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Beethoven's *Italian* Concerto (Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58)

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Abstract: *We know that composers from all times have found inspiration sources in either popular music or in music written by their predecessors or their colleagues and that no music has been completely isolated within a geographical boundary because the whole purpose of it was to be shared with the public and to convey a wide range of emotions and interesting reactions from people who were more or less familiar with the performing side of this art. There were times, from the 15th to the 18th and even the 19th century in Europe, both Western and Central, when even the news of the day was brought in through music, being sung and performed in front of ordinary people by different versions of minstrels or troubadours who also used very basic instruments in conveying their messages. Is it possible that Beethoven used Vivaldi's Four Seasons as an inspiration source when writing his Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58? I will endeavour to show some similarities between the works which could be credited for such an act of translation or transforming existing musical material into innovation.*

Key-words: *Italian music, inspiration source, translation, transformation, Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major Op. 58, innovation.*

1. Introduction

A topic that has preoccupied me for some time is the oddness of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58, within his concerti creation, because of the style it is written in and the general mood conveyed by it. This is not the man facing his tragic destiny, at war with one another, desperate because of his decaying condition, depressed because of ill health, desperate for divine intervention, without major inner struggles or tragic endings. I have just enumerated some of the characteristics of his third piano concerto in C minor, written in 1803, during his time spent in the countryside at his doctor's request in the hope of recovering his

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deteriorating hearing, just after the famous Heiligenstadt Testament of October 1802, where he was on the verge of suicide, but decided in the end, to continue writing music and fulfil his tragic destiny.

The G major concerto, of only a few years later, is characterised by a profound optimism in which the composer finds himself in his few moments of clarity, clear mind, and intense concentration, where the hope of tranquillity, serenity and a favourable outcome to his disability seems to be the desired outcome. The concerto does not try to push to the limit the listener's ability to disseminate the musical discourse or to shock them at any given moment but to bring them alongside him in this serene, meditative and contemplative journey through what is crystal clear to me now, the never-ending cycle of nature's yearly renewal, each period of transition or transformation being associated with one of the four seasons, spring, summer, autumn or winter, which, just like the poems from which Vivaldi took inspiration in a true romantic spirit to write his series of Concerti Grossi for solo violin, as concertino and string orchestra, as ripieno, music which inspired Beethoven in turn, as I will endeavour to bring arguments to my hypothesis.

In terms of innovations brought by the composer in this piano concerto I have written extensively in my first published book with Editura Muzicală from Bucharest, Romania, *Concertele 3, 4 și 5 pentru pian și orchestră de Ludwig van Beethoven: O concepție artistică*, 3 Volume, [Concertos 3, 4 and 5 for piano and orchestra by Ludwig van Beethoven: An artistic vision, 3 Volumes] and I noted things like the piano introduction placed in the orchestral exposition, used before only in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 9 in E Flat Major K. 271 *Jeunnehomme*, but only as a means of musical dialogue between the piano and the orchestra and not as a structural element, such as Beethoven does, the elimination of the sectional character of the orchestral exposition, where it usually ended in the traditional three "hammer blows" before the soloists entrance, and the role of the trill is changed – this is no longer resolved to the dominant or tonic, accordingly, but transformed into a cantabile and expressive four-bar theme that extends the dissonance and maintains the dramatic tension of the work. (Rosen, 1997)

It is well known that composers used one another's works during the Common Era as sources of inspiration. Knowing this as a fact, I can assume that Beethoven was so impressed with Vivaldi's Concerti Grossi, written more than 70 years before his Fourth Piano Concerto, that he thought it worthy of using virtuoso features from the solo violin as well as orchestral elements from the ripieno section of the accompaniment and rewrite them in such a way in which he could innovate further and bring to life one of the most debated among academic music circles, played and enjoyed by audiences around the world piano concerti ever written, even though it was written and premiered in the first decade of the 19th Century. I

will attempt to show how this giant of the Classical Era and the first to transition into the Romantic Era used two of the four Italian Concerti Grossi as inspiration in writing one of his most successful and performed piano concertos.

2. Objectives

The article is aimed at discussing the use of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* Concerti Grossi as an inspiration source in writing his fourth piano concerto, possibly the oddest concerto in his musical output, not just because of its structure, lyrical writing, orchestration, general mood, key signature (it is known that he rarely used G major in his works), as well as the ancient philosophical associations with the second movement, but also because of a different kind of music, much closely related to Southern Europe, Italy in particular, then to Central/Western European music such as German or Austrian music, be it popular or classical. I will demonstrate, using musical examples taken from both Vivaldi's abovementioned and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, the obvious use of melodic material from the Italian composer's works from more than 70 years before this work came into being. Although not directly quoted in the key in which they were written and not always associated with the mood in which they were originally written and intended for performance by a solo violin, it soon becomes evident that virtuoso musical elements such as semiquaver triplets formed from broken chords directed both upwards and downwards as well as demisemiquavers used either as ornaments for specific notes, tremolo accompaniment in the left hand of the pianist for the right-hand melody, or simply as trills, they all seem to suggest various bird songs, which as one might hope, is what inspired Vivaldi in the first place when writing his Concerti Grossi.

As always, with any academic work, a thorough investigation is needed before jumping to any conclusion, but the arguments put forward by now are, in my opinion, more than sufficient to support my hypothesis and the fact that Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 is his *Italian* concerto, and could thus even be nicknamed as such by anyone with sufficient courage to stand by any criticism coming from colleagues or audiences at large.

3. Content

Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major follows a typical sonata form with a double exposition or a concerto form, where the first half of the exposition is given

to the orchestra. At the same time, the soloist takes over the second half, making their individualised theme different from everything that was heard before. As I have mentioned above, there are a few changes presented as innovations in this concerto, such as the beginning of the orchestral exposition with the soloist, the removal of the sectional character of the orchestral exposition, the traditional "hammer blows", replaced with a smooth integration or continuation of the orchestral discourse into the solo exposition without a final cadence or any other feature designed to stop the music. The music flows naturally from the orchestra into the piano through a *subito piano*, thus marking the beginning of the solo exposition. This technique is also used at the end of the recapitulation and into the cadenza without stopping the music (Rosen 1997).

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* follow, in general, a Concerto Grosso structure where there is an ensemble which has the role of accompanying the soloist, the ripieno, and the violin soloist, the concertino, which has a very high status within the work and a dominant position, taking over most of the virtuoso figuration within the works. The two sections are traditionally alternated between one another, and when one plays, the other rests. This does not mean that Vivaldi, himself an innovator, stuck to the old tradition and formalism of the Concerto Grosso, and there are times when members of the ripieno section receive elements of virtuosity which create dramatic and powerful dialogues between them. What strikes the listener and the analyst in these concerti is the highly accurate description of the four seasons with their features through music alone, in a very restrained setting. The programmatical character of these pieces, a quality which took off significantly during the Romantic Era in music, is a significant innovation for the 1720s as it appears and the popularity they have earned with major orchestras, soloists, and music lovers alike. They seemed to convey such a powerful message that Beethoven became obsessed with them and thus got inspired to write his most unusual piano concerto.

Below is a table with the micro- and macro-structural analysis of the exposition of Beethoven's fourth piano concerto which shows some of the deviations from the norm, or as some have called them, innovations, such as the tonality of the second theme, the opening B major orchestral chord, the mediant, after the authentic perfect cadence on the G major ending of the soloist's first intervention, a choice which was considered bad practice, one of the "forbidden rules", in chorale harmonic writing in the Baroque, and many innovative melodic and rhythmic features, which all remind us of Italian music much more than German music:

Bar number	**Big Sections**	**Themes**	**Periods/ Stanzas**	**Phrases/ Sentences**	**Motifs/ Motivic Cells**	**Tonality (modal structure)**
1 6	**Orchestral Exposition (73)**	First Theme (T1)	S1(13)	F1 F2	5(2+1+2) + 8(2+2+2+2)	G Major (Piano) B Major (Orchestra)
14 19 23		Bridge	S2(15)	F1 F2 F3	5(3+2) + 4(2+2) + 6(1+2+1+2)	G Major Modulating
29 33 37		Second Theme (T2)	S1(12)	F1 F2 F3	4(2+2) + 4(2+2) + 4(2+2)	A minor C Major G Major
40(U) 44		Progression	S2(10)	F1 F2	4(2+2) + 6(1+1+1+ 1+1+1)	F # Major Modulating
50 54		Orchestral Exposition Conclusion	S1(10)	F1 F2	4(2+2) + 4(2+2) +2	D Major 7/ D Major 7/ Modulating
60 64			S2(8)	F1 F2	4(2+2) + 4(2+2)	G Major
68		Bridge	S3(6)	F1	6(2+2+2)	G Major
74(U) 82	**Soloist's Exposition (Actual Exposition) (119)**	Begins with a stanza like S1 from The Orchestral Exposition	S1(15)	F1 F2	8(5+3) + 7(2+2+3)	G Major
89(U) 97(U)		First Theme(T1)	A(16)	F1 F2	8[4(2+2) + 4(2+2)] 8[4(2+2) + 4(2+2)]	G Major Modulating
105(U) 111(U)			A1(14)	F1 F2	6(2+2+2) + 8(3+2+2)	B ♭ major A Major/ Modulating
119(U) 127			A2(15)	F1 F2	8[4(2+2) + 4(2+2)] + 7[4(2+2) + 3]	D Major G Major/ A Major 7/ D Major
134(U) 138 142		Second Theme (T2)	B(12)	F1 F2 F3	4(2+2) + 4(2+2) + 4(2+2U)	D Minor F Major C Major

Bar number	Big Sections	Themes	Periods/ Stanzas	Phrases/ Sentences	Motifs/ Motivic Cells	Tonality (modal structure)
145(U) 152			B1(12) – elements from T1 mod. role	F1 F2	7(2+2+1) + 5(3+2)	E Minor D Major
157 161 164 170			B2(17)	F1 F2 F3 F4	4(2+2) + 3(1+1+1) + 6(2+2+2) + 4(2+2)	Modulating Modulating Modulating A Major (V of D Major)
174(U) 180 188(U)	**Conclusion of the Exposition**		C(19)	F1 F2 F3	6(2+2+2) + 8(2+2+2+2)+ 5(2+2+3)	A Major/ D Major D Major

Table 1**.** *Structural scheme of the first movement's double exposition sonata-form or concerto form (micro- and macro-structural analysis)*
(Ștefan 2021, 2: 15-18)

Here are a few musical examples which I consider reveal Beethoven's hidden admiration for the Italian master's compositions. Most ideas seem to be coming from Concerto Grosso or simply Concerto No. 1 in E major, RV 269 (*La primavera*, Spring), and Concerto No. 3 in F major, RV 293 (*L'autunno*, Autumn), both works belonging to the cycle entitled *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione* from the Italian master's Op. 8.

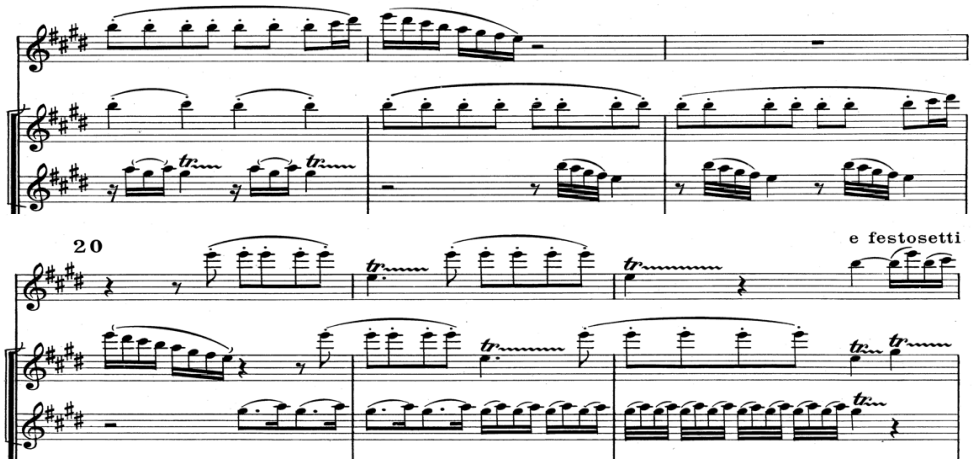

Fig. 1. A. Vivaldi - *Concerto No. 1 in E major, Op. 8, RV 269, "Spring", first movement*, bars 17-22

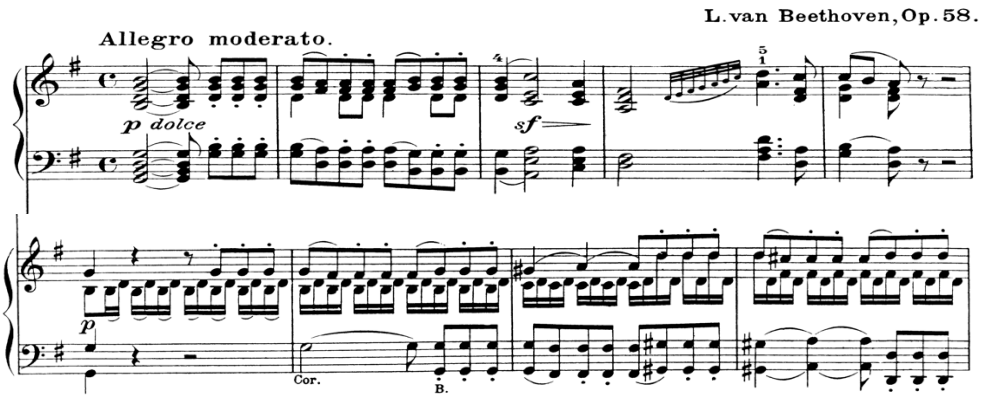

Fig. 2**.** L.V. Beethoven – *Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58, first movement*, bars 1-5,14-17

We can clearly see in Figure one the suggestion of a rhythmic diminution used to increase the tension in the phrase and the formula of four consecutive repeated semiquavers which both composers have used to great effect and in the particular case of Beethoven has been nicknamed the "destiny motif" because of its developmental use as the dominant rhythmic figure of the first movement of his Fifth Symphony, Piano Concerto No. 4, etc., where the composer has gone to great lengths to create a unique tension build up within both the exposition and development sections.

The solo violin enters in a dialogue with the ripieno strings where tension is built up gradually through smaller and smaller rhythmic values which are to be projected through a varied articulation ranging from non-legato, to full legato and even to a suggestion of detachment or staccato, through the marking of slurs of two notes on semiquavers and even demisemiquavers, the excitement in the music being thus elevated to even greater lengths. This process of gradually writing an acceleration or accelerando through the diminution of rhythmic values is also displayed within both piano solo and orchestral sections of the piano concerto, an idea that seems to have inspired Beethoven in his compositional process. These three elements combined, rhythm, articulation and phrasing, the foundation of any composition, are so strikingly similar in both these works, from an observer's and listener's point of view, thus enabling me to express my idea that when writing his piano concerto, Beethoven, used Vivaldi's works as a source of inspiration and further developed the Italian composer's ideas into what is today one of the most played and well-known piano concertos in the musical literature.

At least two of the above elements are clearly shown in figure two, the opening of the piano concerto, but all of them will be used and assigned to either

the orchestral apparatus or to the soloist. It becomes very clear that the smaller note values, in the style of string playing, sometimes even imitating this, are given to the soloist to thus allow them to display their virtuosity and create innovative sound effects. Most of these features are, as the title of the article suggests, written in an Italian style, thus suggesting further the unusual character of Beethoven's work.

It is a certainty that the first movement of Vivaldi's work portrays the arrival of spring with its characteristic optimism and renewal or rebirth of nature, the eternal cycle, the return of the birds, and their melodious songs as well as the symbolic dispersal of the winter clouds. Most of these birds have returned from their winter pilgrimage in warmer areas of other continents but have again returned to their familiar settings.

Although Beethoven's work does not portray in a programmatic way any of the images associated with Vivaldi's *Seasons* it becomes clear in Figure 4, when compared to Figure 3, the Italian style in which this is written, and the obvious imprint took from the Baroque composer's work for solo violin, strings, and harpsichord ensemble. The breaths of the Zephyrs, and the image of a continuous stream flowing with a sweet murmur, portrayed in Vivaldi (see Figure 3) as semiquavers articulated legato two by two, and following what appears and sounds a zip-like direction, both ascending and descending, is also slightly modified by Beethoven and brought about in the second theme of the soloist exposition as embellishments to the actual theme which is given to the orchestra and also as a secondary melodic structural device, that not only increases the tension and brings the section to the expected climax of the conclusion of the exposition and its new key of D Major, but also brings with it a type of melodic multi-levelling. This sends the listener to the distant technique of latent polyphony, widely used by J.S. Bach and his contemporaries, but, unfortunately, so often abandoned in favour of the canon or other less sophisticated polyphonic devices.

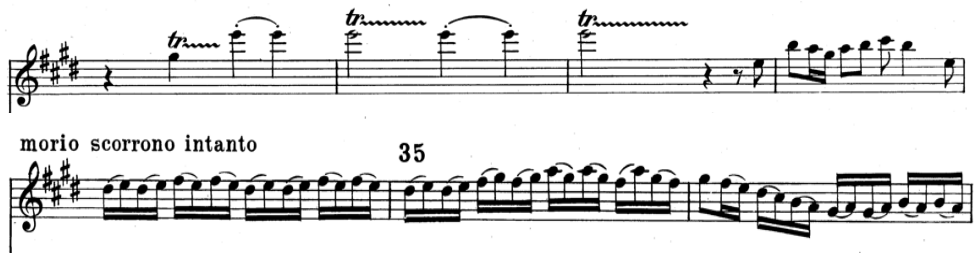

Fig. 3**.** A. Vivaldi - *Concerto No. 1 in E major, Op. 8, RV 269, "Spring", first movement*, bars 26-29, 34-36

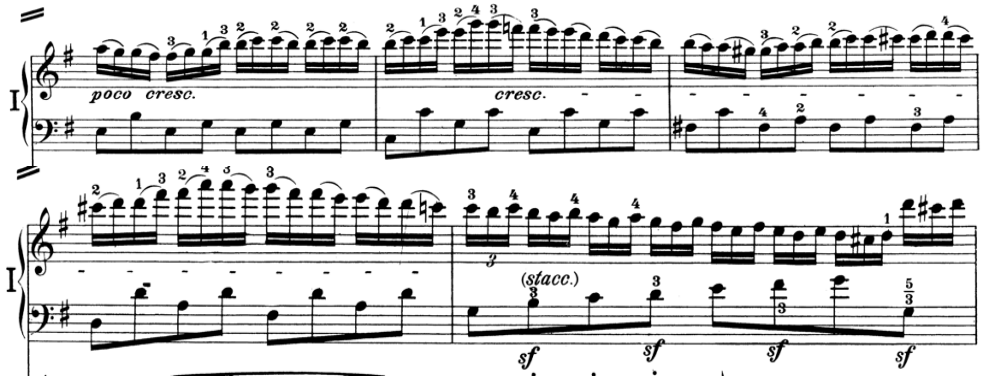

Fig. 4**.** L.V. Beethoven – *Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58, first movement*, bars 148-151

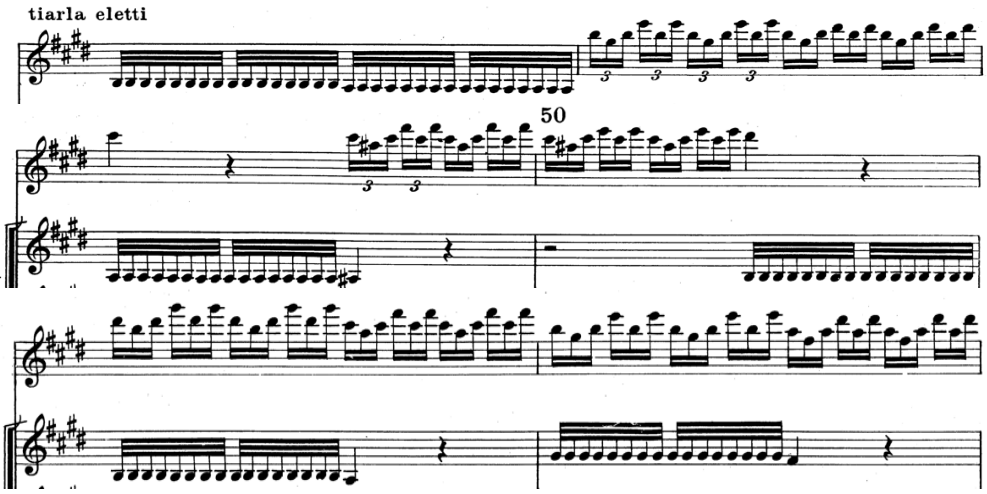

Fig. 5. A. Vivaldi - *Concerto No. 1 in E major, Op. 8, RV 269, "Spring", first movement*, bars 47-52

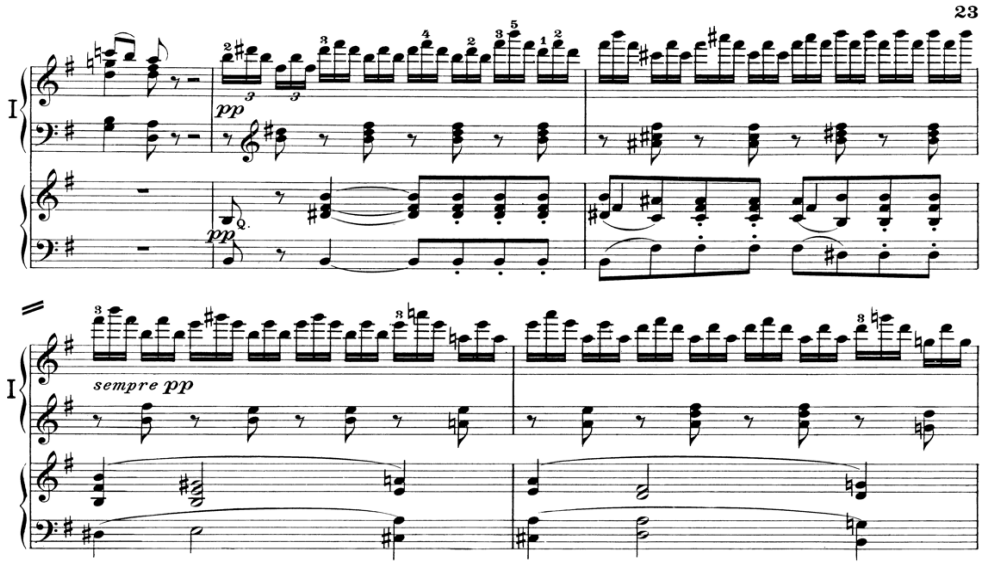

Fig. 6**.** L.V. Beethoven – *Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58, the first movement*, bars 257-261

It becomes interesting that when comparing Figure 5 with Figure 6, Vivaldi's original intent for the triplet semiquavers offered to the solo violin that follow a broken chord pattern, in a zip-like direction both ascending and descending, is that of an unexpected storm, or a massive surprise, which destabilizes the serenity and calming atmosphere of the bird songs and introduces natural elements such as thunder and lightning, poetically portrayed as trouble in the skies. In Vivaldi the character is dominated by fear, anxiety, and a deep sense of insecurity – the noise of thunder, the frightening speed of lightning, water pouring from the sky, the darkness of the clouds, whereas in Beethoven this is the exact opposite and is treated as an antonym in poetry.

The piano right hand plays the exact same figuration as the solo violin, as if copied directly into the score, but, as with the previous examples, it does not take a leading role within the thematic material or the main melodic line, which is given to the orchestra, but it is placed against it, as a secondary exponent, bringing with it a heightened tension, and thus keeping the right hand of the pianist busy for the entire orchestral main melodic statement, and as with Vivaldi, could in fact send the listener's imagination to small and warm rain drops in a soft dynamic, *pianissimo*, as opposed to Vivaldi, which clearly portrays the noise of thunder and the menacing speed and brightness of the lightning. In Beethoven's concerto this

figuration, quoted directly from Vivaldi, has a different character and meaning, which is totally opposite.

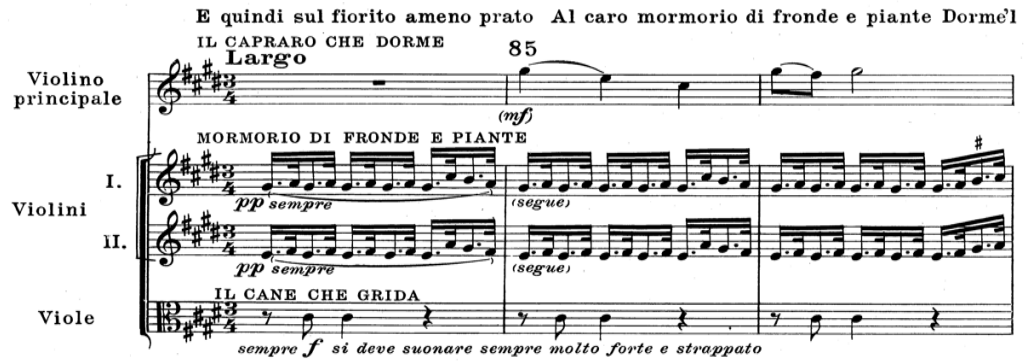

Fig. 7. A. Vivaldi - *Concerto No. 1 in E major, Op. 8, RV 269, "Spring", second movement*, bars 1-7

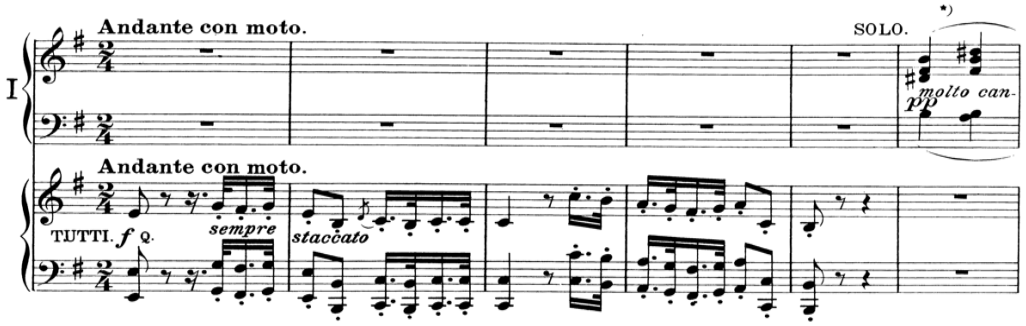

Fig. 8. L.V. Beethoven – *Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58, second movement*, bars 1-6

Even when comparing Figures 7 with Figures 8 one can easily find similarities such as the dotted semiquavers rhythms placed in the accompanying ripieno strings, at about the same time with that of the other instruments, and also at the point where the soloist enters in the piano concerto evoking a very calming and lyrical melody, a contrast between the accompanying section, and the solo one.

4. Conclusion

I want to convince even the most sceptical reader of the unusual character of this piano concerto and of the apparent inspiration source Beethoven used in writing his composition from 1808 and innovating further within the genre. The space limit placed on this article has prevented me from finding even more examples of similarities between these works. Still, as it stands now, they are sufficient to strongly support my original argument, proposition and title offered to this article.

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