

A perspective on the concerto genre in the 20th century

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Abstract: *The instrumental concerto remains one of the most appreciated genres – by the general audience as well as by virtuoso interpreters – throughout its existence, including the 20th century. However, the century of acute modernity afforded a reevaluation of all the musical forms and genres so that new unsuspected challenges emerged, which were solved in the most unexpected ways by the great composers of the time. This paper aims to offer a brief perspective on the evolution of the concerto genre in the music of the 20th century, highlighting several elements of originality, with a succinct analysis of more compositions in the general framework of articulating the formal discourse. The concerto has survived in the art of the 20th century, even in the creation of the most avant-garde composers, perhaps especially because of aspects concerning virtuosity and the competition between a soloist and an orchestra.*

Key-words: *concerto, modernity, soloist, composer, structure*

1. Introduction

The instrumental concerto remains one of the most appreciated genres – by the general audience as well as by virtuoso interpreters – throughout its existence, including the 20th century. However, the century of acute modernity afforded a reevaluation of all the musical forms and genres so that new unsuspected challenges emerged, which were solved in the most unexpected ways by the great composers of the time. This paper aims to offer a brief perspective on the evolution of the concerto genre in the music of the 20th century, highlighting several elements of originality, with a succinct analysis of more compositions in the general framework of articulating the formal discourse. The concerto has survived in the art of the 20th century, even in the creation of the most avant-garde composers, perhaps especially because of aspects concerning virtuosity and the competition between a soloist and an orchestra.

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2. The concerto genre in the 20th century

In the first half of the 20th century, two creation directions can be identified: the one that exploits the romantic experience, which puts forth opposing roles (dramaturgic and musical) for soloist and orchestra, and the one that proposes freedom of speech, as already achieved in the field by S. Rachmaninov, D. Shostakovich or S. Prokofiev.

In order to obtain a more extensive perspective on the development of the concerto genre in the 20th and 21st century, we will rely on several landmarks in its evolution which begins in the first half of the 20th century with works by Sergei Rachmaninoff: concertos no. 2 in C minor op. 18, no. 3 in D minor op. 30, and no. 4 in G minor op. 40 for piano and orchestra, composed in the period 1901-1926. The perspective on the first decade of the 20th century is completed by Ferruccio Busoni's composition for piano (Concerto for piano op. 39), by Jean Sibelius's work for violin (Concerto for violin in D minor op. 47), by M. Reger's genre creations, but also by Bela Bartók's (the first concerto for violin).

The Concerto for piano and orchestra no. 3 Sz. 119, BB 127 (1945) by Béla Bartók is one of the great masterpieces of the modern repertory, an unfinished composition and the expression of his absolute maturity, which he finished in the last days of his existence as a gift, with dedication for his second wife, the pianist Ditta Pásztory-Bartók. In search of a quieter place after the beginning of WWII, he leaves for the United States of America without the perspective of a flourishing career and without the financial resources to support it, struggling with his recently discovered leukemia, Bartók composed the concerto in three parts in a neoclassic atmosphere, after its difficulties had been mostly overcome.

The first part is based on a Hungarian folklore theme, initially presented only by the soloist instrument, proposing a harmonic evolution which illustrates what we call today POLYMODAL CHROMATICISM (a process in which the succession of various alterations leads to a chromatic discourse). The second section, *Adagio religioso*, is a creation in the classical choral style (like a polite allusion to a Beethovenian string quartet) – reaching the illustrious modal substratum of national popular music; also, this is representative for Bartók's nocturnal style (the so-called state in which the great composer proposes a maturity version of his slow parts, characterized by "strange dissonances which give a background to the sounds of nature and to the lonely melodies") (Schneider 2006, 84.). These masterpieces by Bartók entail treating the piano as a percussion instrument, and the polyphonic approach reaches impressive concentrations.

II

Adagio religioso (♩=50-56)

Archi

pp

Fig. 1. B. Bartok – “Concerto for piano and orchestra”,
Adagio religioso, part II, m. 1-5

From the second decade of the 20th century, it is worth mentioning the name of Sergei Prokofiev, who started his concerto creation with the Concertos for piano no. 1 and 2, with Concertos no. 1 and 2 for violin, finishing by the half of the century the concertos for piano no. 3, 4, 5. The Concerto for piano and orchestra no. 3 in C major op. 26 by S. Prokofiev (1913-1921) was interpreted by the composer himself for the first audition, sanctioning his own style by adding extreme dissonances to a framework which sometimes becomes lyrical. The first part (Andante – Allegro), after a slow introduction in which the clarinet plays the main role, highlights the soloist’s exuberance, with a rhythmical frenzy which characterizes the Prokofievian phenomenon. The second part is, in fact, the theme con variazioni from which the entire project started, that began as a sarcastic gavotte (repeated in its initial version in the coda).

Andante

p dolce

Fig. 2. S. Prokofiev – “Concerto for piano and orchestra no. 3” in C major op. 26,
part II, m. 1-3

Other great representatives of the first half of the century are Karol Szymanowski (Concerto for violin no. 1 op. 35) or Igor Stravinsky (Concerto for piano and wind instruments, Concert for violin in D minor - 1931) or George Gershwin (Concerto for piano and orchestra). In the French impressionist space it is worth mentioning Maurice Ravel (Concerto for piano for left hand, Concerto for piano in G - 1931), while in the Russian one, after 1933, D. Shostakovich (Concerto for violin no. 1 in A minor op. 77 -1947). After WWI, Karol Szymanowski composed in Poland (his representative work for the genre is Concerto for violin no. 2 op. 61).

The serialist current brought forth the scientist conceptions of music (criticized by the traditionalists), less visible in the Concerto for violin and orchestra by Alban Berg (1935), but also in Arnold Schoenberg's masterpieces (Concerto for violin op. 36, Concerto for piano op. 42 -1942). Before WWII, Paul Hindemith wrote the Trauermusik for viola and string orchestra, but also the concerto for violin, and the concerto for piano in 1945. In the same period, the repertory for violin and orchestra was enriched by Samuel Barber (Concerto for violin op. 14) and by Benjamin Britten (Concerto for violin op. 15), while the wind instruments – generally less well represented in this context – are also the focus in the Concerto for oboe and orchestra by Richard Strauss (1945).

The concerto which avoids the presence of the soloist is represented from the first half of the 20th century by Michael Tippett, author of Concerto for double string orchestra, which will preface the subsequent achievements of the genre using the orchestra (with its various divisions) at the place of the soloist. In addition, Ernest Bloch was the author of the Concerto grosso for orchestra and piano obbligato in the same period, exploiting the Baroque conception which seemed long outdated. Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev and Bartók continue the Romantic tradition of great composers-interpreters, who interpreted and promoted themselves their own compositions; but there is also the possibility for him to have been inspired by another great virtuoso of his time.

I. Stravinsky was the author of a Concerto for piano (1923–24) which marks the beginning of his concerto creations, followed by the unconventional Concerto in D minor for string orchestra – 1946, and Concerto for violin and orchestra – 1931. From his creation, Ebony Concerto for clarinet and jazz band – 1945 reflects the techniques specific to jazz (similar to the musical experiences of A. Copland – 1926, M. Ravel – 1931, and G. Gershwin – Concerto for piano – 1925). Stravinsky's Concerto was written for a specific formation, dedicated to its soloist. The three parts (articulated based on the formula quick-slow-quick) bring to the fore in the second part a form of blues in F minor. The blues genre belongs to the African-American spirit of the second half of the 19th century, evolving towards jazz,

rhythm and blues, and rock and roll. In the 20th century, more and more composers will resort to forms belonging to jazz.

In A. Berg's composition (Concerto for piano, violin and 13 wind instruments 1923–25) the first part is dedicated to the piano and wind instruments, the entire creation using various sonorous aspects specific for the three great serialism composers (A. Schoenberg, A. Berg and A. Webern). A. Webern's Concerto for nine instruments (1931–34) introduces the piano in the orchestra formation, not as the central element of the musical discourse, but integrated to a conception which treats the instruments approximately the same.

A completely novel case – which we will discuss in detail – is represented by the compositions belonging to Francis Poulenc (1899-1963), great composer and pianist, developing an atypical style, of great simplicity and inner accuracy, as a representative of national religious music next to O. Messiaen. After the Concerto for piano and orchestra, the one for two pianos and orchestra, F. Poulenc composed a Concerto for harpsichord, timpani and strings in the period 1934-1938.

In 1938, Francis Poulenc also composed a concerto for organ, timpani and strings in G minor FP 93, which became one of the most widely performed in this genre for the post-Baroque period. The composer accumulated, on this occasion, all his previous experience with compositions for key instruments in the most diverse situations, also adding to the work the privileged state of mind resulting from the discovery of the Christian faith during a pilgrimage he went on after a friend's death. Religious music gained importance from that moment, this being the first composition for organ in his creation (as we know, compositions for organ involve, perhaps more than for other instruments, thorough knowledge of the possibilities of the instrument, which is difficult to achieve as a beginner in this field).

The work is destined for a simpler space and instrument, more restricted, with little accompaniment, with an unusual configuration: it is made up of a single ample musical movement which contains seven different sections, with various modal structures and types of writing, marked by a change of tempo (Andante, Allegro giocoso, Subito andante moderato, Tempo allegro. Molto agitato, Très calme: Lent, Tempo de l'allegro initial and Tempo d'introduction: Largo). Unlike this, F. Poulenc's Concerto champêtre for harpsichord and orchestra FP 49 (1927–28) benefits from a very ample pastoral orchestra vision, dedicated to the famous soloist Wanda Landowska and the instrument remade in Pleyel's construction workshops, in France. The three sections remind us of the neo-Baroque stylistics.

The 20th century gave the music history several examples of compositions which are not entitled concerto, but which preserve the concerto specificities: in this category we find S. Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini op. 43 for piano and orchestra (1934).

Out of the compositions in this genre dedicated to the orchestra (without soloist) by P. Hindemith or M. Tippett, Bartók's concerto composition includes 5 sections (the second part, 'Presentando le coppie', is the richest from the point of view of the orchestra dynamics). The Concerto for orchestra in F minor Sz. 116, BB 123 by B. Bartók is a five-movement orchestral work composed in 1943, being one of his best-known, most popular and accessible works. The work is called a concerto because many instruments are treated in a virtuosic, soloistic way.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Oboe, Horn in F, Violin I, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked 'Tranquillo, ♩ = 70'. The Oboe part is marked 'p dolce', the Horn in F part is marked 'pp', the Violin I part is marked 'p', and the Violoncello part is marked 'p'. The score is in 3/8 time and F minor.

Fig. 3. B. Bartók – "Concerto for orchestra", part I, theme II, m. 155-157

In addition, the more restricted vision of the concerto is also represented in the composition called CONCERTINO (for example, Arthur Honegger signed the Concertino for piano and orchestra). D. Shostakovich promoted the less conventional timbres of soloists in the Concerto for piano, trumpet and string orchestra in C minor op. 35, exploiting the avant-garde possibilities of his century also from this point of view.

The genres associated with the concerto are represented by the concerting symphony (as in the case of Benjamin Britten, author of the Symphony for violoncello and orchestra op. 68), but also for the Chamber Concerto composed by Gyorgy Ligeti in 1969, as well as the Romanian concerto for small orchestra in 1951 (which has four parts: Larghetto, Allegro vivace, Adagio ma non troppo, Presto poco sostenuto).

Fig. 4. G. Ligeti – “Concerto for cello and orchestra”, part I, m.1-5

The neoclassical and neoromantic tendencies are a reality of the time which attempts to rediscover its bearings in search of balance. Schonberg recovered the material for his violoncello concerto (1932) from the Baroque period, while R. Strauss achieves the same attempt to recover the classic in the second concerto for horn (1942) or in the one for oboe (1945).

In the second half of the 20th century, the preoccupation for the concerto is renewed by John Cage, with his famous compositions entitled Concerto for prepared piano and orchestra, Concerto for piano and orchestra (1957), opening a new field in modern music where no other composers could create. In the national Polish music, Witold Lutosławski signed the Concerto for violoncello and orchestra – 1969, and the Concerto for piano – 1988, and his contemporary Krzysztof Penderecki finished the two concertos for violin during the last three decades of the century.

D. Shostakovich created a unique concerto style in his ample compositions for this genre (through the Concerto for piano no. 2 op. 102, Concerto for violoncello no. 1 op. 107 and no. 2, Concerto for violin no. 2 op. 129 (1967). After 1960 Iannis Xenakis created in the concerto genre (without naming the compositions as such, but preserving their specificities) the Eonta opuses for piano and brass quintet, Synaphai” for piano and orchestra - 1969, Keqrops - 1986. Gyorgy Ligeti dedicated his concertos to the violoncello, flute and oboe, piano and violin. Luciano Berio has a concert for a formation less used in the history of modern music (Concerto for two pianos and orchestra), and Philip Glass also composed, after the 1980s, the Concerto for violin.

One of the directions of the period is the return to the classical-romantic values, as reflected by the compositions belonging to A. Schnittke (Concerti grossi), to L. Berio (Concerto for two pianos and orchestra - 1972–23, as well as Concerto II (Echoing Curves) for piano and orchestra - 1988–90). G. Ligeti composed a dense and very valuable concerto, which uses a new formal principle (the form which regenerates itself from the initial motifs) in his Concerto for violoncello - 1966, in Concerto for chamber orchestra - 1969, in Double Concerto for flute and oboe -

1972, in Concerto for piano (1985, with a five-part structure), and in Concerto for violin and orchestra of 1989. The discourse is not a dialogue (as in the classical interpretation of the concerto), but it is achieved by highlighting the soloist as the unique element responsible for its interpretation.

There are also compositions which are NOT called concerto, but they propose a similar structure, with rich solo performances for instruments or groups of instruments, as we find in I. Stravinsky's *Movements for piano and orchestra* (1958–59) or P. Boulez's *Domaines for clarinet and six instruments* (1961–68).

3. Conclusions

“No musical genre has had a more chequered critical history than the concerto but has simultaneously retained as consistently prominent a place in the affections of the concert-going public. Historically speaking, concertos have had a more polarizing effect than any other kind of musical work. The inherent virtues of a wide range of concertos are now of course taken for granted – and such works are as firmly entrenched as their symphonic counterparts in both critical and performance canons – but established concertos even today inspire widely diverging responses“ (Keefe 2005, 2).

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