro molto**, is dominated by virtuosity, both in terms of orchestral and solo writing. This last movement represents the tensional culmination of the work, being the climax of the concerto, in the general context. The final movement is brilliant, bright, and expansive, in a permanent ascending tension path. The main tension disposal is the competition between the virtuosity of the solo instruments, as opposed to the orchestral ensemble. The versatile character gives the thematic conduit a certain grace and flexibility, as shown in the example below.



Fig. 5. *Concerto in G major, RV 545, mvt. I, m. 24 – 28; oboe-bassoon*

2.4. *Concerto in B flat major "La Notte" for Bassoon, Strings, and Basso continuo, RV 501*

The "*La Notte*" concerto is the only one of the 39 works composed for bassoon with orchestral accompaniment, which consists of four movements, for the rest the composer applying the tripartite standard. At the same time, it is the only one of them that has a suggestive title and is a succession of programmatic movements. These aspects, as well as the poetic treatment of musical expression differentiate it in the genre of concertos dedicated to bassoon, being rather a concertante symphony for bassoon and orchestra, than a concerto itself.

The general expression of the concerto proposes a freely articulated framework, in which the musical form represents more a pretext than a purpose, in general the architectural expression serving the poetic unity of the work, not necessarily the structural one. Thus, the formal segmentation is achieved by joining closed thematic blocks. Independently they converge in synergy, the main feature of the work being represented by the permanent informational novelty. The themes used in the *solo* presentations are generally based on the chordal breakdown in arpeggio formulas.

The architecture of the whole concerto proposes culminating-regressive dualities in the conceptualization of the motion, which make up, at macro-structural level, a circular arc completed with tension climax, which is achieved both by the evolutionary agogics in rapid tempo and by the permanent dialogic intention that oscillates the aesthetic Universe between the homophonic writing within the *solo* moments with the polyphonic-imitative one from the orchestral expositions.

The plastic description that accompanies movement II (*I Fantasmii*), III (*Il Sonno*) and IV (*Sorge l'Aurora*) represents the ideate accumulation of the thematic character described by their titles. Movement I does not have a name, but the nocturnal character is highlighted by the declamatory-cadence type melodic conduit, with fine embroideries of the *solo* instrument (Figure 6).



Fig. 6. Concerto in B flat major, RV 501, m. 17 – 19

The whole aesthetic of the concert is connected to the dramatic gesture. The composer offers a sample of *program music*, without giving in to elaborations of a theatrical, operatic discourse, with a guiding line. The elements of *program music* remain in the sphere of the idea, of the descriptive thematic impulse. Vivaldi “did not become the slave of the programs; he strictly maintained the formal structure of the *ritornello* form and indulged in playful descriptions only in the *solo* sections.” (Bukofzer 1947, 229).

3. Conclusions

The bassoon is a versatile instrument from the timbre point of view (and this aspect is demonstrated, in Vivaldi's creation, by his active participation, in the dedicated concertos) but also an element of co-thematic support. The exploration of the instruments universe, rich in expressiveness, the power to support the passages of virtuosity, the warm timbre and full of harmonics, are the elements that Vivaldi fully exploited. The tripartite form of the concertos offers the possibility to explore different aesthetic worlds, through the presence of virtuosity alternating with lyricism. The exception to this tripartite setting, the "*La Notte*" concerto, brings to the fore the interpretation of the programmatic model. The concertante creation dedicated to the bassoon is, thus, rich in aesthetic and emotional content.

Vivaldi's music is innovative, and the composer's appetite for the instrumental world grounded the concertante genre, establishing its main features: structural tripartite form, agogic alternation, thematic conciseness, harmonic contrast, melodic stratification (by differentiating the theme from thematic development models). "The energy, passion, and lyricism of Vivaldi's concerti and their instrumental color and simple dramatic effects (which are obtained without recourse to contrapuntal artifice) rapidly passed into the general language of music." (Knap, *Antonio Vivaldi*, Britannica online). The descriptive meaning of some of his concertos (for example, "*La Notte*") connects the dramaturgy of music to the poetic program generated by the title. Thus, Vivaldi is one of the important forerunners of programmatic music, later perfected by Beethoven, with the *Sixth "Pastoral" Symphony*. The architectural framework, the melodic inspiration, the relationship of equidistance and complementarity between expressiveness and virtuosity, as they are revealed in the works of the composer, opened the way for the concerto genre, favoring its expansive development over time.

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