

Advanced Higher Commentary

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Since the late 18th century the piano concerto has been at the heart of many composers' careers. J.S Bach was the first to write a piano concerto of sorts in his Brandenburg concerti with the keyboard part taking the most prominent position. However the composer central to this development was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, a classical composer, who wrote 27 piano concerti in total. As the romantic era evolved Sergei Rachmaninoff soon began writing what were to become some of the most famous piano concerti of all time. As a late romantic composer, many of his concerti aimed to display the virtuosity of the players and so were technically, extremely challenging. The complexity and difficulty generally increased with time and so Rachmaninoff's piano concerti are considered some of the hardest pieces in the world. I have chosen to study two piano concerti as I play piano myself and appreciate the skill required in completing such works. While studying at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland Junior department I have played violin in a range of concerti which have continued to increase my interest in this type of work.

Mozart began composing concerti in his Salzburg period and found success in the piano concerto very early on, composing for one, two or three pianos. His concerto in A major (K.V. 488), for one piano was composed in 1786 and consists typically, of three movements. The first of which is allegro in sonata form. This is the movement which I will be focusing on.

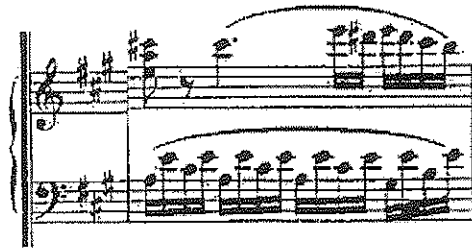
The exposition presents us with the first theme straight from the beginning. This is played only by the string section, with the dynamic marking being *p*. The texture here could be described as mostly homophonic. This creates a calm and light mood.

Excerpt 1

The image shows a musical score for the first movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto in A major, K. 488. The score is for the string section, specifically the first four staves: Violino I., Violino II., Viola., and Violoncello o Basso. The music is in A major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Allegro.' The dynamic marking is 'p' (piano). The score shows the beginning of the exposition, with the first theme starting in the first measure. The texture is homophonic, with the strings playing a simple, rhythmic accompaniment for the first theme. The score is written in a standard musical notation style, with clefs, notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The theme is then imitated by the woodwind and brass an octave above the original pitch. As the theme continues Mozart uses an array of typically classical techniques such as alberti bass and broken chords keeping the piece harmonically very precise.

cerpt 2



Descending sequences are used mainly in the piano and first violins which carry the tune for the majority of the piece. Here octave leaps are used both in ascending and descending sequences played in the piano part.

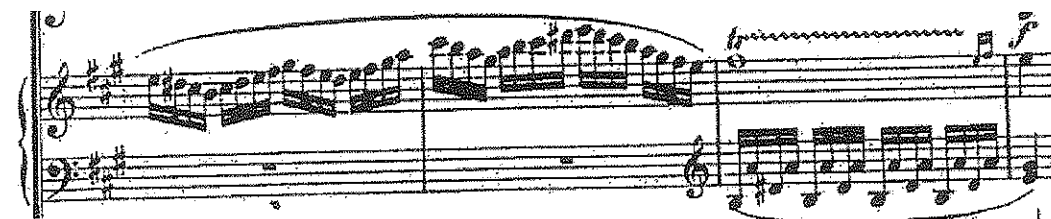
Excerpt 3



Mozart uses an orchestra of small size compared to today's large symphony orchestra. This orchestra consisted of two flutes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, twelve violins, four violas, violoncellos, two contrabass and of course the piano. The lower strings of the orchestra play a harmonically simple bass line often with sequences, moving parallel to those in the violins.

Mozart has composed this concerto, just like many others, with a clear antiphonal relationship in mind between for the piano orchestra. Through the short cadenzas and frequent imitation we see the dialogue pass between the two giving a lively and conversational feel. Mozart will often use solo piano to end cadences. At each cadence point trills are used, an ornament typical of the classical era.

Excerpt 4



Excerpt 5



The classical era did not typically have a wide dynamic range compared to later periods (unless through a gradual change) in its music and Mozart uses terraced dynamics to

gradually increase or decrease volume and change timbre, again keeping a very measured style. He continues this rigid structure also in terms of melody. Often played in sequences these melodies contribute largely to the strong antiphonal relationship between piano and orchestra.

Excerpt 6



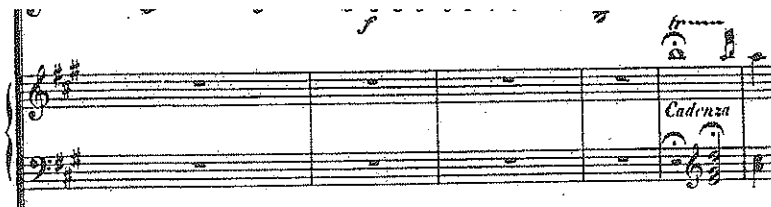
Articulation is often used alongside dynamics as ascending passages will often be marked with staccato bowing in the strings, as apposed to legato. This creates a *leggiero*, or light tone.

Excerpt 7



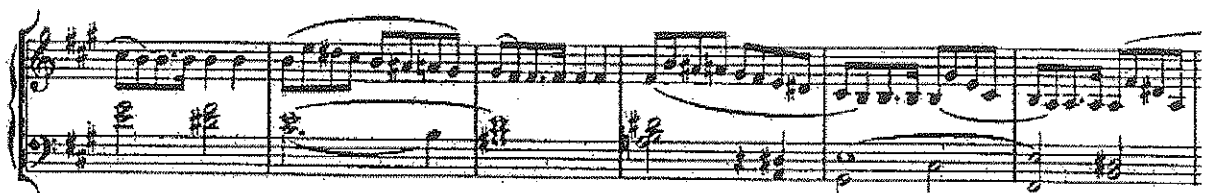
As a classical concerto this piece does not aim to highlight the player's skill and virtuosity and so even cadenzas, famous for their extravagant style, are structured, typical of Mozart's style. Here for example the cadenza ends with a long simple trill resolving from the dominant to the tonic.

Excerpt 8



Here again the piano plays a simply melody with chords underneath. This understated form of composition serves to highlight the beauty and simplicity of the melody.

Excerpt 9



As the piece continues the development changes the theme both rhythmically and harmonically, as the theme is repeated by many instruments. Firstly it is the piano which introduces the development.

Excerpt 10



Here the theme is varied by making the rhythm more complex, and almost improvisational. This type of embellishment is used frequently in the development of many of Mozart's Pieces. Again we see here the Alberti bass in the left hand, complimenting the melodic right hand.

Finally in the recapitulation the theme returns in its original form. It is heard, as before by the string section, with *p* as the dynamic marking.

Excerpt 11



The recapitulation ends the first movement with the final bars providing the typically classical perfect cadence, returning the piece to its tonic key of A major. This cadence is created by the use of a trill and mordent. This was a typical stylistic feature to be used at a cadence point in the time of Mozart.

cerpt 12



The music of Sergei Rachmaninoff could not be further away from the structure and harmonic style of Mozart's work. His bold use of dynamics and chromatic sequences make his work powerful and moving. This is most evident in perhaps his most famous work; his second piano concerto. I will be focusing on the first movement. The tempo marking of moderato tells us it is of moderate to slow speed. We see from looking at the score that the orchestra has evolved since the time of Mozart with the introduction of a larger brass section (now containing trombones) and a larger string section.

The music begins with *p* chords based around F minor, and at this point the piano is alone. This short introduction builds tension through the use of chromatically ascending and descending chords. The octave leaps and pedal in the left hand create a tense mood, with real suspense.

Excerpt 13

Moderato (♩ = 66) rit.

pp poco a poco cresc.

The volume of the chords build, from the direction of “poco a poco crescendo” or a little crescendo. Here Rachmaninoff is creating deeply emotional music from the outset, something which he as a composer is famous for and is only continued throughout this piece. After this short introduction the orchestra enter playing a strong and powerful motif. The texture here is homophonic as seen below, however often the texture is quite the opposite, with frantic and complex rhythms.

Excerpt 14

ff con passione *ff con passione* *ff con passione* *pizz.* *ff pizz.*

“Con passione”, the direction written in the score, tells us that the music must be played passionately and expressively, with a large use of vibrato in the strings. The violins are often directed to play only on the G string in order to give a deep, warm sound. Rachmaninoff often experiments with the various timbres of the string section. The motif above features heavily in the piece with the piano often playing complex and

sometimes chromatic melodies above. This style of composition is used often and serves to exhibit the pianist's virtuosity with fast and demanding passages being played over a simpler accompaniment.

Excerpt 15

This ascending sequence builds to a climax by increasing dynamically (from *p* to *ff*), by the use of triplets which move against the rest of the orchestra (three against two) and by the staccato articulation, all of which add to the overall tense feeling of the piece.

Rachmaninoff goes to great lengths to create atmospheric contrast by frequently changing tempo and by using an extremely wide range of dynamics. This is displayed in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 16

Excerpt 17


Here we see the tempo change to "moto precedente" and also a small amount of the vast dynamic change within this work. Typical of a late romantic composer, Rachmaninoff used everything from articulation, to dynamics, to tempo to create the desired atmosphere and this broke away from previous, more structured and conventional styles of composition.

Rachmaninoff also utilises the range of articulations achievable on the violin. By marking *Pizz.* on the score he can then create a softer and altogether different timbre than the more conventional arco marking. This creates a whole new palette of colour in the music, further engaging the listener.

Excerpt 18

As the piece progresses the complexity in some areas increases. The piano part becomes increasingly complex, with accelerandos marked and dissonant notes adding to the tension. The polyphonic texture continues this, as do the varied dynamics. The freedom in his compositional style is evident here as he appears to work within no boundaries.

Excerpt 19

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The music is highly complex, featuring dense polyphonic textures with many overlapping voices and frequent dissonances. The notation includes various rhythmic values, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and dynamic markings such as 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The overall impression is one of intense technical and emotional complexity.

Both pieces, although the same type of work, contrast in a multitude of ways. Mozart chooses to keep to a very harmonically strict structure, with perfect cadences and consistent tempo. Rachmaninoff however experiments far more with his tempo changes, chromatic sequences and dynamic contrast. This allows him to portray a deeper sense of emotion and passion in his music. The power in Rachmaninoff's work is achieved by the large scale orchestra, something which was not available to Mozart during his lifetime. Mozart's piano concerto however presents a clear antiphonal relationship between the soloist and the orchestra by use of cadenzas and imitation among instruments. This fits perfectly into the structure of sonata form, where repetition is key. The texture of Mozart's piano concerto is largely homophonic giving a clean and structured sound, this is quite different to the largely polyphonic texture of Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto in which the piano is often seen to *battle* with the orchestra.

While studying these two pieces I have become aware just how largely classical composers were restrained by convention, and how as time progressed so did music. The music of late romantic composers portrays far more emotion and power, only achievable because of the technological advancements within the orchestra combined with brave and certainly unconventional composition. I now understand what aspects of the orchestra have changed through time, along with composers attitudes towards their works. I have also gained a deeper insight into the compositional techniques required to portray an array of styles and emotions. None further apart than the clarity of Mozart and the passion and power of Rachmaninoff.