Introduction

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In a famous, oft-repeated British TV comedy sketch, first broadcast on 25 December 1971, the classic duo of Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise wreak havoc in a performance of the opening of Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor, conducted by André Previn. Pianist Morecambe and his 'manager' Wise make a string of ridiculous demands: they want to perform what Morecambe calls a 'special arrangement' of the concerto with the orchestra playing the opening flourishes and the piano the main theme (Previn reluctantly agrees); they deem the new orchestral introduction 'too short' and suggest contacting Grieg to get him to lengthen it; and, after missing Previn's cue on account of a poor sight-line to the conductor, ask him either to wear high heels or to 'jump up in the air' in order to be visible. Finally entering at the appropriate moment at the third attempt, Morecambe delivers a grotesquely butchered version of the main theme. Reprimanded by Previn for 'playing all the wrong notes', Morecambe purses his lips, grabs his conductor by the lapels and, with the exquisite timing that made him one of Britain's greatest post-war comedians, delivered his *coup de grace*: 'I'm playing all the *right* notes, but not *necessarily* in the right order'.[1]

In some respects, Morecambe's comic character is an archetypal arrogant diva (with good, old-fashioned buffoonery thrown in). He is self-regarding and disdainful of the accompanying orchestra ('Is this the band? . . . I've seen better bands on a cigar'), assumes the violins are to blame as Previn approaches him horrified at the distortion of the main theme, and is condescending towards the conductor, dismissing him with the claim that 'For another £4 we could have got [then UK Prime Minister and music aficionado] Edward Heath'. In other respects, however, his actions and behaviour can be taken to represent several of the different strains of criticism levelled specifically against the concerto during its protracted and controversial history. His disregard for the orchestra and blinkered self-interest encapsulate the consistently articulated critical view that concertos are primarily vehicles for compositional and soloistic self-promotion rather than for genuine audience edification. Just as Morecambe considers his orchestra more-or-less irrelevant to the musical experience at hand, so critics collectively condemn countless concerto composers for treating their accompanying orchestras in just this way. While Morecambe is no piano virtuoso (quite the contrary), he neatly sums up the troubled,

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ambiguous reaction to concerto virtuosity in the collective critical consciousness. After Previn performs the correct version of the piano's ostentatious opening salvo, Morecambe is visibly awestruck by the technical skill involved. Composing himself for a few seconds, he finally utters the single word 'Rubbish!' and heads off stage. In short, Morecambe's comedic alter ego is a symbolic critic of the very same genre in which he is an all-too-eager participant.

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. While most of an audience may swoon at, say, the flamboyant virtuosity of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3, self-professed *cognoscenti* often recoil at it. Nothing is more likely to fill a packed performance venue with a buzz of excitement than a concert featuring one of the nineteenth-century 'warhorse' concertos performed by a world-renowned soloist, for example, and nothing more likely to induce weary resignation among musical 'highbrows'. Indeed, the concerto remains an active battleground for musical tastes, continuing to use tensions inherent in polemical reactions to old and new works as fuel for the development of an art form that is as vibrant as ever 400 years or so into its history.

The vitality and longevity of the concerto must also be attributed to the genre's considerable ability both to encourage thinking about issues that reach beyond the narrow confines of the music itself and to engage directly with (and influence directly) prevailing performance trends. This volume therefore assumes a broad remit, including but not limiting itself to consideration of the concertos that have made – and continue to make – such important contributions to musical culture. Part I sets the concerto in its musical and non-musical contexts, surveying theories that surround perceived positive and negative features of the genre and exploring socio-musical factors that bear upon our perception of the concerto (and, indeed, music in general). Following detailed study of concerto repertories in Part II, Part III turns to performance-related topics, examining qualities historically associated with the virtuoso, as well as performance practice trends in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they relate to the genre, and the productive relationship the concerto has enjoyed with the recording industry. A picture emerges of a genre in a continual state of change, reinventing itself in the process of

growth and development and regularly challenging its performers and listeners to broaden the horizons of their musical experience. There is every reason to believe that concertos will be written for centuries to come as so many of the fundamental issues with which they engage – including the status of the 'star' performer and the understanding of how individuals and groups interact – have perennial social and musical relevance. By engaging in our own considerations of the genre – as composers, performers, scholars, critics, music-lovers and concert-goers – we contribute actively to the concerto's colourful history and help to shape its future.

PART ONE

Contexts

1 Theories of the concerto from the eighteenth century to the present day

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Discussing his G major Piano Concerto early in the last century, Maurice Ravel writes that it 'is a concerto in the strictest sense of the term'.[1] At approximately the same time, the critic F. Bonavia explains that Beethoven's Violin Concerto represents 'no conscious departure from the accepted criterion of what a concerto should be'.[2] But what is the 'strictest sense' of concerto and the 'accepted criterion' of its ontological status? At one level, the concerto is all-too-easy to define, at another level, intractably difficult to pin down. In broadest terms a concerto from the eighteenth century through to the present day is expected to feature a soloist or soloists interacting with an orchestra, providing a vehicle for the solo performer(s) to demonstrate their technical and musical proficiency; in practical terms, concertos demonstrate multifarious types of solo–orchestra interaction and virtuosity, often provide as much of a showcase for the orchestra as for the soloist(s) and sometimes dispense altogether with the hard-and-fast distinction between soloist(s) and orchestra. Given the extraordinary diversity of works labelled concertos, it is no wonder that critics, composers and musicologists – indeed, musicians of all shapes and sizes – have on the whole steered clear of systematic theorizing about the genre. The concerto's capacity for reinvention over its venerable 400-year history – even in 1835 a reviewer for the *Gazette musicale* praised Chopin's E minor Piano Concerto for 'rejuvenating such an old form'[3] – has ensured its fundamental elusiveness, its longevity as a genre and, in all likelihood, its deeply ingrained popularity with the musical public at large.

While protracted theorizing about the concerto is rare, aside from on technical matters such as form,[4] there is no shortage of opinion about the genre's aesthetic status and about prerequisites for composing popular and musically successful works. The wide diversity of theoretical and critical views over the last two centuries focuses in particular on two perennially controversial topics that lie at the heart of the concerto: the nature of the interaction among participants, solo and orchestral alike, and, by extension, the function of the 'accompanying' orchestra; and the nature of the music given to the soloist(s). Theoretical and critical debate on these topics influences and is influenced by compositional practice, thus making a highly significant contribution to the continued vitality, transformability and popularity of the concerto genre.

Virtuosity and the interaction of the soloist and orchestra in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respected theorists and critics castigate excessive virtuosity in concertos, believing that it detracts unequivocally from a listener's aesthetic experience. Johann Georg Sulzer's influential *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (*General Theory of the Fine Arts*, 1771–4) contains several swipes at the concerto on account of purportedly extreme virtuosity; Heinrich Christoph Koch (1787) explains that composer-performers 'stuff their concertos with nothing but difficulties and passages in fashion, instead of coaxing the hearts of their listeners with beautiful melodies'; and Johann Karl Friedrich Triest (1801) neatly sums up the received wisdom of his age in claiming that 'hardly one in a hundred [concertos] can claim to possess any inner artistic value' representing the 'special proving ground for virtuosity' instead.[5] Later writers continue this critical trend: reviewers for *La Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* repeatedly stress in the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century that bravura passages with meagre accompaniment will in no way suffice for concertos; writers on early performances from the 1830s and 1840s of Chopin's piano concertos – by no means the most technically challenging of early nineteenth-century virtuoso works – criticize the 'unprecedented and unjustified' difficulties and 'extravagant passages', asking 'what more do the hands need?' and the composer and critic Robert Schumann offers 'a special vote of thanks' in 1839 to 'recent concerto composers for no longer boring us with concluding trills and, especially, leaping octave passages' as they had earlier in the century when excessive virtuosity was *à la mode*, coming down heavily on virtuoso-composers whom he likens to popular entertainers.[6] Indeed, late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, not just Schumann, often equate virtuosos – including writers and performers of concertos – with non-aesthetic phenomena, Sulzer and Koch likening solo roles in many concertos to those of acrobats, Friedrich Rochlitz claiming that virtuosos 'are interested only in the good or bad execution of difficulties and so-called magic tricks, just as tightrope walkers are interested only in keeping their balance on the high wire' and James W. Davidson asserting that for the virtuosos 'repose is nauseous – unless it be the repose indispensable to a winded acrobat'.[7] Davidson continues in this vein with an uproarious account of Anton Rubinstein's performance of a Mozart piano concerto in 1858, clarifying in no uncertain terms that the virtuoso's self-aggrandizement ruined the listener's experience of the work:

> A 'lion' in the most leonine sense of the term, he treated the concerto of Mozart just as the monarch of the forest, hungry and truculent, is in the habit

> of treating the unlucky beast that falls to his prey. He seized it, shook it, worried it, tore it to pieces, and then devoured it, limb by limb. Long intervals of roaring diversified his repast. These roarings were 'cadenzas'. After having swallowed as much of the concerto as extended to the *point d'orgue* of the first movement, his appetite being in some measure assuaged, the lion roared vociferously, and so long, that many ... admitted that, at all events, a 'lion' could be heard from the 'recess' in St. James's Hall. Having thus roared, our 'lion's' appetite revived, and he ate up the slow movement as if it had been the wing of a partridge. (Never did the slow movement so suddenly vanish.) Still ravenous, however, he pounced upon the finale – which having stripped to the *queue* ('*coda*'), he re-roared, as before. The *queue* was then disposed of, and nothing left of the concerto.[8]

Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers often consider active interaction between the concerto soloist and the orchestra an ideal foil for 'excessive' solo virtuosity. While Koch, for example, is as willing as Sulzer to point the finger at empty virtuosity in late eighteenth-century concertos, he is unwilling to condemn the entire genre to aesthetic oblivion as a result, mounting a spirited defence of its genuine aesthetic qualities in the hands of practitioners such as C. P. E. Bach and Mozart. For Koch, the accompanying voices in the best concertos 'are not merely there to sound this or that missing interval' but rather to engage in a 'passionate dialogue' with the soloist, expressing approval, commiseration and comfort.[9] Forcefully countering the prevailing distrust of the concerto, Koch's remarks also foreshadow nineteenth-century concerns. Schumann describes the 'severing of the bond with the orchestra' in many early nineteenth-century works, bemoans the possibility that piano concertos with orchestra could become 'entirely obsolete' and issues a clarion call for 'the genius who will show us a brilliant way of combining orchestra and piano, so that the autocrat at the keyboard may reveal the richness of his instrument and of his art, while the orchestra, more than a mere onlooker, with its many expressive capabilities adds to the artistic whole'.[10] The ideal concerto for writers at *La Revue et Gazette musicale* also focuses on 'equality and dialogue between the solo instrument and the orchestra' rather than on issues such as the showcasing of the soloist or form.[11] Indeed, dialogue has served as one of the most popular metaphors for productive exchange between the soloist and the orchestra over the last 200 years, from Koch's comments on C. P. E. Bach and Mozart and Schumann's on Ignaz Moscheles through to the proliferation of twentieth-century references by composers, critics and performers as diverse as Donald Tovey, Elliot Carter, Joseph Kerman and Glenn Gould.[12] For Carl Dahlhaus, solo–orchestra dialogue is 'a sine qua non of the traditional concerto movement'.[13]

Symphonic dimensions to concertos, as recognized by nineteenth-century writers, also depend upon protracted interaction between the soloist and the orchestra (albeit not necessarily of a co-operative kind) and prominent roles for the orchestra. Whereas in 1800 a writer for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (presumably the editor Friedrich Rochlitz) distinguishes Mozart's symphonies and concertos on account of the 'grandeur' of the former and the 'intimacy' (close to the spirit of his quartets) of the latter,[14] subsequent critics draw attention in a positive way to the symphonic attributes of concertos. Thus, nineteenth-century French writers praise Henri Litolff for 'absorbing the virtuoso', which duly 'gained, rather than lost, in power' in his *Concerto symphonique* No. 4, Op. 102, and Brahms for a 'greater fusion within the whole' in the Piano Concerto No. 1 that results in 'a more elevated musical interest than the technical feats which are the essence of the non-symphonic concerto'.[15]

At the heart of orchestral involvement in concertos is the issue of *how* they interact with the soloist(s), of what the interaction of the protagonists represents in anthropomorphic terms. Ultimately, the rich hermeneutic tradition in regard to solo–orchestra relations has its origins in the uncertain etymology of the term 'concerto', which derives in all likelihood from the Latin *concertare* (to agree, act together), the Italian *concertare* (to compete, contend), or the Latin *conserere* (to consort).[16] Embracing this ontological imprecision brings to the fore contrasting co-operative and competitive types of interaction. Critics in the eighteenth century, for example, are collectively attuned to both types of motivation. Johann Mattheson (1713) describes a scenario whereby 'each part in turn comes to prominence and vies, as it were, with the other parts', subsequently (1739) drawing attention to the 'contest, from which all concertos get their name',[17] Johann Gottfried Walther speaks of the 'rivalry' between concerto protagonists[18] and Augustus Frederick Christopher Kollmann (1799) suggests that the concerto is capable of representing the kind of confrontation witnessed in C. P. E. Bach's famous trio sonata, 'A Conversation between a Cheerful Man and a Melancholy Man'.[19] Other eighteenth-century critics, in contrast, paint pictures of collaboration, Johann Joachim Quantz (1752) explaining that each orchestral participant 'must regulate himself in all cases by the execution of the soloist, ... always do his share' and yield to the soloist's tempo when he or she 'gives a sign to that effect' and Heinrich Koch (1793) identifying sentiments such as 'approval', 'acceptance', 'commiseration' and 'comfort' on the part of the orchestra.[20] Confrontation tends to dominate nineteenth-century discourse on interaction and is often linked to the symphonic qualities of concertos. Thus, Joseph Hellmesberger and Bronislaw Hubermann debate whether Brahms's Violin Concerto, Op. 77, is *for* the orchestra and *against*

the soloist or vice versa (Hubermann suggests that the violin 'wins'), and Maurice Bourges argues that Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G is *against* the soloist on account of the orchestra's 'sudden interruptions' and brusque curtailment of solo passages.[21] In a letter to Nadezhda von Meck from 1880, Tchaikovsky offers a famously uncompromising interpretation of solo–orchestra confrontation in the piano concerto. Maintaining that the tone of the piano renders it incapable of blending with that of the orchestra, he identifies

> two forces possessed of equal rights, i.e. the powerful, inexhaustibly richly coloured orchestra, with which there struggles and over which there triumphs (given a talented performer) a small, insignificant but strong-minded rival. In this struggle there is much poetry and a whole mass of enticing combinations of sound for the composer ... To my mind, the piano can be effective in only three situations: (1) alone, (2) in a contest with the orchestra, (3) as accompaniment, i.e. the background of a picture.[22]

Virtuosity and the interaction of the soloist and orchestra in twentieth-century writings

Twentieth-century writings continue to focus on themes prevalent in the nineteenth century. Criticisms of excessive virtuosity are not uncommon even in scholarly discourse of the last thirty years or so: John Warrack talks disparagingly, for example, of the 'finger music of [Weber's] First [Piano] Concerto and its passages in which the virtuoso is clearly meant to be seen at least as much as heard'.[23] Equally, critics are often eager to stress that a particular work transcends the status of straightforward, solo-dominated display piece; thus, in Schumann's Violin Concerto, 'Specific virtuoso styles ... are not invoked for their own sake, but are rather put to the service of a specific musical function' and in Dvořák's Cello Concerto, the composer's intentions are not 'to dazzle' but rather 'focused much more on the expansion of timbre and the interaction between the cello and the other instruments'.[24] On the whole, however, recent scholarship is marked by a greater receptivity to the aesthetic virtues of virtuosity than in earlier scholarly eras; a good case in point is Joseph Kerman's careful broadening of the concept to include *virtù*, with its constituent bravura, mimetic and spontaneous qualities.[25]

Not surprisingly, given the diversification of the genre to include works such as concertos for orchestra, twentieth-century composers and critics also put significant emphasis – like their nineteenth-century counterparts – on the symphonic dimension of works. Karol Szymanowski writes that his Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 35, is 'really ... a symphonic work for quite

large orchestra with solo violin'.[26] Bartók describes his Concerto for Orchestra as 'symphony-like' and David Cooper claims it can be situated in the nineteenth-century symphonic tradition.[27] Georges Enescu baldly describes Beethoven's Violin Concerto as 'a great symphony. The violin has a leading voice, but it is merely one of the many orchestral voices which make up the whole.'[28] And Sibelius explains a Prokofiev violin concerto (probably No. 1) as 'a symphonic unity where the violin plays a subordinate role'.[29] While the origins and development of the symphonic concerto remain a matter of scholarly debate – Dahlhaus goes against the grain, for example, in considering it 'foolish' to describe Beethoven's concertos as precursors and Schumann's as prototypes[30] – neither its important generic status nor its implications for prominent orchestral involvement and interaction with the soloist(s) are in doubt. Even those who disapprove of symphonic characteristics in concertos (in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries) clarify that the balance of soloist(s) and orchestra – and by implication their interaction – is paramount: Carl Czerny, likening the orchestra to 'inferior objects in a picture, which are merely introduced for the purpose of setting the principal object in a clearer light' counsels against 'an overladen accompaniment' since it 'only creates confusion, and the most brilliant passages of the pianist are then lost'; Donald Tovey is adamant that the opening orchestral section of a Classical concerto 'remains truly a ritornello and does not merge into pure symphonic writing' but also maintains that this section prevents the orchestra from seeming 'unnaturally repressed' after the entry of the soloist, transcending mere 'support'; and Sibelius dislikes the symphonic qualities of Prokofiev ('Quite the opposite of my view') on account of the subordination of the soloist.[31]

In a similar fashion to their nineteenth-century predecessors, twentieth-century composers and critics regularly highlight contrast, conflict and struggle in the concerto, imbuing these types of interaction with symbolic social significance.[32] Thus, Richard Strauss describes his Cello Concerto, which survives only as sketches for a three-movement work (1935/6), as a 'struggle of the artistic spirit [the cello] against pseudo-heroism, resignation, melancholy [the orchestra]', and John Cage explains his Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra (1950–1) as an opposition of 'the piano, which remains romantic, expressive, and the orchestra, which itself follows the principles of oriental philosophy', simultaneously representing the contrasting phenomena of control and freedom.[33] Nicky Losseff's explanation of the broad-ranging musical and social significance of confrontation and opposition in the concerto – supporting and supported by the long-standing tradition of anthropomorphic description of interaction – reflects a substantial body of twentieth-century opinion: 'The dualities and oppositions inherent in the virtuoso piano concerto makes it the