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*Contexts***The early nineteenth-century piano concerto**

The fundamental upheavals in politics and culture that rocked Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries radically altered musical practice and the institutions that supported it. New instrumental and vocal genres, a burgeoning concert and operatic industry, and an entire class of ‘professional performers’ rapidly evolved alongside countless music-publishing and instrument-building ventures, all aiming to satisfy the demands of a bourgeoisie revelling in its recently acquired power as patrons of the arts. The piano was at the heart of this expanding musical world, especially in Vienna, which boasted eminent figures like Mozart, Beethoven, Ries, Hummel and Moscheles, and, later, in Paris, to which dozens of keyboard virtuosos flocked each year ‘like swarms of locusts’, in Heine’s memorable phrase. Continual advances in piano design and construction enabled keyboardists to attain new heights of technical brilliance on both the lighter Viennese and the more sonorous English pianos, and sparkle and dexterity were further enhanced by Erard’s double escapement action, patented in 1821. Such improvements also facilitated the piano’s penetration into the middle-class home, providing composer-pianists with sizeable amateur markets demanding tailor-made pieces or simplifications of the virtuoso *tours de force* heard in the concert hall.

By the time Paris had established itself in the 1830s as ‘capital of the nineteenth century’,¹ keyboard virtuosity and the operatic stage completely dominated professional music-making, much to the chagrin of critics like Schumann, who lamented the damage thus inflicted on ‘serious’ compositional activity.² But even he recognised the charm and appeal of the best virtuoso music, not all of which is the cliché-ridden,

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meretricious claptrap habitually derided by scholars. Early nineteenth-century keyboard virtuosity has in fact unjustly acquired a poisonous reputation (in contrast to the term's original associations with worth and excellence):³ keyboard virtuosos wielded enormous power over audiences through their exultant technical displays, and some of the finest gave concerts attended by the young Chopin in 1820s Warsaw.

Composer-pianists like these played largely their own music, written not for posterity but for immediate consumption in a particular season. Most churned out a seemingly inexhaustible supply of concertos, rondos, variations, potpourris and fantasies (usually on operatic arias), as well as the improvisations that would typically end their smorgasbord-like benefit concerts.⁴ Of these various genres, the concerto suffered changes in fashion more than others, and its relatively lofty nature restricted the amateur market for published concertos. Nevertheless, a large corpus of virtuoso concertos survives to this day, alongside the 'symphonic concertos' of Beethoven, notably Op. 61 for violin and Nos. 3–5 for piano, which belong to a tradition stemming from Mozart's K. 466 and ultimately linked to Liszt's and Brahms's later concertos.⁵ Inspired in different ways by Beethoven, and drawing upon an earlier keyboard idiom manifest most transparently in Mozart's K. 537, virtuoso concertos straddled two domains, those of 'serious' art music and 'popular' concert music. The strategy in most was to minimise the orchestra's role, in part for practical reasons, as they had to be performable as solos or with quartet or quintet accompaniment, depending upon available forces on a given occasion. Thus the principle of contrast so basic to the genre was assimilated into the piano part itself.⁶

Throughout the concerto's lengthy history, the principle of contrast has had many incarnations. Writers in the mid eighteenth century defined it in terms of textural oppositions (*ripieno*/*concertino*, *ritornello*/*solo*), while later theorists such as Vogler and Koch referred more to harmonic polarities. Even later ones – among them Czerny and Prout – focused on thematic oppositions, as in the 'double exposition form' that became the putative, if anachronistic, norm of classical concerto design.⁷ For all its problems, Czerny's model is the one most applicable to Chopin's concertos and many virtuoso specimens, namely, four tutti sections interspersed with three lengthy solo sections that correspond to the ternary components of mid nineteenth-century sonata form (see

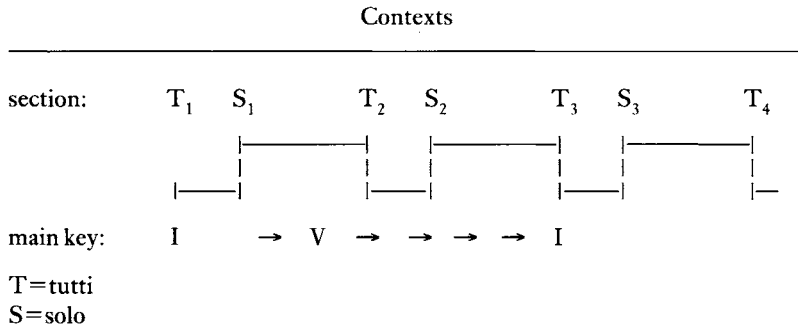


Figure 1.1 Czerny's model of first-movement concerto form
 (from Stevens, 'Theme', 48)

Figure 1.1). As Jane Stevens writes, these tutti had all but lost their ritornello function by Czerny's time: 'Although the first tutti retains the character of a long, expositionlike section, the other three tutti are reduced in importance' – especially in articulating the standard tonal plan, which involves a modulation to the dominant or another key within the first solo and an eventual return to the tonic after a retransition (culminatory build-up in V) at the end of the second solo. Stevens concludes that Czerny's model diminishes 'both the role of the orchestra and the formal significance of textural contrast', placing 'increased importance on melody as a leading determinant of form'.⁸ In this respect at least, it accurately reflects the design of most early nineteenth-century virtuoso concertos, which – like many works in the *stile brillante* – thrived on often abrupt alternations between 'poetry' and 'display' (Jim Samson's terms)⁹ or, more specifically, between 'stable' thematic statements and discursive passagework, in the 'two-phase construction' defined by Józef Chomiński.¹⁰

The principle of alternation shaped not only virtuoso concertos but other early nineteenth-century music – for instance, *Grand Opera*,¹¹ which, like the concerto, fostered soloistic technical brilliance, the portrayal of 'characters' and 'moods', and a certain 'heart-on-sleeve emotionalism'.¹² Evidence of the unusually close relation between these genres can be seen in the cadenzas and recitatives of many concertos. Although after Beethoven's time cadenzas started disappearing from the virtuoso concerto (they were hardly necessary, given the almost ubiquitous bravura writing), recitatives increased in importance in concertos like Moscheles' G minor and Chopin's F minor, which recall earlier

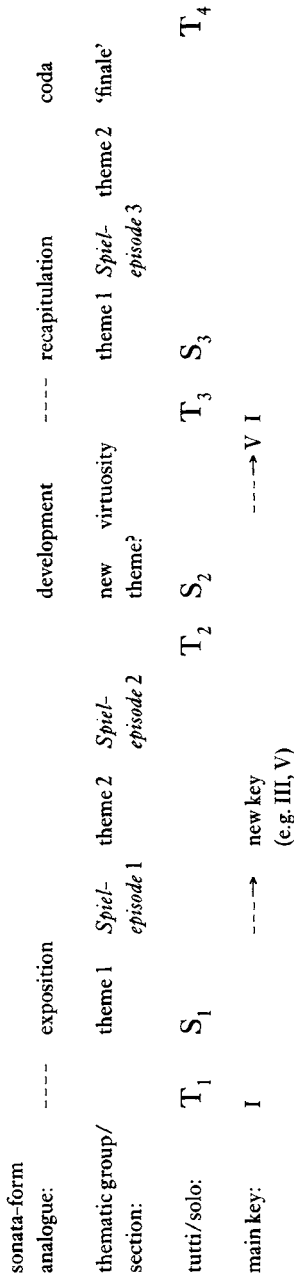


Figure 1.2 Archetypal virtuoso concerto first movement

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examples like Mozart's K. 271. Melodic types in both solos and tutti also betray opera's influence, even in Chopin's *Allegro de concert*, written as the virtuoso era was drawing to a close and the tasks of composer and performer-as-interpreter becoming more distinct.

As a young man, Chopin had ample contact with the parallel worlds of opera and keyboard virtuosity. For instance, he performed concertos by Gyrowetz, Ries, Hummel, Moscheles, Kalkbrenner, and, possibly, Weber and Field, and later he would also encounter the concertos of (among others) Dussek, Spohr, Steibelt, Cramer, Döhler, Herz, Pixis and Klengel,¹³ thus gaining exposure to a concerto idiom that can readily be characterised in terms of the alternation between theme and passage-work described above.

The striking consistency of the virtuoso concerto has been demonstrated in an exhaustive study by Isabella Amster,¹⁴ who discerns a recurrent first-movement pattern accommodating numerous variants but in each case commencing with a tutti that establishes the principal themes in preparation for the first solo. This either restates the main and secondary themes in a virtuosically heightened style or replaces them with new 'brilliant' themes. Indeed, virtuosity dominates the first solo (contrary to the sonata form's usual balance), in a progression from the initial theme(s) through a bravura *Spielepisode* that modulates to a new key, then the typically contrasting second theme and finally a second *Spielepisode* (see Figure 1.2). After the second tutti comes one or more of the following: a new solo theme, usually long-breathed and richly embellished; a virtuosic development of exposition material analogous to the first and second *Spielepisoden*; an independent, non-developmental section; the recapitulation itself. Whatever its point of origin, the reprise stays close to the exposition apart from minor adjustments (occasionally the first *Spielepisode* or one of the themes is omitted), except that the second *Spielepisode* is generally replaced by a stirring conclusion designed to build excitement – comparable in effect to an operatic finale¹⁵ or, on a smaller scale, a cabaletta. The ensuing slow movement, with its limited opportunities for display, tends to be perfunctory, although there is music of great beauty in the three most important influences on Chopin's concertos – Hummel's A minor Op. 85, Kalkbrenner's D minor Op. 61 and Moscheles' G minor Op. 58. The third movement is almost always a rondo structurally similar to those of

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Mozart and Beethoven, although, as in the first movement, the virtuosic element is embodied in extended sections of passagework sandwiched between themes, with an especially brilliant 'finale' after the last thematic statement. Many are coloured by national idioms, as are Chopin's independent *Rondo à la mazur* Op. 5 and *Rondo à la krakowiak* Op. 14.

Amster notes that the 'brilliant' figuration within the virtuoso concerto generally includes scales, either unembellished (diatonic; chromatic; in thirds, sixths or tenths) or varied (with appoggiaturas, reaching-over notes, anticipations, etc.); arpeggios; repeated-note figures; *Rollfiguren* (in which one note remains fixed while other parts move); octaves; leaps; and patterns in thirds, fourths, fifths and sixths, used alone or with other configurations. As mentioned above, the orchestral accompaniment receives little weight, the spotlight instead firmly fixed on the soloist.

As we shall see, some of this template applies to Chopin's F minor and E minor Concertos but by no means all. Chopin's own remarks indicate an effort to achieve something out of the ordinary, as does comparison with his earlier music, much of which bears a closer relation to its models than do Op. 11 and Op. 21, notwithstanding the astonishing originality apparent from very early on.

Chopin's early music

Chopin's first extant compositions are the G minor and B \flat major Polonaises from 1817, both impressive as the work of a seven-year-old but not really distinct from the contemporary polonaises of Ogiński and others, and certainly a far cry from his first mature polonaises, Op. 26 Nos. 1 and 2, written in Paris in 1835 after a fundamental rethinking of the genre. In the meantime, Chopin had completed his 'apprenticeship' in Warsaw and had established himself in the French capital after an unsuccessful eight-month sojourn in Vienna designed as the springboard of his virtuoso career. This was an intensely traumatic time for him and his native Poland, following the brutally suppressed Warsaw Uprising of November 1830 and the state of siege that prevailed until August 1831, just before he arrived in Paris.

Poland had in contrast enjoyed a period of relative stability throughout Chopin's youth, after the creation in 1815 of a kingdom ruled by the

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Russian tsar Alexander I. During this time both the sciences and the arts flourished, and new educational institutions and societies were founded.¹⁶ Music publishing grew rapidly here as elsewhere, initially under the aegis of Chopin's composition teacher Józef Elsner, and during the 1820s Polish editions of piano works by Hummel, Field, Ries and others could be bought in Warsaw shops, in addition to piano arrangements of operas by Rossini, Weber, Auber and Boieldieu – many of them performed at the Teatr Narodowy (National Theatre) under the directorship of Karol Kurpiński, and heard by Chopin. There were also imported scores of Haydn, Mozart and, to a limited extent, Beethoven.¹⁷ By no means a provincial backwater, Warsaw played host to many touring virtuosos and singers, among others Hummel, Szymanowska, Catalani, Sontag and Paganini,¹⁸ all of whom fed Chopin's growing appetite for a career as composer-pianist, directly or indirectly inspiring virtuoso compositions such as his four solo rondos, 'Là ci darem' Variations, *Fantasy on Polish Airs*, *Rondo à la krakowiak* and concertos. These were the key works in his portfolio when he left Warsaw for Vienna on 2 November 1830.

Chopin's education in Warsaw was not entirely conventional, particularly his keyboard training. His first teacher, Adalbert (Wojciech) Żywny, was himself a violinist, but he laid the groundwork of Chopin's keyboard technique as well as his lifelong love of Bach and Mozart, two stylistic influences of the utmost importance.¹⁹ Although he later had guidance from Wilhelm Würfel, a distinguished pianist and organist, Chopin essentially taught himself to play; the result was an idiosyncratic keyboard style based on the beauty of sound, nuance, legato *cantabile*, suppleness, simplicity and colouristic variety.²⁰

Chopin's composition training was more rigorous, initial advice from Żywny leading to private lessons with Elsner and then formal enrolment at the Szkoła Główna Muzyki (Central School of Music), where he received a solid grounding in counterpoint, thoroughbass, rhetoric and aesthetics, taught largely by means of eighteenth-century theoretical texts.²¹ To some extent Elsner indulged his young pupil's genius, absolving him from certain exercises required of such colleagues as Tomasz Nidecki and Ignacy Feliks Dobrzyński (who feature later in this book). But he did insist upon the acquisition of orchestration technique²² and the mastery of compositional form. Elsner's own music reveals an inno-

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vative if orthodox use of the Viennese sonata principle, suggesting that some of the structural anomalies in Chopin's Warsaw-period compositions – not least the E minor Concerto – should be understood as calculated experiments sanctioned by a skilled and knowledgeable teacher.

However rich Warsaw's cultural life might have been, it could not compete with centres like Berlin (which Chopin visited in September 1828, hearing operas by Spontini, Cimarosa, Onslow, Weber and Winter, as well as Handel's 'Ode to St Cecilia') or Vienna, Europe's musical capital at the time. Chopin's first trip to Vienna, in August 1829, was an unqualified success (unlike his second, extended stay there from November 1830 to July 1831). He gave two concerts featuring his 'Là ci darem' Variations and *Rondo à la krakowiak* as well as improvisations on Boïeldieu's *La Dame blanche* and the Polish folksong 'Chmiel', and he earned a rapturous response from a notoriously reticent audience. One reviewer commented: 'From the style of his playing as well as the characteristics of his compositions one may already detect a spark of genius, at least in regard to his unique forms and striking individuality.'²³

Improvisations on national melodies were hardly unusual for early nineteenth-century virtuoso pianists, but in Chopin's case they represent an affinity with folk idioms that would bear particular fruit in his mazurkas and waltzes as well as the two concertos, fostered on various summer excursions from Warsaw to Szafarnia, where he encountered 'rustic' songs and dances such as the mazur, the lively oberek and the more reflective kujawiak. In Warsaw, he had already gained exposure to the polonaise, a processional dance of aristocratic pedigree, as the G minor and B♭ major pieces from 1817 bear witness.

Chopin's early music reflects in varying degrees the influences identified above – opera (especially Rossinian *bel canto*), virtuoso pianism (particularly that of Hummel, Weber and Field), national idioms (whether rural or urban), eighteenth-century masters (Bach and Mozart above all) and improvisation. The latter's role in defining Chopin's style should not be underestimated: not only did he compose at the piano, carefully crafting individual passages before committing them to paper, but he was expert at improvising in public concerts and the more private salons where he made a home for himself in 1830s and 1840s Paris.²⁴

Although the works composed before and immediately after his arrival in Paris can be variously grouped, the following categories are helpful if not watertight:

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- a. 'private' works based on classical archetypes (Sonata in C minor Op. 4 and Trio in G minor Op. 8)
- b. smaller genres, intended largely for private performance (polonaises, mazurkas, waltzes, écossaises, études, nocturnes, songs, etc.)
- c. 'post-classical concert music'²⁵ in the *stile brillante* (Rondo in C minor Op. 1, 'Là ci darem' Variations Op. 2, *Polonaise brillante* Op. 3, *Rondo à la mazur* Op. 5, *Fantasy on Polish Airs* Op. 13, *Rondo à la krakowiak* Op. 14, Rondo in E♭ major Op. 16, *Grande polonaise* Op. 22, Rondo in C major Op. 73, Variations on 'Der Schweizerbub' and the two concertos).²⁶

It must be stressed that the concertos stand out in their class despite shared characteristics, or at least signs of lessons learnt in composing earlier 'brilliant' pieces. Except for the variation sets, Chopin's music in the *stile brillante* tends to maintain the strict alternation between theme and bravura passagework described earlier, with the effect a rather eclectic blend of sometimes incompatible materials, although gradually he succeeded in achieving greater synthesis between such sections, particularly in music from the late 1820s onwards.²⁷ The more stylistically accomplished repertoire from the period also displays a manipulation of impulse lacking in previous works: built upon a seemingly endless succession of sequential patterns clothed in all manner of virtuoso finery, the passagework in Chopin's first 'brilliant' pieces has little innate direction, any forward propulsion being further stifled by a leaden phrase rhythm, that is, the larger accentual patterns set up by four- and eight-bar units, among others. Greater control of momentum can be seen, however, in the 'finale' to Op. 13 and the episodic material in Op. 14, although in both cases the figuration itself sounds derivative and less 'natural' in shaping and inner impulse than that of the two concertos, the virtuosity of which not only assumes an expressive role but also reflects the suppleness and facility at the heart of Chopin's keyboard technique.

The introductions to Op. 13 and Op. 14, in contrast, contain some of Chopin's most original writing yet, likewise the introduction to Op. 2, each pointing in different ways to what would follow in the concertos. Another anticipation occurs in the middle section of the *Grande polonaise* Op. 22, its sequential 'announcements' in octaves analogous to gestures in the concertos' third movements. Additional commonalities include the use of 'finales' – in Opp. 5, 16, 22, 73 – to generate a last burst

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of energy (a feature heralding Chopin's heightened sensitivity to closure, evident in both the increasing concentration of structural weight towards the end of pieces, sometimes in extended structural cadences within foreshortened reprises, and the enhanced role of codas in ensuring large-scale proportion) and harmonic audacities such as parallel diminished sevenths or discursive right-hand chromaticism over left-hand pedal points.

As for tonal schemes, the concertos draw principally from music in the first and second groups above rather than the 'brilliant' compositions. The unorthodox structures in the first movements of the Sonata and the Trio are one obvious precursor. Both have monotonal expositions and recapitulations centred on harmonies other than the tonic (in violation of classical norms): Op. 4's reprise starts in B \flat minor, not C minor, and in Op. 8 the second subject returns in the minor dominant. These 'infringements', like the tonal idiosyncrasies of the concertos' first movements, have been attributed to ignorance of the Viennese sonata principle on the part of Warsaw composers, whereas they may simply represent the experimentation referred to earlier, undertaken with more or less successful results. Such experimentation also occurred in Chopin's smaller Warsaw-period genres, which demonstrate his growing ability to transcend the relatively static, symmetrical tonal plans characteristic of the earliest mazurkas and polonaises by means of 'dynamic', goal-directed progressions that achieve greater structural momentum²⁸ – a technique even more firmly established when he wrote the concertos.

Another such technique was that of 'ornamental melody', apparent above all in the hauntingly beautiful Nocturne in E minor (post-humously published as Op. 72 No. 1), in which embellishment serves as the melodic essence, not mere surface decoration. Developed in Chopin's highly ornate polonaises from earlier in the period, this art of embellishment would influence the thematic material in the first and second movements of both concertos. The third movements, by contrast, reflect a technique principally fostered in the mazurkas, which, like their folk models, thrive upon the obsessive repetition of tiny cells – motives, melodic fragments, grace notes and other ornaments. By repeating ideas throughout the seemingly disparate parts of a work, Chopin ensured an 'organic' unity for his mazurkas – and indeed the